Art as an Early Intervention Tool for Children with Autism

Nicole Martin
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Art as an Early Intervention Tool for Children with Autism

Nicole Martin

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This is for you, little brother.
With special love and thanks to my husband Daniel Jones, big hugs to everyone in my family, much gratitude for the support of my former colleagues and client families in Chicago, Illinois, and appreciation for the warm welcome I have received from my newly adopted home of Kansas.
Only through art can we get outside of ourselves and know another's view of the universe which is not the same as ours and see landscapes which would otherwise have remained unknown to us like the landscapes of the moon.

Marcel Proust

Much of the time, I feel like an anthropologist on Mars.

Temple Grandin
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Why I Wrote this Book

*Art as an Early Intervention Tool for Children with Autism* is about making art with young kids on the spectrum—why it is important, how to go about it, and what to expect as you venture forth. It is written for both parents and professionals and designed to be accessible whatever your level of expertise. I know my audience is a busy one, so I have tried to keep the book short and sweet; in fact, there is a one-page summary of the book in Appendix B for those of you who may want to flip there now before diving into reading. And for those of you who want to dig deeper into the topic, the references and recommended reading lists will not let you down. Successful, therapeutic art-making with a child with autism is a very rewarding experience, and my goal is for you to feel well equipped but not overwhelmed. Please believe me: you do *not* have to be an artist to use the tools in this book.

My passion for this topic can be traced back to my own childhood experiences. In 1993 I was 11 years old and the eldest of four children. My youngest sibling, Jason, was three years old. My parents were worried that my brother might be deaf; I remember how hard it was to get Jason's attention, how oblivious he could seem to the activity around him. A few doctors' appointments and evaluations later, my family came to learn the meaning of a word that I had never heard before: autism.
As an 11-year-old girl, I dealt with this news in a way particular to my age and gender: I locked myself in my room and recorded it in my diary. Earlier entries had noted milestones such as “Jason said Mama today!” but soon those entries stopped and Jason lost his few words, retaining just a few vocalizations that only his family and teachers can decipher. It was not until Jason turned 16 that he began to say Mama again. I still get a lump in my throat even now as I write about it.

During my first year of high school I outgrew the diary and began making art, which I believe served the same purpose but provided me with a broader palette to express my teenage concerns. My brother and I had grown into very different people, but we also had our similarities. He would stare, fixated on his hands while I would “perseverate” in my own way, by making a series of artwork entirely about, well, hands. (I am now pretty good at drawing them.)

The same year that I learned about the field of art therapy and subsequently decided to become an art therapist was also the year that I began training to work as Jason’s applied behavioral analysis (ABA) home therapist. Living in a small southwestern town, families like ours were few in number and in resources, and we had to become our own therapists and advocates. Applied behavioral analysis, as well as picture cards and sign language and everything else we tried, became a way of communicating with my brother, and consequently all my future clients, before I had even taken a single psychology course.

I would like to be able to say that I was the miraculous big sister, who saw the potential in her combination of skills in art and behavioral techniques, tailored programs to meet her brother’s needs, and all around “saved” her brother from severe disability. The truth is I was an insecure adolescent, not brave enough to have any except the closest of friends visit my house lest my brother embarrass me, tuned like an antenna to the stresses and worries of my parents, and desperate to go to college and be on my own. When I think about the ways in which I would reinforce my brother’s behaviors, like spinning objects or making what was affectionately coined “the scary face” (tensing his jaw and curling his fingers), I feel like I could laugh and cry at the
same time. I was only trying to play with him; we as a family just didn’t know any better. I was halfway through undergraduate school before I really started to grasp just how the arts could both address autism-related deficits and build on strengths. For me, art and autism are inextricably intertwined.

Needless to say, this work is very personal for me. Now that I am grown and a “real” therapist, there is a part of me that connects with each one of my clients, whether boy or girl, high or low functioning, that somehow goes beyond my training and touches deeply felt feelings for my brother and my family. I am absolutely aware that this is what therapists might describe as a “misplacement” of feelings about my brother onto a client, but that makes it sound negative, while I see it as a positive source of empathy. My family experience makes it automatic for me to draw from a reservoir of love and understanding for my clients. This is a skill for which I have my brother to thank.

Even when I received the necessary training, things were not always rosy. Being away from my family, not to mention working as a therapist yet unable to help out with my own brother, can be a real source of self-imposed guilt for a big sister. Also, I found that many professionals in the field of autism spectrum disorders had a minimal, or sometimes even erroneous, understanding of art therapy, even though they were often designing therapeutic arts programming of their own. Conversely, I could count on one hand the number of art therapists I knew who could name autism-specific interventions outside of our own field. This book is meant to act as a bridge toward mutual understanding between all people who make art with young children with autism—therapists, educators, parents, caregivers, and artists. I hope that it will inspire you toward further studies and new collaborations.

Art as an Early Intervention Tool for Children with Autism is about the relationship between art-making and young children with autism; it is an old idea put forth with a contemporary perspective. It is not a research book but rather a lovingly compiled description of the specialty told through the lens of my professional and personal experiences. Simply stated, art therapy and autism is about helping people on
the spectrum utilize the visual arts to express and regulate themselves. Some individuals have a natural talent and are able to discover the benefits of making art on their own, but many more do not. What is liked or disliked, comfortable or uncomfortable, for people with autism is often determined very early in life. I believe that if therapeutic art-making was more often and more expertly integrated into early intervention treatment, we would see an improvement in these children’s ability to tap into their imaginations.

This book is for you, busy moms and dads, interested therapists and teachers. Even if your child is past the age highlighted in this
book, I think that you will still find most of the information very useful and applicable at any age. After an evening or two of reading you will understand a great deal about art and autism and be able to determine if this approach is right for your child.
Introduction to Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)

This chapter is designed to give readers who do not know much about autism a basic introduction to the disorder. A functional knowledge of autism is necessary in order to understand this book. Professionals working in the field or parents might consider skipping this chapter, but I would strongly encourage students, new professionals, and artists to read it carefully and check out the recommended websites listed at the end of the chapter.

What is autism?

Autism is defined by the current Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association 2000) as a neurological disorder characterized by qualitative impairment in social interaction and communication as well as the presence of “restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behaviors, interests, and activities” (American Psychiatric Association 2000, p.71). At present, we do not know what causes autism, therefore it is primarily described according to its signs and symptoms (how the person behaves). Traditionally, we think of autism in terms of what is referred to as the “triad of impairment”: socialization, communication, and imagination. To greater or lesser degrees,
these three problem areas have to manifest themselves in a person in order for them to receive a diagnosis of autism.

Socialization problems may present as disengagement, abruptness, lack of expressed empathy, or poor eye contact, among other things. Activities that we think of as making friends, remembering your manners, or maintaining relationships can be incredibly foreign to a child with autism. Socially based emotions like embarrassment or competitiveness often just do not exist. It can be difficult when a child prefers to be alone or does not seem particularly attached to other people, but children with autism do crave human affection and attention just like anyone else. Spend some time with them and you will see what I mean.

Difficulties with communication have to do with both the relative lack of it as well as common grammatical or syntax errors. Contextual questions (e.g., why did something happen) and pronoun use are common problem areas. Using figures of speech (e.g., “go jump in the lake”) might be confusing for some children with autism, as they tend to be very literal, concrete thinkers. Difficulty expressing appropriate emotions can tangle up communication as well. The child’s emotion