

The number of children diagnosed with autism in the United States is growing. Autism is a pervasive developmental disorder (PDD) that impacts development in the areas of social communication, interpersonal relations, and imaginative play. Autism is also called Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Some children may be mute or have exceptional speech and language abilities. Many children are hypersensitive to sensory information such as sound, sight, or touch. When teaching art to children with autism, the focus should be on understanding that all children have the potential to create art and that art exercises critical regions of the developing brain.

Exceptional Abilities

With most of the emphasis on disabilities, it is critical to emphasize the exceptional abilities of some children with autism. An example is Jessica Park's portrait of her father (right) reproduced in Clara Claiborne Park's book, *Exiting Nirvana* (2001), published by Back Bay Books, about the development of her daughter with autism. A few children with autism have the ability to demonstrate well-developed visuospatial and visual memory skills when making art. They may produce detailed spontaneous drawings in perspective of favorite objects such as buildings or animals from various vantage points. Often children with autism exhibit repetitive behavior such as making multiple, identical drawings. This should be encouraged since these children find the activity pleasurable and interesting.

Addressing Individual Needs

Art lessons should accommodate the individual needs and abilities of each child with autism. The art teacher should encourage the child to make art in which the subject matter is child-initiated so that the child reveals his or her visual proc-

Teaching Art to Children with Autism

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cupations and favorite art medium. Children with autism should be given visual references such as photographs of their favorite object. Many children may enjoy a drawing project using paper with crayons or pencils because this medium requires a low threshold for processing sensory information.

Children with autism can later be introduced to working with clay such as plasticine, or thick paint such as tempera. Art lessons that focus on activities in which the child has not demonstrated an interest in may cause him or her to behave inappropriately. This may be because processing new sensory information can be overwhelming to them. Parents should be told about their child's preferences so they can reinforce what he or she is learning.

A child with autism may be encouraged to draw more frequently and for longer periods with positive reinforcement.

The ideal procedure is for one-on-one instruction—a student and teacher aid with a head art teacher. Art classes should be about thirty minutes in length since these children may have short attention spans. A child with autism can be introduced to a new art process by chaining, or teaching a procedure step-by-step by having the teacher demonstrate the target behavior (modeling), or physically guiding the child to perform the target behavior (shaping). Only when mastery of the target behavior is demonstrated should an art teacher move on to a new or slightly more challenging task.

An art teacher can prompt a child with autism to draw by providing a colored crayon and verbally prompt him or her by saying, "Make a drawing." A child with autism may be encouraged to draw more frequently



Portrait of David Park, by Jessica Park, drawn at age fourteen. Special thanks to Clara Claiborne Park for providing the drawing.

and for longer periods with positive reinforcement. An art teacher may say, "Excellent job!" and supply another piece of paper when the child decides the drawing is completed.

Classroom Setup

It is best if each child is given his or her own materials. A child with autism may indicate his or her needs using non-verbal communication, such as grabbing the art teacher's hand to request something. An art teacher can encourage a verbal child to speak about his or her art process. An art teacher can ask, "What color is the crayon?" If the child responds with the correct answer, he or she should be praised. If not, the art teacher may say, "Say 'red crayon'" to elicit a correct response, followed by praise. ☺

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