



ART BRIDGES: Lesson Plans for Enrichment, Growth and Healing

ART AND AUTISM

With Comments From
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Difficulty with verbal and social communication is a definite marker for those individuals with autism spectrum disorders. Some people with autism are unable to use speech to communicate at all while others have a hard time processing language and using it to converse. Remarkably, many people with autism have an extraordinary ability to “think visually” in pictures. Using pictures, they can process memories and express ideas through drawing and other artistic media. Art becomes a way for autistic individuals to express themselves and communicate with very little or no verbal interaction.

There is only one firm rule when it comes to creating art with individuals with autism—**there are no rules!** Each individual who faces the challenges of autism is unique in his/her reactions, aversions, tolerances and abilities. It is imperative that those parents, teachers, therapists and counselors who work with individuals

facing the challenges of autism to learn to recognize triggers and appreciate the beautifully-unique attributes possessed by each individual. While working with individuals with autism in a large classroom setting is far from desirable, art therapists working one-on-one with these students can make great strides.

Art experiences can have a wonderful value for individuals with autism—they can:

- bring joy in the creation of art
- bring a sense of accomplishment
- offer new opportunities to experience and experiment
- help individuals to learn to adapt and cope in new situations
- help individuals to gain confidence
- act as a means of communication
- create unique opportunities for bonding
- serve as a stepping stone in mastering other life skills based on the successes achieved

Other possible outcomes include improved:

- ability to imagine and think symbolically
- ability to recognize and respond to facial expressions
- ability to manage sensory issues
- fine-motor skills

Recommendations in working with individuals with autism:

- Find the triggers for challenging behaviors; avoid these triggers or work to desensitize the individual to them. Always have a back-up plan in place for calming. Possible triggers include certain sounds, textures, touch, smells, movements, fabrics, colors and tastes.
- You can identify a trigger and work to increase tolerance by introducing the individual to the situation for small periods of time and reinforcing the ability to tolerate the trigger for longer and longer periods of time.
- Pair the unpleasant trigger with positive reinforcements.
- Unpredictability and changes in routine can be challenging for individuals with autism. Let the individuals know what is happening and what behavior is appropriate for this new situation.
- Use a wall chart as a visual strategy to explain with pictures what will be happening. This kind of visual aid will help to clarify concepts and can be more easily processed than words.

- Encourage interaction so the individual can express any discomfort and gain some sense of control over their situation.
- Give clear expectations that can be understood to minimize anxiety that can lead to inappropriate behavior.
- Many individuals with autism respond well to lessons framed musically or rhythmically. Be innovative when planning lessons.

In order to offer art experiences to individuals with autism, the facilitator needs to think outside the box and be a true detective. Knowing the individual and what can be tolerated, understanding triggers, anticipating those triggers, and having a plan to calm the individual and help him/her re-focus and re-center will go a long way in making the art experience enjoyable, meaningful and even therapeutic.

Sources:

www.autism-help.org

<http://autism.about.com/od/autismtherapy>

<http://the-art-of-autism.com>

Advice from “The Trenches”

Mary Ebers and **Diane Boney**, Occupational Therapists who work with children at Lincoln, Nebraska-based Handprints and Footsteps Pediatric Physical and Occupational Therapy Clinic, offer additional practical advice for working with autistic children and their families.

- 1) **Communicate.** Ask parents (and/or grandparents) to share information and insights about their children with autism. These families know their children better than anyone and will have a lot of answers for the therapists about triggers, aversions and calming strategies. Adopting a “team” approach between families and therapists will help tremendously in formulating strategies that will result in a jump start in the therapy process.
- 2) **Analyze and Adapt.** Look at each activity or therapy method undertaken, carefully pulling out elements and making adaptations to meet the needs of each individual child. Look at the age of the child, interests and skill sets they currently possess and those you are helping them to achieve.

Example: Diane shared that an art activity may call for the child to use a sponge and paint to create art, making it necessary to clean the sponge with water when switching to a new color. Now suppose the child has an aversion to touching a wet sponge dipped in water but can safely

manipulate a dry sponge. The therapist would be wise to provide multiple dry sponges so the child can complete the project without setting off a trigger. Another adaptation method Diane has used it to provide plastic gloves or even zip-lock bags for children to use so they can experience textures without having to physically touch the materials.

- 3) **Movement.** When using materials or objects in therapy or activity sessions, place those items in locations so students need to get up and move to retrieve them. Allowing and encouraging movement helps the child to focus. The central nervous system is organized through movement.
- 4) **Establish Trust.** It is crucial for the child to trust the therapist. The child needs to know she is not going to be forced to do something she cannot tolerate. At the same time, with that trust, the therapist will be able to help the child move forward to expand her threshold of tolerance. Without this trust, the child could be placed in a state of anxiety that will cause unwanted behaviors.

Example: *Mary worked with a child who did not want to sit in a swing used for therapy. Since the child had developed a relationship with the therapy dog at the clinic, Mary placed the dog on the swing and worked with the child to push the dog in the swing. The next session, the child was able to sit with the dog in the swing. The third session, the child was able to sit in the swing by himself. By developing trust, looking for alternative methods to help the child move forward and helping the child to feel like he was in control, he was successfully able to complete this task, giving him added confidence and a sense of accomplishment.*

Anna Alcalde of Urban Legends Art Studio and Artisans of Lincoln, NE gives art lessons to individuals with autism. In her work, she has developed some “secret techniques” in working with this unique population that she graciously shares as part of her mission to “spread the joy of art!” From Anna:

“For new students, I show them the supplies. I point out big and small brushes. I encourage them to smell the paint and touch it before actually painting. Some students do not like to get paint on their hands. I always talk about how neat it is to have paint on my hands because when someone asks me about it, I can state, “I am an artist!” I brag about how cool it is to “get into your work” and have those paint marks. I try to discourage constant hand washing after about the third class—the hand washing seems to taper off if I don’t make a “big deal” out of it.”

“When starting an art project, I always create a sample as I teach so the students can mirror my moves. After we get underway and they feel comfortable, I encourage them to “branch out” and explore with their art if they would like. Repetition works great, too. Working on many paintings may seem redundant; however, you will see the level of achievement rise with each painting, even if it is the same subject matter.”

“Something important to take into consideration: I believe that many persons with Autism Spectrum can split their attention. If a rotating fan or the air conditioner bothers a student who is highly sensitive to noises, I’ve found that playing Disney music or another favorite music helps. Play it low so it’s in the background and the students can still hear the teacher’s voice. Many students have grown up with Disney movies to help soothe them as children. I stumbled across this calming method by trial and error; however, there is a theory on the connection between Disney and autism as a calming method, so I really can’t take full credit (see: <http://theautismnews.com/disney-treatment-for-children-with-autism/>).”

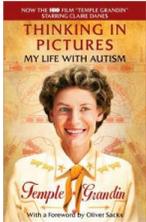
“I’ve also found that relating to a favorite subject will help in a lesson. If a student loves “Thomas the Train,” you may be able to slow down a hurried movement by stating calmly, “You are to move like a train slowing down to the station.....chug....chug.....chug...” I have found great success with soothing chatter and “pounce “noises when painting in a pattern. Again, there is a splitting of the attention between hearing, thought and action.

“Laughing is probably most important! If you can find the path to make your students enjoy the whole experience, laughing and exchanging ideas will be the ultimate winning combination for all involved!”

Providing a feeling of safety, reducing anxiety and offering encouragement are all crucial to making the art encounter successful. In addition, the opportunity to try new experiences, even if taking baby steps, and grow in confidence will be a major bonus for participating in art activities. Art will not make the challenges of autism go away—what it will do is act as a vehicle to help the individual express

him/herself and learn to manage the impulses and triggers associated with autism. Being able to demonstrate their personal talents, intelligence and worth is priceless for these individuals!

Suggested Resource:



Thinking in Pictures: My Life with Autism by Temple Grandin

In this unprecedented book, Grandin delivers a report from the “country” of autism. Writing from the dual perspectives of a scientist and a person with autism, she tells us how that “country” is experienced by its inhabitants and how she managed to breach its boundaries to function in the outside world. Available through Barnes and Noble, Amazon and other sources. Also check out Temple’s website: [www.http://templegrandin.com/](http://templegrandin.com/)

*Heartfelt thanks to **Mary Ebers** and **Diane Boney** for providing valuable insights into working with autistic children and their families. Mary and Diane are occupational therapists at “Handprints and Footsteps Pediatric Physical and Occupational Therapy Clinic” in Lincoln, NE. “Handprints and Footsteps” philosophy is to provide quality, intensive therapy services for children of all ages with an emphasis on family-centered care. To learn more about their work, please visit <http://handprintsandfootsteps.com/> . Also, special thanks to **Anna Alcalde** of Urban Legends Art Studio and Artisans for sharing her “secret techniques” in working with individuals with autism. Her enthusiasm, love and compassion show through in all that she shares. To learn more about Anna and her work, visit www.urbanlegendsart.com .*

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