



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 twofold:

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.

The 'taster' sessions begin with a one-off 'taster' during the school holidays to determine whether music therapy is a fit, followed by a term block (usually 9-10 weeks). Some tamariki have been offered a second term block. Most tamariki have attended on their own, but a few have had a family member present as support for some or all their sessions, some blocks have been 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.

An initial survey was conducted in July 2024 to assess how effectively the project was meeting its objectives. A report of the 2024 survey can be found here: [AMT/LMC 2024 survey](#).

Following feedback from this first survey, a cancellation list was introduced for whānau who had completed a 'taster' session plus a term block, and 'cancellation slots' have been offered to the list on a first reply basis, meaning that sessions are fully booked each week.

In addition, within the last 12 months, there have been two new music therapists from the LMC working with AMT tamariki (Marianne in terms 3 and 4 2024 and Deb in 2025) and the closure of Awesome Bounce in May 2025 meant a relocation to Chipmunks in Tawa. There was a brief lull in interest the term of the move, but this has since picked up and we now have a waiting list for 2026.

Evaluation

To evaluate the project again, caregivers of attendees were invited in July 2025 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, 7 responded giving a response rate of 50%, which is higher than for the previous survey (43%). All responders had a child who had attended for a ‘taster’ session plus a term block or more, and only 2 of 6 indicated that they were already part of the AMT community before their child attended music therapy.

Understanding of Music Therapy

4 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.

5 of the respondents gave a summary of what they understood music therapy to be, and highlighted some key areas of support, including developing communication skills, self-expression through sound and music, exploring ‘temperaments’ (mood), regulation and creativity. One respondent described music therapy as a child-led introduction to music.

Child’s response to ‘taster’ sessions

All 7 caregivers reported that their children enjoyed sessions and had positive things to say about the impact sessions had, identifying different aspects which were valued: Learning musical skills; agency; curiosity and the freedom to try new things and make own choices; social connection; joint attention; practicing skills like turn-taking; using music to ‘calm down’ (regulate); creativity and a sense of accomplishment; meeting sensory needs.

One particularly articulate respondent identified the therapy benefits their child experienced, and how this generalized beyond the therapy space:

“[My child] enjoyed the therapy. She interacted with a lot of the instruments and demonstrated a curiosity to try new things, that she has taken outside of therapy. She also demonstrated shared attention by singing along and dancing to the songs. She waited and took turns playing drums, guitar and keyboard! According to the therapist [my child] sings with perfect pitch, we clapped and encouraged [my child],

and we have seen her continue to add new sounds to the ones she already made. She absolutely gained new sounds and exploration of sound and textures... After the sessions she would be more "chatty" making more sounds and trying out new sounds and sound sequences e.g "ji ji ji ji. guga guga guga. eeeeiyee eeeeoyooo eeeeoyoo eeeeyiii " etc."

Four respondents noted that their child(ren) looked forward to sessions each week. One commented: "[my child's] behaviour leading up to music therapy nights was great, it was something he really loved." And another: "[Music therapy] became a highlight event of her week."

One caregiver found the change in evening routine tricky, as it meant going out at dinner time, but commented that it was worth the disruption as their child enjoyed the sessions so much.

The AMT community at Awesome Bounce/ Chipmunks

Of the 7 survey responders, 5 were new to the community. This is an increase from 2 in the previous survey and reflects an increased number of new whānau attending the high sensory sessions due to their enrollment for music therapy.

For one caregiver, the focus was on providing a space for their children to play without feeling overwhelmed rather than connecting with other families. Another chose to 'keep to themselves' but commented on the environment of inclusiveness, and a third said that they didn't get the chance to meet other families due to the timing of their session at the end of the night. Another respondent mentioned meeting trustee Paul Latham and learning about the mahi that Āhuru Mōwai Trust does.

The remaining respondents valued the opportunity to connect:

"It was nice to be around families with similar challenges where our kids weren't judged for being "too much.\""

"We love these evenings!"

"I just felt like I wasn't alone ekk how to explain well it's nice to know there's other mums out there with special kids like me as I have a huge whānau but not many have children with disability's so it's nice to see mums you can relate to and just an awesome community."

When asked whether they had returned to Awesome Bounce/ Chipmunks after their term block had ended, one caregiver replied that Chipmunks is not suitable for their child, another that the extra distance to Chipmunks put them off but they would make the effort if their child got therapy sessions again. Three replied that they had or would return:

"We have been back a few times, just so the kids could burn off their energy and excitement in a safe environment where we got to have a bit of a break."

“I knew of Ahuru Mowai Trust’s sensory sessions at Awesome Bounce. The sensory session introduced our family and [my child] to the Music Therapy. We love the sensory sessions and we now come to Chipmunks too.”

Improvements to ‘taster’ sessions

6 out of 7 responders were keen for their child to attend further sessions, with the other 1 responding ‘depends.’ The reason for this was unclear from their response.

When asked what we might do to improve sessions, most responders asked for more sessions and one commented that the reduced pricing made access to music therapy affordable for them. One caregiver suggested that group sessions to extend social interaction with peers would be beneficial and another suggested a more directive and structured approach.

Conclusion

Music therapy ‘taster’ sessions are now well established at Āhuru Mōwai Trust’s high sensory sessions. There seemed to be a lull in interest when the venue changed from Awesome Bounce to Chipmunks, and with the move details uncertain, it proved tricky to fill the third spot in term 2 with a new whānau. However, this offered an opportunity to introduce existing whānau to the new venue by offering the third spot to the cancellation list. At the time of writing (October 2025), interest in ‘taster’ sessions has since picked up as awareness of the new venue has increased. When we do get a cancellation, we are usually able to fill the vacant slot either through the cancellation list or on the night.

Through participation in our ‘taster’ sessions, families are being introduced to music therapy and from the survey we can confirm that caregivers are gaining a greater understanding of what music therapy is and how it can help. In the last survey we identified that there was some confusion between music *education* and music *therapy*, and our therapists have worked to clarify this in session notes, end of term summaries and via incidental conversations. It was particularly gratifying to see how well one respondent could identify and articulate the therapy benefits their child experienced.

Survey responses about the ‘taster’ sessions themselves were overwhelmingly positive. Caregivers reported that they and their tamariki have enjoyed and valued sessions at AMT’s high sensory sessions and have listed a number of very relevant therapy outcomes when describing the impact that they believe sessions have had. These include agency and decision-making, confidence, social connection (including practicing skills like turn-taking), increased joined attention and focus, sensory and emotional regulation, creative thinking and gaining music skills.

‘Taster’ sessions were also successful in introducing new whānau to the AMT community at Awesome Bounce/ Chipmunks. The opportunity to network with other supportive parents was viewed positively by those who wanted to make use of it and one parent commented: “I just felt like I wasn’t alone.”

Recommendations

Survey responders had a couple of suggestions for improvement; group sessions to extend social connection and more directive, structured sessions (which the LMC would usually lean away from as this can conflict with our Post-Ableist approach.) Otherwise, responders asked for additional sessions to be offered to previous attendees. 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. A number of AMT whānau have gone on to access music therapy with the LMC or another service privately. This question was not included in the survey and is not reported on here.

Two years into our partnership, 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 logically how this might be managed in an equitable way.
- Continue to offer ‘cancellation’ slots.
- Explore whether it might be possible to trial group sessions over the summer holidays, either at Awesome Bounce or at Mana Therapy Hub.

Closing caregiver comments

“I think you are all wonderful and the mahi you do doesn’t go unproved and my boy has truly spread the word to all his mates at his Kura keep up the awesome mahi!”

“Thank you so much for the mahi you do! [My child] has really benefitted.”

“[My child] immensely enjoyed it as it was and he would leave the session in such a happy mood.”

“Ohh hell yes my son loved his sessions absolutely enjoyed every minute and my other children enjoyed playing at chipmunks and I mum enjoyed having a cuppa and break it’s a win win win.”

“Thank you again for this wonderful opportunity.”

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