

by Katherine McGavern

# Music Lessons

## FOR KIDS WITH ADHD

**Y**OU'VE JUST READ the latest news about the positive impact of music instruction on the ADHD brain. Now you're dealing with two simultaneous, deeply conflicting thoughts:

- Wow! This is just what my ADHD child needs!
- Wait, *what?* Give a musical instrument to a child with *no* patience, *no* interest, *no* attention span, and *no* known musical talent?

The surprising answer is, "Yes!" The neurobiological enhancements are proven, and for kids with ADHD the advantages of music instruction stretch even further.

### Music instruction and the brain

The National Institutes of Health recently announced some very exciting findings about how studying a musical instrument impacts the brain. An MRI study followed 232 youths (ages six to eighteen) who were studying a musical instrument, with MRI scanning and behavioral testing occurring at two-year intervals.

In an interview with the *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, Dr. James Hudziak noted that his team took "a whole brain approach, [meaning] every neuron could play." This approach led to some surprising findings.



Earlier studies had already shown that musical training can enhance reading-related skills and language abilities. As Dr. Hudziak noted, it was no surprise that his study confirmed the “significant association between early music instruction and spatial-temporal reasoning abilities,” as well as fine motor and auditory processing skills. What was surprising, however, was the clear MRI evidence that early music instruction also positively impacted *prefrontal* regions in the brain associated with emotional regulation and inhibitory control.

Said Dr. Hudziak, “What we found was the more a child trained on an instrument, it accelerated cortical organization in attention skill, anxiety management, and emotional control.”

The participants in this study were healthy youths; however, the authors write, “Future research may benefit from examining the extent to which music training affects cortical development among youths with clinically significant attention problems. Although speculative, it is possible that music training’s influence on cortical maturation, particularly in the prefrontal regions, may serve to mitigate aspects of ADHD symptomology.”

### **ADHD challenges and music training**

How could music instruction potentially benefit children learning to manage ADHD? Here are some of the common ADHD challenges and how music could help.

**Difficulty breaking down big jobs into small, doable step.** Practicing music requires continually breaking down a big project (each new piece) into small steps. Setting short goals for each practice session is immediately motivating and keeps practice time focused and efficient. This is a foundational strategy every child with ADHD can learn to apply to other big projects in life.

**Difficulty setting or achieving long-term goals.** Children with ADHD especially benefit from experiencing the positive results that come from working at one thing every day over a long period of time. Their in-the-moment brain won’t notice, but they feel true delight when you remind them, with enthusiastic praise, that they’ve “already finished Book Six!” This sends an important message: Daily practice (of anything) is powerful and effective.

**Low self-esteem.** Progress in music ability lets kids with ADHD feel special and accomplished. Every small victory—from learning a song and playing it for the family, to performing in a recital or playing for peers in the school band—builds confidence. In the adolescent



### **To Read the Study:**

James J. Hudziak, MD, *et al*, Cortical Thickness Maturation and Duration of Music Training: Health-Promoting Activities Shape Brain Development, in *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, November 2014: Volume 53, Issue 11, Pages 1153-1161.e2.

Full text available at [jaacap.org](http://jaacap.org).

<http://www.jaacap.com/article/S0890-8567%2814%2900578-4/abstract>

## Websites for Music Instruction for Kids

<http://musicalresources.blogspot.com>

<http://www.pianoeducation.org>

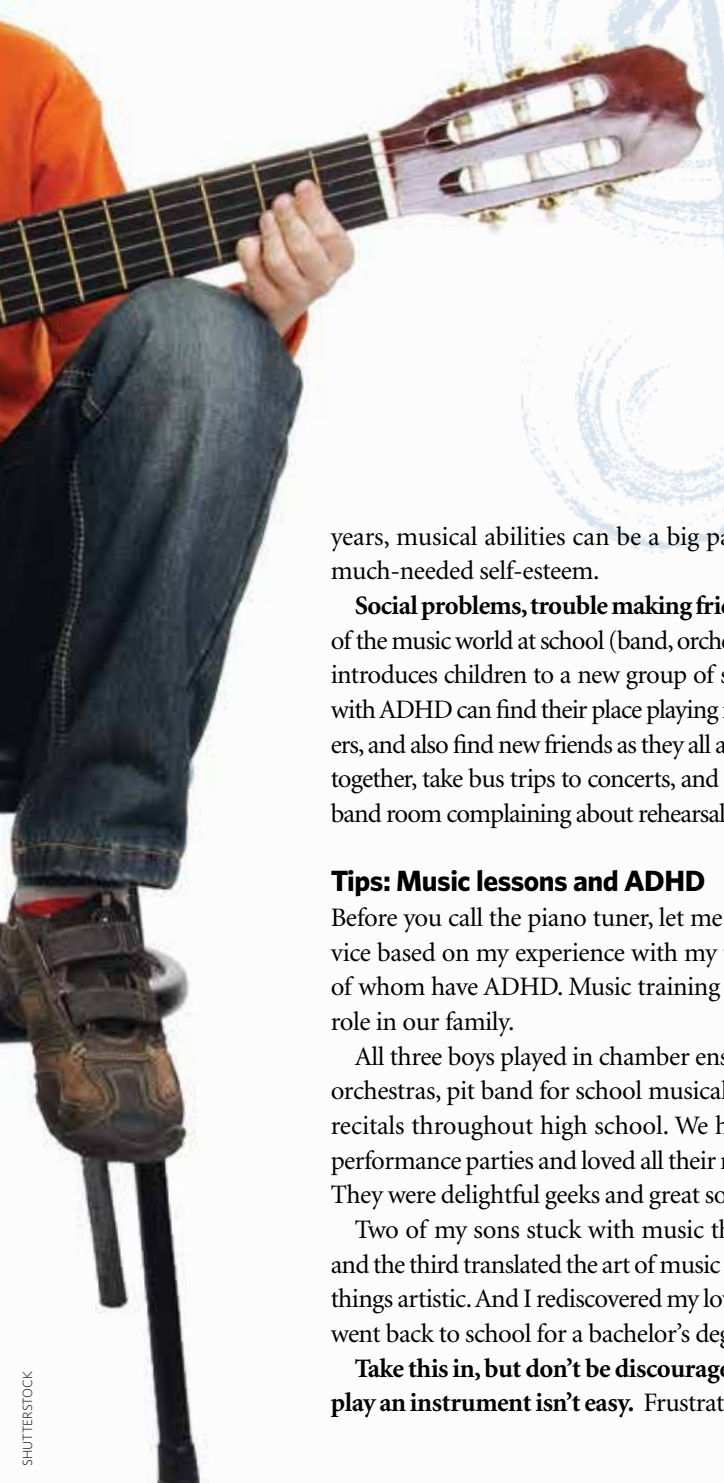
<http://www.musicteachershelper.com/>

<http://www.pbs.org/parents/education/music-arts/>

<http://www.pianodiscoveries.com>

<http://www.getinfuzed.com>

<http://blog.musicnoodle.com>



years, musical abilities can be a big part of boosting much-needed self-esteem.

**Social problems, trouble making friends.** Being part of the music world at school (band, orchestra, choir, etc.) introduces children to a new group of students. Those with ADHD can find their place playing music with others, and also find new friends as they all attend rehearsals together, take bus trips to concerts, and hang out in the band room complaining about rehearsals.

### Tips: Music lessons and ADHD

Before you call the piano tuner, let me offer some advice based on my experience with my three sons, two of whom have ADHD. Music training played a major role in our family.

All three boys played in chamber ensembles, school orchestras, pit band for school musicals, and ongoing recitals throughout high school. We hosted all post-performance parties and loved all their musical friends. They were delightful geeks and great social influences!

Two of my sons stuck with music through college, and the third translated the art of music into a love of all things artistic. And I rediscovered my love of music and went back to school for a bachelor's degree in music.

**Take this in, but don't be discouraged: Learning to play an instrument isn't easy.** Frustration is built in to

the endeavor, and very few children are self-motivated to practice. They need incentives and reminders. From *you*.

Your commitment to this project is the single, most essential ingredient of all. Make your commitment solid, and your child will see that you're serious about lessons and practice times (and eventually see that you won't give in to cries for mercy or inventive excuses). Sure, grant the occasional exception, but maintain your momentum and always signal your seriousness.

**You'll need some guidelines in place to show you're on your child's side.** When writing your own rules, make sure they're kid-friendly. You don't want to win the battle and lose the war. These were a few of mine:

- You can change instruments, but you must give the new one a serious try (lessons for a semester or more) before changing again.
- I'll go to your lessons with you, and if you don't like your teacher I'll find one you do.
- Practice will be five days a week—no practicing on lesson day and you get one free skip day.
- Practice can occasionally be traded for chore exemptions and extra privileges.
- You can do two practice sessions in one day to create another skip day.
- You won't have lessons during the summer.

Try to be sensitive to the natural ebb and flow of interest and effort on your child's part, and loosen the reins a bit from time to time. It's better to meet heavy resistance with patience and flexibility—not with giving up.

**Most importantly, this project will take a lot of rewards. A LOT.** The occasional threat may come in handy, but you'll get much farther with incentives (okay, bribes). Children with ADHD need an extra measure of reminders and motivation. Be creative.

Early on, my motivators were as simple as three M&Ms for a good scale. Then it was Pirate Legos, rock climbing gear, and eventually, cold hard cash. Every child has a price. Use this to your advantage.

Finally, stay strong, don't give up. Learning to make music can be a life-changing experience, and your child might actually enjoy it! 🎵

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