

Learning in Tune

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Give Kayla Cornale, 17, a complex problem, and she'll puzzle her way to an innovative solution. The teen from Burlington, Ontario, Canada, devised a musical way to help her cousin with autism learn to read. Kayla has expanded the Sounds into Syllables program to other children with autism and learning disabilities. She takes as much delight in helping kids as she does in the science of her method. For her work, she won a 2007 Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes. Now a freshman at Stanford University in California, Kayla told *Current Health* about her research.



CH: What inspired the Sounds into Syllables project?

Kayla: My cousin. When she was 7, I noticed that she wouldn't necessarily remember everything that was said to her but she could recite song lyrics. She'd always be drawn to the piano and just had a general interest in music. I started doing some research and found that this was a trend across the autistic spectrum. I thought I could create some sort of musical system that would teach [children with autism] how to learn to read in a way that would be fun.

CH: How did you develop the program?

Kayla: My cousin didn't know any of the letters of the alphabet and couldn't read. My first hypothesis was to take the 26 letters of the alphabet and put them on the central keys of the piano, and essentially give each letter a musical identity. And then I started to teach other things besides just language and learning to read and write. In autism there are some social difficulties, so I started to define universal emotions by matching them up with harmonies. I had been working with this with my cousin the entire time, but I've also implemented this in a pilot project within my school board and other satellite groups in the area.

CH: What kind of results have you seen?

Kayla: From last September to June, the pilot project [ran] with these groups. Most children, if they *did* know any letters of the alphabet, it was a single letter. For instance, there's a young boy who's 6 years old—his name is Nathan and he had recognition of the letter *N* only. But from the end of the session, in June he could then spell every word in the book and had full recognition of the alphabet. I didn't know if this was going to be able to touch more than one child. But the fact that a lot are identifying with it in some way has been really gratifying.