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A Movement and Music Program for Children with Autism

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The Movement and Music Program is a public school dance and music curriculum developed to serve children with autism. A full-time certified public school dance specialist, I teach in an inclusion program from September through June. For six weeks in the summer, I have the privilege of working with children with autism in a 6:1:1 setting (six students, one teacher, and one paraprofessional). In collaboration with Educational Assistant Linda Walker, I have developed a dance and music curriculum that promotes social interaction and personal expression while building dance and music skills.

BACKGROUND

Our summer school program serves children with special needs whose individualized educational plans (IEPs) stipulate year-round schooling. It is a full-day program of study including language arts and mathematics, as well as classes provided by specialists in dance, science, and physical education.

I see each of the five classes for children with autism for a 45-minute class twice each week for six weeks. The children served in this program have a wide range of abilities and challenges. Some of the children are nonverbal. Others have both expressive and receptive language skills. Most have difficulty understanding and responding to social cues. Gross and fine motor challenges are common, and students face many other challenges that affect their learning. Our program targets social skills such as listening, taking turns, greeting and parting, and making eye contact. Discipline-specific skills include the development of gross motor competencies; learning, replicating, and creating movement

ABSTRACT

This article describes a movement and music program for children with moderate to severe autism in a public elementary school in Brooklyn, New York. It takes place during a six-week, full-day summer school. The children have a range of abilities and challenges. Some are completely nonverbal, whereas others have both receptive and expressive language skills. Many students have gross and fine motor challenges, and most of the children have difficulty understanding and responding to social cues. The Movement and Music curriculum promotes social interaction and personal expression while building dance and music skills. Classes include carefully crafted and consistently followed routines, providing a safe space for exploration. Visual images including pictures, symbols, and physical modeling are embedded in every class. Instruction is also supported by the use of song, body percussion, drumming, and rhythmic movement. Collaboration between the dance educator and paraprofessionals allows activities to be modified for individual students and supports student achievement.

and rhythmic patterns; and exploring a range of movement elements through improvisation.

The Picture Exchange Communication System

The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) is an alternative communication system developed in 1985 at the Delaware Autism Program by Lori Frost and Andy Bondy. Visual images representing people, objects, and actions, PECS symbols are designed to build communication skills in children with limited or no verbal language. Implementation of the PECS system involves learning a specific training protocol based on applied behavioral analysis (Overcash and Horton 2010). At PS 372, The Children's School, classroom teachers and administration members are trained in the use of the system. PECS is used in dance and music class to facilitate communication and understanding.

During class, I wear 20 of the symbols hung on a key ring necklace. I greet my students at the door, saying "Good morning" while showing the "good morning" symbol. Other symbols are used to cue behavior and transitions such as "line up" and "your turn" (see Figure 1). PECS symbols are displayed with words on the image wall, and are used to notate dance sequences.

CLASS STRUCTURE

Predictable routines are important in all dance classes, and crucial in classes for students with autism. A highly structured, predictable environment helps children with autism to feel safe, and supports their learning readiness (Gallant, Duggan, and Stratton-Gonzalez 2007). Although individual activities and elements of my class will grow and change, the overall structure stays the same over the six-week summer session.

Preparing the Space

The classroom space is spare. I turn bookshelves around and cover the backs with colorful paper. Other bookcases are draped with fabric, providing access to supplies. Clutter is removed. Free of visual distraction and objects to touch, the environment helps children to focus.

Vinyl floor tape and spot markers are used to designate the location of different class activities such as circle time, dancing across the floor, and freeze dance. The walls are sparingly decorated. As the summer evolves, the bulletin boards and walls are used to display the photographs and work of my students.

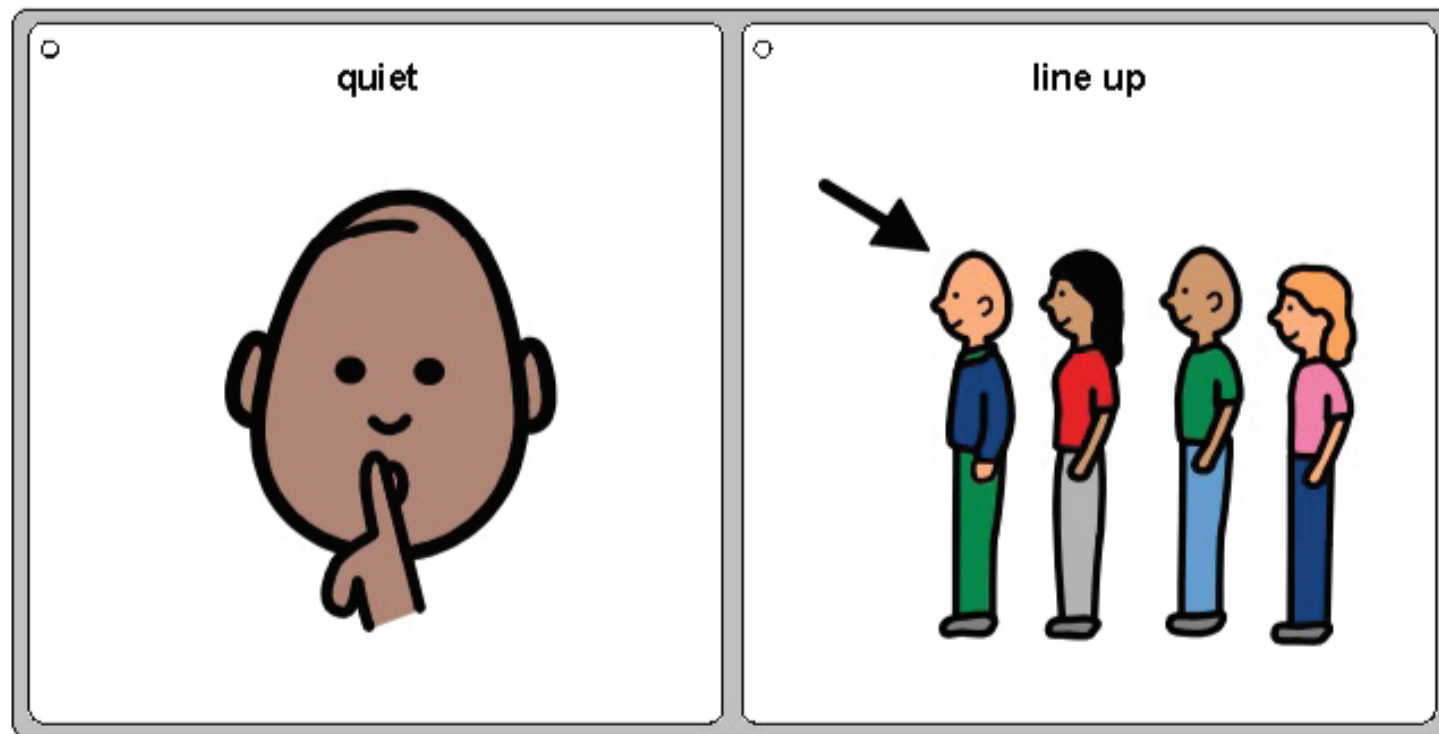


Figure 1. Picture Exchange Communication System symbols are useful to teaching and reinforcing expectations and routines. The Picture Communication Symbols ©1981–2011 by Mayer-Johnson LLC. All rights reserved worldwide. Used with permission. Mayer-Johnson, 2100 Wharton Street, Suite 400, Pittsburgh, PA 15203. Phone: 1 (800) 588–4548. Fax: 1 (866) 585–6260. Email: mayer-johnson.usa@dynavotech.com. Web site: www.mayer-johnson.com

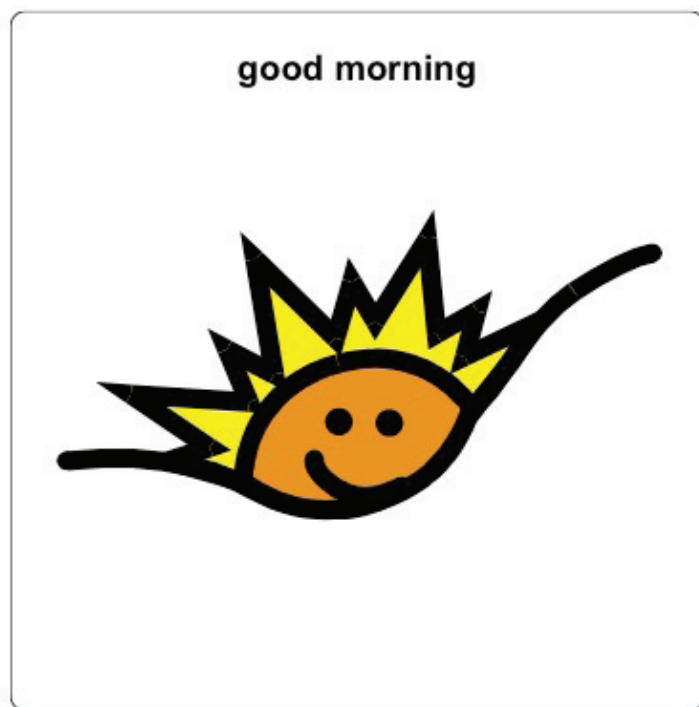


Figure 2. Good morning symbol. The Picture Communication Symbols ©1981–2011 by Mayer-Johnson LLC. All rights reserved worldwide. Used with permission. Mayer-Johnson, 2100 Wharton Street, Suite 400, Pittsburgh, PA 15203. Phone: 1 (800) 588–4548. Fax: 1 (866) 585–6260. Email: mayer-johnson.usa@dynavoxtech.com. Web site: www.mayer-johnson.com

Greeting

I greet my students and the class paraprofessional(s) at the door. I say “Good morning,” showing the “good morning” symbol (Figure 2), and greet each child by name. I then ask, “What time is it?” while showing the PECS “dance” symbol. At least one child will answer, “Dance!” I will say, “It’s time to dance!” and show the “circle time” symbol, telling the children to come sit in a circle on one of the spot markers.

It might take a minute or two to get the class settled, and I have learned to relax and wait until children and adults are calm and seated in the circle. Paraprofessionals are asked to bring chairs to the circle to sit behind children who need extra support—or to sit on the floor next to them if they are comfortable doing so. Children who might enter the room and then begin wandering around are gently coaxed into the circle. Once the circle is established, I begin the first song, which borrows from the first line of “Hello, I Love You,” by the classic rock band The Doors and lead singer Jim Morrison.

Greeting Song

Hello, I love you, won’t you tell me your name?

Hello, I love you, won’t you tell me your name?

“Hello, I Love You” is sung with tap/clap body percussion. We sing the phrase twice, then I put my hands together and point to the child next to me to indicate it is her turn to tell me her name. Some children will tell me their name on their own, some when prompted, and others cannot yet speak. For nonverbal children, I show the symbol for “my name is” and give them time to answer before saying their name. Everyone in the circle responds by saying, for example, “Hello, Sara.” The song is repeated for each person, children and adults. In a high-functioning class, there will be a short conversation after the hello; for example, “My name is Charlie.” “Hello Charlie, it’s nice to see you today; I like your blue shirt.” “Thank you.”

Warm Up

The warm up is a set series of activities, and most warm-up exercises are sung. The lyrics of the first two songs are provided here, with movement instructions in italics.

Butterfly (*seated with the soles of the feet together*)
 Butterfly, flap your wings (*bounce the knees*)
 and fly so high, then tuck your wings (*tuck your knees*)
 look up in the sky (*look up*)
 stretch your wings (*reach the arms overhead*)
 open them wide as you fly (*reach the arms to the side*)
 then land back down, on the ground (*bend at the waist and touch the floor*)
 Look! Another butterfly flies by (*find one of the butterflies on the wall*)

Stretch and Stretch (*in seated pike position, sliding hands from thighs to feet as we sing*)
 We stretch and stretch and smooth it out
 Stretch and stretch and smooth it out
 Clap high, clap low
 on the floor one two three
 Show me the bottoms of your feet! (*sitting in a pike position arms extended forward feet flexed*)

Depending on the children’s focus, there will be three to six warm-up songs. The songs are simple and short, and rhyming lyrics describe the movement. My verbal students love to sing these songs, and in time many can lead the songs themselves. As advanced students become familiar with warm up, I add a standing section based on isolations. Body parts are named for each isolation, using a call and response and moving from head to toe.

Circle Dances

Immediately following the warm-up, we learn a basic circle dance. I have used simple country dances with success. PECS symbols are modified to show the sequence of the dance. For example, the symbols for a clockwise circle and walking are combined and named “walk in a circle.” Adults

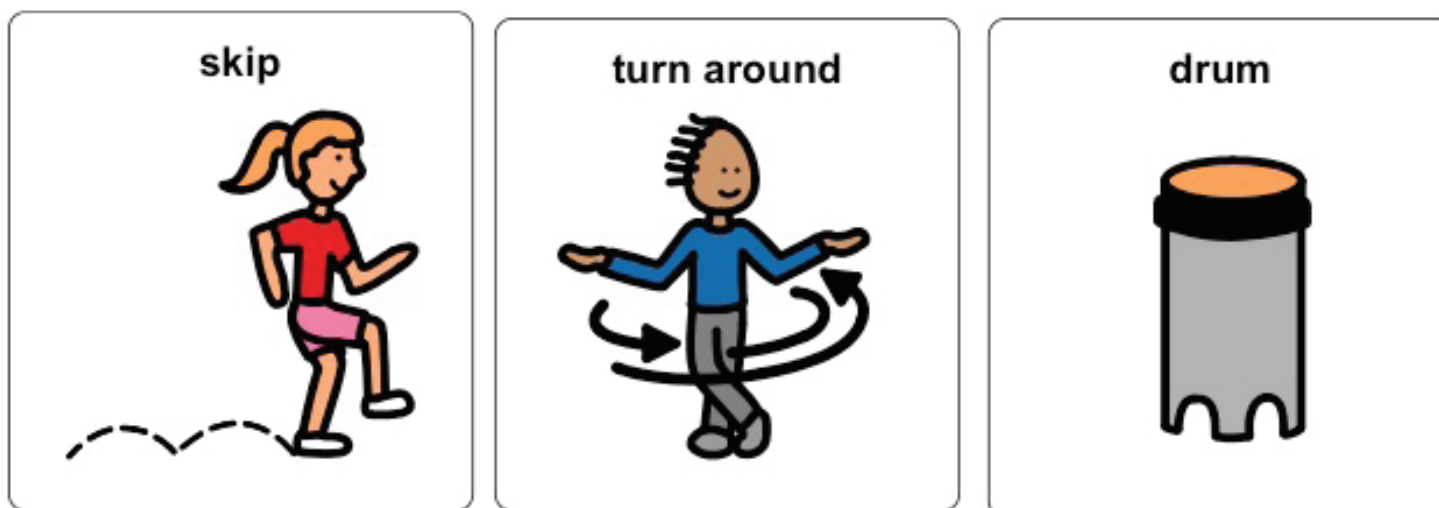


Figure 3. Skip, turn around, and play the drum. The Picture Communication Symbols ©1981–2011 by Mayer-Johnson LLC. All rights reserved worldwide. Used with permission. Mayer-Johnson, 2100 Wharton Street, Suite 400, Pittsburgh, PA 15203. Phone: 1 (800) 588–4548. Fax: 1 (866) 585–6260. Email: mayer-johnson.usa@dynavoxtech.com. Web site: www.mayer-johnson.com

are positioned in the circle next to children who need support. For accompaniment, I use New England Dancing Master's *Chimes of Dunkirk* CD, and I "call" the steps of the dance.

Country Dance Sequence

Holding hands walk around the circle clockwise—16 counts
Reverse, and walk back home—16 counts
Drop hands and clap one, two, one two three—8 times
Hold hands and walk into the circle, then walk back out—16 counts

Repeat walking in and out

Swing your partner to the right—8 counts

And then to the left—8 counts

Repeat

Dancing Across the Floor

Many of my students struggle with focus and have difficulty following directions. A highly structured approach to dancing "across the floor" has been successful with these children. The children sit on a blue line taped to the floor on one side of the room. A diagonal line of a different color is taped to the floor. A green spot is placed on one end of the diagonal to indicate the start. One of the class paraprofessionals is at the other end of the diagonal with a large djembe or conga.

I introduce a single locomotor movement and place its symbol on an easel, next to the symbol for drum. This is our first movement sequence: Run and drum, skip and drum or hop and drum (Figure 3)! I approach each child in turn, sharing the symbol "your turn." The first time a child goes across the floor, we walk to the easel and review the sequence of symbols. Then we walk together to the

I introduce
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and place its
symbol on an
easel next to
the drum.

start point and dance to the drum. Children who are independent are encouraged to dance on their own. Others will go across the floor independently after the first or second turn. Some children will need continued one-on-one support with the mechanics of the movement, sequencing, or both. The teaching assistant on the drum supports the movement by playing a skipping, running, or jumping rhythm as needed. The sequence ends with its built-in reward—playing the drum!

Soon, the children are ready to choose their own movements. Four or

five symbols are displayed on the easel. Each child in turn chooses one symbol to place next to the drum symbol. Eventually, symbol choices can be expanded, and movement sequences of three or four actions can be created and varied with changes in level, pathway, and direction.

Improvisation

Improvisation is an important part of all dance classes and allows students the opportunity to explore and expand their own movement choices. I often begin improvisation with a

basic freeze dance, using the symbols “dance” and “stop,” along with demonstration and verbal cuing. Most children will readily get up to dance, and the adults partner the reluctant dancers. While dancing with a child, I often mirror the movements the child chooses and provide verbal feedback; for example, “Sarah, what a strong turn!” or “Harry, I love the way you can jump on one leg.”

Once the class is comfortable moving in general space, we explore dance elements. Tempo is a great element to start with, changing music from slow to moderate to fast. In my experience, the addition of props engages children and adults. Movement elements are easily explored with scarves, ribbon wands, and stretch bands. Scarves can float, wave, and turn, and they encourage light movement. They can be tossed and caught. And, of course, scarves make wonderful costumes—capas, headscarves, aprons, and so on.

Ribbon Wands

Ribbon wands introduce spatial design, pathways, and levels. I begin by demonstrating specific ribbon dance moves from the Chinese Ribbon Dance including Rainbow, Rocket, and Baby Dragon. The pathways of these movements are drawn on the white board, demonstrated, practiced together, and then sequenced to music from Yim Hok-Man’s *Master of Chinese Percussion*. Advanced students are encouraged to create their own moves, draw them, and share them with the class. Students who are reluctant movers are again partnered with an adult. Echoing a movement that a child is

creates a field of parallel play. After a few moments, teachers might expand on a child’s movement, making it larger, slower, faster, or smaller. In turn, these changes are often mirrored back by the child.

Echoing a movement that a child is doing with her or his wand creates a field of parallel play. After a few moments, teachers might expand on a child’s movement, making it larger, slower, faster, or smaller.

Drum Circle

The last 15 to 20 minutes of each class are reserved for our drum circle. As we prepare to play, children are encouraged to help gather props and bring out the chairs to the circle.

Drum time begins with just one hand drum and one mallet. I play a simple pattern on the drum and then pass the drum and mallet to the first child. That child repeats the pattern and passes the drum back to me. Some children easily replicate patterns, whereas others need support in holding the mallet and drum. Every effort is celebrated and children are encouraged to handle the drum on their own. We continue around the circle, passing the drum from teacher to student until everyone has played.

Next, the drum is passed from child to child around the circle while the teacher holds a second drum. Here I work with patterns of beats, volume, and tempo. I show the symbols for soft and loud (or fast and slow), and we repeat the pattern with specific volume and tempo choices. Attention is paid to passing the drum. Each child is given time to process the request to pass the drum, and the child receiving waits until the drum is offered. Eye contact is encouraged, and the child receiving the drum says “Thank you.”

Adults are strategically seated in the drum circle to support and assist students who need help with the mechanics of drumming, help attending to instructions, or help with behavior. For an anxious or hyperactive child, the educational assistant can sit in a chair directly behind her or him to give a light touch on the shoulders, helping the student to stay in place.

Bingo and Other Patterns

Once the drums are passed, each child and adult is given a drum and we play as a group. We begin by singing the Bingo song, playing the drum only during the B-I-N-G-O refrain. I use the gesture of holding my drum and mallet up in the air to signal stop, and bring the drum to my lap when it’s time to play. This pattern of singing and playing is repeated using the names of each child. In this way, for example, Sasha’s name, which is five letters like Bingo, is played in the Bingo beat pattern, but Sylvia’s six-letter name is played eighth-eighth/quarter/eighth-eighth/quarter. Many children correctly play the various patterns; others find success by alternating playing and stopping.

New patterns can be created using contrasting tempo, tones (bass/high) and volume. One of the teachers models a pattern (e.g., soft/soft/loud), and the group plays together following her 4/4 beat. Later, as children become comfortable with drumming, I encourage each child to create a pattern for the group to copy.

Many variations to the drum circle can be created using instruments such as shakers, cowbells, wood blocks, djembes, and congas. These can be introduced in the same way the

hand drum was introduced, or as solo instruments played during ensemble drumming. For ensemble drumming, I begin with a simple 4/4 beat with at least one adult anchoring the rhythm to keep the group together.

Cool Down: Goodbye Song and Line Up

When drum time is over, the students collect and put away the instruments—with adults assisting as needed. We all then return to our seats to sing goodbye.

Goodbye, goodbye, It's time to say goodbye

Goodbye, goodbye, It's time to say goodbye

The symbol for “line up” is shown, and children line up at the classroom door. As the children exit, I individually say “Goodbye,” “Good work” or “See you tomorrow.”

COLLABORATION

The success of this class is based on the high level of collaboration among the many adults in the room. Educational assistants have a deep understanding of children's needs and behavior. At each moment in class, we are working together. During warm-up, all adults join in the warm-up circle. Those who prefer to are invited to sit in the circle on chairs; some sit on the floor; and some sit in a chair behind children who need help staying in place. Paraprofessionals are included in the “Hello, I Love You” song, model movements for children, provide oral cues, and physically manipulate children's arms or legs if needed.

When we dance across the floor, an educational assistant will sit at the end of our diagonal line with the conga and accompany the dance. Paraprofessionals help children stay seated, and get them ready to dance by providing oral and visual cues regarding expected behavior (e.g., quiet hands) and the coming task (e.g., skip and jump). In the case of serious behavioral disruptions, a paraprofessional might take a child out into the hallway briefly to help the child calm down. Paraprofessionals help with difficult movement challenges such as getting down on the floor to help a child roll, or holding a child's hand to support his or her skipping or jumping.

During drum time, our roles are sometimes reversed: A paraprofessional might lead the class while I sit with individual children to support their participation. A paraprofessional might play the drum with a child, model the activity, hold the drum for a child who cannot wait her turn, or stand in the middle of the drum circle modeling the activity and keeping the beat while I work my way around the circle one student at a time. At the end of the class, we sing the goodbye song together; I supervise lining up; and an assistant supervises the collection of instruments and clean up.

DATA

To support teaching and learning, I have created a daily checklist that I use to track the progress of individual students and classes overall (Figure 4). The checklist includes reoccurring criteria such as focus and participation, as well as lesson-specific criteria such as performing a movement sequence or demonstrating fast and slow tempos. Each checklist includes space for a quick outline of class activities and comments for each student and the class overall.

The success
of this class is
based on the
high level of
collaboration
among the
many adults
in the room.

Each day's lesson determines the details of the lesson plan for the next class and the specific goals for each child. A positive experience with a particular activity in one class can result in a modification that adds an additional challenge in the following class. If a child has a difficult time with a task or activity, the next lesson might break the task into more manageable parts.

Activities often need modification for physical comfort and skill. For example, a child afraid of rolling needs direct support. First, I get on the floor to demonstrate a roll and encourage the child to roll with me. For more support, I place a mat on the floor and kneel behind the child and encourage him or her to lay on his or her back and relax. Slowly, I cross the child's ankles and begin to roll the child to his or her stomach. Then I manipulate the child's arms to complete a full roll to his or her back. We might do only one or two rolls. In subsequent classes, I will repeat the sequence, building to three or four rolls.

SUMMARY

A successful dance and music class for children with autism starts with the creation of a safe space. The room is cleared of obstacles and visual distractions. Class routines are in place and followed consistently. All class activities are explicitly demonstrated, described, and represented visually. Repetition is used to support student achievement. It is also crucial for the dance educator to model calm behavior, have the confidence to allow silence and time for a child to respond, and have patience for confusion and chaos when children become overwhelmed and act out.

7/16 Activities: Warm up Cross floor sequence Freeze Dance: tempo Pass the shaker Shakers soft/loud Ensemble playing	Focus	Participation	Sequencing 3 actions	Use of slow and fast tempo	Passes Shaker	Replicates 4/4 pattern	Maintains 4/4 beat in ensemble	+ Excellent job ✓ Accomplishes task - Needs support Comments
Adam								
Betty								
Candace								
Doug								
Elliot								

Figure 4. Sample checklist: Class ABC.

The use of multiple entry points is another key to success. Visual images are extremely important in the autism classroom. The PECS symbols work well in my classroom because they are the standard in my school. Physical demonstration is another key to learning, particularly when combined with a clear underlying rhythm supported by drumming, body percussion, or song.

Careful scaffolding of activities supports learning in the autism classroom. Each stage of the learning process is repeated before the next stage is attempted. For students ready to move on before the rest of the class, dance elements can be added (e.g., levels, dynamics, tempo), and sequences can be expanded.

In the autism classroom, each child is honored, and the best supports are sought for each one. For example, I noticed that Doug barely moved his ribbon wand and kept reaching for another one. I gave him a second wand and he created symmetrical spirals with them. Doug needed to move his arms symmetrically to begin exploring ribbons. Once he mastered the parallel spirals, Doug was open to new movements and tried swinging the wands up and down. I found several other children also increased their range of movement when using two wands. To support these children further, I encouraged them to cross the midline with the wands—moving wands in and out in addition to up and down.

After each class, I complete the checklist. I keep this information in my iPad, and can remember at a glance the progress or struggles of each child. The checklist provides benchmarks for student challenges and successes, and helps to guide lesson planning and development.

Working with children with autism is a deeply gratifying experience. I am freed from the demands of performance, production, and grading experienced during the September-to-June year in the inclusion classroom. In the summer, I can hone in on the essence of movement. How do we move? Who are we as movers? How do movement, rhythm, and song interact and allow the teacher and student to communicate and explore?

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