

Review of Tacpac[®] Two **by Sally-Anne Zimmermann, RNIB Music Adviser**

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TACPAC Two: communication through touch and music
Published by Hilary Wainer and Alexander Massey in Oxford
www.tacpac.co.uk

Who is it for? Partners, usually one with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD) and one able bodied

What is it for? Having fun and learning.

What is needed? A comfy, disturbance free zone plus some everyday objects (listed in the pack) plus a good quality CD player and the CDs, time (about an hour), and of course the participants.

What happens? Through linking what becomes familiar music with objects, actions and people in a pattern of different activities, the partners communicate with each other.

Go into many exciting classrooms in special schools for pupils with complex needs and you see in the rows of neatly labelled boxes "TacPac resources" on one of the shelves. Visit play areas at home and again you come across bags hanging up with TacPac resources ready for use. In TacPac the consistency of recorded music linked to the varied used of everyday objects linked to the spontaneity of initiating and responding in interaction one to one mainly through touch leads to communication. Since the first scheme, created in 1995, TacPac has become a hit promoting interaction between adults and those who "have no voice to declare their perspective on life and little power to shape their own lives" (Orr, 2003)¹. Some pairs have kept going merrily along with the original materials whilst others have added their own music tracks and accompanying physical contact activities.

Now since June 2007 there is TacPac Two, comprising three CDs, three laminated cards, an additional tips page and a booklet of explanation. These are all bright, well presented and clear. The package costs £47.50 including postage and packing, and you can book training. The tips sheet (and there are more on the website) both gently educates in the often neglected details of different types of touch and gesture and hints at the considerable degree of freedom pairs have once affective communication is perceived. The users are urged to listen to the beat and to "try to keep in time with this". TacPac is about synchronisation, not for a change getting sound and picture together but sound and feeling.

¹ Orr, R. (2003) My right to play: a child with complex needs Maidenhead: Open University Press

Getting all adult users to read the sixteen pages of explanation including witty cartoon strips and largely blank observation sheets seems a reasonable expectation. You could just copy those "in the know" in a session but having some idea of why you are doing things can mean you become more alert to your partners' actions. These experiences are placed in levels: awareness, variety, pattern, association. These four are described as types of touch, music and sound, and then the tactile and aural combined, with examples given of adult activities. The types of responses are then outlined, based on a framework developed on an Institute of Education, London University project "Sounds of Intent" (see www.soundsofintent.org) . How to set the routine into a story is illustrated and how the work links to the P levels of the National Curriculum (for those in England) is laid out. The booklet ends with a joyous couple of pages about those involved with TacPac reminding us that this is all about people as well as ideas. Working through the booklet and having an adult to adult session and then discussing the session would make a fascinating training session for staff at a school or residential setting, or a parents' group.

Does it do what it "says on the tin"? All the pupils at RNIB Sunshine House School Northwood have serious sight loss and additional needs. TacPac has long been a regular activity in each class. The new pack has gone down really well with all the classes, reception through to the end of Key Stage 2. The more varied types of music are welcomed along with the length of the tracks being good for getting each activity established. Having CDs means the sound quality is better (yes they were still on the cassette version of TacPac one), an important issue with students so dependent on their hearing, and CDs are easier to organise. The only quibble from staff was that the voice announcing the tracks after a few sessions is rather intrusive in an otherwise non verbal session where each track sets up a distinct atmosphere; clearly numbered sets of objects and the prompt card is all that is required, not a verbal prompt. There is plenty of silence between tracks on the CD to stop one activity elegantly (oh how rarely is this done!) and still get things ready for the next one.

So watching two lads working through Set Four's six activities, how did they do. The session is cued with an Object of Reference and the "Do not disturb" notice is on the door, which in practice means that lots of people still come in but they creep in and do not talk (how hard for adults) and so the children do not notice they are there (that is the theory: strong perfume destroys that!). The lads had had four or five sessions before this particular one. Track One plays on contrast – the quick rolling of a textured ball for a whistled tune with a drum pattern accompaniment followed by a smooth ball rolled slowly accompanied by a low clarinet sound and block chords. Martin's breathing slowed down as the smooth ball was rolled around his little body and then wriggled his fingers whilst the textured ball was tickling his toes. Track Two has a hairbrush rolled and pressed to a catchy xylophone melody, bass line and beat, which is played at two different pitches sequentially. Both lads look surprised (pleasantly) at this track. Track Three and we are back to

contrasting activities, painting the skin with warm water and then blowing where there is water. The music is male voices chanting in two parts and then for the blowing a wave like sound which gets gradually louder and then softer. Timothy giggled at the bottom of his vocal range with his adult blowing on his wriggling toes. Out comes the loofah for Track Four which is a Blues number on the piano, starting with an introduction for shaker and beat and getting more complex on each repeat. The ending is slower and louder and, yes, has a "yeah" coolly at the very end. In class there is the first vocalisation of the session. Martin makes deep "ooing" sounds as the loofah is flicked over his hands. Like the giving away the ending to a cliff hanger who dunnit, I do not want to give the game away with Track Five: suffice to say that the lads were intrigued by one of the sounds on the CD when it first came in and the staff had to hold their breaths to stop their hysterics getting in the way. Do find out for yourselves! The session ends with a tune on the vibraphone and a held chord on a wash of strings, as everybody relaxes, keeps in contact and ...listens. ²

All the music is unusual yet very approachable. As it is specially composed the music is "context free" allowing it to be matched with the tactile activity without having to rid it of other connotations. A welcome contrast to the number of well-known tunes used with new words in many special settings. The music is all unhurried and uncluttered, simple and effective but not "nursery twinkle". It is appropriate for any age group. There is little dynamic range, and speeds are on the whole leisurely, so that when the volume or tempo does change it is significant. The structure of each piece is particularly clear and interesting (and could form a completely different role for a more able class in a special school leading to some kind of joint performance routed in the PMLD skills). Some pieces have contrasting sections to match the contrast touch stimulation, whilst others get more complex on each repeat and others have random elements. A wide pitch range is used from whistling to male voices and bass guitar like sounds and the recording is of good quality. Many people with PMLD have hearing difficulties as well; do think carefully about where the speakers are placed and experiment with various levels available on your equipment.

Much is invested in objectives in turn taking as a milestone in the development of communication in education for those with complex needs. Less is focused upon the setting of points of joint reference, "the same topic of conversation", as a prelude to turn taking (Nind & Hewett, 2005)³ Linking music, each piece with a distinctive character, with specific textures and touch from familiar objects, with two people communicating provides this stable joint reference. The richness of tactile experience – "a dozen or more sensory systems operate in the skin and deeper in the body tissue" (Orr,

² With thanks to the children and staff at RNIB Sunshine House School, Northwood, particularly Ruth and Lynda, and the lads "Martin" and "Timothy".

³ Nind, M. & Hewett, D. (2005) Access to Communication: developing basic communication with people who have severe learning difficulties London: David Fulton

2003, page 60) – in developing communication is often underused. Here the tactile is blended with the direct motivation of interesting music, music the organised arrangement of what otherwise is largely a random, chaotic and insignificant world of sound for those with PMLD. Then the human sensitivity is added, close up and concentrated. In TACPAC sessions everyone has an opportunity to know the essentials of being aware:

“I need to know

- where I am
- who I’m with
- what’s happening
- what’s happening next” (Orr 2003, page 19)

This is a kindly package giving structure and freedom, just requiring sensitivity from those involved but giving no limits to the range of its impact. Enjoy TACPAC Two and spread your successes at www.tacpac.co.uk