

Reflection

Therapy Reimagined: The Power of Parent Advocacy

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The Critical Role of Parents in Early Intervention and Therapy

Decades of early intervention research affirm that parent engagement is central to promoting optimal outcomes for young children (Bruder, 2010; Dunst & Trivette, 2009; Jeong et al.; 2021; Shonkoff & Hauser-Cram, 1987). In early childhood music therapy, parent engagement is not simply supportive—it is essential. The active involvement of parents from the initial advocacy for services to the weekly participation in sessions provides sustained pathways for developmental progress beyond the clinical setting and across various stages of life ([see podcasts series in this issue](#); Phan Quoc et al., 2023).

 Reflecting on Mary Beth Moore's poignant lead article (see [Moore, 2025 in this issue](#)), *Learning Reimagined: The Music Therapy Impact*, this reflection article explores how music therapists build collaborative partnership with parents and caregivers to promote meaningful and lasting developmental learning opportunities for and with young children with various disabilities.

Family Engagement and Music Therapy

Rooted in ecological and systems theories (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), family-centered music therapy positions parents not as passive observers but as active co-facilitators of their child’s therapeutic journey (Tuomi et al., 2017; 2021; Thompson, 2012, 2014; Walworth, 2010). Structured family-centered models gained momentum in the early 2000s, aligning with broader educational and therapeutic standards such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) and Division for Early Childhood (DEC) recommended practices (DEC, 2014). These frameworks codify family participation as not only best practice but as a legal right and clinical necessity. Building on these principles, the DEC outlines three core elements of effective family engagement: *family-centered practices*, *family-centered support*, and *family and professional collaboration*. These interconnected practices form the foundation for ethical and effective engagement across disciplines, including music therapy.

■ A compelling illustration of these principles is found in Mary Beth Moore’s account of her son’s diagnosis, a moment she describes as “the experience of a soul breaking.” In the wake of complex medical procedures and developmental delays, she discovered music therapy through peer connections—a service previously unknown to her.

In terms of *family-centered practices*, a music therapist provided Moore with clear, objective information about her son’s need areas and how music could support his development through evidence-based, strength-focused interventions integrated into his Individualized Education Program (IEP).

Through *capacity-building*, a music therapist equipped her with practical strategies and measurable data—showing meaningful gains in communication, emotional

regulation, and learning—that she could replicate at home and use as a basis for formal advocacy.

Finally, *family–professional collaboration* is reflected in Moore’s active partnership with a music therapist. Together they secured service approval, guided school staff training, and scaled access to music therapy districtwide—demonstrating how joint efforts can reshape system practices to support inclusion.

Three Core Elements of Family Engagement in Music Therapy

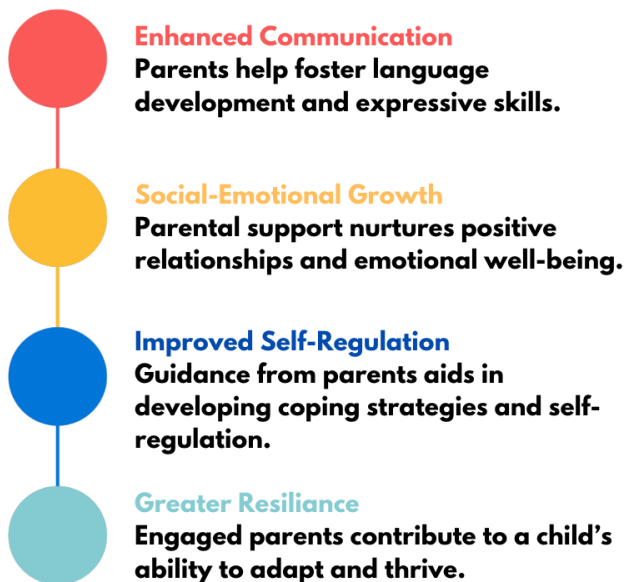


Adapted from DEC Recommended Practices (2014), this framework illustrates how music therapists support families through clear guidance, capacity-building, and collaborative partnerships.

The Evidence Base: Why Parent Involvement Matters

Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that when parents are actively engaged, children show stronger gains across developmental domains, including communication, social-emotional competence, and self-regulation. Music therapy interventions offer multisensory and emotionally resonant opportunities for promoting attachment and resilience through interactive, co-regulated experiences between caregivers and children. A growing body of research affirms that family-integrated sessions are associated with reduced parental stress, improved caregiver-child attunement, and greater consistency of intervention across settings—factors known to contribute to sustained developmental progress. These outcomes are strongest when parents are treated as collaborative partners and empowered to integrate musical routines into daily life ([see Gooding & Kern, 2025 in this issue](#)).

Why Parent Involvement Matters

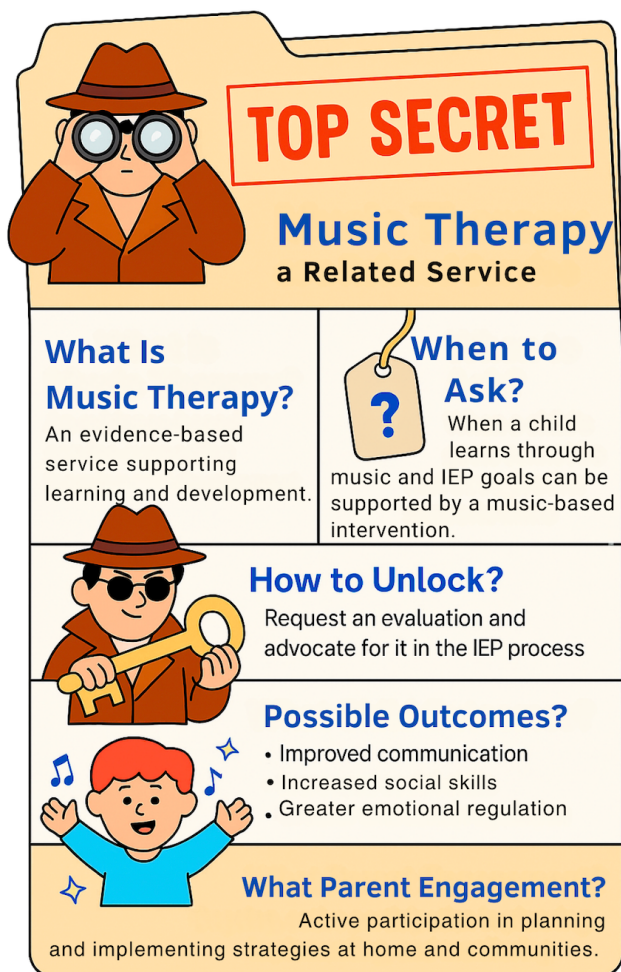


Moore's personal narrative echoes this body of evidence, documenting measurable improvements in her son's engagement, communication, and academic access through IEP-integrated music therapy support.

Parent Advocacy: The Engine Behind Access to Services

Family advocacy remains critical to accessing and maintaining appropriate therapeutic and educational supports ([see the imagine 2016 Advocacy issue](#)). Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), families are vital members of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team. Under IDEA Part C and Part B provisions, parents possess key rights to participate in planning and decision-making for their child's services. Related services, including music therapy, must be considered based on a child's unique needs (AMTA, 2021).

Moore's account underscores that access to services like music therapy often hinges not merely on professional recommendation but on informed parental advocacy. Families must be empowered to request evaluations and understand their procedural safeguards. However, systemic barriers such as shifting public policies and variable access to services continue to require vigilant, informed parent advocacy (CEC, 2025; DEC, 2024; Public Council, 2024). Without strong parental voices, service discontinuities following early intervention remain a significant risk. Advocacy organizations, such as *The Advocacy Underground* initiated by Moore, play a critical role in bridging these gaps, ensuring families are informed of their rights and possibilities.



A quick guide to accessing music therapy through the IEP process, including when to ask, how to unlock it, outcomes, and parent roles.

Policy-Informed Best Practices: Advocacy Starts in the Session

Therapists contribute to broader systemic change by grounding daily practice in informed, ethical family engagement. Core practices include obtaining informed parental consent, ensuring family participation in planning, and educating caregivers about their procedural rights under current laws (DEC, 2014; Kern, 2025). These efforts build parent capacity, reduce service gaps, and support long-term success for the child beyond the music therapy environment.

Moore's experience highlights the ongoing need for professional transparency and educational equity. Music therapists can encourage authentic parent partnerships by implementing the following strategies:

- **Transparent Communication:** Co-create therapeutic goals, music-mediated interventions, and expected outcomes. Engage in regular shared decision-making to review and revise intervention plans.
- **Flexible Service Delivery:** Offer hybrid approaches, including direct and consultative services, based on family preferences and child needs.
- **Coaching Models:** Teach parents musical routines to embed within daily home life (e.g., transition songs, emotional regulation strategies).
- **Accessibility:** Create adaptable resources such as visual supports or simple musical scripts.
- **Cultural Responsiveness:** Adapt interventions to respect each family's cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic context.

Parents can contribute to the partnerships by engaging in the following way:

- **Share Observations:** Provide insight into your child's strengths, preferences, and behaviors at home to help shape meaningful, personalized goals.
- **Ask Questions:** Seek clarity about music therapy approaches, progress data, and how music-mediated interventions support your child's educational or developmental goals.
- **Participate Actively:** Join sessions, when possible, observe therapeutic strategies, and collaborate on adapting them for the home or classroom setting.
- **Practice at Home:** Integrate music routines into everyday life (e.g., singing during transitions, using musical cues for tasks) to support generalization of skills.
- **Track Progress:** Communicate changes you observe outside of therapy and share updates during IEP meetings or team check-ins.

- **Advocate Knowledgeably:** Request evaluations or services as needed, reference your child's IEP goals, and utilize procedural safeguards if services are denied or changed.
- **Provide Feedback:** Offer input on what is or is not working and help refine goals or approaches based on your child's evolving needs and your family's priorities.

Conclusion: Sustaining Parent Partnerships

Parents are—and will remain—their child's most enduring advocates, nurturers, and teachers. Contemporary trends in healthcare and education, including medical home models, inclusive education, and family-centered care, emphasize the growing need for sustained family engagement (AMTA, 2019). In music therapy, this means not only honoring parents as co-therapists but actively supporting their role as informed decision-makers across systems.

Looking ahead, the field must continue advocating for the integration of music therapists into IEP teams, invest in research on long-term outcomes, and refine culturally responsive practices to reflect the diverse realities of families. Music therapists play a critical role in building trusting relationships, increasing transparency, and making services—and their impacts—more visible and accessible.

 By grounding practice in family partnerships and professional advocacy, music therapy becomes more than a service—it becomes a vehicle for restoring what Mary Beth Moore calls the "dignity of learning" for every child through collaborative, capacity-building care.

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