



Evidence Review

Role of Creative Therapists in Working with People with a Learning Disability and the Impact they have on Patient Care

Key messages

Therapeutic Role and Approaches

- **Enhancement of Self-Determination and Autonomy:** Creative therapies foster self-determination, enabling individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) to actively participate in decisions about their care. Art therapy similarly prioritises respecting autonomy and advocacy through relational approaches. [9, 12, 15]
- **Nonverbal Communication and Emotional Expression:** Creative therapies facilitate nonverbal expression and communication of both conscious and unconscious content through modalities such as music improvisation, art creation, dance/movement, and improvisational theatre. [4, 11, 13]
- **Relational and Social Connection:** Core relational experiences (curiosity, invitation, celebration, recognition) underpin music therapy with adults with severe and profound disabilities, contributing to improved emotional health. Dance and community choir participation support social engagement and connection, reducing isolation and fostering meaningful peer and caregiver relationships. [3, 17]
- **Holistic and Community-Focused Service Development:** Successful music therapy programmes align with organisational culture and policy frameworks promoting community integration, flexibility, and sustainability. Continuous informal education and collaboration with other health professionals are key to developing impactful services. [6]





- **Reduction in Emotional and Mental Health Challenges:** Dance/movement therapy programmes focused on emotional self-regulation have demonstrated measurable improvements in adolescents with intellectual disabilities, including emotional stability and wellbeing. Drama-based improv therapy supports social skills and self-esteem, further contributing to mental health enhancement. [4]

Positive Impacts on Patient Care and Wellbeing

- **Improved Emotional and Psychological Health:** Engaging in creative therapies leads to enhanced emotional self-regulation, reduced stress, and better mental health outcomes. Music therapy also elicits emotional health benefits, especially for those with profound disabilities. [4]
- **Increased Physical Engagement and Mobility:** Dance interventions promote body awareness and physical activity, which are critical for health and mobility among adults with intellectual disabilities. [2]
- **Enhanced Social Interaction and Quality of Life:** Participation in group-based creative therapy activities facilitates social interaction, fostering a sense of belonging and improving quality of life. [3, 7, 12]
- **Support for Cognitive and Communication Skills:** Music therapy enhances joint attention, motor imitation, nonverbal communication, and cognitive functions such as memory and attention in children and adolescents with neurodevelopmental disorders. [3, 12, 13]
- **Empowerment Through Creative Expression:** Creative therapies enable externalisation of feelings and experiences that may otherwise be difficult to articulate, aiding understanding by caregivers and professionals and empowering individuals with learning disabilities. [7, 11]

Professional and Implementation Considerations

- **Importance of Therapist Skills and Flexibility:** Effective therapy requires therapists to remain curious, flexible, and culturally sensitive to properly meet client needs and navigate service development challenges. [6, 9]
- **Theoretical and Policy Alignment:** Therapists benefit from aligning their approaches with national disability policies and the organisational culture of their clinical settings to optimise service acceptance and integration. [1, 6]



- **Need for Ongoing Research and Evidence-Based Practice:** While positive outcomes are reported, many studies call for further research to empirically verify efficacy, refine protocols, and explore longitudinal benefits of creative/arts therapies. [4, 6, 9]

November 2025

You asked

Original Query:

Title of search: Role of Creative Therapists in working with people with a learning disability and the impact they have on patient care.

Explanation: I am looking for a literature review to support having a creative therapy workforce working with people with a learning disability, including any clinical models used, workforce type / numbers and patient outcomes. Creative Therapists are Art Therapists (Art Psychotherapists), Drama Therapists, Music Therapists and Dance / Movement Therapists.

Alternative terminology: As mentioned above.

Date range: (None specified). The Evidence Reviewer used a date range of 2020 – 2025 due to the volume of papers.

The Evidence

1. **Condie J, Franklin M, Doorn KA, Foscarini-Craggs P, McKinnon I, Harrison TL, Iranpour A, Zubala A, Rose S, Randell E, McNamara R, Riaz M, Hackett S. Statistical and health economic analysis plan for a secure care hospital evaluation of manualised (interpersonal) art-psychotherapy: the SCHEMA randomized controlled trial. *Trials*. 2025 Jul 1;26(1):227.**

UK study

The researchers in this trial aim to evaluate the effectiveness of interpersonal art psychotherapy in reducing the frequency and severity of aggressive behaviour among adults in secure care, compared to usual care alone, using the Modified Overt Aggression Scale (MOAS) as the primary outcome. It also assesses cost-effectiveness based on health-related quality of life and healthcare costs. The study focused on changes in aggression and patient distress over 38 weeks post-randomisation. The trial could have possible attrition bias, variation in participants' adherence to and delivery of the intervention. The single-blind design and cost analysis limited to the NHS, excluding wider societal costs, could restrict the scope of its conclusions.



2025 Statistical and health economic analy

2. Dumitru C. Exploring the transformative power of dance: A scoping review of dance interventions for adults with intellectual disabilities. Journal of Intellectual Disabilities. 2025 Mar;29(1):214-232.

This scoping paper broadly analysed the impact of dance on adults with intellectual disabilities, focusing on its effects on mobility, interpersonal relationships, well-being, and overall quality of life. The authors reviewed 15 primary research papers and the found that the dancing made significant improvements in body awareness, physical activity engagement, mental health, stress reduction, and social interaction. There's a possibility that relevant findings might have been missed due to the less rigorous methodology of a scoping review. The diversity of methodologies and intervention types also complicated the synthesis and assessment of evidence strength.



2025 Exploring the transformative power.

3. Kennedy JR, Jozwiak R, Chavez S, LaGasse AB. Singing Together: A Practice-Based Study of a Community-Based Choir for Neurodiverse Adults. Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities. 2025 Sep;38(5):e70117.

American study

This study assessed the feasibility, initial outcomes, and perceptions of participating in a community-based choir for neurodiverse adults with intellectual or developmental disabilities. The main findings indicated that the choir was a meaningful and enjoyable opportunity for social engagement, with most social interactions being unprompted and consistent across sessions. Caregivers reported travel distance and motivation as primary barriers, while choir members valued the sense of community and specialised music instruction. The study is limited by its small sample size, challenges in using measurement tools with non-speaking members, and difficulties capturing qualitative data due to participants' limited language skills, suggesting a need for adapted methods and larger future studies.



2025 Singing
Together_A Practice-B

- 4. Leung SLA, Payne H. The Effects of a Dance/Movement Therapy Emotional Self-Regulation Program for Adolescents with Intellectual Disabilities in Hong Kong. American Journal of Dance Therapy. 2025 Oct 30; 1-19.**

Chinese study

This study explored how a dance/movement therapy (DMT) programme aimed at improving emotional self-regulation could support adolescents with intellectual disabilities as they transitioned from school to post-school life in Hong Kong. The results showed that the intervention group had significant improvements in conduct problems by the 14-week follow-up. Qualitative feedback also suggested better emotional awareness, improved recognition of body language, and a wider range of self-regulation strategies, including using external support and movement-based techniques. However, the study's limitations included a relatively small sample that was drawn from just five schools. Parental preferences might also have influenced group assignments. These points highlight the need for longer-term follow-up and larger, controlled studies to confirm the results.



2025 The Effects of a
Dance_Movement The

- 5. Liuzzi T, D'Arienzo F, Staccioli S, Slaiby RF, Harb MBS, Tarabay M, et al. Inclusive orchestral music therapy according to the Euterpe Method: a multimodal framework for neurodevelopmental disorders. Frontiers in Neurology. 2025 Oct. 2;16.**

Italian study

The authors set out to develop and assess the I-SOUND model, an inclusive orchestral music therapy framework that integrates Individual Music Therapy, Orchestral Music Therapy, and a Multidirectional, Iterative Transfer Process to support neurofunctional domains in diverse NDD populations.

The I-SOUND framework proposes a standardised multimodal approach consisting of three modules: Individual Music Therapy (IMT) targeting predictive timing and sensorimotor integration; Orchestral Music Therapy (OMT) emphasising ensemble synchronisation and



hierarchical coordination; and the Multidirectional and Iterative Transfer Process (MIT-P), aimed at consolidating and generalising skills within daily contexts.

Although efficacy claims are not made as the model requires empirical verification, the paper outlines a rigorous two-phase evaluation plan involving an observational study followed by a randomised controlled trial to assess feasibility, fidelity, sustainability, and clinical applicability. Challenges include methodological variability in previous music therapy studies, the need for greater standardisation, and difficulties balancing ethical inclusion with internal validity.



2025 Inclusive
orchestral music ther

- 6. Glynn M, Wrigley A, McCaffrey T. A qualitative exploration of music therapy practice development in intellectual disability services in Ireland: “The future is the community”. *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy*. 2025 May 1;1-19.**

Irish study

This exploratory study set out to understand how music therapy services are developed within organisations supporting people with intellectual disabilities in Ireland, drawing on insights from both music therapists and managers. The findings highlighted four main themes: the unexpected challenges therapists encounter when setting up services; key ingredients for success (such as clear communication, supportive management, and realistic, sustainable scheduling); the educational role that music therapists often take on in ID settings; and the value of a flexible, community-focused approach. The study also emphasised the importance of transferable clinical skills, strong manager involvement, and a good fit with the organisation’s culture. However, with only nine participants and a focus on the Irish context, the findings may not fully generalise to other settings or countries.



2025 A qualitative
exploration of music t

- 7. Greenboim-Zimchoni A. Exploring relationships through art therapy for children with specific learning disabilities. *International Journal of Art Therapy*. 2025;30(3):138-46.**

Israeli Study



In this qualitative case study, the author looked at how art therapy can shed light on the experiences and relationships of children with specific learning disabilities (SLD) and aimed to identify the themes that emerge in their artwork.

Three Israeli children aged 11-13 with specific learning disabilities (SLD) participated in the study. Each child attended three home-based sessions, creating drawings representing their relationships with teachers, friends, family, and self, guided by the Understand Me and My Surroundings tool.

Thematic analysis was used for the findings, which showed that the children expressed their views nonverbally, revealing themes like trust in special education teachers, tensions between friendships and classroom dynamics, the role of parental support, and the family as a key source of self-support. The study is severely limited by only including three participants as well as its exploratory case-study design, reducing the generalisability of the results. More research is needed to better understand the experiences of children with SLD in inclusive education settings.



2025 Exploring
relationships through

8. Fabian R, Tarasova D, Bergmann T, Sappok T. An improvisational theatre intervention in people with intellectual disabilities and mental health problems. *International Journal of Developmental Disabilities*. 2024;70(2):278-286.

German study

This pilot study examined whether an improvisational theatre (improv) programme is feasible and suitable for people with mild to moderate intellectual disability. The authors found that participants stayed engaged for an average of 19 months, and satisfaction levels were high, with a mean CSQ-8 score of 27.6 out of 32. Participants also gave positive feedback about the techniques used and the supportive group atmosphere, noting that the intervention adapted well to different support needs. However, the study was limited by its small sample size (N=24) and the use of some non-validated, self-developed questionnaires. More robust research is needed to determine the intervention's effectiveness for mental health outcomes in this group.



2024 An
improvisational theatr



9. Harpazi S, Regev D, Snir S. 'Being attentive': art therapy for adults with intellectual disabilities. International Journal of Art Therapy. 2024 May 10;1-10.

Israeli study

This study explored how art therapists perceive their work with adults with intellectual disabilities, aiming to identify the key elements of their practice. The findings highlighted an overarching theme of an individualised “being with the clients” approach, where therapists adapt to each person’s needs rather than focusing solely on diagnosis.

Five main categories emerged:

- the integration of therapy and rehabilitation,
- the variety of art-based methods used,
- the emotional challenges therapists face,
- the patience and effort required,
- the distinctive nature of therapeutic change.

Limitations included relying on retrospective interviews rather than direct observation, and the study did not examine differences between novice and experienced therapists, pointing to the need for further research to better understand therapeutic mechanisms and professional identity.



2024 Being
attentive_Art therapy f

10. Yum YN, Poon K, Lau WK, Ho FC, Sin KF, Chung KM, Lee HY, Liang DC. Music therapy improves engagement and initiation for autistic children with mild intellectual disabilities: A randomized controlled study. Autism Research. 2024 Dec;17(12):2702-2722.

Chinese study

This randomised controlled trial evaluated group music therapy (MT) against non-musical social skills interventions in 67 autistic children with mild-to-borderline intellectual disabilities (IQ 50–84). Participants underwent 12 weekly 45-minute sessions of either MT or active social skills training.

Primary outcomes included standardised assessments (CARS-2 and parental SRS-2 ratings), while secondary outcomes involved video-coded social behaviours such as engagement, initiation, and disengagement. The main findings show that music therapy significantly



enhances these aspects compared to control interventions, demonstrating promising benefits for this population.

Despite COVID-related disruptions and some data loss limiting sample size, findings support group music therapy as a cost-effective intervention that enhances social interaction in autistic children with intellectual disabilities. Although it's important to note that the findings might be limited by possible biases from recruitment saturation, lack of generalisability, and the imprecision or multiple analyses noted in the trial's reported limitations.



2024 Music therapy
improves engagement

11. Kim J, Chung YJ. A case study of group art therapy using digital media for adolescents with intellectual disabilities. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*. 2023 May 2;14.

Korean study

The aim of this study was to investigate how group interactive art therapy using digital media could support social skills and emotional expression in adolescents with intellectual disabilities within a class setting.

Data was collected using interviews, observations, and an analysis of digital artworks.

Six thematic experiences emerged:

- novelty and enjoyment with digital art therapy,
- autonomy through choosing subjects,
- discovery of potential and positive empowerment,
- sensory enrichment via multimedia convergence,
- valuing collaborative processes,
- heightened immersion and emotional sublimation.

Therapeutic factors identified include playfulness, interaction, and scalability of digital media, enhancing motivation, communication, and inclusivity.

Results indicated that structured, step-by-step interventions incorporating symbolic imagery and play helped participants express emotions and develop confidence and collaboration in social interactions. However, the study was limited by a small sample of five students, which restricts generalisability, and the qualitative approach meant the findings were interpretive and context specific. Differences in participants' levels of intellectual disability and individual backgrounds may also have influenced the outcomes.



2023 A case study of group art therapy.pdf

12. Beebe K. Perceptions of Self-Determination in Music Therapy for Individuals Diagnosed with Intellectual Disabilities: A Survey of Music Therapists. Music Therapy Perspectives. 2022 Apr. 1;40(1):94-103.

American study

This research paper explored how self-determination is integrated into music therapy for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, focusing on their involvement in healthcare-related decisions during therapy. Findings showed that music therapists consider certain elements essential to supporting self-determination, identified the benefits of fostering it, and described various strategies for incorporating it into sessions.

Self-determination was broadly understood as the individual's empowerment to direct their life, with therapists identifying key client skills such as communication, self-awareness, confidence, choice-making, and cognition as essential. Therapists also emphasised the critical role of unbiased support from themselves and the environment in fostering self-determination, recognising that factors like restrictive living environments and societal perceptions limit clients' autonomy. The study also highlighted connections between therapists' experience, attitudes, and the frequency with which self-determination is applied.

Limitations included restricting participants to a single geographic region, which may have overlooked multi-regional perspectives, and the lack of member checking for open-ended responses. This initial investigation points to the need for further research that considers therapists' education, work settings, and the perspectives of service users.



2022 Perceptions of Self-Determination.pdf

13. Mayer-Benarous H, Benarous X, Vonthron F, Cohen D. Music Therapy for Children With Autistic Spectrum Disorder and/or Other Neurodevelopmental Disorders: A Systematic Review. Frontiers in Psychiatry. 2021 Apr. 9;12.

This systematic review evaluated the impact of educational music therapy on language and communication skills in youths with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The review included 39 studies with 1,774 participants and two main music therapy approaches were used -



educational music therapy and improvisational music therapy. Findings showed notable improvements in language outcomes for participants receiving music therapy, with four out of five studies reporting statistically significant results, including enhanced new word learning and spontaneous verbal expression. For example, children exposed to rhythmic music demonstrated better word list retention compared with those working with rhythm alone. Limitations include variability in assessment methods across studies and the small number of studies available, which could limit the generalisability of the results.



2021 Music Therapy
for Children With Auti

14. Senkal OA, Muhtar Z. Role of orff music therapy in improving auditory processing skills in children with intellectual disability. Nigerian Journal of Clinical Practice. 2021 Jul;24(7):1005-1014.

Turkish study

In this paper, the authors sought to evaluate the effects of Orff Music Therapy on auditory processing and linguistic organisation in children with intellectual disabilities (ID).

It involved a controlled trial comparing a study group undergoing six weeks of Orff therapy with a control group, assessing changes in musical assessment scores and Test of Language Integration (TLI) scores.

They found that there were significant improvements in musical performance and reductions in TLI scores (indicative of enhanced auditory processing and linguistic organisation) in the therapy group compared to the controls. The study suggests that Orff Music Therapy can be used as a valuable developmental intervention for improving various auditory processing-related skills in children with ID, although extended or more intensive sessions might be required to achieve significant progress in core auditory processing abilities.

The study has a relatively small sample size (29 per group), potential subjectivity in musical assessments, and reliance on proxy ratings rather than direct neurological measures, which could affect the generalisability and precision of results.



2021 Role of Orff
Music Therapy in Imp



15. Miller SM, Ludwick J, Colucy Krcmar C. Professional Considerations for Art Therapists Supporting the Work of People With Intellectual Disabilities. Art Therapy. 2020 Apr. 2;37(2):83-7.

This text critiques traditional, medicalised models of therapeutic support for people with intellectual disabilities (ID) and argues that art therapy, grounded in disability theory and a relational perspective, can provide a more balanced and socially attuned mode of practice.

It outlines three main considerations for art therapists working with individuals with ID:

- upholding autonomy and advocacy
- cultivating mutual trust
- maintaining clear spatial and temporal boundaries

The conclusions highlight the importance of shifting from a purely individual-focused model of treatment to one that recognises broader social and political factors, which could ultimately enhance the therapeutic relationship. Limitations include the absence of empirical evidence and limited generalisability, as the discussion is mainly theoretical and practice focused.



2020 Professional
Considerations for Ar

16. Mino-Roy J, St-Jean J, Lemus-Folgar O, Caron K, Constant-Nolett O, Després J, et al. Effects of music, dance and drama therapies for people with an intellectual disability: A scoping review. British Journal of Learning Disabilities. 2021 July 10;50(3):385-401.

This scoping review aimed to document the effects of music, dance and drama therapies for people with an intellectual disability. 72 documents were selected and analysed. Depending on the modality of the therapy, various physical, emotional, cognitive and spiritual benefits were noted. Most studies presented a limited sample size and had no control group.

Key findings:

- Music therapy helped improve verbal and non-verbal communication skills, self-esteem, social skills, expression and management of emotions.
- Dance therapy improved physical skills like posture, balance, muscle strength as well as emotional regulation and social integration.



- Drama therapy facilitated emotional expression, problem-solving, social skills and personal growth.

Overall, the use of arts therapy (music, dance and drama) shows promise for people with an intellectual disability and the results could contribute to the development of diversified and meaningful activities.



2021 Effects of music, dance and drama the

17. Swaney M. Four Relational Experiences in Music Therapy with Adults with Severe and Profound Intellectual Disability. Music Therapy Perspectives. 2020;38(1);69-79.

This paper presents a conceptual framework in music therapy for working with adults with severe and profound intellectual disability. The author draws on Carl Rogers' person-centred approach and the notion of the "good life" as a direction rather than a destination.

The paper outlines four core relational experiences that underpin the therapeutic process:

- the curiosity of another
- the invitation of another
- the celebration of another
- the recognition of another

Key findings show these relational experiences can lead to increased awareness of self and other, spontaneous client-initiated gestures, and recognition of one's contribution to the musical exchange. The author suggests these good-life-oriented experiences are essential for enhancing the emotional health of individuals with severe and profound intellectual disability, both within and beyond the music therapy space.

Even though the author doesn't list the limitations of this paper, potential limitations include the reliance on case vignettes from the author's clinical work (which could limit generalisability); and the subjective nature of interpreting relational experiences through music therapy improvisation, which can vary with therapist skill and context.



2020 Four Relational Experiences.pdf



Indicative search strategy

“Learning disabilit*” OR “learning disorder*” OR “LD” OR “learning difficulties” OR “intellectual disabilit*” OR “ID” OR “intellectual disorder*” OR “developmental disabilit*” OR “developmental disorder*” OR “neurodevelopmental disorder*”

AND

“Creative therap*” OR “art therap*” OR “creative psychotherap*” OR “art psychotherap*” OR “drama therap*” OR “music therap*” OR “dance therap*” OR “music and dance therap*” OR “movement therap*”

AND/OR *[too limited with the third concept added]*

Role* OR “clinical model*” OR “clinical framework*” OR model* OR framework* OR “workforce type” OR “workforce numbers” OR “patient outcome*” OR outcome*

Sources searched

BMJ, CINAHL, Emcare, MEDLINE, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, PsycInfo, PubMed, Social Policy and Practice.

A structured public domain search for unpublished research.

This review is a summary of the best available evidence that has been selected using expert searching in order to answer a specific query. It may not be representative of the entire body of evidence available. No responsibility can be accepted for any action taken on the basis of the information presented herein.



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