

Communicating with each other through music

By Sally Thompson\Sun Newspapers

From rock to Rachmaninov, music stimulates people, relaxes people and interests people. It also has the power to transform lives.

Now, thanks to a cooperative program between the MacPhail Center for Music in Minneapolis and Opportunity Partners Karlins Center in Plymouth, music therapists are working with autistic adults to broaden their horizons.

"They are doing an excellent job," said Michelle Feigh of Karlins Center. "I couldn't be more pleased."

Communicating with others can be difficult for people with autism, and music therapy is helping Karlins Center clients develop communications skills, Feigh said.

"Usually they live in a world that's very much about them and have very little awareness of others," she said. "One woman has started initiating contact with others."

About half of the 50 clients for which Karlins Center is licensed are autistic, so the program started with a \$1,000 grant from the Autism Society, Feigh said.

The program is scheduled to run through May 11, she said.

Other grants are being sought. A \$10,000 grant could fund the program for a year, Feigh said.

Class size is limited to six in order to keep the students' attention. But if funds were available, more clients could benefit from the program, she said.

Music therapy has many values, particularly when it comes to working with people with autism, said Todd Schwartzberg, music therapy partnership coordinator at MacPhail.

"Most important, it gives individuals the opportunity to express meaningful experiences," he said.

Because music therapy sessions take place in a group setting, individuals develop social skills. They also develop better muscular coordination, improve in their ability to follow directions and start making eye contact with others, Schwartzberg said.

Before sessions began, the music therapists worked with Karlins staff to set specific goals for each of the participants, he said.

Just as small children learn their alphabets more quickly by singing the alphabet song, Karlins clients learn certain skills through rhythm and repetition in music, Schwartzberg said.

"Music provides a means to express themselves," he said.

In addition to Karlins Center, MacPhail Center for Music provides music therapy through nine other partnerships with three new partnerships scheduled to begin in January. Those programs are in such places as Ronald McDonald House and Fairview/University Children's Hospital in Minneapolis, Therapy Place in Bloomington and Partnership Resources in St. Louis Park, Schwartzberg said.

Schools and Head Start also are partnering in music therapy programs, he said.



Six adults who attend Karlins Center in Plymouth take part in weekly music therapy sessions with Jenifer Josephson (right). Here, LaShauna White strums the guitar with Josephson's help. (Marie Foss/Sun Newspapers)