

# INCLUSIVE MUSIC MAKING:

## A Guide to Finding Welcoming Community Music Experiences

By Carol Ann Blank

I love music. Concerts, parades, musical theatre, parent-child music classes, symphonies, drum corps - all of it. I love recorded music, too, but I feel most at home when I am in the presence of live music making. I am a music therapist and a performer; making music with others is what I do! When I became a mother, I thought that bringing my children to music events in our community would be easy. Since I loved music, so would they. I was counting on our shared genetics to pass on my love of music.

Only, it didn't work out the way I hoped. Our daughter could not tolerate most live music events. She cried, frightened of all the indescribable sensations that assaulted her brain. Lacking the language to describe her discomfort, she spent the majority of our family experience at public music venues in my husband's arms far away from the action. In direct contrast to his sister, our son wanted only to get closer to the instruments; the vibrations felt so good to him. Such are the trials of the family raising a sensory avoider and a sensory seeker.

Music is important. Balancing your desire to attend the local concert in the park or theatre with your child's tolerance for such events can be tricky. Several aspects of live music events can challenge children who have sensory concerns. Sensory concerns occur in many people, and may or may not be associated with conditions such as Autism Spectrum Disorders. Perhaps your child needs to move around a lot. Perhaps your child uses a walker or wheelchair. Perhaps you have multiple children who are all very different (like many families!). Any of these factors may be obstacles to your family's enjoyment of a live music event.

Nothing is worth trying to "force" a child to be comfortable in a situation that's uncomfortable.

Here are some strategies I found helpful. While informed by my work at Music Together as a music therapist, I share these with my "parent hat" on. These suggestions are useful for any child, regardless of apparent neurological concern or developmental trajectory.

1. Loud sounds and “live” acoustics can be distracting to sensitive ears. Consider bringing earplugs or noise-canceling headphones when you go to music events in the community.

2. Concerts can be crowded! Consider having a wagon or stroller for your child to sit in when they need a break from the crowd. Line it with blankets and a pillow to act as additional sound barriers.

3. Lighting can also be a source of overstimulation. Consider having a hat with a brim and sunglasses handy when the lights or sun are too bright. For venues with insufficient illumination, having a small flashlight or glow sticks can provide just enough light to soothe your child’s worries.

4. Know before you go. Ask questions about the venue before you purchase tickets. Can you bring a wagon or stroller into the concert space? Will the performers be on stage or on the floor? This is important; it signals the performers’ willingness to get close to their audience. Some performers welcome children exploring the performing space but only at particular times and with supervision. If you are at a venue without a clear visual separation between audience and performers, ask the crew to place a strip of black tape on the floor to signal where the audience shouldn’t cross. If they balk, tell them it will help keep curious children away from the expensive and delicate equipment.

5. How large is the concert space? How is seating arranged? If there are chairs, are they fixed to the ground or are they moveable? Is there space for moving around or for children or adults who use wheelchairs? Where is this open space located? At the front, near the speakers, or are the children only allowed to roam in the back away from all the action? If possible, seek out Sensory Friendly Concerts for a welcoming experience.

6. Find out if there’s a quieter space you can take your child if he/she becomes overwhelmed. Smaller venues (e.g., coffee houses) simply don’t have another room. Libraries or churches may open another room for you and your child to take some quiet moments.

7. Concerts in the park are actually perfect for families with children who need to move or are easily overwhelmed by loud sounds. Experiment with different locations in proximity to the speakers. You may need to pick up and move once the music starts, but finding a place where your family can enjoy the experience together is much better than sitting in the middle of a crowded venue holding your hands over your child’s ears during the entire concert. Ask me how I know.

No matter what happens, it’s OK! You are not a failure as a parent if your child isn’t able to tolerate a live music event despite all your efforts! Sometimes things happen that are beyond your control.

Similarly, your child isn’t being bad if he or she isn’t able to tolerate a live music event despite all your preparation. Life is tricky, and kids have bad days. With love and support, your family will create wonderful memories at live music events.



Carol Ann Blank, LCAT, LPC, MMT, MT-BC, is a board-certified music therapist and Level 2 Certified Music Together teacher. She earned her Masters of Music Therapy at Temple University in Philadelphia, PA, and is a doctoral candidate at Drexel University in Philadelphia, PA. She is employed at Music Together LLC in Princeton, NJ, and is responsible for developing training materials and mentoring for implementing the Music Together program models for Music Together teachers, center directors, and preschool program providers who work with children with special needs and their families. In addition, she coordinates research for Music Together LLC and chairs the Special Needs Program Development Workgroup. She has taught Music Together classes for children with special needs in the Trenton, NJ, school district as well as through Music Together Princeton Lab School. She owns Music Therapy Services of Central New Jersey.

