

Removing Barriers

darts

A beginner's guide
for music leaders

By
Dyzelle Sutherland
Matt Harper-Hardcastle



all aboard

Behind every successful musician, there is at least one passionate teacher or instructor who went the extra mile to support them on their journey.

Disabled children experience many barriers to accessing music education, but if we come armed with awareness, thoughtfulness, flexibility, and the creativity inherent to our practice, we can make their pathway a much smoother journey.



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Introduction

You don't need to know about medical conditions or have any specialist skills to support your disabled pupils. Open conversations and small changes to our music lessons can make a huge difference. Conversations and adaptations that focus on how the music, instrument or lesson can change to meet the needs and skills of a disabled child, rather than how the child can change to suit the music, instrument or lesson will keep inclusivity and accessibility at the forefront. This guide aims to provide you with some language and thinking around disability, with practical tips on how to adapt your lessons to help disabled pupils thrive.



This resource has come out of the learning gathered through the All Aboard Music Network - a strand of professional development that darts (Doncaster's Creative Health charity) initiated alongside a four-year Youth Music funded project. The All Aboard Music Network offers musicians and educators access to a series of events with guest speakers, opening up the conversation around accessible music-making. The authors of this resource - Dyzelle Sutherland and Matt Harper-Hardcastle - have been collaborating on the All Aboard Music Network events since the beginning and are passionate about sharing the knowledge and expertise from the network to a wider audience. We hope that this resource empowers music leaders and instructors to feel confident in making change for disabled pupils.



Throughout this resource you will see that the language we use is informed by the Social Model of Disability, meaning we refer to a disabled person, not a person with a disability. In some educational settings, terms like Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)/nurture groups/additional needs might be more commonly used, and we also respect that the way people talk about themselves and their disability may not align with the approach we have taken. The content in this resource is designed to support music leaders working with a variety of groups and settings, but we are aware that we couldn't cover everything – e.g. some of these ideas and approaches wouldn't work for learning disabled groups with more complex or severe support needs. If you'd like more support in how to remove barriers for these groups, please email hello@wearedarts.org.uk

We know that every person's experience of disability is unique, so the support or adaptations they may need will vary. It would be impossible to cover every eventuality for every impairment or condition. This resource is designed to be used as an overview and to inform a way of thinking, rather than a prescriptive set of solutions.

We are aware that conversations around disability are ever evolving. If you spot something we need to update, please contact hello@wearedarts.org.uk

About the authors

Dyzelle Sutherland is a violinist, community musician and string instructor and is passionate about making music education accessible to everyone. Dyzelle has worked as a violin instructor for Music Services and companies across the country and as part of her work for darts, runs the All Aboard Music Network – an online network that aims to support music leaders and educators to gain confidence in supporting disabled pupils to access music education. Dyzelle is also a SEND music specialist and manages darts' accessible Music and Makaton programme based across Doncaster's special schools. Dyzelle has worked in partnership with the Royal Ballet and Opera to develop inclusive music resources based on the Sounds of Intent framework.

Matt Harper-Hardcastle is an award-winning, disabled theatre director, writer and facilitator, with a focus on applied arts. Having worked for regional theatres, universities, national equality and diversity campaigns and local charities, Matt founded his own theatre company, Next Door But One in 2013 to create a home for all those who shared in his passion for theatre, community and co-production. As an LGBTQ+ and disability-led theatre company, Next Door But One specialises in promoting creative skills and encouraging community cohesion, particularly with those who face barriers to accessing the arts. In 2023 they joined Arts Council England's Investment Programme and in 2024 won the award for Community Changemaker and Inclusive Business at the York Enterprise Awards. Away from Next Door But One, Matt is the Vice Chair of Tutti Frutti Productions and Out of Character (a theatre company formed of actors with lived experience of mental ill health).

About darts

darts is Doncaster's award-winning creative health and learning charity and the largest participatory arts organisation in the UK. darts creates art with people in Doncaster to improve life, learning and health, making high-quality, inclusive, creative experiences across Doncaster and collaborating with partners worldwide. The programmes are open to everyone, particularly those facing the greatest barriers to cultural engagement.

Understanding the Social Model of Disability

We know that it can be daunting, but in order to support our disabled pupils in the music room, we need to get comfortable with talking openly about the barriers to access that many of our pupils experience. If we can't talk about it, we can't support pupils to talk about it. We would encourage all teachers and instructors to become familiar with, and to adopt the Social Model of Disability – here's some key points:

The Social Model of Disability

The Social Model of Disability makes a key distinction between 'impairment' (which is the diagnosis, the health condition, illness or loss/lack of function) and 'disability' (the physical, attitudinal or cultural barriers which imposes limitations, challenges and discrimination upon the individual), in order to remove blame, responsibility or requirement to change away from the disabled individual and onto organisations, communities and governments. It is a positive, constructive reframing. The best way to understand this is by comparing the Social Model of Disability to the Medical Model of Disability.



Medical vs Social

The Medical Model of Disability begins and sustains its approach with the clinical diagnosis of a person (e.g. Cerebral Palsy), focusing on what an individual cannot do because of this and what redressive action needs to be taken to eliminate the presence of the impairment. This will lead to the individual undergoing medical interventions such as therapies, surgeries, and corrective aids. Although helpful in supporting an individual to manage their impairment, it reinforces the stigma that the individual with the impairment is 'the problem that needs to be fixed'. Overall, the Medical Model is not as empowering as some may have once thought, as its benefit is for the normative world – i.e. how can the person have less of an impairment and therefore be easier to interact with by others. It puts no responsibility on the societal, cultural and even legal barriers which individuals are disabled by and need to be removed. This is where the Social Model of Disability reframes things.

Removing barriers

The Social Model of Disability's starting point is that a person with an impairment is disabled by society; when they encounter physical or attitudinal barriers that are exclusionary to the impairment. It is an active process; someone is not inherently disabled they are 'disabled when...'. For example, when attending a meeting, a wheelchair user could be disabled when there is a flight of stairs and no working lift but would not be disabled if the lift was working or if a level access room had been arranged instead. The barrier is not the impairment, it is the not fit for purpose building and/or lack of planning from the meeting holder. If we remove the barrier, we remove the disability.

Key thoughts

Ultimately it is how the person with the impairment can interact with the world, and how the world needs to adapt to stop disabling that person. This can feel quite overwhelming, but in practice it comes down to open conversations, flexible approaches and a willingness to adapt.



Language to use around disability

Language around disability can be stifling for many, fuelled by a fear of 'getting it wrong' or offending somebody. However, there are 3 key points to remember:

- 1 Not talking about it at all is even worse** – not knowing the needs or wants of someone with an impairment means we cannot begin to meet them, and we are giving no open invitation for them to communicate those to us. It also inadvertently perpetuates the shame/stigma around disability that the individual may already be feeling/experiencing.
- 2 Avoid medicalising the conversation** – unless you are a health professional or someone responsible for direct, personal care, enquiring into diagnosis and/or personal, medical information is unnecessary and can even feel intrusive. You want to enquire into access needs instead. For example, if we look at Matt's example on the next page, gaining information on the factors of what Hemiplegia actually is won't support Matt in playing the drums, but answers to, 'How could you/do you want to play this?' and, 'How can I help you to do that?' will.
- 3 Disabled isn't a dirty word** – substituting the term disabled for phrases like 'differently-abled' or 'handi-capable' does more damage than intended. While seemingly well-meaning and an attempt to empower the person with the impairment, these words ignore or silence the disabling experiences and negate that changes in society need to take place. It strengthens the rhetoric that disabled people should simply be applauded for living in spite of a rigid, ableist world. This language is seen by many as patronising, distancing and stemming from the Charity Model of Disability¹.



Disability can be a complex and varied term that encompasses many lived experiences, to understand more about inclusive language, we would recommend you read [this article by Scope](#).

¹ The Charity Model is an offshoot of The Medical Model - The disability is a 'problem' in the person's body and 'good citizens' should feel pity for the disabled person's tragedy or inspired by a disabled person's achievements in spite of their impairment.

An example from Matt:

'My impairment is Cerebral Palsy, which means that my grip, dexterity and coordination in my left arm and leg is limited. If I was being asked to play on a drum kit, there are a number of ways in which I could be actively disabled. I am disabled when I have to hold a drumstick in both hands, when instruments are on my left-hand side, and when the required tempo is too fast for my hands to keep up. But I am not disabled when I can play holding one drumstick, only in my right hand or with my hands themselves, when instruments are on my right-hand side, or when the tempo is moderated so my hands can keep up. My impairment remains the same, it is the adaptations being made to the environment I inhabit which means I am not disabled.'



Using the Social Model of Disability in the music classroom

If we keep the Social Model of Disability in mind when planning, running and evaluating music sessions, it allows us to make our lessons as accessible as we can – by looking for barriers to access, involving pupils in the decision-making process, and taking steps to remove the barriers we have control over in our lessons and environment.

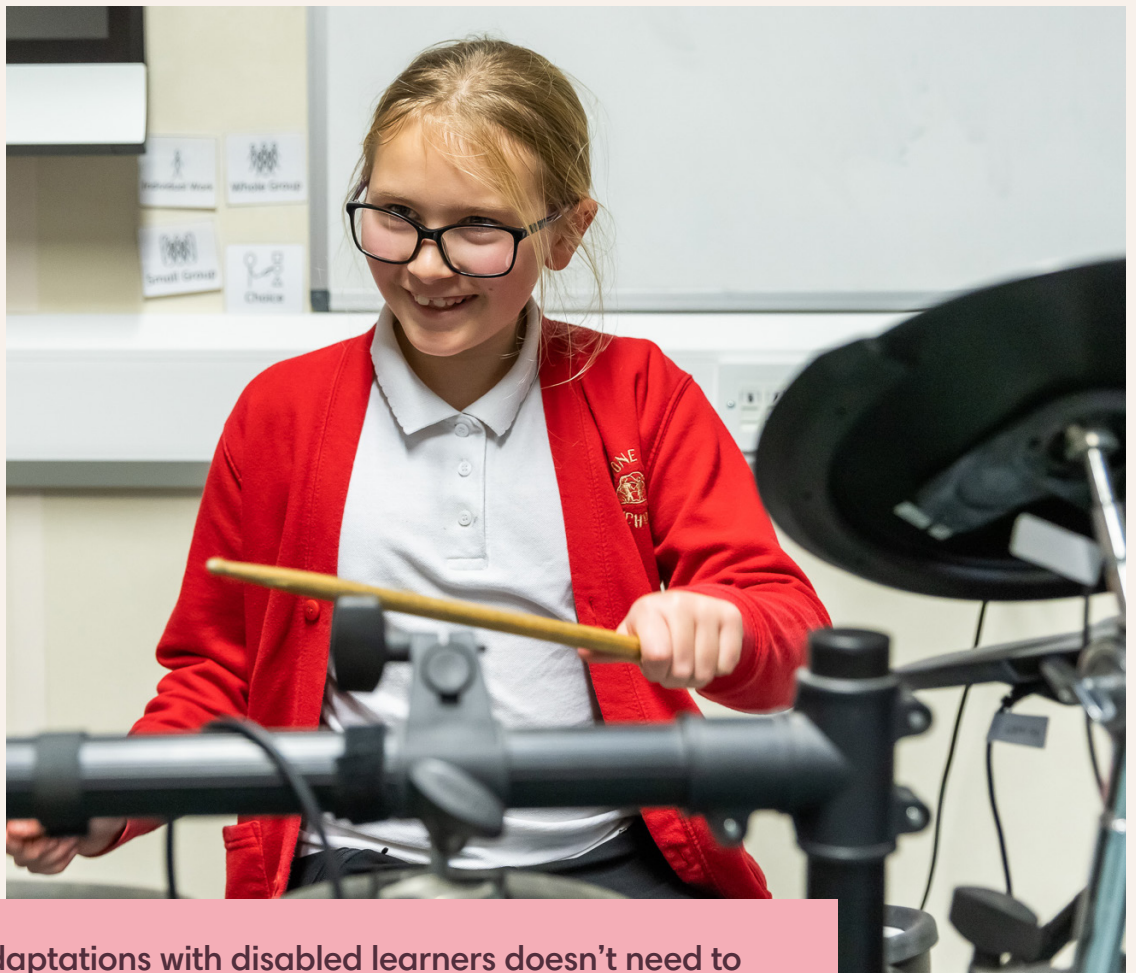


Before we get into specifics, we just wanted to highlight some key elements of best practice:

- ▶ **Meet children where they are on that given day.** There may be challenging days where not much playing gets done and there may be days when you leave the lesson feeling like the undisputed champion of music education. It's all part of the wiggly journey that music education takes us on. Where you can, try to think process over product and keep the bigger picture in mind – in the grand scheme of things, consistency wins out over one challenging lesson.
- ▶ **Celebrate the wins - even the small wins.** Progress looks different for every pupil and for some, choosing to be in the room for the full 30-minute lesson is a huge step forward! It may seem small, but that pupil is choosing to be in your lesson and that in itself is adding value.

- ▶ **Shine spotlights on what your pupils can do, rather than what they struggle with.** Build on what they can do and progress from there. Build progress into your lesson plan so pupils can succeed at each stage. For instance, when teaching a new piece of music, can you start with keeping the beat along with the piece, before moving on to rhythmic or melodic ostinatos that could layer over the top of the piece, with pupils moving on to the whole piece when they are ready? This 'bottom up' approach where you work upwards from what pupils can successfully manage needs a slight mind-shift, as we have likely been trained to present a new piece and focus on the bars or phrases that are causing difficulty.
- ▶ **Come prepared with a 'toolkit' of options or adaptations:** having different ways to engage 'in your back pocket' means you don't feel you are caught off guard, you can readily provide alternatives and/or there is no hesitation or accidental embarrassment when adaptations are asked for.
- ▶ **Don't assume.** We have all fallen into this trap at some point but try not to make assumptions about what pupils will or won't be able to do. Let them have a go, and simply be there to help them find alternative approaches or techniques when needed!





- ▶ **Discussing adaptations with disabled learners doesn't need to be scary** – simply ask them how they can/would like to access the activity and come up with solutions together. As well as discussing with the pupil, it may be useful asking teachers/support staff or family members about any successful adaptations or approaches they already use in the school/at home – this means that what you can offer feels familiar and/or complementary to what has already been put in place.
- ▶ **Don't let the adults around a pupil place assumptions on what pupils can or can't do**, e.g. 'Pupil X won't be able to do that'. Let pupils have a go, be there with adaptations and alternative approaches for them to try if needed and see what happens!
- ▶ **Disability is fluid** and the situation may well change with time or from day to day. Keep the conversation open and encourage pupils to let you know if/when things change or if they need different support from you.

Some Inspiration

Some disabled musicians that your pupils
may find interesting...

Ludwig van Beethoven, Composer

Stevie Wonder, Multi-instrumentalist

Maddie Morris, Folk Musician

Derek Paravicini, Pianist

Felix Klieser, French Horn Player

Nicholas McCarthy, Pianist

Evelyn Glennie, Percussionist

Kris Halpin, Electronic Musician

Lucy Illingworth, Pianist

Removing barriers in your lessons

Environment:

- Ensure that the room is well lit and laid out well with no trip hazards and sufficient clear space to move around.
- Ensure pupils can see and hear you from where they are standing or sitting – let pupils know that you are happy for them to move to a position where they would find it easier to follow you.
- Let pupils know that you are open to making changes and that you want them to point out areas that could be improved to support access.
- If pupils use hearing aids, make sure you have a discussion with them about what works for them – e.g. do they want you to use an FM Hearing system (where you wear the microphone around your neck), and if so, should you switch it off before playing your instrument loudly?
- If a pupil asks a question or makes a comment during a group lesson, try and repeat the question for the whole group, to ensure everyone can hear it clearly.
- Try and prepare your pupils for any big changes e.g. if you have a concert or performance coming up in a new venue, can you talk them through what to expect, or do a short video walk-through? Simple things like, 'this is where you will put your cases and your jackets, here are the toilets,' will go a long way to reassuring pupils.
- Can you alter the mood or energy of your space to make it feel welcoming? For example, with whole class teaching, playing background music as the groups enter that models the mood you'd like to achieve e.g. uplifting music, calm music etc. If you are doing one-to-one lessons, you may have less flexibility, but simply showing how glad you are to see a pupil goes a long way!

Create a checklist for your teaching environments, to ensure they are as accessible as possible.



Content and resources:

- Is the content engaging and relevant for your pupils? Don't assume that your pupils will automatically be in to certain bands or genres just because they are young – ask them and the answers may well surprise you!
- For printed resources, is there a colour of paper, a particular font, or font size that would make it easy for all pupils to read?
- Where you can, include tasks that support different learning styles and that allow pupils to explore music and develop their skills in a way that resonates with them – learning by ear, composing tasks, theory challenges, physical music games etc.
- When teaching learning disabled pupils, don't default to using music aimed at much younger children. Your learners may respond to music aimed at younger children, but where you can, try to expand their musical horizons!



Sarah Townsend from the Children's Trust advises taking the musical elements that children enjoy from those songs/pieces and using that to guide pupils to other music they may enjoy – e.g. if they are drawn to steady beat and repeated rhythmic patterns, would they like hip hop? For those who like lively fast music, they may enjoy playing folk tunes. Finding resources that are both age appropriate but also relevant can be tricky and may take some trial and error to find things that work. Overall, we want to avoid patronising the learner and potentially, inadvertently othering them from their non-disabled, same age peers.

Take some time to review the resources you use in lessons. Which ones do the learners love working through? Are there certain gaps in your collection? Ask your colleagues or students for ideas.

Delivery style:

- Use clear speech and ensure you are facing pupils when you are giving instructions
- If you know Makaton, it can be a useful tool to support spoken word – it simply offers everyone an extra chance at understanding what you are communicating! Don't feel the need to add signs to every word, but a few key words added to instructions might help pupils to process your instructions.
- Let pupils know that you are open to receiving feedback or making changes and encourage them to talk about what support they need from you.
- Warn pupils if you are about to play loud music or an activity is going to get noisy! If pupils are sensitive to sound, it may be useful to discuss options with them –e.g. if they feel they need to take short breaks or wear ear defenders.



- Be flexible about how pupils access your lessons. It could be that a learner will struggle to access a whole lesson at first and they need to dip in and out. Or it might be that they stay in the space with you, but they don't actively play for the whole lesson. Having some options available for alternative ways that they can engage would be useful, e.g. if they are sat at the side of a group lesson, could you give them a task to do when watching/listening the others?

- Monitor and react to the focus levels, attention and energy in the room – during an hour-long whole class teaching session, add in some music games or theory challenges to break up the physicality of playing and to offer a change in focus. In individual or small group teaching, add in an exercise part way through that recaptures attention and focus if needed.
- Remember 'space and pace'. Give pupils the space to process information and explore new ideas and adjust the pace to allow for sufficient revision, repetition of tasks and consolidation.
- Can you build a familiar, predictable structure into your lessons? For whole class teaching can you build a routine or structure you stick to every week, so groups know what to expect when they enter the room? In individual lessons, it could look a little simpler i.e. tuning, scales, technical exercises, pieces.
- When working with both large groups and individual lessons, a quick emotional check-in can be useful – this could be as simple as having a quick chat with individual pupils as they enter their lesson to see how they are feeling or for larger groups or whole class teaching it could be a music game or welcome activity. It gives you an idea of whether the pupils are in a head space for learning and lets them know that you care about their wellbeing.
- Think about ways to share the work happening in lessons with the families at home – can you record audio of pupils playing to send home via the school systems like Class Dojo? Can you send practice backing tracks home so pupils can do performances for their families? Some of our pupils struggle to tell their families about what they've been doing in school, so it's really useful to be able to share the journey and progress where we can!



Seek out opportunities to shadow other instructors or to have colleagues observe your lessons - what can you learn from them and what can you improve?

Flexibility of approach:

- Can you offer more flexibility in order to support pupils – this could be letting a pupil come in for just part of the session before taking a short break, it could be working in a particular room or space that feels safe, it could be that the pupils bring a certain object with them that brings them comfort or having a piece of background music playing as they enter the room. Work with pupils to find ways you can make your lessons feel like a safe, supportive place!
- Could you do a quick emotional check-in or a grounding exercise at the start of lessons that gives the chance for pupils to regulate and be in a headspace for learning?



Compile a list of music-related activities and tasks that your pupils can do when they can't physically practise their instrument





Create an access rider that you could use with your pupils.

- Access riders are a way for people to communicate what their needs are to engage fully with the activity they are engaging with. They are common practice in the arts and there is no reason why you can't do a simplified access rider with your pupils - this could include a simple chat about what they need in place in order to work well and what factors might make it hard for them to engage. This could be done as a paper form that pupils fill in before starting lessons, through a short chat, or done through creative activities during the first lesson. It's important to remember that access riders are only a snapshot in time and need to be revisited by you and the pupil to be useful and stay relevant.
- There may be times when pupils simply can't practise, due to ill health (both physical and mental), concentration span, or environmental factors you have no control over. All of these can make it tricky to stick to a practice schedule. When they can't practise, are there easy tasks you can offer that allow them to still develop their musicality in some way? Listening to the pieces they are learning whilst following sheet music, listening challenges that explore different genres of music, musical performances you'd like them to watch on YouTube, websites to explore or music theory apps?

A note on physical barriers to playing

If your pupil encounters a physical barrier to playing an instrument, which means they can't hold or manipulate the instrument in the traditionally accepted way, it can seem daunting to suggest alternative ways of playing. You may feel like you are breaking some very strict set of rules about 'proper' technique. Different instructors will react to this quandary differently, but helping pupils find a way to play the instrument that works for them is more important than sticking with 'acceptable' technique.

Here are some suggestions for how to approach this:

- Let pupils have a go at playing with the technique you suggest, and if they struggle simply ask the pupil how they can/would want to play that instrument.
- Focus on what they can do (rather than dwelling on what they can't do) and work with them to find a solution that works. You may have to try a few different solutions before you find one that feels right for them.
- Changing the way a pupil holds or manipulates an instrument may impact the quality of tone, but it is process over product – them being able to play the instrument is more important than the sound.
- Pupils may try an instrument and make the decision that it isn't the right instrument for them. This is perfectly fine, as long as that is their own decision and not influenced by music leaders/instructors feeling awkward about making adaptations with them.
- In group teaching, if a pupil does decide that an instrument isn't for them, is there a way that you could still involve them in the group lessons? Could they look at participating in an alternative way, e.g. could they add an instrumental part on a different instrument that complements what the rest of the group are doing? Could they use their voice or technology such as an iPad to add to the piece? For example, if you have a group of pupils learning ukulele but one learner is really driven by rhythmic patterns, could you add a rhythmic section or layer into your piece, using the ukulele in a different way or a different instrument like a drum or iPad app?



Approaches to advocating for pupils

When exploring music with students, we sometimes have the privilege of seeing something different to what their day-to-day educators do. This is particularly true of disabled children and young people, and at times we may need to advocate on behalf of them. If you see missed opportunities or imposed limitations, advocacy might be the way to improve access and/or the pupils' experiences with music lessons. When working with schools, it is useful to approach any conversation about access with the assumption that the educators want the absolute best for this child too.

Issues can often be fixed or alleviated with open communication. If there is an issue that is impacting a pupil's lessons, then try having a chat with the class teacher or the support staff to see what the issue is. Don't just rely on the pupil's version of events, as there may be vital pieces of information missing or unknown. When you have heard from both parties, see if you can work together to improve things.

It can be useful to talk with school staff to let them know about what you do and don't find acceptable in your lessons. That way, they have a better idea of when to step in with more support. It's also useful to encourage staff to share useful information with you about pupils who may need more support. Sometimes when we ask 'what do we need to know about these pupils', we get a response that includes medical conditions. The question 'how can I best support them' may offer more useful information. Don't

be afraid to ask if there are any successful support mechanisms or strategies already in place in the classroom that you could use in your lessons. When you have a positive relationship with the adults around a child, you may even be able to advocate further by providing expert feedback and case studies for the likes of funding applications and support requests.



School staff want us to have a good experience in their school. Sometimes this can lead them to put measures in place to ensure you engage with students on their best behaviour. This might include schools stopping pupils coming to your lessons because their behaviour hasn't been good enough. At other times, it may even be excluding pupils from your class who they don't think would be able to play your instrument e.g. d/Deaf pupils or pupils with physical barriers to playing an instrument. You may not be able to remove this barrier to access all together, but it may be useful to talk to the class teacher to highlight the benefits of your lessons and see if there is a compromise to be found. Always push for pupils to be able to access your lessons – it may turn out that it isn't for them, but they may flourish!

Finally, not everyone will have the same outlook as you about disability. Remember that we are all learning and developing our practice – if you encounter people who aren't as far along on their journey as you, modelling empathy and best practice by using the language and ideas that we have highlighted above will hopefully help them along on their own journey.



Disability is a huge, complicated subject but conversations around it don't have to be. We don't want to overly simplify it, but at the core of every approach outlined in this resource lies open and proactive communication. You don't need to have all the answers or get it right the first time.

By listening to your pupils, valuing what they tell you and removing the barriers within your control, you can help to build a world where music education doesn't disable children and young people.

We would love to hear more about the ways that you make music lessons more accessible – if you have ideas or suggestions that we didn't cover in this resource, please email hello@wearedarts.org.uk

To find out more about the All Aboard programme at darts, please [click here](#).



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