During my 55 years practicing Pediatric Dentistry, I have been an ardent advocate of informal music therapy as an essential tool for enhancing communication and encouraging patient cooperation. I’m not referring to passive elevator music. I’m talking about interactive singing and playing in the dental office environment and in the context of providing dental treatment. I admit I have a special affinity for music having been a piano concert artist and performed on stage since I was a child, long before I became a dentist.

From the moment I began practicing pediatric dentistry, I used my love of music to ease the anxiety of even the most reluctant patients, with great success. In my lectures, I show numerous videos of very young children and adults as well, singing with the doctors and the assistants while getting the shot or having a tooth extracted, playing their favorite instrument or playing their latest musical creation on the piano in my private office.

I spend considerable time playing music at assisted living facilities where I observe first-hand people in an almost catatonic state not moving and not speaking who suddenly begin enthusiastically singing “Yes sir that’s my baby. No sir don’t mean maybe” or whatever familiar song I’m playing and singing.

Oliver Sacks, the famous neurologist who wrote “Awakenings” (later a movie with Robert DiNiro and Robin Williams author of Musicophilia definitively states “People with Parkinsons disease who can barely move, become animated. Stroke patients gain words and people with dementia and amnesia become calm and organized...That’s the power of music.

My evidence of success is mostly anecdotal, however, in recent years advances in neuroscience have established a scientific basis for the direct relationship between music and its connectivity to brain function.

It was William Congreve a 18th century playwright, in his play “The Mourning Bride” who said “music hath charms to soothe the savage breast...to soften rocks... or bend the knotted Oak!” It was William Shakespeare in “Twelfth Night” who wrote “if music be the food of love...play on”. 
In a more scientific vein, Dr. Jonathan Burdette, neurologist at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center (and a concert pianist himself), in his article in Science Daily, “Music and the Brain” describes his MRI studies of the brain while the subjects are listening to various kinds of music, discovering changes in blood flow and an increased connectivity between the auditory brain areas and those areas that affect emotion and memory.

“Music plays a therapeutic role as an integral part of the rehabilitation process in people with brain injuries, strokes, Alzheimers disease and dementia. Patients just sitting there become engaged.”

Dr. Michael Taut, professor of Music and Neuroscience at Colorado State and author of “The Handbook of Neurology and Music states in Rhythm, Music and the Brain “modern cognitive neuroscience can study the brain “live” and we’ve determined that music is a highly complex sensory language that can move us and affect our thoughts and feelings and influence our behavior.”

He discusses music therapy for people with cognitive, sensory and motor dysfunctions, Alzheimers and for children with autism spectrum disorders. He points out that utilizing music and rhythm increases social-emotional responsiveness, reduces anxiety and promotes social interaction (perfect for dentists).

Dr. Daniel Levitin in his “This is Your Brain on Music” discusses one of his studies that focuses on two groups of patients about undergo surgery. One group received anti-anxiety drugs, the other listened to music of their choice. The music group was more relaxed, calm and less anxious (perfect for my anti-drug approach to managing reluctant child behavior.

(You can watch Dr. Levitin’s Ted Med Talk online)

Other studies concern babies in the womb who after 6-7 months in utero can hear voices and music and some people think that babies develop a musical preference even before they’re born and the shared musical experience strengthens the bond between mother and child.

Did you know that you can buy music on Amazon entitled “Developmental Music for the Unborn Child”??

Pursuant to this discussion, let me describe a most interesting study by two researchers who set up two groups of children. The first group were children who
were read a story (non-musical group). The second group (musical group) were read the same story but it involved singing and playing percussion instruments. The results? The musical group of children were remarkably more attentive and more cooperative and helpful to each other

I would like to encourage those of you reading this blog to try using music in one way or another to establish a rapport and connection with your patients, young and old. It’s not about being skilled musicians or singers. It’s about having fun and providing a better experience for the patient.

A great starter song:   Sesame Street...Joe Reposo
Sing. Sing a song.
Sing out loud. Sing out strong
Sing of happy, not sad
Sing of good things, not bad.

Sing. Sing a song
Make it happy to last your whole life long
Don’t worry that it’s not good enough
For anyone else to hear.
   Just Sing, Sing a song.
   La, La,La,La,La La,La,La,La,La
   La, La, La, La, La, La
   La, La,La,La,La,La,La,La,La,La

Musically yours,
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