

Column



# Students With Disabilities: Using Music to Promote Health and Wellness

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## Alice-Ann Darrow and Lorna Segall

#### **Abstract**

School and community wellness programs are particularly important as many children and adolescents do not learn or are not exposed to healthy behaviors at home. Music has the potential to enhance all areas of wellness programs for students with and without disabilities; however, students with disabilities often face barriers to wellness programs that are environmental, structural, or attitudinal. Disability need not preclude any student from acquiring healthy behaviors and habits. Wellness programs that include accessible program materials, adaptive equipment, and trained personnel have the potential to meet the health needs of many students with disabilities. Music educators and therapists can contribute to the development of healthy behaviors and habits by including activities in their curriculum that are directed to that goal. Using music as a motivator or reward for healthy behaviors, or as a vehicle to access physical exercise and health information, can promote the lifelong wellness of all students.

#### **Keywords**

disability, disuse syndrome, health, music, wellness

Wellness is a process through which individuals become aware of and make wise choices toward a more healthy existence. School wellness programs are designed to help students achieve a state of well-being by providing services that promote good health. Wellness includes six dimensions: physical, emotional, intellectual, social, spiritual, and occupational (Hettler, 1976). Wellness programs for children and teens generally focus on the first four of these dimensions; they include objectives such as reducing obesity through exercise and healthy eating, and increasing social, emotional, and intellectual health through education and counseling. Research indicates that school health and wellness programs can positively affect students' academic performances and educational outcomes, as well as improve their health outcomes (Murray, Low, Hollis, Cross, & Davis, 2007).

School and community wellness programs are particularly important as many children and adolescents do not learn or are not exposed to healthy behaviors at home. Health-promoting strategies for children include classroom and interactive activities designed to increase their knowledge about healthy behaviors and to provide opportunities to practice these behaviors. Only when behaviors become habits will there be observable differences in students' health. Additionally, good health is essential for attending school and for cognitive development. Schools have the potential to greatly influence students' health practices and, consequently, to contribute to their future as productive adults.

### Wellness and Disability

Participation in wellness programs is as important for students with disabilities as it is for those without disabilities. Students with physical disabilities are often at risk for additional or secondary disabilities due to "disuse syndrome." *Disuse syndrome* 

is a pattern of symptoms as a result of long-term disuse, which is characterized by both physical and psychosocial effects of inactivity. Typical symptoms of disuse syndrome include muscle weaknesses, restricted range of motion of joints, declined respiratory function, altered blood flow in the peripheral tissue, and reduction of bone density. (Mosby's Medical Dictionary, 2009, p. 1)

Consequently, it is especially important that students who have experienced restricted mobility be included in programs that promote physical activity, as well as good nutrition. Sedentary behavior can also affect weight as well as physical mobility, making healthy eating habits particularly important for students who have disabilities that affect their physical activities.

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"Health and wellness are not the same as the presence or absence of a disability; they are broader concepts that directly affect the quality of a person's life experience" (Office of the Surgeon General, 2005, p. 1). Individuals with disabilities can be well and healthy; however, research indicates a substantially lower percentage of persons with disabilities than those without disabilities report their health to be excellent or very good (28.4% vs. 61.4%; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004). These findings concerning the health of adults with disabilities in the United States indicate that school health and wellness programs are particularly important for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities are capable of leading healthy, productive lives, and with education and training, they can promote their own good health by developing and maintaining healthy lifestyles. It is imperative, however, that such education and training programs be accessible to students who may have physical, cognitive, sensory, or social disabilities.

#### **Music and Wellness**

Music has the potential to enhance all areas of wellness programs for children with and without disabilities. Music can serve as a motivator or as a reward for engaging in many activities that promote general wellness. These activities are generally directed toward socialization and physical or cognitive functioning. Music, because of its pervasiveness, universal appeal, and flexibility in terms of tempo, complexity, and genres, is particularly suited to accompany numerous physical, cognitive, and social activities. Music can be used as a structure for physical and social activities, as an information carrier for academic information, and as a vehicle for discussing emotions. Nearly all students of any age enjoy some style of music—whether it is listening to music or actively engaging in music making.

Active engagement (music making) and receptive participation (music listening) in music have the potential to affect health. Instrument playing has been shown to increase manual dexterity and range of motion, while listening to music has been shown to improve mood states and increase physical endurance (Clair & Memmott, 2008). Participating in music lessons has been shown to reduce stress and improve mood (Grape, Sandgren, Hansson, Ericson, & Theorell, 2003). Music ensembles provide an excellent opportunity for musical development as well as socialization. Ensembles require camaraderie and a good working relationship among members.

Songs have long been used to teach basic wellness concepts to young children. Many preschool children learned to wash their hands, brush their teeth, and other personal hygiene practices to the song lyrics, "This is the way we brush our teeth, brush our teeth, brush our teeth. This is the way we brush our teeth so early in the morning." The music and lyrics provided the structure, verbal prompts, and repetition needed to learn these basic health care routines. Songs have also been used to teach about the benefits of healthy eating and exercise. The purpose of a study by Mori-Inoue (2010) was to investigate the effect of a music-based intervention program created for children with weight issues. The program was designed to educate participants about healthy eating habits through the use of music and music therapy strategies, and to use music as an accompaniment to exercise. Participants were evaluated for changes in weight, waist measurements, and body mass index measures. Results indicated moderately successful positive body and mind changes as evidenced by both physiological measurements and attitudinal evaluations.

# Music, Wellness, and Students With Disabilities

Students with disabilities may face barriers to wellness that are environmental, structural, or attitudinal. Many health and fitness facilities have buildings and equipment that are not accessible, or have personnel who lack the attitude or training to appropriately assist students with disabilities in accessing exercise machines or classes (Smeltzer, 2010). In addition, health programs are often not adapted for students who have intellectual or sensory disabilities and need accommodations or modifications in their instruction. Music and wellness programs can overcome some of these barriers or can serve as an alternative approach to health and fitness for students with disabilities. Wellness teams that include school nurses, music educators or music therapists, and physical education teachers, especially adaptive physical education teachers, have the potential to design specialized programs that promote the health and well-being of students with disabilities. These programs can include goals and objectives that target the physical, nutritional, and social/ emotional health of these students.

#### Physical Health

Physical health is an important component of optimal living. It is important even for students with physical disabilities to reach their full potential for physical health. Elements of physical wellness include building muscular strength and endurance, cardiovascular strength and endurance, and flexibility. Researchers have explored the effect of music to serve as a motivation to exercise, an agent to encourage exercise compliance and endurance, a means to structure exercise, and a medium to reduce the

perception of pain (Terry & Karageorghis, 2011). For many children, rhythmic music naturally prompts or stimulates physical movement. Songs to encourage children's physical activity can be found at the following websites:

Songs for Physical Fitness: www.songsforteaching.com/physicalfitnesssongs.htm

Physical Education Songs: www.jackhartmann.com/physical-education-songs-volume-1/

Fun Action Songs: www.kididdles.com/lyrics/busy. html

#### Nutritional Health

Good nutrition is essential to good health. Nearly 18% of all children aged 2 to 18 years now meet the criteria for being overweight. Overweight and obese children are at greater risk for major health issues such as type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, joint pain, high cholesterol, and cardiovascular disease (Ogden, Carroll, Kit, & Flegal, 2014). Children with disabilities, like all children, are often dependent on their parents or caregivers to provide and prepare meals that are healthy and nutritious. There are times, however, when children do make food choices and when they can inform their parents or caregivers as to their food preferences. To do so, however, they need an education as to what constitutes a healthy diet, and its importance to their overall health.

Food and Nutrition Songs: www.songsforteaching.com/foodnutrition.htm

Health, Nutrition, and Safety: www.songsforteaching.com/store/health-nutrition-and-safety-songs-c-408. html

Kids' Songs about Food and Nutrition: http://freesongsforkids.com/food-nutrition

#### Social/Emotional Health

Kershner (2015), a music therapist, states,

Much of our concept of wellness focuses on the physical: obesity, heart health, and exercise. However, emotional health and social health are also critical for "staying well." It is important to not separate the body and the mind when looking at ways to incorporate wellness programs into a child's life. (p. 1)

Students with disabilities are often faced with numerous challenges as they progress through their school years. In addition to disability-related challenges, they may encounter additional difficulties such as bullying in school and social acceptance by their peers. It is

important that students with disabilities develop competence in skills that will promote their emotional and social success in school (Darrow, 2014).

Social Skills Songs: www.songsforteaching.com/socialskills-interpersonal-interaction-children/

Friendship Songs: www.songsforteaching.com/friendshipsongs.htm

Ten Activities and Songs to Explore Emotions: www. lizs-early-learning-spot.com/10-activities-tube-songs-explore-emotions/

#### **Conclusions**

All students deserve the opportunity to become healthy adults. Wellness programs that include accessible program materials, adaptive equipment, and trained personnel have the potential to meet the health needs of many students with disabilities. Disability need not preclude any student from acquiring healthy behaviors and habits. Music educators and therapists can contribute to the development of such behaviors and habits by including activities in their curriculum that are directed to that goal. Using music as a motivator or reward for healthy behaviors or as a vehicle to access physical exercise and health information can promote the lifelong wellness of all students.

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