

Art therapy and children/youth with autism

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Art therapy is an efficient therapeutic method for autistic children, many of whom suffer from a deficit in symbolism i.e., the child has an incomplete idea about himself, starting with his or her own body. This translates into issues of self-mutilation, obsession with feces, difficulty with eye contact, etc. Art making helps the child represent themselves, therefore giving their body a symbolic existence. The triangular dynamic of therapist-art-child establishes a comfortable, indirect method of communication. The art making and play guided by the art therapist helps improve the child's ability to communicate and often leads to improved verbal and emotional expression. Art therapy with children on the spectrum is often a long process, but over the years progress is measurable and sustained as the examples below demonstrate.

Progress experienced by children and youth who participated in art therapy

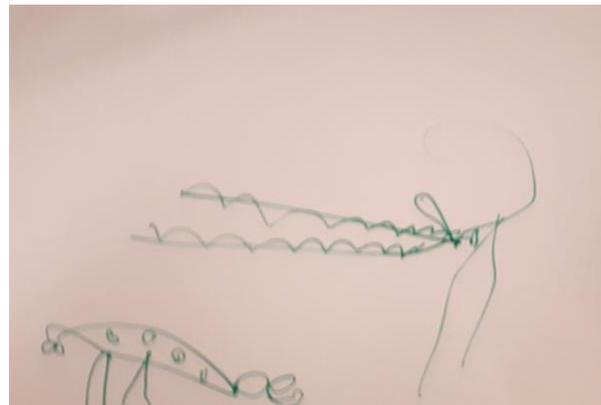
D., 6-year-old young boy. Diagnosis of autism at the age of 4. Non-verbal to challenging speech. Participated in art therapy for 2 years.

Parents' comments

"D. was only making scribbles and could not communicate verbally with a stranger. After a few hours of art therapy only, he started drawing animals and making stories. He is much more interactive and wants to read stories with us."



Session 1 – interactive drawing with therapist



Session 8 – stegosaurus and T-rex.

E., 13-year-old girl. Dual diagnosis of autism and fetal alcohol syndrome. Participated in art therapy for 4 years.

At the start of therapy, E was unable to talk to strangers and experienced frequent mood swings as well as an inability to function at school. Based on a few successful individual sessions, parents decided to use their Cognitive Disability Strategy funding for long-term art

therapy. The art therapist used puppetry to establish indirect verbal connection with no eye contact. This simple method was introduced at school and gave E a way to communicate with her education assistant and teacher. A talented cartoon creator, E sees animation and cartooning as a career now that she's graduated from high school at the age of 19.

Parents' comments

"E loves art therapy and looks forward to coming. The main progress has been at school, settling into high school very well. She is monitoring her mood swings and social behaviour. Her art is very much improving, she is writing tons of stories and is expanding with her drawing and painting."



Puppetry with E, at 14 years old. The mop, Mickey magic books and Mickey-the-magician.



E's cartooning at the age of 17.

J., 7-year-old boy. Diagnosis of autism at the age of 4. Participated in art therapy for 2 years.

Unable to interact with strangers, J started art therapy refusing contact with the art therapist with the exception of symbolic puppet fights with the art therapist. He gradually accepted the art therapist's presence and engaged in the construction and painting of machines (washing machine, trains). He progressed to using different forms of language to make up small stories as he created various objects (train, barriers, dinosaurs). He gradually developed his ability to make complex construction projects, showing exceptional skills in that regard (see photos of T-rex, built in 40 minutes with no pre-existing plan or technical help from the therapist).

Parents' comments:

"J likes art therapy. He looks forward to attending every week, which is unusual for him when it comes to interacting with others. He is more patient in his activities. He socializes with his classmates."



J's construction of a "T-rex"

J., 9-year-old boy. Diagnosis of autism at the age of 5. Participated in art therapy for 5 years.

J began art therapy sessions as non-verbal and very little social interaction. With Cognitive Disability Strategy funding, J was able to stay in art therapy for 5 years and emerged from deep, non-verbal autism through interaction with the art therapist. Using drawing, body painting and singing, J now communicates verbally and emotionally with others. Comments of parents:

Parents' comments:

"J established a real and deep affectionate relationship with the art therapist that has extended to others. He now shows affection to all family members and is curious about everything. He finally managed to pronounce his first word."

W., 11-year-old boy. Diagnosis of autism at the age of 4. Participated in art therapy for 7 years.

W showed an obsession for feces and was constantly making fart noises. He expressed angry feelings towards his mother and could not cope with her authority. He had a number of obsessions for objects. Over the course of 7 years, he managed to get rid of his obsessions and behaviour to become social and start working for a non-profit organization.