The Value Of Art Therapy For Those On The Autism Spectrum

New treatments, such as art therapy, are emerging to meet the pervasive challenges autism presents. Many parents look to art to help their child with sensory processing disorder (SPD) issues.

by Kate Lacour, ATR-BC

In recent years, autism has been featured frequently in the news, and it seems that everyone knows someone whose life has been touched by the condition. What is autism and how is it treated? Autism is a neurological condition present at birth, whose precise cause is as yet unknown. The symptoms of autism include repetitive or compulsive behaviors, social impairment, problems with communication and trouble processing sensory information (such as hypersensitivity to sounds). The most popular treatment is behavior modification therapy, which aims at shaping behaviors through a system of rewards and consequences. In recent years, caregivers seeking alternative or complimentary treatments have a broader range of options available. One such treatment is art therapy.

Broadly speaking, art therapy promotes mental and emotional growth through art making. Unlike art instruction, art therapy is conducted with the aim of building life skills, addressing deficits and problem behaviors, and promoting healthy self-expression. Clients are encouraged to explore and express themselves using art materials; crafting attractive artwork is not the goal (though it may be a happy by-product).

Art presents an Alternative to Verbal Communication

Art therapy is a natural fit for autism for several reasons. One of the hallmarks of autism is impaired communication. Verbal self-expression and language is often especially difficult. One person with autism writes “I just couldn’t get my words out. It was like a big stutter... Screaming was the only way I could communicate.” Art offers a way for people who have trouble “speaking their mind” with words to express themselves directly, without words. People with autism are often highly visual thinkers, and many report that they “think in pictures”. Expressing feelings and ideas through images is very natural for such people and can be a welcome relief from the daily struggle to use words effectively.

Art therapy can help with social skills

Autistic people also tend to struggle with social issues, such as interpreting tone of voice and facial expression, and may feel uncomfortable relating to others. One-on-one interactions, such as conversations, are often extremely intimidating and stressful. For such people, working alongside a therapist can be much more comfortable. As the two share focus on the client’s art-making, a powerful bond can be forged without the initial need for direct, face-to-face interaction.

Art can also be a wonderful facilitator in forming connections with peers. Cooperation, turn-taking, respecting differences and other social skills can all be practiced in an enjoyable, natural setting. People with autism may also struggle to comprehend other people’s perspectives; looking at a peer’s art work offers a concrete way to “see” another person’s point of view. Working together on group projects fosters cooperation, teamwork and a sense of acceptance.

Art therapy can address Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD)

Art therapy is ideally suited for addressing sensory processing disorder (SPD), a pervasive problem in autism which contributes to a great deal of difficult emotions and behaviors, yet is too often overlooked. Seemingly innocuous sensations, such as the texture of carpet, fluorescent lighting, crunchy foods, the hum of a refrigerator, may be irritating, or even excruciating, to people with autism (“like nails on a chalkboard,” as a client once put it). When thus overstimulated, people with autism may become agitated, avoidant or simply “shut down” and become impassive in order to escape the unpleasant stimulus.

One of the most common goals in art therapy is to increase tolerance for unpleasant stimuli, while channeling self-stimulating behavior into more creative activity. Because art is naturally enjoyable for almost all children, autistic or not, they are more likely to tolerate textures and smells they might otherwise avoid when they are part of a fun art process. A child might find that he or she can actually cope with handling slimy, paste-covered strips of newspaper, for instance, when it’s part of a fun paper mache craft project. Repeatedly confronting the stimuli they prefer to avoid helps to desensitize kids to them, making it more bearable when they encounter these sensations in daily life. A child who learned to deal with paper mache, for instance, might then find that handling slimy hand soap was no longer so unpleasant.

Sensory fixations are another common feature of autism. Some people may stare in rapt attention at their fingers as they flick them back and forth or endlessly twisting tiny strips of paper. Repetitively engaging in such self-stimulating behaviors (or “stimming”) can make people with autism stand out, prevent them from interacting with others, and can
distract them from other activities, such as school work or play. On the other hand, these sensations may provide some calming, soothing feelings when the person is agitated. In art therapy, the goal is to channel non-functional or inappropriate stimming into socially acceptable, creative outlets.

**Compulsive shredding of paper turned into beautiful collages**
One autistic child was disciplined at school for his compulsive habit of shredding paper. When taught to use his love of shredding to make collage, the child embraced this new outlet. Today, Grant Manier wins awards for his striking, realistic collages, made with thousands of torn strips of paper and other shredded media. Another successful artist, obsessed with twisting bits of paper, now makes art using twist ties. This type of art making can help turn a behavior that once caused social problems into a form of self expression and enjoyment.

Grant’s compulsive tearing-paper habit turned into beautiful collages

In addition to its efficacy in improving sensory, social and emotional functioning, art therapy is an excellent treatment for autism because it is inherently reinforcing. Kids get enjoyment, stress relief and a boost to their self confidence from tackling art projects or simply exploring art materials. That they are practicing life skills while doing so may not enter their minds.

Art therapy is a unique form of treatment for autism, as it helps mitigate symptom, while also channeling autistic behaviors into an expressive, creative outlet. It promotes communication, emotional growth and sensory integration while also fostering social interaction in a fun setting.

For more information visit The Art of Autism research hub, www.arttherapy.org or www.atcb.org.