

# HOW & WHY ART THERAPY HELPS INDIVIDUALS WITH ASD



## ART THERAPY PROMOTES

- Social skills practice, communication and relationship development
- Flexible thinking
- Self-regulation
- Sensory engagement and regulation
- Motor skills development

## RESPECTS AUTONOMY

- By acknowledging and integrating client interests
- By encouraging and cultivating self-expression
- By using alternatives to traditional language-based therapeutic communication



## ENGAGES PERSEVERATIVE INTERESTS

- "...perseveration is not simply mindless repetition without significance. What is said, drawn, sung or written often holds the key to the child's salient concerns. One need only listen seriously and see in order to partake in their struggles" (Henley, 1989, p. 53, Art Therapy Journal-AATA).

## COMMON OUTCOMES

- Improved communication
- Increased emotional expression
- Improved self-image
- Increased flexibility in thought
- Improved behavioral control



## USES VISUAL & PATTERN THINKING

- Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders often rely on visual or pattern thinking (Grandin and Panek, 2013, in the book The Autistic Brain).
- Individuals with ASDs rely more heavily on visual systems than those without (Kana, Keller, Cherassky, Minshew and Just, 2006, Brain issue 129)

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Schweizer, C.; Spreen, M.; & Knorth, E.J. (2017) Exploring what works in art therapy with children with autism: Tacit knowledge. Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association, 34(4), 183-191.
- Van Lith, T.; Woolhiser Stallings, J.; & Elliot Harris, C. (2017). Discovering good practice for art therapy with children who have Autism Spectrum Disorder. The Arts in Psychotherapy, 54, 78-84.



**\*NEURODIVERGENT = INDIVIDUALS WITH DIAGNOSES OF NEUROLOGICAL OR PSYCHIATRIC CONDITIONS SUCH AS ADHD OR AUTISM**

QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS? VISIT THE WEBSITE OR EMAIL  
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Following your client's lead

## Considerations for pop culture inclusion with your client



### What are your client's preferences?

*Pop culture based interests take many forms and some are easier than others to integrate into the therapeutic process*

*Examples include: Sports, video games, TV, movies, YouTube, books, comics, music, politics, religion, popular toys, superheroes*

### Does your client want to include it?

*They spend a significant amount of time talking about or participating in these special interests - one might call these obsessions or perseverations*

*They are more willing to communicate when special interests are a part of the conversation*

*The special interests do not cause distress or cause distress that can be or needs to be addressed in therapy*

*They specifically request their inclusion*

### Is it appropriate to explore pop culture in your setting?

*Restrictions such as company policy, internet filters, or auditing procedures may lead to challenges in employing popular culture in some settings.*

*These may prohibit integrating YouTube, playing video games or other forms of pop-culture in session.*

*If such restrictions apply consider encouraging traditional art-making based in these interests. Themed coloring pages and collage materials can help facilitate integration.*

### Can these interests further treatment goals?

*Case example for goal of anxiety reduction:*

*Jamie liked to create stories about Thomas the Train. When he was anxious about something, like the start of the school year, something disastrous would happen to Thomas.*

*Jamie would role play or draw Thomas and the village of Sodor experiencing a terrible tornado.*

*I encouraged Jamie to problem solve to help Thomas, which often led to helping Jamie too.*

### Functions of pop culture in neurodiverse art therapy

*Behavioral reward*

*Social initiator (rapport builder)*

*Social facilitator (encourage engagement in non preferred topics)*

*Personal metaphor*

*Anxiety mediator*

*Communication clarifier (communicate meaning or understanding)*

*For more information, visit website listed below*

### Cautions

*Too much time using technology based interests can lead to:*

- sleep disruption
- overstimulation
- increased social difficulties
- increased anxiety
- shortened attention span
- addiction to screen based technology

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/mental-wealth/201612/autism-and-screen-time-special-brains-special-risks>

*NOTE: Adapting these interests to art and play based activity can help in addressing these concerns*

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VISIT: ARTTHERAPYANDNEURODIVERSITY.COM

## EMPLOYING POP CULTURE IN ART THERAPY INTERACTIONS



### Pop culture as behavioral reward

**To reward desired behaviors**

Offering pop-culture-based rewards (stickers, watching YouTube, playing video games) upon completion of one or more desired behaviors.



### Pop culture as social initiator

**To initiate social relationships through sharing interests.**

Participating in video games, watching YouTube together, joint attention through making art about popular culture interests.



### Pop culture as social facilitator

**To serve as a social buffer for uncomfortable or undesirable topics**

Encouraging and co-creating artwork, comic strips, or role-play featuring preferred characters and topics to explore non-preferred topics, and to identify and process relevant concepts, for instance emotions or coping skills.



### Pop culture as personal metaphor

**To resolve conflict through pop-culture-based role play or artwork**

Encouraging creation of personal metaphors based in pop-culture special interests, such as addressing sibling conflict through artwork about conflict within a video game.



### Pop culture as anxiety mediator

**To interact via pop culture during or prior to processing anxiety, directly or indirectly**

Using special interests as primer for addressing root anxiety, such as creating video game themed art prior to addressing anxiety or developing special interests into coping skills.



### Pop culture as communication clarifier

**To indicate or encourage understanding through pop culture references and examples.**

Using special interest examples to clarify concepts, by the therapist or the client, for instance using character interactions from a TV show to explain the dynamics of a relationship.



Credits:  
www.arttherapyand  
neurodiversity.com

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR USE OF POP CULTURE IN THERAPEUTIC SETTINGS



### MEDICAL & PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITALS



#### following client lead & respecting policy

Access to video games, YouTube, TV and movies, sports viewing, etc. may be limited in hospital settings. Coloring pages, collage materials, and tailored art directives may be a more appropriate way to explore interests.

### MENTAL HEALTH AGENCIES



#### respecting client autonomy & the rules

Again, access may be limited and therefore adaptations are necessary. Due to managed care guidelines, be sure to justify use of actual popular media and balance its use with more traditional talk and art methods.

### SCHOOL-BASED SERVICES



#### student lead interactions and internet filters

By necessity, schools often have internet filters that prevent the playing of internet based games or videos. Coloring books, stickers, collage materials, directed drawing or other art-making can encourage integration without access to popular media.

### PRIVATE PRACTICE



#### pleasing clients, insurance, and guardians

In private practice, clinicians generally have more control over what can be used in session. The largest concern here is documenting in ways that justify the use of popular media. Explicitly articulate the purpose and effects of its use.

### COMMUNITY-BASED & OPEN STUDIO



#### the sky's the limit...maybe...

Community-based and open studio art therapy generally allow for the most freedom in integrating pop culture. Provision of themed supplies is important. When completing public art, consider issues of copyright.

#### ALWAYS FOLLOW YOUR CLIENT'S LEAD

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