Williams Syndrome (WS): Recent Research on Music and Sound

WS is estimated to affect about 1 in 20,000 births, although reported rates vary slightly in the literature between 1 in 15,000 to 1 in 25,000. Given the rarity of WS, the typical music therapist may only see the occasional WS client. Therefore, local applied research tends either a) to aggregate data of WS clients with that of individuals with other developmental and genetic disorders or b) focus on case studies. However, more recent efforts in the field of neurobiology and genetics have launched larger scale studies gathering data on persons with WS from multiple sites nationwide. The National Science Foundation funded the first study of WS and music within the last five years. Therefore, findings from formal research are ongoing. In addition, it is well known and documented that persons with WS tend to have a strong affinity for music.

A leading investigator examining the relationship of music, the brain and WS is Dr. Daniel Levitin, Associate Professor at McGill University. Much of his work and that of his colleagues focuses on identifying and exploring the implications of the affinity of music among persons with WS. There exists strong evidence explaining the link between the genetics of WS and neuron-cognitive processing. This basic research is essential to understanding strategies for growth, adaptation and optimal development. Trained and qualified music therapists are recommended for the WS client assessed to respond to music as part of their therapeutic and/or educational plans. This recommendation is also endorsed by the WS Association. Furthermore, some persons with WS have tendencies for hyperacusia. The music therapist can assist the entire team on the management of this sensitivity.


*Abstract:* Musical processing can be decomposed into the appreciation of global and local elements. This global/local dissociation was investigated with the processing of contour-violated and interval-violated melodies. Performance of a group of 16 children with Williams syndrome and a group of 16 control children were compared in a same-different task. Control participants were more accurate in detecting differences in the contour-violated than in the interval-violated condition while Williams syndrome individuals performed equally well in both conditions. This finding suggests that global precedence may occur at an early perceptual stage in normally developing children. In contrast, no such global precedence is observed in the Williams syndrome population. These data are discussed in the context of atypical cognitive profiles of individuals with Williams syndrome.

Abstract: In this two-part study, we assessed musical involvements in two samples of persons with Williams syndrome compared to others with mental retardation and also related musicality to anxiety and fears in Study 2. Relative to others with mental retardation, those with Williams syndrome were more likely to take music lessons, play an instrument, and have higher ratings of musical skills. In the Williams syndrome groups only, fewer externalizing symptoms were associated with listening to music, whereas less anxiety and fewer fears were associated with the frequency, duration, and skill in producing music as well as emotional responses to negatively toned music. Implications are discussed for future research on musical processing, musical interventions, and well-being in Williams syndrome and other groups.


Abstract: This study explored whether parents of children with three different genetic syndromes, Down syndrome (n=39), Prader-Willi syndrome (n=25), and Williams syndrome (n=26), express divergent desires, for modifications in their child's current educational programming. A content analysis was performed on the parents' answers to an open-ended question about how to improve their child's current placement. The parents of children with Down syndrome spontaneously expressed a greater desire for changes or improvements in speech therapy and reading services, the parents of children with Prader-Willi syndrome expressed a desire for increases in adaptive physical education services, and the parents of children with Williams syndrome expressed a desire for increases and modifications to music services and aides in the classroom. Within-syndrome variation was also found in the specific sentiments and desires expressed. Implications for a syndrome-specific approach to special education programming are discussed.


Abstract: This paper studied music in 14 children and adolescents with Williams-Beuren syndrome (WBS), a multi-system neurodevelopmental disorder, and 14 age-matched controls. Five aspects of music were tested. There were two tests of core music domains, pitch discrimination and rhythm discrimination. There were two tests of musical expressiveness, melodic imagery and phrasing. There was one test of musical interpretation, the ability to identify the emotional resonance of a musical excerpt. Music scores were analyzed by means of logistic regressions that modeled outcome (higher or lower music scores) as a function of group membership (WBS or Control) and cognitive age. Compared to age peers, children with WBS had similar levels of musical expressiveness, but were less able to discriminate pitch and rhythm, or to attach a semantic interpretation to emotion in music. Music skill did not vary with cognitive age. Musical strength in individuals with WBS involves not so much formal analytic skill in pitch and rhythm discrimination as a strong engagement with music as a means of expression, play, and, perhaps, improvisation.


*Abstract:* Williams syndrome (WS), a neurogenetic developmental disorder, is characterized by a rare fractionation of higher cortical functioning: selective preservation of certain complex faculties (language, music, face processing, and sociability) in contrast to marked and severe deficits in nearly every other cognitive domain (reasoning, spatial ability, motor coordination, arithmetic, problem solving). WS people are also known to suffer from hyperacusis and to experience heightened emotional reactions to music and certain classes of noise. We used functional magnetic resonance imaging to examine the neural basis of auditory processing of music and noise in WS patients and age matched controls and found strikingly different patterns of neural organization between the groups. Those regions supporting music and noise processing in normal subjects were found not to be consistently activated in the WS participants (e.g., superior temporal and middle temporal gyri). Instead, the WS participants showed significantly reduced activation in the temporal lobes coupled with significantly greater activation in the right amygdala. In addition, WS participants (but not controls) showed a widely distributed network of activation in cortical and subcortical structures, including the brain stem, during music processing. Taken together with previous ERP and cytoarchitectonic studies, this first published report of WS using MRI provides additional evidence of a different neurofunctional organization in WS people than normal people, which may help to explain their atypical reactions to sound. These results constitute an important first step in drawing out the links between genes, brain, cognition, and behavior in Williams syndrome.


*Abstract:* Williams Syndrome (WS), a neurodevelopmental genetic disorder, is characterized by peaks and valleys in mental function: substantial impairments in cognitive domains such as reasoning, arithmetic ability, and spatial cognition, alongside
relatively preserved skills in social domains, face processing, language, and music. We report the results of a comprehensive survey on musical behaviors and background administered to the largest sample of individuals with WS to date (n = 118, mean age = 20.4), and compare the results to those obtained from a control group of typically developing normal individuals (n = 118, mean age = 20.9) and two groups of individuals with other neurodevelopmental genetic disorders, Autism (n = 30, mean age = 18.2) and Down Syndrome (n = 40, mean age = 17.2). Individuals with WS were found to be rated higher in musical accomplishment, engagement, and interest than either of the comparison groups, and equivalent on most measures to the control group. Compared to all other groups including the controls, the WS individuals displayed greater emotional responses to music, manifested interest in music at an earlier age, and spent more hours per week listening to music. In addition, the effects of music listening (whether positive or negative) tended to last longer in the WS group. A factor analysis extracted seven principal components that characterize the musical phenotype in our sample, and discriminant function analysis of those factors was able to successfully predict group membership for the majority of cases. We discuss the neurobiological implications of these findings.


*Williams Syndrome, The Brain And Music*
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Note: This story has been adapted from a news release issued by Salk Institute.

*Science Daily* — Children with Williams syndrome, a rare genetic disorder, just love music and will spend hours listening to or making music. Despite averaging an IQ score of 60, many possess a great memory for songs, an uncanny sense of rhythm, and the kind of auditory acuity, than can discern differences between different vacuum cleaner brands.

A study by a multi-institutional collaboration of scientists, published in a forthcoming issue of *NeuroImage*, identified structural abnormalities in a certain brain area of people afflicted with Williams syndrome. This might explain their heightened interest in music and, in some cases, savant-like musical skill.

Professor Ursula Bellugi, director of the Laboratory for Cognitive Neuroscience at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies --the central hub of this unique scientific alliance-- explains, "Understanding the connections between missing genes, the resulting changes in brain structure and function, and ultimately behavior may help us to reveal how the brain works."
The current study is just the latest chapter in a story that's been unfolding for quite some time -- gaining increasing momentum in recent years. It all started when Bellugi reached out across disciplines and assembled a team of experts under the umbrella of a Program Project from the National Institutes of Child Health and Human Development to help her trace the influence of individual genes on the development and functioning of the brain.

Along with co-author Albert Galaburda, a professor at the Harvard Medical School's Department of Neurology, Professor Allan L. Reiss, Director of the Center for Interdisciplinary Brain Sciences Research at Stanford University and senior author of the current study, focuses on the overall morphology of the brain, zooming in on the cellular architecture of the brain. Molecular geneticist Julie R. Korenberg, a professor in the Department of Pediatrics at UCLA, digs even deeper and studies the genes missing in people with Williams syndrome, whereas Debra Mills, an associate professor in the Department of Psychology at Emory University, concentrates on the neurophysiology, the electrical activity of behaving neural networks. Says Bellugi, who studies the cognitive aspects of the disorder: "Things are really starting to come together now."

Identified more than 40 years ago, Williams syndrome arises from a faulty recombination event during the development of sperm or egg cells. As a result, almost invariably the same set of about 20 genes is deleted from one copy of chromosome seven, catapulting the carrier of the deletion into a world where people make much more sense than objects do.

"Williams syndrome is a perfect example where a genetic predisposition interacts with the environment to sculpt the brain in unique ways," says Reiss. "It provides a unique window of understanding on how the brain develops under typical and atypical conditions," he adds.

People with Williams syndrome are irresistibly drawn to strangers, remember names and faces with ease, show strong empathy and have fluent and exceptionally expressive language. Yet, they are confounded by the visual world around them: While they can't scribble more than a few rudimentary lines to illustrate an elephant, they can verbally describe one in almost poetic detail.

"The discrepancy between their engaging social use of language and their poor visual-spatial skills is startling," says Bellugi. "I am confident that once all the evidence is in, we will have identified genes and pathways in the Williams syndrome deletion that underlie these drastic differences in modalities," she adds.

Despite whole brain volumes that are about 15 percent smaller than normal, the temporal lobe, which lies above the ear canal and, among other things, is involved in processing sounds and interpreting music and language, is of approximately normal volume in people with Williams syndrome. In their study, the researchers tried to answer the question of whether an atypical development of the planum temporale, which is part of the temporal lobe and thought to be involved many auditory tasks, including perfect pitch, may underlie the unusual musical and language skills.

First author Mark Eckert, formerly at Stanford and now an assistant professor at the Medical University of South Carolina, and his colleagues used data from brain scans of 42 individuals with Williams syndrome and 40 control participants to compare the surface folds of the planum
In most people, the structure, a slender inch-long piece of tissue, is larger on the left side of the brain than the right.

In people with Williams syndrome, however, both sides tended toward symmetry. "There are different possible explanations: Either the left side didn't grow enough or the right side grew larger than usual," says Galaburda. The folding pattern, in particular one groove called the Sylvian fissure, pointed to an increase size of the right planum temporale.

But size alone might not explain the unusual auditory strengths of people with Williams syndrome. A more general explanation includes variations in the connectivity of certain brain regions that might contribute to the specific strengths and weaknesses in Williams syndrome."

In recent studies, Galaburda had found that cells in the primary visual cortex of carriers of the Williams deletion are smaller and more densely packed -- allowing for fewer connections between cells. Neurons in the primary auditory cortex, on the other hand, were larger and loosely packed, denoting increased "connectedness."

"These differences in cell size and density may underlie the strengths in auditory phonology, language and possibly music, and the difficulties in visual spatial construction for primary visual areas," says Bellugi, adding, "This is really just part of the overall effect of the genes' deletion on brain development."

"Relatively subtle developmental defects can have a significant impact on neurological function," says Dennis O'Leary, a Salk neurobiologist who studies the development of the visual system. "This work opens the door to explaining how genes work through the brain and make us who we are," he adds.

The Salk Institute for Biological Studies in La Jolla, California, is an independent nonprofit organization dedicated to fundamental discoveries in the life sciences, the improvement of human health and the training of future generations of researchers. Jonas Salk, M.D., whose polio vaccine all but eradicated the crippling disease poliomyelitis in 1955, opened the Institute in 1965 with a gift of land from the City of San Diego and the financial support of the March of Dimes.