THE ART OF THERAPY
DRAWING INDIVIDUALS OUT IN CREATIVE WAYS
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THERE ARE COUNTLESS INDIVIDUALS WITH AUTISM WHO ARE GIFTED ARTISTICALLY. SOME HAVE ARTWORK DISPLAYED IN SHOWS AROUND THE COUNTRY AND IN ONLINE GALLERIES RUN BY SUCH ORGANIZATIONS AS THE VERONICA BIRD CHARITABLE FOUNDATION AND VSA ARTS. AND ALTHOUGH STUDIES HAVE SHOWN THAT ART THERAPY IS AN EFFECTIVE METHOD OF BREAKING THROUGH THE BARRIERS OF AUTISM (BANKS, 1993), IN ORDER TO BENEFIT FROM ART THERAPY, THE PARTICIPANT IS NOT REQUIRED TO DEMONSTRATE A MAJOR TALENT FOR ART.

Editor’s note: Four years ago, Donna Betts was asked to write an article for the Advocate on how individuals with autism can benefit from exploring creative outlets, specifically participating in art therapy. This includes drawing, painting, and working with clay. The article below was revisited, edited and republished with permission.

Rather, he or she needs to be able to respond on some level to the art materials that are within his or her competence to use, whether it’s forming clay, drawing, or painting with watercolors. Tasks are taken on in small, incremental steps (Marion and Felix, 1980), and art therapists help clients with developmental disorders find strengths and competencies to build upon.

HOW ART THERAPY HELPS
An art therapist is a mental health clinician trained to work with many different types of individuals. With post-Master’s degree credentials, art therapists can be found working in a variety of settings, including facilities that serve persons diagnosed with autism and other developmental disabilities.

Art therapy helps clients with autism on different levels. Several areas that art therapists focus on include: increasing communication skills, developing a sense of self, relationship building and facilitating sensory integration.

PROVIDING A FAMILIAR SETTING, ROUTINE
An individual with autism who is withdrawn may be approached through the objects and activities that he or she prefers (Kramer, 1979). By beginning with the familiar and progressively introducing the new, individuals with autism are more willing to accept the unfamiliar.

I once taught a student with autism who was obsessed with his own wet saliva. I realized that he was fascinated with the patterns of movement he created with his spit, and that this was what kept him interested in the activity. So I devised a way to divert the boy away from his saliva, by introducing a dry substance: sand.

In his art therapy sessions, he was encouraged to play with sand and containers in a tabletop box. As he learned about how to manipulate his environment through sand play, his obsession
with spit eventually disappeared. And with my continuous encouragement and praise for using the sand, rather than the saliva, he progressed toward a more flexible and mature ego functioning. In that respect he experienced positive behavioral and emotional growth.

**Increasing communication skills**

Art therapy can help open pathways into underdeveloped areas of the brain and provide an avenue for nonverbal expression. When a client creates art, he or she is communicating on a symbolic level. This process, in turn, can foster the development of more direct communication and even the reorganization of thought processes (Bentivegna, 1983).

Art therapists can also focus on communication skills by employing techniques such as shared drawing tasks and mirroring (mimicking the client’s behavior and art expressions in order to establish a relationship). My clients with autism often respond to the mirroring of their behavior and art-making, which works to get their attention and engage them in interpersonal interaction.

When the art therapist builds a relationship with the client, he or she is provided a corrective attachment experience (Henley, 2001). This means the therapist’s facilitation of the communication process through art creates a positive climate conducive to producing a healthy attachment to the therapist. And this also benefits the client by reducing anxiety, thereby promoting emotional regulation.

**Developing a sense of self**

Art therapy also helps individuals with autism develop a sense of self. Because the individual with autism can have an unstable sense of self, the art therapist can share his or her own sense of reality to support the client (Henley, 2001).

This method of reality testing provides the client with an “auxiliary ego” — the therapist’s use of his or her self to benefit the client. This is accomplished by staying within the symbolic content revealed through the client’s art and helping to revise this content so that it is based more on reality (Henley, 2001).

**Facilitating sensory integration**

Sensory integration is another important aspect of treatment. The use of multi-sensory methods can help integrate the senses, such as hearing and touch. For instance, making a rattle with art materials and encouraging the client to make sound with it can provide him or her with yet another expressive outlet while enhancing the art therapy session.

Despite their difficulties, individuals with autism can increase their communication skills and develop a sense of self through the process of art therapy. These unique individuals can forge a positive relationship with the art therapist while facilitating sensory integration. These mechanisms can also help to decrease negative behavior while improving cognitive growth and emotional regulation (AATA, circa 1983), making art therapy a beneficial mode of treatment for many individuals on the spectrum.

**REFERENCES:**


