

## Report: Music Therapy 'Taster' Sessions with the Little Musical Caravan for Āhuru Mōwai Trust

### Introduction

This project began in May 2023 as a partnership between the *Little Musical Caravan* and *Āhuru Mōwai Trust*.

The *Little Musical Caravan* (LMC) is a Porirua-based mobile music therapy service working in a neuro-affirming and disability positive way with primary and pre-school aged children, as well as teens and young adults.

*Āhuru Mōwai Trust* (AMT) is a charitable organization whose purpose is to establish specifically designed environments (sheltered havens) that improve the lives of families and children who have additional needs.

The project was envisioned as a way of enriching existing 'high sensory' sessions held on Thursday evenings for AMT families at Awesome Bounce, a trampoline park and children's 'play land' in Porirua. Music therapy 'taster' sessions were held in one of the 'party rooms' to increase the visibility of music therapy and to create a therapy space that was available within the wider community space. The focus of the project was two fold:

1. To introduce music therapy as a modality to whānau who may not have heard of it and offer equitable access for tamariki to try it out.
2. To use music therapy as a means of introducing new families to AMT's spaces and offer caregivers and/or siblings a sense of community.

### Project Phases

#### Phase 1: Term 2 2023

One off 'taster' sessions were offered whilst the project was established. 30 minute sessions were run one-on-one, with flexibility over timing and some whānau involvement. Attendees were mainly existing AMT tamariki but publicizing the sessions on social media also brought in new whānau. Over the course of term 2, there were a few repeat attendees and this gave direction for phase 2.

#### Phase 2: Term 3 2023 - current

For tamariki who had attended a 'taster' session, blocks of 10 sessions were offered during term time, with three 30 minute sessions scheduled within the 2 hour 'high sensory' session: 6.30-7.00, 7.15-7.45, 8.00-8.30.

One off 'taster' sessions were also offered for new attendees during school holidays.

With one notable exception, 10 week blocks have been offered to different tamariki each term. Most tamariki have attended on their own, but a few have had a family member

present as support for some or all of their sessions, one block was more family therapy oriented than individual therapy and one block of sessions was run as a small group with two participants. The rationale for how sessions were run was based on participant need and preferences.

### **Project Resources**

The medium term plan was always to resource the project with instruments to allow maximum flexibility. However, initially instruments were borrowed from the LMC's caravan and transported to Awesome Bounce and back every Thursday evening. Over time, this became more difficult logistically and by the start of term 4 2023, AMT had been successful in securing \$1,000 of funding for instruments from the Hutt Mana Charitable Trust. This money was spent on some of the bulkier instruments (keyboard, gathering drum, boomwhackers etc.) and the LMC was also gifted a guitar and ukulele for use at Awesome Bounce. At the end of term 4, the LMC was successful in securing a grant from Music Therapy New Zealand's 'Lindgren Project Fund' which matched the amount from the Hutt Mana Charitable Trust and has been used to purchase a number of smaller percussion instruments as well as a trolley to store and move the instruments easily.

The project is now independently resourced, with a full set of instruments secured onsite. This has enabled more flexibility, and a new LMC staff member is now able to run the sessions on Thursday evenings.

### **Attendance**

In the first 12 months of phase 2 from July 2023 - June 2024:

1 tamariki was booked for a 'taster' session but did not attend.

4 tamariki attended one 'taster' session.

6 tamariki attended one 'taster' session and a block of term-time sessions.

4 tamariki attended one 'taster' session, a block of term-time sessions and then went on to attend further music therapy, one continuing at AMT's high sensory sessions and the others either privately through the LMC or elsewhere.

### **Evaluation**

To evaluate the project so far, caregivers of attendees were invited to respond anonymously to a survey which considered 4 main areas:

1. Whether the 'taster' sessions had increased caregivers' understanding of music therapy.
2. What impact caregivers thought sessions had on their child.
3. Whether the sessions had introduced new caregivers to the AMT community and/ or encouraged AMT community-based supports for whānau.
4. What suggestions for improvement or other feedback caregivers might have.

Of the 14 families invited to take part in the survey, 6 responded giving a response rate of 43%. All responders had a child who had attended for a 'taster' session plus a term block or more, and 4 of 6 indicated that they were already part of the AMT community before their child attended music therapy.

### *Understanding of Music Therapy*

3 caregivers had an existing understanding of music therapy.

1 caregiver had heard of music therapy but didn't really know what it was.

2 caregivers had not heard of music therapy before.

Of those for whom music therapy was unfamiliar, all three could see benefits for their tamariki. One framed sessions as 'music lessons' but valued their child's relationship with their therapist and the growth this offered. Another appreciated the "calm supportive environment for [their child] to try new things as he struggles with fitting in." The third commented:

"I have a better understanding now since my child started sessions. Initially I thought it was to help more so with strengthening communication skills, I didn't know that it could benefit by just providing a safe space for my child to relax and regulate her mood."

### *Child's response to 'taster' sessions*

All 6 caregivers reported that their children enjoyed sessions and had positive things to say about the impact sessions had, identifying different aspects which were valued: Increased participation and focus; connection with the therapist; sense of belonging; boost in confidence; reduction in anxiety – a space "to feel safe and calm"; sense of accomplishment; freedom to explore; opportunity to experiment and create music rather than copy.

One caregiver found the evening timing of the sessions problematic as it meant a later bedtime for their child and this usually had a knock on effect the following morning. However, they felt the benefit for their child attending sessions outweighed the late night.

### *The AMT community at Awesome Bounce*

Of the 6 survey responders, just 2 were new to the community and both of these said they found it helpful to engage with other parents at Awesome Bounce.

One caregiver described themselves as socially 'awkward' but that when they did engage "it was great to connect with others on a similar journey." The other found the community "kind and welcoming" and mentioned that their child's sibling had made friends with other children there and looked forward to seeing them each week.

Of the AMT regulars, one expressed a preference to keep to themselves, but the others clearly value the sense of connection and belonging that they experience as part of the AMT community:

"AMT's sensory sessions are really helpful for bringing families together and creating community support."

"That [the community] is why we go! Love it."

### *Improvements to 'taster' sessions*

4 out of 6 responders were keen for their child to attend further sessions, with the other 2 responding 'depends'; the reservation for one was around the timing of sessions close to bedtime but the reason for the other was unclear from their response.

When asked what we might do to improve sessions, one had nothing to add but all the others said they were happy with the way sessions were run and just wanted more of the same. In addition, one responder mentioned that they valued receiving session notes afterwards because their child is not able to communicate clearly and doesn't want their parent hovering too closely during the session itself. Brief session notes are provided after each session, with an additional summary emailed at the end of each block.

### **Conclusions**

Awesome Bounce music therapy 'taster' sessions are now well established and sessions are consistently fully booked, with new whānau each term. Where we are given sufficient notice of a cancellation, we are also able to offer extra sessions to previous attendees and/ or one-off 'taster' sessions for new tamariki. At the time of writing this report (end of term 2 2024) all 3 one off 'taster' sessions for the first week of the upcoming July school holidays had been filled by word of mouth alone. This is an encouraging sign that awareness of our project is spreading. Through participation in our 'taster' sessions, families are being introduced to music therapy and from the survey we can confirm that caregivers are gaining some understanding of what music therapy is and how it can help. Where there may still be confusion about what is music 'education' vs 'therapy', our therapists can work to clarify this in session notes, end of term summaries and via incidental conversations.

Other than one caregiver's concerns over the late timing of sessions, survey responses about the 'taster' sessions themselves were overwhelmingly positive. Caregivers reported that they and their tamariki have enjoyed and valued sessions at Awesome Bounce and have listed a number of very relevant therapy outcomes when describing the impact that they believe sessions have had. These include social connection (for tamariki and caregivers), sensory and emotional regulation, exploration of music and identity as well as increased focus and engagement.

'Taster' sessions were also successful in introducing new whanau to the AMT community at Awesome Bounce. The opportunity to network with other supportive parents was viewed positively by those who wanted to make use of it and siblings made friends with other tamariki in the wider 'high sensory' session.

### **Recommendations**

Survey responders didn't have any suggestions for improvement other than to continue with sessions as they are and to offer additional blocks of sessions to previous attendees. Because of our child-led strengths-based approach, at the LMC we are well placed to adapt sessions depending on individual need. Although 10 weeks is not a large amount of time to effect much change with music therapy, we believe it does offer the opportunity for tamariki and caregivers to get a taste of what music therapy can offer.

One year into phase 2, it is timely for AMT to review the LMC offering at Awesome Bounce. LMC recommendations would be:

- We think the current model for ‘taster’ sessions is working, but we are always open to feedback to adapt or improve our service.
- Whilst there is still interest from new families, to continue offering ‘taster’ sessions followed by a single term block of sessions.
- Review whether to offer additional blocks to families who have already made use of a block of sessions, and to discuss logistically how this might be managed in an equitable way.

### **Closing caregiver comments**

“It’s just a great experience that you have put so much time and effort into for these gorgeous kids, thank you.”

“Keep providing these sessions for tamariki. It’s hard to get one on one with any Kaiako these days. You provide an awesome service for tamariki with special needs. Keep doing what you are doing.”

“Thank you for providing our child with these sessions and even better helping with funding. This is something we would struggle to pay for normally but Ahuru Mowai makes it affordable for us and we are grateful. We hope these continue to be available for many other children and families to enjoy!”