

Rainbow Harp Resources for Students with Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities (PMLD)

The Rainbow Harp is a great tool for connecting sound, colour and texture.

It allows the student to explore and take the lead.

Harp Basics for Practitioners

You do not need to be a musician to use the Rainbow Harp. But there are some techniques worth learning to protect your hand health.

1. Play with your fingers pointing down and thumb raised up
2. Don't use your pinkie finger
3. Try to keep your finger joints relaxed rather than locked
4. Play with palms facing down
5. Bring your fingers into towards you palms when you pluck the strings.

Please see our video demonstration of this on the "resources area" of our website.

Response Patterns

There are a few basic response patterns any practitioner, class assistant or parent can learn within minutes. These basic patterns can be used to respond to your student's actions, with their actions "conducting" your playing.

1. Single note. If they touch something red, you play the red string. If they touch something yellow, you play the yellow sting. It's that simple, and applies to all the colours.
2. Two-finger chords. Building on the previous technique slightly we can add a second string to make a simple chord. This gives a slightly fuller sound. Use your index finger to match the colour note to the colour of the material the student has chosen but his time use your thumb to play the sting two notes higher. For example, if the student was playing with something red, you would use your index finger to play the red string and your thumb would be playing the purple string. An easy way to remember this is you always keep a one string gap between your fingers, and you always match the bottom note of the chord.
3. Three-finger chords. This is one step more complex but building on the same idea. Now we are using two fingers and a thumb to make a three-finger chord. It's exactly the same principle as the previous technique, but now we are adding the middle finger to play the matching note, the index finger to play the string that is two notes higher than that and the thumb to play the string two notes higher than the index finger.
4. Glissandos. Glissando is a fancy name for running your fingers up the harp. With the Rainbow Harp, all you need to learn is where to start and where to stop. Working on the same idea of colour matching, if the student picks up something blue then start on a blue string and slide your finger up or down the harp playing all the strings until you arrive at another blue string.

These are the basic fundamental techniques required to use the Rainbow Harp as a multi-sensory therapy tool with students with PMLD.

The two- and three-finger chords can be played by plucking all the strings in the chord at the same time, or one after another. It's nice to match the feeling of the sound to the student's movements.

Scarf Conducting

Lay out a set of silk or organza scarves. You will need a set with the colours red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple and pink.

Allow the student to pick them up and explore sensorially. Try to encourage them to first explore one at a time so you can demonstrate the different sounds attached to the different colours.

Then, if they pick up multiple scarves, you can play the strings that correlate to the scarves they have. This allows the student to explore different chord combinations. They may find ones they particularly like and dislike.

If the student is gently stroking the scarf, try to mimic this in the volume of your playing. Likewise, if they are flapping wildly then match that with a faster rhythm and louder volume.

Taste Sounds

This can be useful for speech and language development, and children who have a barrier to accessing a variety of food.

Set an array of food out with corresponding colours. For example, strawberries, oranges, a slice of lemon, cucumber, blueberries, beetroot and ham.

When the child looks at the food, lightly play its corresponding-coloured string. Once they touch it play a two-finger chord that corresponds with it. When they put it in their mouth play a three finger chords that corresponds and if they eat it a full glissando to celebrate. This way the sound gets fuller with every step. It can help children use their other senses to motivate the exploration.

Sound Touch

For this you need a second practitioner.

Lay out the touch cards and allow the student to choose one. When they choose the touch card, it's simply a case of matching the string or chord to the card.

The second practitioner is there to translate the card into touch. We recommend doing this on hands or feet.

Here is a list of the touch cards:

Red. Light touch using single fingertip.

Orange. Squeezing lightly on student's finger tips.

Yellow. Tickling lightly using all fingers.

Green. Slow gentle deep pressure squeezes

Blue. Using medium pressure, full hand strokes.

Purple. Using fingers to surround student's individual fingers and pull outwards.

Pink. Rhythmic tapping.

This exercise uses music to motivate children to explore touch, in a setting where they are in complete control of the touch they receive.

You can take this one step further and colour code different essential oils for the massage and allow the student to smell them all first and help select the smell they prefer.

Bead Composing

Bead composing is a great way to develop fine motor skills whilst also accessing creativity for those who are challenged to manipulate regular creative materials.

Hand the student a lace and pot of beads that correspond with the colours of the harp strings. Allow the student to thread the beads on in whatever order they wish, repeating colours as much as they want. There are no rules.

When they have filled up the lace, you can play the notes back to them in the order they put them on the string. This is their unique composition.

If the student enjoys this you can progress to using an extra-large hole punch and coloured card so they can punch out circles and stick them in a line. And eventually use scissors to cut freeform shapes to stick in a line.

This can be done using any coloured sensory materials. Coloured grains of rice are really good for extra fine motor skills.

Once the student progresses from threading you can print off our template to help them to group notes in groups of four, also known as musical bars.

Then, when you play it back to them, they will have a chance to change some of the groups before sticking it down and finalising their piece of music. This allows the student to genuinely have participation in composing their own piece of music.

We offer a sheet music printing service of their composition so other musicians, or even the school orchestra, can play it.

Sound Art

This is very similar to the taste sound activity only using paint. This needs the practitioner to be a bit more confident with the harp because they need to, as best they can, match the brush or finger paint style to the sound. I'd say that matching the notes to the colours is less important with this one. It's about giving an auditory sensation to the movements they are making. Artistic expression is often a reflection of how someone is feeling. So, it is the practitioner's job to help enhance this expression by matching it with a corresponding expressive sound.

If you are worried about getting paint on the harp, fear not! Poster paint comes off nicely with a damp cloth. Just remember to dry it properly with a towel and retune it once it's dry, as the moisture can change the tuning.

Chord Building

You can start with Duplo or something similar. Get the student to build a tower. Each time they add a brick, play the notes that correspond to the colours of the bricks in order, then stop until they add another.

Once they can handle Duplo then you can move onto wooden blocks. This is harder as they don't interconnect. Then once they have mastered this you can move onto geometric shapes for stacking.

Each time they add a block, play the colours of each block starting from the bottom. This builds suspense. It helps children cope with suspense and frustration, develop their reactions to sudden change and work on using the coordination of two hands together.

Once the blocks or tower topple and fall, lots of glissandos help the child see this as a celebration to help with the frustration. The child could also get a go at doing a glissando themselves every time the tower falls.

Sound Exploring

The Rainbow Harp is in the key of C major. This makes it perfect for students to get a satisfying sound with very little technical input.

For students in wheelchairs, you can place the harp across the arm rests and place the student's arms on top of it. They may benefit from you holding it at a bit of an angle if their range of movement is impaired.

For highly sensitive or extremely shy students we recommend placing the harp on its back on the floor with cushions either side. Allow the students to approach the harp and explore the strings in their own time.

If a student is likely to push the harp over with force, then start with the harp lying on its side on the floor. The strings can be accessed easily this way without the risk of the harp falling over.

For students with ODD. We recommend the practitioner plays with harp to encourage interest. The student is likely in time to come and explore the bass strings by interrupting the practitioner's playing. Initially keep going like this and then gently let them gain more control over the instrument.

For those physically able to sit on a stool. We recommend adopting the traditional harp position of having the harp (on a stool if necessary) between one's knees and leaning it back on their dominant shoulder.

For students that struggle to sit in one position a cushion on the floor instead of a stool will allow them to kneel and sit in whatever position they need.

Sound Games

Harp hide and seek is a great game! Get the student to wait with a member of staff while the practitioner with the harp hides. The practitioner then needs to gently play the harp. The student follows their ears to find the practitioner. The roles can be reversed if applicable. This can also be played with a group of students throughout a large building or in the school grounds.

Swing Strings

Occupational therapists, physiotherapists and others may enjoy using the harp with students by allowing them to swing and use different limb to stretch out and try and strum the harp when the swing is at its closest to the harp. This means the student has to stretch, and use timing as well as concentration. It is helpful if the practitioner is playful with this.

Object Sounds

Students may enjoy exploring the different sounds that come from using different things to strum or pluck the strings. For example, holding the harp at an angle and rolling a ping pong ball down the strings. Or using a tea spoon to lightly tap the strings with the harp laid flat.

Other things that make interesting sounds on the strings are using a piece of paper, a feather-first the soft bit then the pointy tip. ID cards make a very loud noise. Pipe cleaners make a very soft muffled sound.

Classic Games

Musical chairs, musical statues etc. can all be played but the students can take it in turns to be the musician. This allows them to feel responsible and in control.

We hope this information has explained the versatility of this instrument when working with students with PMLD.

For demonstrational videos supporting this print out please go to www.rainbowharp.co.uk