

# Featured

## Learning Reimagined: The Music Therapy Impact

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When I think back to the first moment of impact, I think of a doctor telling me my son was going to die. I struggle to adequately put into words the experience of a soul breaking. That news of imminent death was prefaced with the fact that my son would be born with a serious heart defect, that his stomach and intestines were not connected, and that he had multiple markers indicating he would be born with Down syndrome. I wasn't sure how long he would live, but I knew I was going to fight like hell for him to have a chance.

He will turn 13 this year!

There have been many additional moments of impact as he has endured roughly fifteen surgeries and has at least one more on the horizon. Many tears have been shed, prayers lifted in urgency, and new knowledge acquired through participating in functional therapies focused on communication, motor skills, and feeding. Yet, I have learned that not every life-changing moment is rooted in trauma. Some shift everything in the best possible way. They bring joy, clarity, and the kind of hope that reshapes how you see the world.

For a child who doctors did not expect to live, who professionals labeled as severely disabled, and who the world often sees as a burden—Gavin lives a life that defies every prediction made about him. His joy is infectious. Laughter comes easily. Love flows freely.

And music? Music is pure magic.



## Learning Possibilities in Special Education

Our journey from early intervention to preschool was, like it is for most families, a bit rocky. That transition rips the family from the center of a child’s care plan and replaces it with a school team. Part of that is necessary for growth and support within an educational environment, but the process itself often lacks consistent communication, transparency, and support for families.

When Gavin transitioned to preschool, we were told the school district would drop all feeding therapy support, claiming it was “non-educational” and not the responsibility of schools. I will not dive into every detail here—that story is chronicled in my book, *Unwanted: Fighting to Belong*—but what followed was an 18-month battle with both the district and the state. It was that fight that first led me to an awareness and understanding of special education law. In the end, feeding therapy was affirmed as a related service under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and Gavin not only received the support he needed, but our district went on to establish a formal feeding therapy program that now benefits many students with IEPs. That victory opened the door—not just for services, but for a new way of thinking: What else is possible when we truly meet the comprehensive needs of students with disabilities?

One of the first families I supported as an advocate introduced me to a service I had never heard of before: music therapy. They had moved from another state where their daughter had music therapy on her IEP. When they enrolled in our district, they were told, “We don’t do music therapy here.” That’s a blanket statement of denying services and raises a red flag that the individual needs of the student are not being taken into account. The school attempted to remove the service and suggested the general education music teacher take over the goals—something the

music teacher, to her credit, refused, explaining that music therapy is a clinical, credentialed profession with a very different scope of practice. I was intrigued. In all my research on special education services, I had never come across music therapy as a related service. But the more these parents shared with me, the more I realized this wasn’t just a good fit for their child—it might be exactly what my son needed too.

For their daughter, music therapy supported her communication and social-emotional development while also reinforcing academic concepts. When I reached out to a local music therapist to learn more, I discovered that music therapy is grounded in neuroscience. Research shows that it can help children with disabilities develop new neural pathways (Stegemöller, 2014), regulate emotions (Sena Moore & Hanson-Abromeit, 2015), improve engagement (Kim et al., 2009), and increase retention of information (Wolfe & Hom, 1993)—especially when traditional methods fall short.

### Music Therapy in Special Education Resources

[Music Therapy in Special Education: Fact Sheet \(AMTA, 2021\)](#) - Outlines how music therapy can be included in IEPs, the qualifications required, and when it's appropriate under IDEA.

[Music Therapy & Music Education \(AMTA, 2006\)](#): Clarifies how music-based interventions support the physical, cognitive, emotional, and social needs of students with disabilities within educational settings.

[U.S. Department of Education: IEP Process Q&A \(2010\)](#): Answers common legal questions around developing IEPs, including related services like music therapy.

[Wrightslaw—Related Services in IEPs](#): Explains when and how related services like music therapy must be provided under IDEA.

Eventually, after several long IEP meetings, our district agreed to contract with a music therapist to complete an evaluation. The therapist not only evaluated the student and addressed IEP goals, but trained the school team on how to integrate music into their own service delivery effectively. That one agreement for services led to a broader shift: the district signed a contract with the provider, making music therapy more accessible for other students. The only thing families needed was to know it was possible and how to ask for it.

Music therapy is recognized as a related service under IDEA. Schools are required to evaluate in all areas of suspected disability, and a parent/legal guardian can request a music therapy evaluation in writing at any time. If the school declines the request for a music therapy evaluation, they must provide a Prior Written Notice detailing why they denied the request—and the burden of proof falls on the school to explain why the evaluation is not necessary. If a music therapy

evaluation supports the need for services, the therapist will recommend either direct services or a consultative model, both of which can transform student outcomes.

With the direct services approach, I have seen music therapists help students achieve academic, communication, and social goals with remarkable success. In the support model, they have empowered school teams to integrate music into their instruction with strategies that are easy to implement (Geist et al., 2008; McCarthy et al., 2008). In every single case I have supported where music therapy was added to the IEP, families and educators alike have reported accelerated progress. No other related service has prompted the same consistent, enthusiastic response. From both emotional and evidence-based standpoints, music therapy is unlocking learning opportunities in ways many of us never dreamed were possible for our children with disabilities.

### **SUPPORTING FAMILIES THROUGH THE IEP PROCESS: A MUSIC THERAPIST'S PERSPECTIVE**

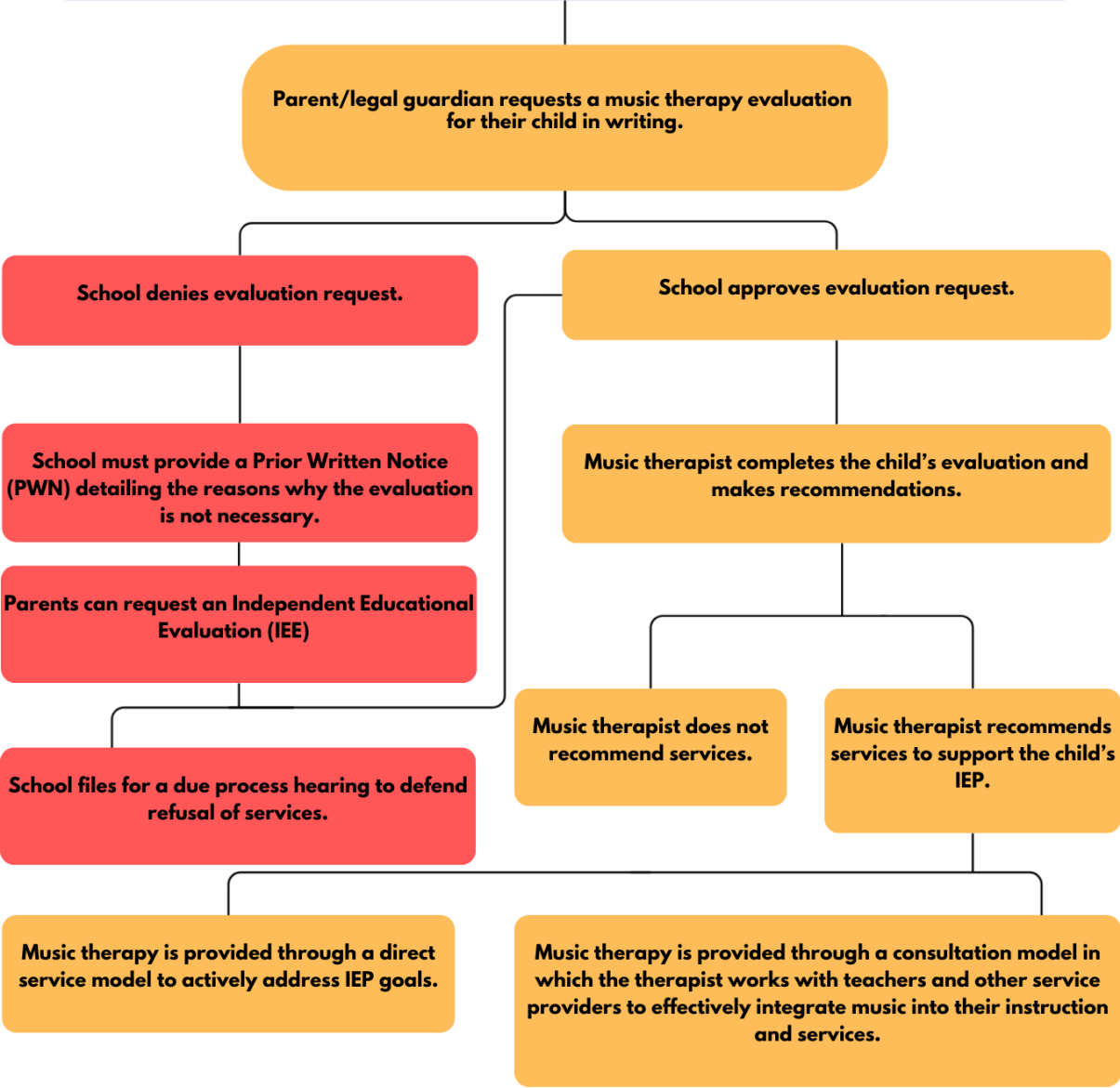


Aimee Roylance MA, MT-BC

Meet music Therapist Aimee Roylance in a short Q&A with *imagine* Editor Dr. Petra Kern.

Media Credit: Imagine

# STEPS TO IEP MUSIC THERAPY SERVICES



This flowchart outlines a general process for requesting and implementing music therapy services within a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP), beginning with a parent or IEP team request and moving through evaluation to potential service delivery via direct or consultative models. While practices may vary by district or state, this model reflects a typical procedural framework.

### Learning Unlocked in Music Therapy

Before Gavin’s music therapy evaluation even began, I told the therapist what I had learned as a mom: If music is playing, I can get him to do almost anything. Sign language? More likely. Engaging in a new task? Much easier. Transitions? Smoother. Communication? Often clearer. Music did not just help regulate his emotions—it brought him joy, focus, and a willingness to participate. It was like a key I had stumbled across that helped open doors the rest of the world kept trying to shut.

When the therapist nodded and made a note, I hoped—quietly—that what I saw at home might finally be seen as something more than just a quirk. Maybe this was not just about Gavin liking music. Maybe it was about music helping Gavin access learning. Then the evaluation results came in, and there it was—data confirming what I had instinctively known all along. In reading, Gavin needed 70% fewer prompts in music therapy than during a non-music observation. In math, his accuracy in adding to patterns increased by 26%. All around, he independently selected answers, responded more frequently, and showed clear signs of motivation and understanding.

But what struck me most was how he communicated. He used sign language to request a drum demonstration. He independently initiated an “I want...” statement to choose a *Frozen 2* song over Katy Perry. He smiled more, made longer eye contact, mimicked words with his mouth—even though verbal skills were still emerging. The therapist noted that his communication was more intentional, his responses quicker, and his mood happier. He was not just compliant. He was connected. Music did not change who Gavin was. It gave him the support he needed to engage with the world in a way that made sense for him.

His school team noted an obvious shift with the addition of music therapy services. Music was listed as a clear strength on his IEP—one that improved retention and increased his access to academic content. Music therapy helped him reach a goal to answer WH questions with 80% accuracy using total communication. He commented on songs, chose activities independently, and engaged in tasks more consistently. Recent progress data reflects that his emotional regulation, impulse control, and communication have all improved significantly through music-based interventions.

Music therapy has not been a miracle cure to his disabilities, but it has been a bridge to connect with him in a more profound way. A way to reach him where he is, so he can show the world what he’s always known, but hasn’t always had the chance to say.

### LEARNING THROUGH MUSICAL INTERACTIONS



Gavin and his music therapist, Aimee Roylance, explore sea animals and letters through song.

Media Credit: Author

## Learning Growth for Families

The challenge is not just accessing music therapy services. It is making sure others know the door is there. I knew how to ask for services. I knew the language, the laws, the process. And even with all that knowledge, discovering how profoundly music therapy could transform my son’s learning felt like unlocking a door I didn’t know existed.

We have this powerful, growing body of evidence showing how music therapy makes learning accessible in ways that are truly unprecedented (Marcos Treceño & Arias Gago, 2024). It reaches across developmental domains, engages the whole child, and opens possibilities where traditional methods fall short (Williams, 2018). But so many families and educators do not even know it is an option.

As an advocate, one of the first things I ask families is: “Have you ever heard about music therapy?” Most have not. So, I walk them through how to request an evaluation. I help them understand what it can look like and how it aligns with their child’s needs. Even in districts that have providers, it is still treated as a closely-held secret. The knowledge is not shared, families are not informed, and children miss out. That’s where awareness becomes advocacy.

At [The Advocacy Underground](#), we are working to change that. We provide free IEP support to families and partner with schools to build real, inclusive practices—not just in theory, but in every classroom. We believe in legitimate equality and authentic inclusion—not as buzzwords, but as a moral imperative.

Because every child deserves to be seen, every family deserves to know what is possible, and every educational system must be held accountable to the promise that learning—joyful, accessible, and dignified learning—belongs to everyone.

## General Special Education Resources

[WrightsLaw](#): Leading site for special ed law and advocacy—packed with guides, legal updates, and practical strategies.

[Center for Parent Information & Resources \(CPIR\)](#): National hub for family-friendly IDEA information and links to local parent training centers in every state.

[Understood.org](#): Accessible, well-designed tools and resources for families navigating learning and thinking differences.

[Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates \(COPAA\)](#): Advocacy network for protecting the legal and civil rights of students with disabilities, with a strong focus on due process and systemic reform.

## Reimagining the Dignity of Learning

At its core, the dignity of learning isn’t measured by test scores or standardized expectations. It’s found in the *how* and *what* of a child’s experience.

How we learn—especially in the early years—is grounded in what the Anita Zucker Center for Excellence in Early Childhood Studies calls the [3Rs of early learning](#): Relationships, Repetition, and Routines. Trusting relationships give children the safety to explore. Repetition builds mastery. Routines create predictability and confidence. These foundations are essential to learning, and for many children with disabilities, they are the very things most often overlooked in the rush to meet curriculum demands.

What we learn matters, too. Yes, academics. But also social interaction. Emotional regulation. Self-advocacy. Communication—in every form it takes. For a child like Gavin, and for so many others, access to that kind of holistic learning often requires us to rethink what support looks like.

Music therapy honors both the *how* and *what* of a learning experience.

It builds connection through rhythm and repetition. It supports regulation through routine and predictability. It strengthens relationships through shared experiences that foster joy, trust, and engagement. And it opens access to academic content, expressive language, and social participation in a way that feels natural—because it is.

When we make room for services like music therapy, we are not just adding an intervention—we are restoring a sense of possibility. We are recognizing that learning does not only happen at a desk, in silence, with a worksheet. Sometimes, it happens with a drumbeat. Sometimes, it sounds like a favorite song. Sometimes, it is a quiet moment where a child finally feels safe enough to stay, to try, to shine in their own way.

**That is the dignity of learning, and that's what every child deserves.**

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### About the Author

Mary Beth Moore is a visionary marketing leader and expert in go-to-market strategies and brand storytelling. She is the author of *Unwanted: Fighting to Belong*, which chronicles her journey as an advocate for inclusive education and her fight for her son's right to belong in the education system. As the founder of The Advocacy Underground, a nonprofit providing free IEP support to families of children with disabilities, Mary Beth empowers parents to confidently navigate special education. A passionate advocate and parent, she brings the central voice to this year's imagine topic—parent involvement in music therapy—highlighting its vital role in inclusive education and family engagement.

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