

International multicentre randomised controlled trial of improvisational music therapy for children with autism spectrum disorder: TIME-A study

Mike J Crawford,^{1*} Christian Gold,²
Helen Odell-Miller,³ Lavanya Thana,¹ Sarah Faber,³
Jörg Assmus,² Łucja Bieleninik,² Monika Geretsegger,²
Claire Grant,⁴ Anna Maratos,⁴ Stephan Sandford,⁵
Amy Claringbold,¹ Helen McConachie,⁶
Morag Maskey,⁷ Karin Antonia Mössler,²
Paul Ramchandani¹ and Angela Hassiotis⁸ on behalf
of the TIME-A study team

¹Centre for Psychiatry, Imperial College London, London, UK

²The Grieg Academy Music Therapy Research Centre, Uni Research Health, Bergen, Norway

³Music for Health Research Centre, Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, UK

⁴Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust, London, UK

⁵Chelsea and Westminster Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, London, UK

⁶Institute of Health and Society, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

⁷Institute of Neuroscience, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

⁸Division of Psychiatry, University College London, London, UK

*Corresponding author m.crawford@imperial.ac.uk

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Plain English summary

The TIME-A study

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Plain English summary

Children with autism have problems understanding and communicating with other people. This can affect their general development, emotional health and social relationships. Little is known about how best to help them.

Music therapy is a treatment that aims to help children develop better communication skills and relationships through making, listening and responding to music. A number of studies have shown promising results, but were too small to be sure if this is really an effective approach.

The TIME-A trial was an international randomised controlled trial study of music therapy for children with autism. We recruited 364 children with autism, aged 4–7 years, across nine countries. We offered all the children three sessions of advice and support, then randomly selected half and offered them music therapy as well. The music therapy was delivered either once or three times per week for 5 months. We followed the children up at 5 and 12 months and assessed their social and communication skills, as well as the level of stress and mental well-being experienced by their parents.

Nearly all the children who were offered music therapy attended it and, on average, 19 sessions were attended in total. However, there were no significant differences in social and communication skills between children allocated to the additional music therapy and those allocated to the advice and support alone. There was also no difference in the parent's assessment of the child's related social responsiveness.

Despite high levels of engagement in music therapy, it does not appear to improve social communication in children with autism. Alternative methods for delivering music-focused interventions for children with autism should be explored.

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