

Art Therapy & Autism Spectrum Disorder

Integrating Creative Interventions

Developed by the Autism Society of America & the American Art Therapy Association

The Autism Society of America joined with the American Art Therapy Association to develop this practice toolkit. It provides art therapy information and resources for healthcare professionals as well as those individuals on the Autism Spectrum, their families, and caregivers; offers practical guidance to assist in building or expanding an effective art therapy program; and, addresses some of the many opportunities for successful application and engagement of art therapy in ASD.

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Engaging Expression Through Creativity

“Imagine being chronically over-stimulated, with inadequate communication tools, difficulty focusing, and anxiety--this is the world of a person with autism. Art therapy provides real relief; a visual tool for communication, a window to the imagination, and a motivation to make connections. Art therapists are fluent in providing high-quality, visual, sensory-rich opportunities for learning for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders.” -Nicole Martin, ATR

About Art Therapy

Art therapists are Master’s level and above health professionals who use art as a means of communication and support. The art making process is used to guide people in: attaining enhanced communication and socialization; easing stress, pain, and loss; improving cognitive and motor skills; gaining mental health resilience and coping skills; and, increasing a sense of empowerment through illness, transitions, and end-of-life concerns.

In order to properly treat and protect those seeking assistance, the American Art Therapy Association strongly promotes art therapy programs that employ Art Therapists credentialed through the independent [Art Therapy Credentials Board](#). The ATCB defines appropriate and established standards for art therapy education, training, ethics, and competence in practice. Three credentialing levels include: Registered Art Therapist (ATR), Board Certified Art Therapist (ATR-BC), and Art Therapy Certified Supervisor. [Click here](#) to learn more

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MODEL ART THERAPY PROGRAMS

Successful art therapy programs offer uniquely tailored treatment modalities that do not threaten a client's autonomy, restrict perception, or pigeonhole emotion. Rather, the appropriate program promotes a comfortable, supportive, and creative environment in which functional, sensory, and social experiences may be safely explored.

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Community - Autism Spectrum Therapies, Covington, LA [Click to learn more](#)

The program employs the latest Applied Behavior Analysis findings to craft individually tailored therapy programs to address the needs of families and individuals with autism and other developmental needs of all ages. Overarching goal is to help individuals with developmental needs achieve their full potential.

Education – Special Needs – St. Elizabeth School, Baltimore, MD [Click to learn more](#)

The school serves students in grades 1 -12, and is a member of the Maryland Association of Non-Public Special Education Facilities. Art therapy is the clinical treatment of choice for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. In groups, art therapy builds on strengths and students' own special interests.

Hospital - Psychiatric Adolescent - Shadow Mountain at Riverside, Tulsa, OK [Click to learn more](#)

The inpatient autism/neurology unit for adolescents offers individual and family therapy weekly, and group therapy three times weekly. The art therapist works closely with a comprehensive treatment team. The SCERTS approach is employed, which emphasizes Social Communication, Emotional Regulation, and Transactional Support.

Hospital – Special Needs - Hazelwood Center ICF/MR, Louisville, KY [Click to learn more](#)

The residential program is for patients with severe to profound disabilities and co-occurring disorders. Treatment philosophy is to provide persons DD and ID the opportunity to engage in the art process, within the safe confines of a professional, therapeutic relationship. Participants work to increase awareness of self and others; cope with symptoms, stress, and traumatic experiences; enhance cognitive abilities; and, enjoy the life-affirming pleasures of making art.

Private Practice - Intentional, Creative, Engaged LLC, New York, NY [Click to learn more](#)

The program's developmental perspective brings a child's passion for art-making into a shared experience, using the art media to encourage reciprocal interactions and to support the development of abstract thinking. Each child's sensory, visual, and motor-planning systems are evaluated and materials are adapted to promote optimal exploration and expression.

Studio - Make Studio, Baltimore, MD [Click to learn more](#)

The studio's mission is to provide multimodal visual arts programming, including sales and exhibition opportunities, to adults with disabilities in a supportive and inclusive environment. Participating artists explore new techniques and media with experienced staff, earn income and recognition of their creative talents, and increase job and life skills.

American Art Therapy Association is an organization of more than 5,000 professionals dedicated to the field of art therapy. Its mission is to serve its members and the general public by providing standards of professional competence, and developing and promoting knowledge about the field of art therapy.

IMPLEMENTATION TOOLS

There are a number of options for implementing an effective, thriving art therapy program.

Current best practices provide insight into the potential impact of an art therapy program, its outcomes, and appropriate implementation strategies. Activities can be designed to suit the individual's specific strengths and weaknesses, age, and functioning level.

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Art therapy provides infinite opportunities to improve sensory integration in natural and engaging ways. A variety of creative activities are beneficial in improving motor skills, planning, sequencing, organization, attention span, cognitive processing, problem solving, flexibility, socialization, impulse control, and more.

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Sectors Offering Support Include: Public, Private, Nonprofit, Health, Educational, And Research.

"The creative process of art making allows for a child to move into the psychosocial stage of industry vs. inferiority. During this period, a child with ASD can use the creative process to enhance competency and mastery, allowing for positive development of their self-esteem and relationship skills."

—Dr. Laura JJ Dessauer, ATR-BC

Institute for Continuing Education- Art Therapy (sample of available online courses)

[Social Support Group Preliminary Results \(0308\)](#)
Highlights preliminary research results of an Art Therapy Autism Social Support Group named 'Club ASD' (About Social Development), that provides art-based social skills lessons and community field trips to help individuals with Autism and Asperger's learn and practice social skills.

[Art Therapy & DIR/Floortime Model \(0310\)](#)

The DIR/Floortime approach teaches art therapists to follow a child's natural emotional interests while challenging them toward greater mastery of their social, emotional, and intellectual capacities. Invite the child with autism to experience creativity by first understanding them and then joining them in their work

OUTCOMES & MORE

Art therapy is a beneficial and enjoyable treatment because of its inherent ability to surpass language barriers and achieve therapeutic gains in a safe zone. Art therapy helps participants gain self-esteem, learn social cues and norms, identify non-literal and non-verbal language, and advance comfortable interpersonal relationships.

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- [Art As An Early Intervention Tool For Children With Autism BOOK](#)
- [Art Therapy Applied To An Adolescent With Asperger's Syndrome](#)
- [Art Therapy With A Child Experiencing Sensory Integration Difficulty](#)
- [Art Therapy With Children On The Autistic Spectrum: Beyond Words BOOK](#)
- [Evaluation Of Group Therapy For Children With ASD](#)
- [Individual Expresses Himself Through Art Therapy](#)
- [Integrating Art Therapy And The](#)

[DIR/Floortime Model](#)

Bibliography & Outcome Studies

References

Research confirms art therapy is a proven treatment modality that helps individuals on the Autism Spectrum to comfortably explore and attain increased self-awareness, enhanced communication and self-expression, improved focus and motor skills, and balanced sensory integration.