

Using music to explore the neural bases of emotional 'processing' in the autistic brain

13 May 2008

Music has a universal ability to tap into our deepest emotions. Unfortunately, for children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), understanding emotions is a very difficult task. Can music help them?

Thanks to funding from the GRAMMY Foundation Grant Program, researchers at UCLA are about to find out. Individuals with ASD have trouble recognizing emotions, particularly social emotions like facial expressions a frown, a smirk, or a smile. This inability can rob a child from being able to communicate and socialize, and often leads to social isolation. In an innovative study led by Istvan Molnar-Szakacs, a researcher at the UCLA Tennenbaum Center for the Biology of Creativity, music will be used as a tool to explore the ability of children with ASD to identify emotions in musical excerpts and facial expressions.

“Music has long been known to touch autistic children,” said Molnar-Szakacs. “Studies from the early days of autism research have already shown us that music provokes engagement and interest in kids with ASD. More recently, such things as musical memory and pitch abilities in children with ASD have been found to be as good as or better than in typically developing children.”

Also, he said, researchers have shown that because many children with ASD are naturally interested in music, they respond well to music-based therapy.

But no one has ever done a study to see if the brains of children with ASD process musical emotions and social emotions in the same way that typically developing children do.

In this study, Molnar-Szakacs will use “emotional music” to engage the brain regions involved in emotion processing. “Our hypothesis is that if we are able to engage the brain region involved in emotion processing using emotional music, this will

open the doorway for teaching children with ASD to better recognize emotions in social stimuli, such as facial expressions.”

The overarching goal of the study, of course, is to gain insights about the causes of autism. Molnar-Szakacs will use neuroimaging functional magnetic resonance imaging, or fMRI to look at the brain activity of children with ASD, and compare them to the brains of typically developing kids, while both groups are engaged in identifying emotions from faces and musical excerpts. “The study should help us to better understand how the brain processes emotion in children with autism; that in turn will help us develop more optimal interventions. Importantly, this study will also help us promote the use of music as a powerful tool for studying brain functions from cognition to creativity.”

Approximately 15 children with ASD ranging from 10-13 years of age will participate in this study, which is being conducted under the auspices of The Help Group – UCLA Autism Research Alliance. The Alliance, directed by Elizabeth Laugeson, is an innovative partnership between The Help Group and the UCLA Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior, and is dedicated to enhancing and expanding research in autism spectrum disorders. The project is also in collaboration with Katie Overy, Co-Director of the Institute for Music in Human and Social Development at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland.

“The hope, of course, is that this work will not only be of scientific value and interest, but most of all, that it will translate into real-life improvements in the quality of the children's lives,” said Molnar-Szakacs.

Source: University of California - Los Angeles

APA citation: Using music to explore the neural bases of emotional 'processing' in the autistic brain (2008, May 13) retrieved 23 September 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-05-music-explore-neural-bases-emotional.html>

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