5 Must Dos for Incorporating Music Into Speech Therapy Sessions for Preschool & Elementary Gestalt Language Processors

I have a student on my caseload - let's call him Max - who loves watching songs on YouTube. He also has pretty significant anxiety - he's anxious around of loud noises, schedule changes, being away from parents and more.

For reference, I'll be using real examples of students to walk you through many different sessions using songs for gestalt language processors - but names and some details are changed so that it's not a privacy violation.

Max is also an Autistic student, and he's a gestalt language learner at Stage 2, meaning he's mixing and matching (or mitigating) some of his gestalts. For example "let's go" and "play colors" can come let's go play colors.

Media use is an important part of Max's leisure time. He loves Mickey Mouse, Nursery Rhymes, and other songs. These give him some auditory input he craves, and when we watch the song on YouTube, some of the visual input he's seeking. He also has a few favorite songs that help calm him down when he feels upset.

Over the past year working with Max, we've gone from passive media consumption with him (where he was watching YouTube clips of songs, and there wasn't much communication) to active media use that encourages communication and is a part of what helps us make progress on our goals (currently of mixing and matching gestalts). Through working with Max and making plenty of mistakes (and learning from those mistakes), I've learned some must-dos for incorporating music into speech therapy sessions - and the focus here will be on preschool and elementary school age, since that's the majority of the students I work with (although I do have a few middle and high school students on my caseload right now).

In this episode, I'll be sharing some research on music and speech therapy, who and when I use music in sessions and how. I hope that by having music be a part of your sessions, you'll have more fun, variety and joy in your speech therapy sessions - and that your students will too.

I'm Sarah, an SLP in private practice in Oregon, and I'm also a Teachers Pay Teachers materials designer. You can find my packet on using songs for your students who are Gestalt Language Processors (specifically stages 1-3) by following the link in the show

notes or going to teacherspayteachers.com and searching for the SLP Happy Hour stor - the Product is Called Autism & Songs for Gestalt Language Processors Stages 1-3.

As I share resources in this episode, there will be link to the show notes in your podcast app, or you can go to slphappyhour.com/show-notes and find this episode for links of everything discussed here. There will also be a blog post on the blog tab of the SLP Happy Hour website with this information in written form as well.

When it comes to using music in speech therapy sessions, there are some research findings that suggest that when music was incorporated into speech and language sessions, children's development in several key areas increases (including improvements in verbal expression, speech development and production, intonation, socialization, cognitive, emotional and motor skills). This was the findings of a systematic review of 8 articles titled Music and Musical Elements in the treatment of childhood speech sound disorders: a systematic review of the literature) by van Tellingen et al. (link) and it was published in the international journal of speech language pathology. The review noted that due to the small sample sizes in the study and poor methodological rigor, we do need updated robust studies in this area. Another resource: ASHA has an evidence map for Music and Speech Therapy

So, there is some limited early information that suggests music in sessions could be really good for children. Although the evidence isn't robust (yet), I still encourage SLPs to use music in their sessions - since research (called internal and external evidence) is only one side of the Evidence-Based Practice Triangle (the other two sides being clinical expertise and client perspectives).
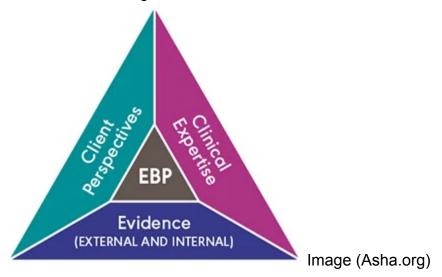
Considering client perspectives (again one of the three sides of the EBP triangle), I often ask myself:
What does a student love most?
What do they love about it?
When is the student joyful and engaged?

For many of my students, one of the answers to this question is when they are listening to music, singing, or watching a song on YouTube. So, when considering client perspectives, I want my sessions to be child-led and based on the interests of the child I'm working with.

The third side of the EBP triangle is clinical expertise. As an SLP, I can take ongoing data of how sessions go when I use music. I've found that for the most part students are engaged, attentive to language models, and are interested when songs are a part of the

session. Furthermore, my students are more regulated and in the "learning zone" when we incorporate songs. I can take data like: amount of time spent per session on task, level of regulation and attention, and use language samples to document growth over time as we use songs in sessions.

Image (Asha.org)

So, now that we've discussed EBP and using songs in speech therapy, here are 5 must dos when using songs in sessions - let's start off on the right foot by learning 5 things to do when it comes to songs.

ONE - consider the child's age and attention level
In general, there are some media use guidelines recommended by the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) which is
Under 18 months - no screen time (video calls don't count)
Ages 2-5 one hour per day
Ages 6-17 two hours per day
Given that, I typically stick to using videos of songs for ages 4 and older. I do sing songs for children younger than that. This should be a decision based on what you notice regarding regulation with the children you work with, and any family beliefs or priorities around screen time, if you are wanting to watch YouTube video clips of the songs.
Given this, I also don't spend the entire session watching songs - but I do like them for the start and end of sessions, sometimes as transitions between activities and also at times for regulation (you'll learn that certain students may have specific songs that put them into a calm state over time).
And regarding those screen time recommendations, I think that they may be unrealistic for most families. And what experts are recommending against is this passive media consumption - not pausing the song, and talking about what is happening while we

listen (making inferences, discussing feelings, and modeling gestalts) to support a child's language skills.

From my own clinical experience, young kids can tend to get sucked into media use and really not have the attention or self regulation to pause a video and talk about the song. So in general terms, if a child is under the age of 4, I'll sing songs in sessions. Once kids are four and up, I'll probably try watching YouTube videos of the songs and see how engaging it is, and how the child's regulation is.

Two - Envision your Session, and Make it Interactive
So what do these sessions look like? Here are a few examples.

Max loves Mickey Mouse and watching really any YouTube song. I don't always have themes, but this week I have a farm theme (mostly to make it easier for me to plan). Although I plan less with in-person sessions, this is a telepractice session and Max is at home. Max is Stage 2, but for this session he was having an anxious day, so I noticed most that nearly all of his gestalts were stage 1, so I made a decision in the moment to model mainly new stage one gestalts rather than stage two - because I had to account for his attention and regulation. His default stage 1 gestalt is one he learned at ABA that more than a year later we are still working hard on expanding (and it takes a lot of effort) which is I want + item.

Onward with the barn theme, we started with a song - Old MacDonald. Max loves animals so I'm mostly modeling gestalts like "it's so cute" "look at that one" "aww, look - what a cute one" - because that's what he's shown me he wants to communicate. When each animal was found he said "I love it" which was such a cute way of communicating to others things he loves - so we'll work on using that gestalt in more activities. Then, I did a GoGo Speech activity called Peek-a-Boo Barn, that company makes powerpoint presentations you go through that can be interactive, so max covered his eyes and we surprised the animals. For this - I was really working on regulation. He was having a dysregulated day and feeling a bit anxious so something I've learned is that if you don't have regulation the goal IS regulation. So we did peekaboo and he started to feel successful and he really enjoyed looking at mom sitting next to him as she was doing the peek-a-boo motion with him. So there we go - we have a glimmer of engagement. Next we had the BINGO song and really all I got here was "I want BINGO," I was still noticing that really active anxiety state (eyes darting, asking for hugs - which is great that he was asking for what he needs, and low attention). Then, we went on and did a boom card deck which was guess the animal - Max would hear an animal sound and we'd work on the gestalt "it's a _____." Now, this session looked a lot like a session we would have had six months ago, which is why I wanted to mention when it comes to any session (including gestalt language learners) regulation is paramount. We may need to

model at an easier level based on how things are going and the regulation of the student - we meet them where they are today, not where we think they should be. Did I model the Stage 2 gestalts I thought I would? No. Was it still a successful session because I met Max where he was and worked on expanding models for more diverse stage 1 gestalts? Yes. Work on making it interactive and meeting the child where they are now.

So, envision your session - a few activities you might do and a few gestalts you might model, and then be flexible to observe your student and see where they are today.

Three - have a goal in mind (and be flexible)
When we do anything in sessions, we have a goal in mind. So let's give another example. One day per week I co-treat with a private practice OT in her sensory gym. I have another student - also in Stage 2 - let's call him Peter.
I started the session by thinking about what was interesting to him - spinning in a spinning chair and climbing up the ladder to the monkey bars (he doesn't actually go across them). His gestalts for the chair are "push me" and "push me please" and his gestalts for the monkey bars are "let's go up" and "let's go down"
So, in my mind some mitigated gestalts I could model based on what he already has and on the activities he likes are: let's spin, let's go around, let's do it again, let's climb up, let's play monkey bars and more.
So before the session I have in mind a few gestalts and a few activity ideas (monkey bars and spinning chair). (By the way, if you have an opportunity to cotreat with an OT - do it, I spend less time lesson planning and absolutely love having access to a sensory gym and learning from the OT I work with.)
However, today Peter was hungry and wanted a snack and wanted tickles. So I spent very little time doing what I thought we would do. For example, when Peter laid down on the crash mat, he said "tickle" so I modeled "tickle + feet" and "tickle + hands" and other body parts. He already had gestalts with body parts and "tickle me" so whereas yes strictly speaking I was expanding on his utterance, I was using parts of gestalts he already had (which I could review in my trusty Google Doc language sample that I keep for each students) to gain specificity.
So, starting the session I had a few activity ideas and gestalts in mind based on his language sample. For me, having that in my mind helped me be flexible once the session started and Peter wanted tickles - because I'd just glanced through his language sample.
So to review have a goal in mind AND be flexible.

Four - take data on the goal
Continuing with the example of Peter - what data do I take, and how?

Some of my students have engagement goals - in other words to open circles of communication, others have goals to participate in a certain number of people or toy play activities so that we can build communication off those, and other students have gestalt processing specific goals. Peter's goal was to mitigate +10 new gestalts in speech sessions, and I track that with ongoing language sampling. For me because I'm on the go, I write down utterances on my phone's note app during the session and after the session delete it, transfer it to the soap note and copy and paste from the SOAP note it into a google doc language sample I have for this student.
When I have a goal in mind - mixing and matching 10 new gestalts to form 10 unique new gestalts, my language sample is the data and I can track progress over time.

Five - vary the songs and activities to vary the language models
Conner is an elementary student who is Stage 5, so we are modeling some pronouns and negatives in sessions. He loves playing with a Fisher Price pirate ship, and we use magnatiles to make an ocean under the ship and sometimes sharks even visit.
While I can't think of any pirate songs per se, I immediately think of baby shark and wonder if there's a way to expand baby shark or even include it in our play routine. I end up grabbing two sharks. I know we are clearing up his use of "they" and I want to model it, plus something specific to his stage 5 level - modeling the negatives *isn't and won't.*
So, during the play routine I start to sing the beginning of baby shark (and I can see I'm getting more attention and engagement, then I pause and return to the play scene
"Oh no!" I say holding one of the people "Sharks!"
Holding another person I say "Don't worry, they won't get you," and we build a box around one of the sharks, the shark saying "This isn't fair! I can't get out."
We keep singing more of the song and expand the play routine.
Again, I'm doing things I've seen the student do before in sessions (play with the sharks and the ship, play a routine where the sharks get the people, and enclose a toy within a box made out of magnatiles), and I'm modeling language based on his stage.
I didn't have to sing the whole song, I didn't have to include a device or YouTube, and I didn't need to base my whole session on the song.
The next session I brought out 5 sharks and we did 5 little sharks to the tune of 5 little monkeys and had them (one at a time) fall off the table where the pirate ship was, and I'd model the people in the boat say "he won't get me" "that one isn't here."
I've noticed that while I *can* use the same song over and over and model different gestalts, there does become a point at which it's almost *too* much of a routine, and kids will get their favorite gestalts to go with the song. While that's great- they have favorite things to say, I'll also want to vary the songs so that I can vary my models.

Outro

So there, you have it, 5 must dos for incorporating music into your speech therapy sessions.

ONE - consider the child's age and attention level
Two - Envision your Session, and Make it Interactive
Three - have a goal in mind (and be flexible)
Four - take data on the goal
Five - vary the songs and activities to vary the language models

If you'd like a bit more support and structure around using music with your gestalt language learners, I have an Autism & Songs For Gestalt Language Stages 1-3 packet available on my website (slphappyhour.com) or on (teacherspayteachers.com, links in the show notes. This product comes with a review of stages 1-3, lesson planning templates, ideas for finding a focus for your sessions, and 15 songs with suggested gestalts for stages 1-3. Let me do the work for you with this print-and-go resource for on-the-go SLPs with busy days.

That's it for this episode of the SLP Happy Hour podcast. I hope it was helpful to be a fly on the wall for some of my speech therapy sessions to gain some ideas for using songs with your gestalt