

Outdoor music therapy offers powerful benefits for the deafblind community

Kate Mannerings, Inclusive Play Champion at Percussion Play, which considers itself "the world's leading expert in creating inclusive and engaging musical spaces", describes their work in engaging deafblind people in outdoor music therapy

Deafblindness impacts over 450,000 people across the UK. While the severity and experience of the condition vary significantly, it often presents profound challenges for communication, mobility, and social connection. Yet, even amid these challenges, meaningful interaction and enrichment are possible, and in many cases, music proves to be the bridge.

Percussion Play, the world's leading expert in creating inclusive and engaging musical play spaces for everyone in the community to enjoy, is a champion in the use of outdoor music therapy to support people living with deafblindness. Through carefully designed sound sculptures and accessible installations, the company is working with schools, care centres, and communities across the world to create inclusive environments where music becomes a fun, therapeutic, and engaging tool.

One of the key benefits of outdoor musical instruments for children with deafblindness is that they offer an inclusive activity the whole



Cavatina



Cattail chimes

family can enjoy together. Making music with loved ones not only strengthens family bonds but also creates joyful, lasting memories. This shared experience enhances the educational and therapeutic value of outdoor music-making, adding emotional connection and social interaction to the sensory benefits.

One striking example comes from the United States, at the Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children. With over 190 students and a range of programmes, including an adult day centre and childcare services, the school has embraced outdoor music therapy as a central part of its educational and therapeutic efforts.

Thanks to the generosity of donor Ray Wojszynski, the school has been able to integrate Percussion Play's instruments into a number of outdoor music gardens. Wojszynski, who supports the Creative Arts Series, a programme bringing artists and performers into the school, wanted



Harmony

to give students something both lasting and experiential. The result is a collection of vibrant, accessible instruments such as the **Harmony flowers, Sunflower petal drum, and Tubular bells.**

These instruments were chosen with careful consideration. Sue Wiedder, the school's Director of Development and Communications, worked closely with Percussion Play's co-founder Robin to ensure the selected instruments would suit their students' unique needs.

"The students at our school are visually impaired or blind, and many live with additional medical complexities," says Wiedder. "Some have residual vision, but all are legally blind, and some are non-verbal, using adaptive devices to communicate. We had to ensure the instruments offered real sensory feedback and accessibility."

A standout choice was the Tubular bells, an instrument that resonates with rich, deep tones and strong vibrations. For one student in particular, Isaiah, the bells offered a new form of connection. "Isaiah is primarily a tactile learner," explains Kelly Welsh, a Certified Teacher of the Visually Impaired. "He explores the world through touch and has profound hearing and vision loss. Feeling the movement and vibrations of the Tubular bells gave him joy and a sense of interaction that is otherwise difficult to achieve."

The school's 5.5-acre urban campus provided the perfect

canvas to build multiple musical play areas. Their own maintenance team handled the installation post-Covid lockdowns, ensuring a seamless integration into the existing outdoor spaces. The accessibility of the instruments, built with varying heights and easy-to-use features, means that even students who use wheelchairs (which make up 75% of the school's population) can freely engage.

Each student benefits from a dedicated team that includes specialists in speech and language and occupational therapy, and mobility. These professionals are already seeing the profound impact of music therapy. "Seeing our students smile, engage, and express themselves through these instruments has been transformative," says Wiedder. "You hand them a mallet, they strike the bells and their faces light up. It's not just therapy; it's

joy; it's empowerment."

Kate Mannerings, Inclusive Play Champion at Percussion Play underlines the company's mission: "We're proud to champion inclusive design across public spaces, education, and mental health. Outdoor musical instruments should be accessible to everyone. Music's tactile and resonant nature makes it especially powerful for individuals who are deafblind. That's why we continue to innovate, listen, and advocate for truly inclusive play."

Mannerings also highlights the growing global demand for Percussion Play's inclusive instruments, now featured in schools, libraries, hospitals, places of worship, and senior living communities around the world. "These installations foster intergenerational connection and help break down barriers, whether sensory, social, or physical, through the universal language of music."

Outdoor music therapy is not just an educational tool; it's a means of liberation for those who have fewer conventional ways to connect with the world. The work being done at the Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children is a powerful demonstration of how thoughtful, inclusive design can open doors for sensory exploration, creativity, and emotional expression.

As more institutions embrace this approach and as communities prioritise accessibility in their public spaces, music stands as a powerful, tangible symbol of inclusion. ■



Kate Mannerings, Inclusive Play Champion at Percussion Play, began her career working in schools and kindergartens, supporting young children both in and out of the classroom. She also brings valuable experience as a camp counsellor. This strong foundation in child-focused environments, especially on inclusive play, makes her the ideal specialist and advocate for educational initiatives at Percussion Play. Kate has been with Percussion Play since 2018.



BATOD Magazine

This article was published in the June 2025 issue.

© BATOD 2025



Thank you to this edition's advertisers

