

# Music & Autism



# Tips

## INTRODUCTION

Autism is a complex neurobiological disorder that affects 1 in 150 individuals. Marked by social and communication challenges, children with autism have difficulty connecting with the world around them and frequently show rigid or repetitive patterns of behavior.

Research from the field of applied behavior analysis indicates that integrating a child's interests and motivations into instruction can lead to increased success. Because studies support enhanced musical processing and musical interest in individuals with autism, music can be an ideal tool to promote learning. Preliminary findings from clinical studies also show positive outcomes for interactive and individualized music strategies to improve communication, play skills, and socialization. When using music to teach children with autism, it is important to tailor activities to their learning style. Below are classroom-tested tips to help your students tune in!

- **Design a visual schedule** to prepare the student for the order of songs during music time. Create photos or icons for each song, then laminate and affix with Velcro. On the back of the schedule board you can include a pouch with a "finished" icon for the student to place icons in once the song is over. See example at right.
- **Pre-teach songs in the one to one setting** until the student is familiar with the lyrics and can imitate motor movements or follow target instructions before using the song in the group environment.
- **Pair songs with visual supports** such as photos, flashcards, or objects to increase comprehension of the song lyrics.
- If the student begins to tune out, **provide a simple motor movement** such as clapping or tapping knees which the child can easily imitate, or if using visual supports, bring them in close proximity to the student, guiding him or her to look or point.
- To prime the student for speech activities, engage the child in singing of a preferred song before working on more challenging speech tasks. **Try leaving out a word at the end of each song phrase** and have the student fill it in with the correct word or word approximation.



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- **Quiz the student after the song** to increase generalization of skills. For example, after singing a Days of the Week song, have the student find the day on the calendar, or recite the days of the week verbally.
- **Take an inventory of the student's favorite songs** and music recordings from home and make the same music available at school to use as a special reinforcer or reward.
- **Use instruments that have high appeal for turn taking activities** such as an Ocean Drum or Rainbowmaker Rainstick (visit [www.westmusic.com](http://www.westmusic.com) or [www.musiciselementary.com](http://www.musiciselementary.com))
- **Sing themed songs** that correspond with play activities to increase motivation and interaction. For example, sing "I've Been Working on the Railroad" during a train play activity or "Row Your Boat" during a water play activity.

## TEACHING RESOURCES

Much of traditional children's music contains fast paced and complex lyrics that can be overwhelming for children with autism who frequently have language processing difficulties. Although individuals on the autism spectrum often recite songs from memory, they may not understand the meaning behind the words. For these reasons, it is important to utilize songs that target concepts that can be readily applied to everyday life, have appropriate pacing, use concise language, and offer the child time to respond after an instruction is given.

The Tuned in to Learning® program was designed specifically for children with autism and related disorders and targets 90 educational objectives across the 9-volume music-assisted learning curriculum. The program uses an engaging combination of inventive songs, movement, and vibrant visual supports to boost motivation and lock in core concepts.

**TuNed In to LEARNING™**

To learn more, visit  
[www.tunedintolearning.com](http://www.tunedintolearning.com)

