

# Music therapy helping Auckland girl navigate neurodivergent life

## Kiara did not like going to school

**She had trouble sleeping, and didn't like initiating a conversation or speaking with strangers. So it's hard to believe that she's the same girl who jumps up to brightly greet me, inquisitively asks about my outfit and quizzes us about the muffler on the microphone she has got on for filming.**

"What do you think about my new clothes?" the six-year-old fashionista asked. Her mother, Surangie Weerasinghe, said Kiara received an autism diagnosis when she was about two-and-a-half years old.

"It was hard for us ourselves as well. To navigate this journey and learn what suits her the best has been difficult, so of course, it's a little bit difficult when dealing with outside parties, especially. But in saying that, there are lots of people out there who understand and who are willing to make a difference and try to really understand what it means to us and Kiara."

Kiara tried many things to help her navigate a neurodivergent life, but her parents found she flourished the most with her weekly sessions at Raukatauri Music Therapy Centre in Auckland.

"She was this girl who was very timid and didn't want to even move away from us," Weerasinghe said.

"[During the first music therapy session] she was sitting with me and my husband and did not even want to try or touch or anything to do with the music instruments - although she loved music, she was keeping it to herself," she said.

"When we initially came here, like at the door when she was pressing the bell, we always used to tell 'it's Kiara here', and then they would open the door."

Now, it has become one of Kiara's weekly highlights.

As well as being the one to speak up at the doorbell, she has learnt about new instruments, how to play the violin, and - her favourite - the colourful ribbons on a stick.

Her mother said she has been fascinated by colours recently, learning how rainbows are created and what makes them translucent.

"She's come a long way since we started this journey," Weerasinghe said.

Her music therapist Aliss Pollock said Kiara is playful and enthusiastic.

She enjoyed following Kiara's creative mind to express herself through music and dance.

Even at school, which Kiara initially did not like going to, she is now not afraid to speak up and mingle with other students and has been praised for it, Weerasinghe said.

"It was a smooth transition from kindergarten to school because of the [music] therapy we were giving her constantly.

"We're happy to see the progress that she's made, and it's helped us with giving her options when she's feeling anxious or a little bit overwhelmed. We find it very easy to ask her 'do you want to listen to some music? Put on your headphones and listen to some music'. I'm really glad that we found this, and we managed to give it a go and it's a slow journey, and you don't see the results like instantly, but it's been a very great journey."

Music therapist Alison Talmage worked at Raukatauri Music Therapy Centre for about seven years and co-founded the CeleBRation Choir - which helps adults with neurological conditions come together in healing through music - in 2009.

She said music therapy has proven useful for people of all ages - whether it be for speech and language rehabilitation, bringing back memories for those with dementia, changing moods or a sense of community.

"I can remember one child with autism who I worked with who needed to be in control of everything. He had a lot of anxiety and I worked with him and his mum together, but he would throw things around the room and run around and it ended up that for a while, the only thing that I had in the room was the piano and a chair for his mum to sit on... I gradually introduced instruments one at a time, and I can remember two things about working with him. One was that he squeezed into the tiny gap between the piano and the wall, and peeped over the top of the piano and made eye contact with me, and there was just this moment when I thought 'it's going to be okay, we're going to make some progress here'. He'd taken weeks and weeks to connect... It's a lovely feeling to be able to bring out the best in other people and to provide something meaningful for them when life is quite challenging."

Re-published with permission from the author and RNZ. Originally published by RNZ at 9:27 am on 19 January 2025 <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/539340/music-therapy-helping-auckland-girl-navigate-neurodivergent-life>



13 Tune Me In MENZA

