

Applying Parent-Child Music Activities to Elicit Initiating Joint Attention in a Child with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Fang-Yu Liu¹

Shu-Yu Chen²

Tsung-Ren Yang³

Summary

The difficulty in the development of social communication and interaction is regarded as one of the most significant deficits in individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In the research on social communication skills in those with ASD, it has been reported that the inability to develop joint attention, including initiating joint attention and responding joint attention, was the core deficit influencing an individual's social communication skills. Even though some studies have reported that the skills of joint attention could be trained through interventions, with reference to the application of these skills in daily life, the generalization of skills learned in a therapy room is considered the most important factor for this population. Therefore, researchers have advocated that parents should be involved in the treatment or be trained as intervention providers in order to implement interventions in their child's daily life. Many recent empirical studies also approved the effectiveness of parental implementation for facilitating joint attention in this population.

Studies have reported that Orff music therapy had been tried with persons with disabilities, such as individuals with ASD and intellectual disability, as well as individuals in medical settings. Studies indicated that Orff music therapy was able to improve social interaction skills in the population with ASD. Orff music therapy focuses on responsive interaction, which could also be seen in the interactions between parents and their child. Moreover, it was noted that everyone

¹ Doctoral Candidate / Department of Music, National Taiwan Normal University

² Associate Professor / Department of Special Education, University of Taipei

³ Associate Professor / Department of Special Education, National Taipei University of Education

had the potential of music, which also implied that even untrained parents had the potential to implement music activities with their child. However, there was a lack of information on how parents implement music activities in order to facilitate the development of joint attention in their child with ASD. Therefore, the present study developed parent-child activities based on the principles of Orff music therapy and investigated how such activities impacted the development of joint attention in the child in order to provide suggestions for parents, researchers, music therapists, and music educators who work with individuals with ASD. Specifically, the purposes of the study were: (1) to train the musical and non-musical skills of a mother of a child with ASD in order to implement parent-child music activities, and (2) to investigate the influences of the parent-child music activities on the child's initiating joint attention.

This study adopted a case study approach. The participants included a mother and her son (six years and 11 months old). Based on a checklist on joint attention that was implemented before the implementation of the parent-child music activities, the child was found to demonstrate responding joint attention but not initiating joint attention. Joint attention lectures (three hours in total) were provided for the mother to help her acquire knowledge and techniques of bringing about social interaction and joint attention. Interviews were conducted with the mother before the intervention to gather information regarding the abilities of the mother and the son. The authors synthesized the gathered information to design ability-appropriated parent-child music activities. The parent-child music activities took place once a week, for 10 weeks, and the mother implemented the activities after receiving training for each session. The process of training and the mother's implementation of the parent-child music activities were recorded. Additionally, informal interviews were conducted with the mother. Multiple data sources, such as documented observation forms, interview recordings, researcher's journals, verbatim data from recordings, and related journal articles, were triangulated to improve the reliability of this study.

Through the 10-week intervention, the mother who had never undergone any kind of music training before showed an improvement in her confidence in facilitating parent-child music activities. For example, the mother was able to implement parent-child music activities by singing songs, observe the child's behavior and provide feedback through music, and involve music activities in the child's daily life. The mother was taught to implement the parent-child musical activities through model singing, imitating singing, practicing interaction, and simulation exercises. The mother was delighted to see the improvement in the child's initiating joint attention behaviors including eye-gazing, eye-alternating, singing with shared gaze, gestures with shared

gaze, and showing objects. The strategies of the parent-child music activities to improve the child's joint attention consisted of using clearly structured songs, singing and performing songs repeatedly, providing clear instructions that are easy to implement, interpreting songs differently, providing social reinforcement and hints through music, and utilizing instruments that helped to engage the child.