

2026 Report: Music Therapy 'Taster' Sessions with the Little Musical Caravan for Āhuru Mōwai Trust

Introduction

This project originally began in May 2023 as a partnership between the Little Musical Caravan (LMC) and Āhuru Mōwai Trust (AMT). It has been running successfully for three years.

The Little Musical Caravan 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 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. Sessions are currently held at Chipmunks Playland, Tawa. Music therapy 'taster' sessions are run in a 'party' room, visible from the main seating area, to increase the visibility of music therapy and create an accessible therapy space within a wider community setting. The focus of the project is 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 offering begins with a one-off 'taster' session during the school holidays to determine whether music therapy is a fit, followed by a term block (usually 9–10 weeks), with cancellation slots offered to whānau who have completed their initial block. Most tamariki have attended on their own, but a few have had a family member present for all or some of their sessions. Some tamariki have also invited a friend to join in the sessions from time to time. The rationale for how sessions run is based on participant need and preferences.

Previous evaluation reports were completed in July 2024 and July 2025. This report covers the most recent survey evaluation conducted in July 2026.

Evaluation

To evaluate the project's ongoing impact, caregivers of attendees were invited in July 2026 to respond anonymously to a survey assessing four main areas:

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

Out of 16 families invited to participate, 4 responded, giving a response rate of 25%. This is lower than previous years (50% in 2025 and 43% in 2024). Two respondents had children who completed a taster plus a term block, while the other two had completed a term block and went on to access additional cancellation slots.

1. Understanding of Music Therapy

Prior Awareness: Three caregivers had heard of music therapy prior to enrolling, while one had heard of it but didn't fully understand what it entailed.

Refined Understanding: Following participation, all four caregivers demonstrated an accurate, neuro-affirming understanding of music therapy. Key themes identified in their descriptions included:

- *Child-Led Exploration:* Following the child's lead without pressure to perform or "do it correctly."
- *Regulation & Brain State Shifts:* Creating a safe sensory container that aids emotional regulation, helping transition from overwhelming sensory states ("brain feels like a scribble") into a grounded, present state.
- *Motor & Expressive Skill Development:* Supporting fine and gross motor development alongside non-pressured self-expression.

2. Child's Response to 'Taster' Sessions

All four caregivers reported highly positive experiences for their tamariki. Key outcomes and valued aspects included:

- *Autonomy and Agency:* Caregivers highlighted the rarity and value of their child having full choice over what and when to play - a contrast to typical daily demands. One parent shared that their child loved being able to bring his passions into the space and get a positive response rather than being told "not now" or to "shoosh."
- *Increased Confidence & Generalization:* Parents noted an increased willingness to try new things outside of therapy, improved mood, and a deeper love of music.
- *Accessible Entry Point:* One caregiver emphasized that the low-cost 'taster' model reduces financial risk, allowing families to explore if music therapy is a good fit before making a larger financial commitment.
- *Routine Impact:* For most, sessions were an eager highlight of the week ("a definite highlight with improved mood"). One family noted the travel to Tawa was a slight logistical hurdle, and another navigated the fine line between

therapy being a beneficial outlet versus an extra weekly demand during busy school terms.

3. The Āhuru Mōwai Community at Chipmunks

Three of the four respondents were already part of the AMT community prior to signing up for music therapy, while one whānau was introduced to the AMT sensory sessions *through* the music therapy opportunity.

Across all responses, the AMT high sensory space at Chipmunks was described as an essential "lifeline":

- *Non-Judgmental Environment:* Parents strongly valued having a safe space where children can experience big feelings or express themselves without judgment, allowing adults to relax and connect with peers who "get it."
- *Peer Connection & Identity:* One parent shared their own recent diagnosis (ADHD/suspected autism) and described the space as a vital sanctuary to speak openly or rest without social pressure. They noted it is the only place where their child consistently comes home saying, "I made a new friend today."
- *Sustained Engagement:* Three of the four families actively return to the high sensory sessions regularly, affirming the space as a long-term community anchor.

4. Improvements & Looking Forward

Feedback regarding potential improvements and future delivery included:

- *Session Continuity & Flexibility:* One caregiver requested options for make-up sessions when illness or school commitments interrupt a term block (e.g. only achieving 6 of 10 sessions).
- *Home Integration:* A caregiver suggested providing ideas or strategies on how to integrate music and musical regulation tools into the home routine between sessions.
- *High Demand for Further Blocks:* Three of the four respondents explicitly requested further term blocks for their child and asked to be placed on the waitlist. The fourth respondent noted interest depended on balancing their child's school workload, while reinforcing their strong support for the service.

Conclusion

The 2026 survey demonstrates that the partnership between the Little Musical Caravan and Āhuru Mōwai Trust continues to deliver deep, meaningful value to tamariki and their whānau. Despite a lower survey response rate this cycle (25%), the qualitative feedback offers rich evidence of therapeutic efficacy.

Caregivers consistently articulate the core tenets of LMC's post-ableist, child-led approach - valuing agency, emotional regulation, and non-judgmental exploration over rigid musical performance. Furthermore, the co-location of therapy within AMT's high

sensory sessions continues to reinforce a safe, wraparound community space where both children and parents experience belonging and reduced isolation.

Recommendations

Survey responders had a couple of suggestions for improvement: Catch up opportunities for sessions missed during the term block; resourcing parents to utilise musical strategies at home (which is something we can do but would require a different family therapy focus to sessions). Other than this, one responder suggested more comfortable seating at Chipmunks.

Although 10 weeks is a relatively short period for therapy, and not long enough to effect much change, we still think it is sufficient to introduce tamariki and their caregivers to what music therapy can offer. A number of AMT whānau have gone on to access music therapy privately through the LMC or via another service. This question was not included in the survey and is not reported on here. Cancellation spots continue to be well used by whānau who have previously accessed 'taster' sessions and where notice of cancellation has been received too late in the day to offer to the 'cancellation list', Deb has usually filled the space by offering it to whānau attending Chipmunks that evening – sometimes to previous attendees and sometimes to new whānau, some of which have gone on to register for a term block. We consistently have a waitlist for initial compatibility 'taster' sessions in the school holidays, so demand remains high for this service.

Three years into our partnership, we welcome expansion for music therapy to AMT's Kāpiti Coast sensory sessions in the New Year and look forward to continuing our work at Chipmunks.

For Rebound sessions (Monday evenings in Paraparaumu) we suggest:

- A soft launch in January, with NZ RMTh(s) attending on Monday evenings to talk to parents, offer mini demonstrations and raise the profile of upcoming taster sessions which are due to start in term 1.
- Utilising the same format of 3 x 30 minute sessions during the AMT sensory session with the following timings:
 - 5.45-6.15 pm
 - 6.30-7.00 pm
 - 7.15-7.45 pm
- Offering one off sessions in the school holidays to check for compatibility followed by a term block.

For Chipmunks sessions (Thursday evenings in Tawa) we recommend:

- Whilst there is still interest, continue to offer single term blocks to new whānau to preserve equitable access and introduce new whānau to the AMT community.
- Continue to use the cancellation list to keep capacity full.

- Review whether we might be able to offer 'catch up' sessions in the first week of the school holidays for sessions cancelled during the term block (particularly where this was due to practitioner absence).
- Consider adding a further question to the EOI form to establish when caregivers might like to be more involved in sessions and when they might like to co-develop some musical strategies to use at home.
- Formalise criteria for allocating second or subsequent blocks to returning families (when we have availability).

Closing Caregiver Comments

"I think these are fantastic... thank you for the opportunity - I hope that you'll continue to offer these sessions <3"

"It's a lifeline space... the kids can play and be themselves, their adults can breathe a little. And the music therapy being there as well, is an awesome opportunity for kids to expand their self-knowledge."

"My kid who is reluctant to try new things... tried and really enjoyed the taster session. I have such faith that you're doing amazing things, because even one taster was great for him."

"My daughter connected with Deb and loved her sessions."