

Allan Cott and Lakeview Groups Learn Important Life Skills *through* Drumming

For thousands of years drumming has been used by almost every culture in the world. Not only does the physical nature of drumming provide emotional release, it has been used as a tool for education and communication as well.

With the guidance of a trained facilitator, drumming can also be used to teach social skills such as maintaining eye contact, taking turns, sharing, and group participation. Since 2003, Rhythmic Empowerment® sessions have been provided for the Allan Cott and Lakeview students. With the help of all staff, a positive impact has been made on the students. Students who once seemed shy and apprehensive have learned to associate drumming with positive feelings.

The drumming sessions begin with a special drum called an ocean drum, which mimics the sound of the ocean when balanced correctly. Students are asked to place their hands on the sides of the drum while working together to produce the peaceful rhythmic sounds of the ocean. Along with auditory stimulation, the ocean drum activity also provides visual stimulation that can have reinforcing effects for students with autism.

Following this activity, a steady rhythm is produced on an African Ashiko drum which is carried around the circle to engage each student and encourage one to one interactions. Because the drum is such a “community building” tool, people can’t help but move or respond to the rhythm. Clapping, tapping, stamping feet, smiling, etc. are all encouraged. Students are also taught to follow a steady rhythm that can enhance motor imitation skills as well as produce a calming effect. One of the final activities in the 30 minute session involves the



FROM TOP: John Scalici, Betty, and Peyton enjoy Rhythmic Empowerment®; Daniel creates his unique rhythm; more Rhythmic Empowerment®.

use of other rhythmic instruments such as shakers, wooden frogs, hand bells, and scarves. Each instrument requires a different action to produce a sound, such as scraping backward and forward, striking the edge with a mallet, or shaking from side to side.

Throughout the entire drumming session, the students are taught to use the various instruments appropriately by implementing methods of prompting and prompt fading. The drumming sessions also allow for opportunities to teach students important language and communication skills such as requesting, labeling, imitation, conversation, and receptive language.

Inclusion is a very important aspect of the Rhythmic Empowerment® program. Each person can be creative and add his or her own sounds to the group soundscape. Through the drum, we create positive outcomes with the aid of staff and therapists, and help to make a real, measurable difference in the lives of the students.

*By John Scalici,
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