PARTNERING WITH YOUR CHILD’S PEDIATRICIAN
Paul Carbone, MD, and Alan Rosenblatt, MD

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Developing Skills through the Arts Joanne Lara, MA, and Keri Bowers
EXPRESSIVE ARTS: LEARNING, GROWING, AND EXPRESSING

Joanne Lara, MA, and Keri Bowers
A boy sings a glorious song in the holiday choral and walks offstage in silence; he does not speak. A young girl dances with a troupe of dancers swaying rhythmically to the music. Her dancing does not reveal her inability to make friends in the "real world." A child paints a seascape of the origins of a culture far away. He communicates feelings, desires, and dreams through the beauty of paint, charcoal, and paper montage, but he cannot tell his mother what he did at school or that he loves her.

Art: A Common Language
As a society, we are now moving forward past the doom and gloom idea that was pervasive in the early 2000s when children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) were labeled without regard for who they were and what their personal likes and wants might have been. Traditionally we would apply a formula of strategies and educational programs to assist children with ASD without considering their intrinsic personalities and strengths. However, we see that as these kids have entered adulthood, many have begun to speak for themselves saying, "Help me, but please do not erase who I am." And so we see that one way to appreciate each individual's uniqueness is to help him access the arts while nurturing his abilities to be in the world. For many individuals on the spectrum who have difficulties connecting, art can be an integral, valid part of therapy—a tool to show us who they are and what they are made of.

Art expression comes through, within, and beyond limitations of the human condition. Art is the common language that cuts across racial, cultural, social, educational, and economic barriers. It is a language that defies impaired neurological, physical, and so-called disabled dimensions. Art is a language that all people speak. Visual arts, dance, movement, music, drama, writing, speaking, or other creative mediums of expression—all the fine arts—are the one historical tie that defines who we are. Art explains what sometimes science cannot; it is the soul of our human existence.

Art as Therapy for Spectrum Kids
For many with special needs, the arts are not merely enrichment. Rather, the arts are a staple, a means to develop more than cultural or appreciative values. The arts provide opportunities to develop language, cognition, fine and gross motor skills, social and life skills, self-esteem and self-expression, and even the opportunity to define potential career paths. The arts are an avenue to developing an otherwise unheard voice. As a vehicle to expression, the arts have the capacity to bring a voice to every human being, encouraging the inner world to connect to the outer world of concrete reality.

We have come to see that the arts allow for both independence and collaboration for individuals who otherwise may have challenges in these areas. Through dance or music, you and your child may be able to access personal strengths in meaningful ways, to create a bridge to understanding sometimes difficult abstractions, or to create meaningful communication. Empirical data show us that the arts often increase academic achievement, enhance test scores, and improve attitudes, social skills, and critical and creative thinking (McCarr and Russo 2011). Tones, notes, movement, color, and vibrations support an exercise in developing higher-level thinking skills, including analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and problem solving (Wan et al. 2010).

Not too long ago, art therapies were rated second to traditional therapies. The arts were not, and are still not, considered to be best practices. Because of this, many parents and professionals have been reluctant to entertain the idea that dance, movement, music, visual arts, theater, and animation are programs compatible with traditional therapies. However, change is on the horizon. With this change in ideology and the valid results the arts provide, not to mention low- and no-cost interventions, we now see how the arts significantly improve an individual's brain development in the domains of cognitive, social, and behavioral deficit.

So much has the pendulum swung in favor of the arts that we now see large organizations like Autism Speaks funding grants at Harvard University to study how movement and music affects the brains of individuals with ASD. We have come a long way to begin to accept the arts as powerful, fundamental tools and strategies that not only benefit our kids but become pathways both literally and physically to academic achievement, social inclusion, and community acceptance.

Studies indicate that forward and backward movement—and the starting and stopping, side-to-side motion—paired with music helps stimulate transmission of information in the brain. Temple Grandin tells us in the documentary, Generation A: Portraits of Autism and the Arts, that music is processed in the frontal and temporal lobes of the brain, and that the rhythm and balancing that dance requires could contribute to our kids' speaking progress. The Horse Boy, by Rupert Isaacson, and music therapy as described in Oliver Sacks' study at Columbia University, Misticophilia, add insight into the stimulation of areas of the brain using rocking and music, respectively. Visually arts such as painting, drawing, and sculpture often require dormant brain areas to become activated. Many respond to theater and the performing arts with gusto. It is important to find out how your child learns—visually, kinesthetically, or auditorily—to make certain he has access to the intrinsic modality through the arts, which enrich and give meaning and understanding to ourselves and the world around us.

In the end, we know that social skills and expression are a huge challenge for spectrum kids. Our kids are often not able to initiate, create, and sustain meaningful conversations due to speech and language impairment. Faced with their difficulty in both speaking and the cognitive pragmatics of speaking (ideas of language) that are the foundation of all human social interaction, how do we raise the bar? To meet this need, Autism Movement Therapy was especially designed for individuals with ASD to jumpstart the integration of neurological transmission of information between the four lobes of the brain via the corpus callosum (Lara 2009). The results have been outstanding. Many of our kids have performed in national theater performances through working with Autism Movement Therapy and the Art of Autism. They have built a portfolio
of experience and been lifted to see and share their potential as the unique and gifted individuals they are.

Last year, 77 artists and poets with ASD from around the world were included in the book, *The Art of Autism* (www.the-art-of-autism.com). Four of the artists included in the book were recognized by the United Nations with Autism Awareness stamps depicting their works of art. How do you imagine that changed their world, their beliefs, their confidence in themselves? What benefits have these artists and poets gained from the exposure, recognition, and potential resume experience? We know your child has unknown talents. Share his gifts of autism through the arts. Be a part of the art movement!

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Visit www.autismmovementtherapy.org to learn more.


Editor’s Note: Love this article about the expressive arts? Then watch for the new column by Joanne Lara and Keri Bowers, spotlighting autism and the arts, beginning in the January/February 2014 issue of AADigest!

References


Resources

