

## MUSIC LINKS

The MusicLINKS program was developed as a pilot project with the generous financial support of Alberta Health Services.

We learned a great deal about the impact and promising practices of music-based programs, and we are happy to share those learnings so that other areas of the province may benefit.

### MusicLINKS program outline:

The MusicLINKS program is an intergenerational program which pairs junior and senior high school students with senior care centre residents experiencing dementia over a period of six months to engage through the medium of music.

- The program is music-based, in that each senior has the use of a tablet and a pair of headphones, so that they can listen to current music or music from their youth which they find pleasing.
- Students receive intergenerational sensitivity training, as well as specialized training about dementia, about how to engage and support someone experiencing dementia at each level, and how to safely interact with seniors in a care centre setting.
- The students' role is to engage the senior to the best of their ability, help the senior identify music that they like, help to download it onto a tablet, and to show the senior how to access the music on their own, where possible.

### MusicLINKS pilot project outline:

- The program took place in 4 care centre sites where people experiencing dementia ranged from a few residents with early stage dementia to a majority of residents with mid to late dementia.
- The project involved a maximum of 12 seniors, and 24 students per site.
- The program was held weekly or bi-weekly for one hour, depending on the schedule and needs of the care centres and school.
- Students were informed of the program through information sessions held at their schools, applied for the program specifically, and were accepted based on their interest and willingness to learn and commit to the program over the 6-month period.
- Students were bussed to the care centres when required, and walked to the care centre in situations where the care centre was located within a 15-minute walk of a school.



- The students received training and were paired together and partnered with a senior friend to create groups of 3.
- Ongoing feedback was gathered directly from the students, and the senior participants where possible.
- The University of Lethbridge completed a study of the MusicLinks project involving surveys and observation during its inaugural run.

### **Pilot project and promising practice learning:**

- Seniors showed increased ability to engage through music. Music appears to reach a part of the brain which remains active and connected regardless of the stage of dementia.
- Both seniors and students really enjoyed the program. This was both stated and observed.
- Training and orientation specific to dementia, seniors, and care centres was beneficial for the students.
- Ongoing support for the students was critical, as some may experience atypical behaviours from seniors, or the loss (death) of their senior during the program.
- Support for the program, both by school staff, and care centre staff is crucial to its success.
- There is need for variety in music activities, based on the stage of dementia:
  - The residents with early stage dementia wanted to engage in conversation with the students, more than strictly listen to music (which was great), so incorporating musical activities such as sing-alongs, and “name that tune” would be of benefit.
  - As the dementia progresses, individuals require more support with putting on the headphones properly, etc., but enjoy listening to the music a great deal.
  - Residents experiencing early stage dementia were perfectly capable of, and interested in learning how to operate the Ipods and tablets.
  - In supporting individuals experiencing late-stage dementia, students were able to either try different songs to see which ones their senior responded positively to, or leave notes for family members to ask what songs the senior liked.
- Based on our pilot project, we can say definitively that music is a powerful positive tool with which to engage people experiencing dementia.
- There is added benefit to incorporating intergenerational aspects to programming. Both seniors and youth benefit from the program as they are exposed to demographics they don't typically interact with. Seniors reported feeling “younger” and youth reported increased learning about the aging process and enjoying the knowledge and experiences which the seniors had to offer.
- Both junior and senior high youth demonstrated incredible capacity for compassion, patience, care of, and commitment to their seniors across the pilot sites.



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