



# Bell Choirs For Care

## MODULE 1 - Introduction: What is a bell choir?

Hello! Welcome to Bells for Care. I'm Brad, and I'm Chelsea, and we'll be your instructors for this Virtual Learning Studio course! A bell choir is a music ensemble led by a conductor and composed of a group of members who each play one or more handheld bells or chimes. Our goal is to provide you with the knowledge needed to conduct or lead a bell choir and to use the bell choir program in health and wellness contexts.

Now, why the bells? I (Brad) am a recreation therapist and I use music in my work because it is one of the few activities that can touch upon all of the domains of health - physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and spiritual. With the bells specifically, minimal musical experience is required. With a simple flick of the wrist, you can become a part of a musical experience with others. Most of the time this is a new experience that people haven't had the opportunity to be a part of any other time in their lives. In my (Chelsea's) roles as a music and health educator and community musician, I love the bells because they can be used with different generations, ages and abilities. Being a part of a bell choir is a unique, collaborative, team building, group musical experience.

Let's get things started with a little history of the bells. Handbells were first used in Eastern civilizations as early as the year 1000AD. In the Western world, handbells were first used in England in the 17th century to practice something called change ringing, which involves playing the large bells in church towers in a specific sequence. Instead of practicing on the large bells in the tower, where the hot temperatures in the summer and the cold temperatures in the winter made it super uncomfortable, and to prevent neighbours of the church from getting frustrated with the constant bell ringing, smaller *handbells* were created to practice for the main bell ringing event in the church tower. This was the original use of the handbells, but it was soon realized that the handbells themselves are quite aesthetically pleasing and can be played by a group to make music. Playing these handbells together became known as "tune ringing" and became common practice in villages in England by the 18th century.

In this course, we're going to teach you how to lead your own bell choir in a care context. There are many different types of bell choirs that exist to support health and wellness outcomes of participants. Here, you can see a bell choir at Queens Garden, in Hamilton Ontario. The goal of this choir is to foster social connections and a sense of belonging between different members. Another example is this classroom choir at Mohawk College in Hamilton; the goal here is for team-building and to learn to lead a choir in these students' own care settings. A third example is the St Olaf Handbell Choir, from St Olaf College in Northfield Minnesota, where the goal is to perform at a high level with a focus on performance. We'll play a short clip of one of their performances now.

As you can see, each bell choir is unique because it has a specific goal, and various levels of skill. We hope you can see that you do NOT need to be a music expert, or have any musical training really, to have a meaningful role in a bell choir. At Room 217, we have taught hundreds of care providers how to lead a bell choir to have health and wellness outcomes for participants. In fact, the goal of this course is to do just that - we want you to leave feeling confident putting your bell choir leadership skills into practice within your care setting!



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There are two distinct types of “bells” to discuss in the context of a bell choir. The first type is handbells. These are the traditional instruments used in the original bell choirs and most likely what you are thinking of when you hear the term bell choir. They are bell shaped and small enough to be held with one hand. The second type is hand-chimes. These are tubular-shaped metal bars that have a mallet on a hinge, which makes the bar resonate when struck. While the hand-chimes may be less familiar, they also produce a great sound. Similar to how handbells were created for church bell practice, hand-chimes were created to be used as a training tool for handbell ringers. Back in the day, they were cheaper, easier, lighter and more resilient than handbells. Now-a-days you can find a wide range of bells and chimes that are expensive, inexpensive, light, heavy and accessible. The main difference between handbells and hand-chimes is the shape and feel of them. Both can be purchased for as low as \$50 to \$100 and can be as expensive as \$5000 for a high-end set.

In our experience, the cost of the handbells and hand-chimes impacts the timbre or tone quality of the sound, but we have seen very functional bell choirs use 30 dollar bell sets purchased online. If you are starting a new bell choir, we think this is a fine place to start. You can always upgrade your bells after starting your choir. And, as we’ll discuss in this course, depending on the goal of your bell choir, the tone quality or sound produced by the bells may not be your most important factor to consider.

One final note - while there are inexpensive handbells and inexpensive hand-chimes, in our experience, it is much easier to find a set of less expensive handbells than it is to find hand-chimes at a comparable price. For the rest of this course, for simplicity's sake, we will refer to the instruments used as handbells, even though you can totally use a set of hand-chimes if you prefer.

Before we jump into the next module, there are a few considerations we want you to be aware of. First, this course has been designed to teach you how to run a group-based bell choir program. Even though the bells were originally used in Europe by one person practicing church bell ringing sequences, in care contexts, the bells are used in a group setting. Bells CAN be used individually, and we’ll address this in module 8, but this is not the main focus of the course. Next, we’ll primarily be talking about running a bell choir program aimed at accomplishing social health outcomes, which is applicable in a number of different health and wellness contexts. We’ll discuss other applications such as rehabilitation contexts but again this is not a main focus of the course. And third, in this course we will focus on a bell choir structure of 8 players or participants, and one conductor or leader. It is totally possible to have more bell players and additional bells, but most of our examples will be with this 8 bell structure, as this is the best structure when you are just starting out.

There are five key learning outcomes in this course:

- 1) Understand music fundamentals of melody and harmony and how they relate to bell choirs
- 2) Demonstrate bell playing ability and capacity to teach others
- 3) Define appropriate goals, outcomes and planning strategies for a bell choir in your care context
- 4) Demonstrate clear communication strategies while leading a bell choir
- 5) Analyze leadership techniques and practices that can be used to support participants (of different capacities) to participate in the bell choir



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This course is made up of 8 modules, ranging from 5-18 minutes in length. There is a Handbook that you can download and use as you progress through the modules, and there is a short quiz to complete at the end of each module.

You've reached the end of the first module in the course, congratulations! Don't forget to complete the quiz for this module.

You can also check out the Buyer's Guide in your course handbook - in the next module, we'll discuss detailed considerations when purchasing bells!