

The Hirstwood Training 2 Day course notes



Working with sound in the multi sensory
room.

Course Tutor

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Our **hearing** is used to gain vast amounts of information about our environment and other people. For many people it is a part of every day communication. Sounds can reassure us that we are not alone and give us pleasure. But when in the Multi sensory room, sound often takes second place to the visual effects.

Does the sound you are using have any meaning or is it just incidental to the session?

Consider how important your hearing is to you? Close your eyes and listen. There is a vast, cascading stream of sounds around us, all with something to offer. Hearing loss is found in a vast amount of people with profound and multiple disabilities. This does not mean that all will be totally deaf but the sounds very confusing, this is also found with autistic students.

The word, which is familiar to us all, is 'listening', but what is listening and what are the skills we need to acquire to listen? There is a difference between listening and hearing. When we **listen** we are focusing on the sound. Sounds we **hear** are often placed in the background but not ignored.

- **Listening** – Sounds we focus on.
- **Hearing** – Sounds we monitor.

When we '**listen**' to a sound, we evaluate and rationalise the sound. A change in a familiar sound may spark interest from the listener. It may be a new sound but we only really notice sound when it stops!

You have also developed an expectation of sounds. You expect the right noises to come from the right objects. If they do not, then the sounds may invite more investigation. We have a massive memory of sounds built in to our brain and we understand their meaning and how they can affect us. We have had the 'experience' or 'stimulation' to understand the sound.

When we hear a sound, we very quickly evaluate:

- How loud is it?
- Is it high pitch or low pitch?
- Where is it coming from?
- Is the sound moving?
- Is there more than one sound?
- Is it a friendly or unfriendly sound?
- Will it affect me?
- Do I need to do anything about it?

So how does this have an effect the way we use sound in the MSR? There is obviously a hierarchy for these actions and we may feel that we to do them all

at once, in a split second. Hearing is difficult to evaluate, as many students do not possess easily identified ways of communicating hearing preferences. We may need to look for subtle changes in the student's body language no matter how slight.

'If you know nothing about the hearing abilities of the student it has to start with assessment'. One of the best examples I have found was published by the RNIB. The full text is available from: Gill Levy at the RNIB, Multiple Disability Service, 224 Great Portland St, London, W1N 6AA. Telephone 0044 (0) 171 3 88 12 66

The full document can be downloaded from the web Site www.rnib.org.uk/multdis

Also see 'Investigations' on this CD.

There are many observations you could make when using music, sound effects or other sound makers. Whilst the student has her back to the bubble tube, switch it on. See if the student turns to the sound, the reward for locating the sound could be the visual effect associated to the sound. This could apply to much of the equipment in the room as most makes some kind of noise.

You may be working with students at a more advanced level. You could ask the student to identify the 'same sounds' 'different sounds' and 'families of sound'. This could be through the medium of percussion instruments. You have a set and the student has another set. Hide your instruments, make the sound and see if the student can find the same sound by selecting the correct instrument.

Try matching sounds to the picture of the 'noisemaker' e.g. telephone ringing, car engine starting. This could be done in the MSR by making a 'sound wheel' for your projector with pictures of objects, which make a sound. You would ask the student to tell you when the right picture comes around. Picture cards or the real object could complement the activity. Use sounds of everyday activities e.g. making a cup of tea, or in the MSR the sound of a bubble tube. Excellent sound effect CD's can be obtained at record shops (if we still call them that) or Mike Ayres has a full range of CD sound effects, contact 0044 (0) 1359 251 551.

Remember that verbal communication is very important too us all. There are pre-requisite skills we need to learn a task could be to put sounds in the right sequence. 'The cat sat on the mat' must be remembered in the correct sequence to understand the statement. You could have games like 'what happens next? Using switches. Or try stories (or themes) in the room using books. 'The Hungry Caterpillar' is an obvious choice for children or an age appropriate book for adults, maybe based on an interest somebody has.

Music is excellent for setting moods in a room and sound may be used to complement lighting effects. When working with challenging behaviour calming music may have the desired effect. Some music can have a calming effect, and there is no doubt pan pipes and new age music is very appropriate for some, but for others, experimentation is needed. Think about the style of the music you are playing.

1. **Is it familiar to the student, or is it a new experience for them?**
2. **Is the music the correct frequency for the student?**
3. **Is the music within the communication zone of the student?**
4. **Is the music fast or slow so affecting the mood of the student?**
5. **Are the other sounds around complicating or confusing the music?**
6. **Is it age appropriate?**

Try a CD or tape to the left of a student then after some time, (e.g. 5 minutes) move the sound to the right. This could also be done with the balance control on a fixed stereo system. What we are doing is changing the location of the sound. We may then assess the student to see if they have noticed the change in direction.

A variation of this technique could be to play pop music on the left try classical music to the right when you move the sound. If you move the sound back to the left put the pop music on again!

Just like us, our students will have likes and dislikes, for exactly the same reason as us. We sometimes relate music to past experiences and expectations. The theme to a television program is an example. Music can hold expectations in the same way as when we here the theme tune we expect the program. For some people sounds need to be familiar, and using the same sound when you go into the room, a musical instrument or a favourite piece of music may be a good object of reference to the start of an MSR session.

To **encourage listening** and **hearing** skills we could:

- A. Try different sounds on a regular basis to expand the student's range of enjoyment and listening skills.
- B. Use the familiar music as a tool for motivation, for example switch operation and object referencing.

Working with a student with a total hearing loss requires a little more imagination. Sound may be accessed through vibration. In one school, a colleague and myself were working with a student with a total hearing loss. So for his sound session we used a piece of plywood or and placed it close to his face. We got a portable cassette deck and put the speaker close to the board. The boy was encouraged to hold the board. The sound resonated through the board and the he felt the sound on his cheek. He thought it was wonderful! He pressed his face up against the board and sat still for around 15 minutes. For

the staff this was a revelation, as his attention span was often much shorter than 15 minutes.

Since then technology has advanced, you could try an airbed (or Lilo as they are often known). Put the speakers of the stereo system touching the sides and turn the volume up a little. You will find the sound resonates through the bed. You could also try this with inflatable furniture. This way people without hearing may feel the sound as it vibrates through the chair or bed. Some years ago Lili Neilson designed the resonance board, her papers are available from the R.N.I.B. and although some years old, the ideas are still very relevant to both children and adults.

So the next time you reach for the new age whale and panpipe music, think, what are you doing with that sound?

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