

Music: a vehicle, a language, a tool.

By HCA Hospice Care Community Relations Team
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Twelve-year-old Esther, who has been living with arthrogryposis since birth, depends heavily on her parents and domestic helper. Although her condition prevents her from speaking or moving, the bubbly girl communicates with heart-melting smiles and giggles.

Star PALS nurse Ms Serene Wong noticed that Esther smiles and laughs most when she hears music or singing, and suggested that Esther try music therapy with music intervention trainer Ms Serena Lo.

"Through various techniques, music therapists make use of different kinds of music to help patients in different ways – like in cognition, speech, gross and fine motor skills, and social skills. Research has shown that music can stimulate multiple parts of the brain at one time, and even reconnect them," Ms Lo explained.

Mdm Chng, Esther's mother, was initially unsure of what to expect from the session, but was quickly swept away by Ms Lo's enthusiasm and systematic approach.



After unpacking a keyboard and an array of percussion instruments, Ms Lo kicked off the session with a simple greeting song. She then introduced the family to the different instruments, helping Esther feel and play them by wrapping her hand around Esther's, and playing the instruments together.

The session was tailored to Esther's preferences. Ms Lo found out that repetitive sounds made Esther laugh, and employed these in her songs. She changed lyrics to Esther's experiences – for example, 'The Wheels of the Bus Go Round and Round' became 'Esther Sits In A Yellow Taxi', as Esther takes taxis to school at Rainbow Centre. She also taught the family to perform simple massage and physiotherapy exercises to the beat of the music.

Throughout the session, she engaged Mdm Chng, her husband and their helper in singing, acting and playing percussion in front of Esther, where she could see them. She also asked them to help Esther 'play' the instruments herself.

Esther was delighted by the whole session, and surprised her parents by the responsiveness she showed. She continues to respond to the recorded session with excitement every night when her mother plays it back for her.

"We've always known she loves music, but never expected this sort of response," Mdm Chng said. "I think the difference is that she usually listens passively, but Ms Lo got her to take an active role this time by playing the instruments with us, and with all the actions."

She also advised Mdm Chng to involve the family during their music sessions. "It brings the family together and it's also a good opportunity to give Esther's siblings some attention," said Ms Lo. "The more sounds there are from the different instruments, the more the child's brain is stimulated."

At one point during Esther's music therapy session, Ms Lo sang, to the tune of the theme song from Barney, 'Esther loves Mummy', and 'Esther loves Daddy'. The family moved their faces in to Esther to allow her to "kiss" them.

For Ms Lo, this is an important moment in her therapy. "Through music, we can help these children express their feelings, even if they can't speak.

"I see music as a vehicle, a language and a tool, that can convey messages of love and other emotions," she said. ❤️

About Star PALS

Star PALS, an initiative of HCA Hospice Care, is a paediatrics palliative care service that provides holistic home care for young patients aged 19 years and below, and extends support to their families.

Multidisciplinary care is provided by doctors, nurses, medical social workers, counsellors and allied health specialists like art therapists.

Star PALS also actively engages the help of trained respite caregivers, known as Medi Minders. Find out more about our paediatric palliative care services on www.starpals.sg