



## Beating the drum for inclusion

*Jody Ashfield on the role of music in accessibility.*

**M**usic is a universal language that transcends cultures and barriers, bringing people together with pure sound. Musical play can be mobilised to improve accessibility and inclusion for people with intellectual, developmental, or learning disabilities and those living with certain physical disabilities. Music has a vital role in supporting accessibility and inclusion. For people who find linguistic communication difficult, music enables social integration and cohesion. Playing musical instruments can improve communication skills for those who participate and has been proven to be particularly beneficial for people with autistic spectrum disorders.

Improved communication can lead to improved social skills and, in addition, provides a means of self-expression, which is sometimes missing if verbal communication is difficult or limited. Playing musical instruments also promotes social development because people of all ages and abilities can play together, creating multi-generational interactions and facilitating enhanced community cohesion, communication,

*Music can be magical in its impact*

and integration. Our dopamine levels soar when we listen to or play music. Dopamine is the chemical in our brain that is activated when we experience pleasure and plays a vital role in our survival. People with learning disabilities or difficulties are often at greater risk of experiencing decreased dopamine levels because their lives are more likely to entail more frustrations, and they are sometimes unable to access the types of sensory experiences that contribute to increased levels of dopamine. It is essential to note that this is at least partially due to the ways in which modern society is structured in ways that often present structural barriers to people with disabilities in relation to social mobility, communication modes, and paths to employment and progression. For this reason, playing musical instruments can

be a powerful and accessible way to increase these feel-good chemicals and enhance the quality of life for those who have learning disabilities and difficulties.

### The pentatonic scale...





Music that is harmonious can also help boost our feel-good chemicals. Some musical instruments are tuned according to the pentatonic scale, meaning they consist of notes that can be played in any order and still sound harmonious. These complimentary sounds encourage tactile play and creativity because it is impossible to produce 'wrong' notes. The sounds of pentatonically tuned instruments are always pleasant, so maximise the feelings of safety and creative exploration for people who play them and thus allow them greater freedom of expression. In turn, this means that people are likely to become less anxious and more likely to engage with their peers, meaning that communication channels are opened. For people with intellectual or developmental disabilities that seriously affect their capacities for verbal communication, self-expression, and co-playing with others through musical play can be a powerful tool.

### The power of outdoor play....

Combining the power of music with the great outdoors can see multiple benefits for people with developmental needs. Playing outdoor musical instruments promotes physical movement and whole-body engagement. It combines sound with movement in an interactive way; this supports the establishment of positive responses to stimuli. Children with sensory processing disorders often display 'fight or flight' reflexes to unexpected sensations. Many observers have found that these fight or flight reactions are rarely seen with musical instruments. Children are generally calmer because the sensations are pleasant and anticipated,

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*All generations can play together*

and because their whole bodies are engaged in making music, they can access the music holistically, reducing fear and anxiety.

Instruments placed in any outdoor space can positively transform the way people communicate and help support accessibility and inclusion. All amateur musicians can play the same instruments together, regardless of physical ability or accessibility requirements. People from all walks of life can congregate in the same space to enjoy the instruments, thus working to break down any perceived social barriers that may exist. They can contribute to community regeneration through the ways in which inclusion, accessibility, and possibilities for togetherness are built into their very structure. 



■ Space to enjoy the instrument.