

ART THERAPY AND AUTISM

SERAJ HAQUE¹, MAINUL HAQUE^{2*}

¹Year-IV Medical Student, University of Dundee, Scotland DD1 4HN, UK. ²Unit of Pharmacology, Faculty of Medicine, Medical Campus, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, 20400 Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia. Email: runurono@gmail.com

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WHAT IS AUTISM?

Autism is a developmental condition that affects social interaction and behavior in human beings. The condition falls under a wider group known autism spectrum disorder (ASD). There are some diagnostic criteria in DSM-5 for ASD [1]; the pathognomonic symptoms of the disease revolve around impairment in social communication, and behaviors that are restrictive or repetitive in nature. Psychiatrist Lorna Wing proposed a central triad of symptoms, which can be seen in Fig. 1 [2,3]. It should be noted that social imagination refers to an autistic person's inability to predict and understand the behaviors of people around them, rather than a lack of imagination as a whole.

The condition can be present from birth or develop due to environmental factors or other medical causes. Elements such as genetics, as well as psychological and neurological development, may also play a key role in the condition [4].

Although there is no cure for ASD, there are some strategies that can be used to help aid an individual with autism to grow and achieve the most out of their lives. One of these approaches is the use of art therapy.

MAKING SENSE OF THE WORLD

The world is a complex and confusing place for children (and most adults too). It can be observed that most neurotypical children enjoy drawing, as it gives them a way to order their thoughts and feelings about the world. This behavior centers on the theory of object constancy; the understanding that objects still exist when they cannot be observed, and having an internal relationship with the environment around you. Object constancy is something that children with developmental deficits often struggle with. The repetitive behavior patterns often seen in autistic children may be a manifestation of their attempt to create object constancy. However, with the use of art therapy, this is an issue

that can be worked on to help the child develop schemas through which to relate better to the world around them [5].

WHAT IS ART THERAPY?

The British Association of Art Therapists defines art therapy as "a form of psychotherapy that uses art media as its primary mode of expression and communication...as a medium to address emotional issues which may be confusing and distressing." The individuals art therapists work with may be of all ages, with a diverse spectrum of problems [6].

COMMUNICATION

A human's ability to communicate with one another is a key hallmark of our species. We have formed a myriad of ways of accomplishing this; whether through speech, the written word, storytelling, art, music, and

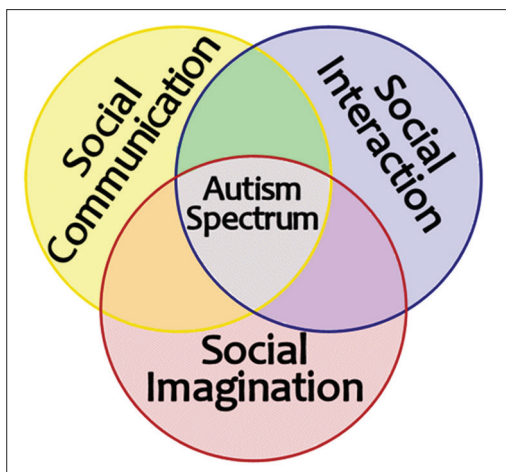


Fig. 1: Triad of impairments [3]



Fig. 2: Autistic Younger brother and Principal Author, June 2014



Fig. 3: Autistic child is having speech therapy at International Islamic university, Kuantan Campus, Malaysia, May 2014

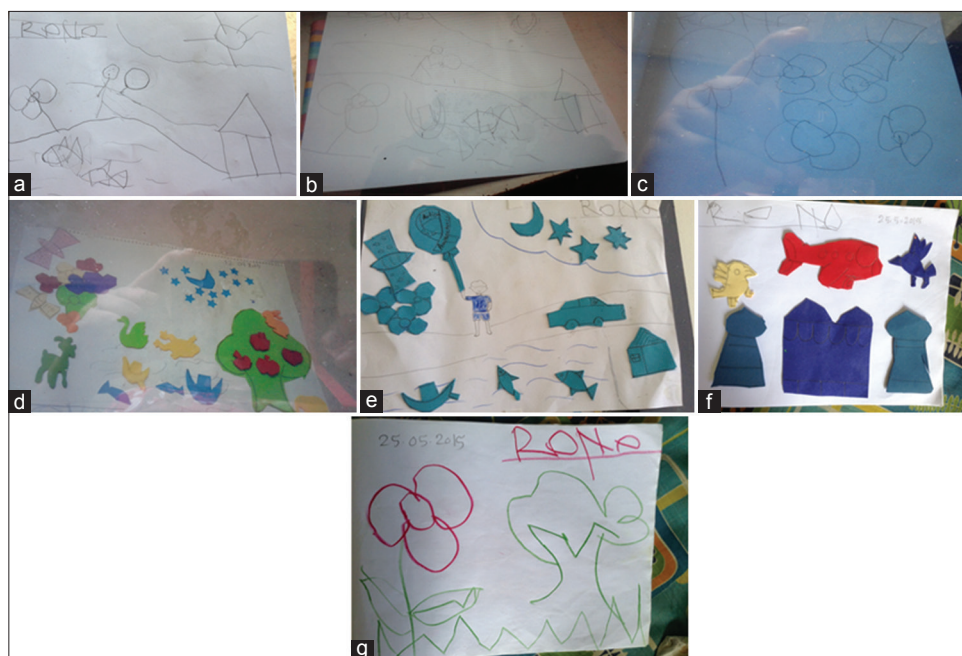


Fig. 4: An 8-year-old non-verbal Autistic Child Rono's art work. (a) 02/04/2015, (b) 06/04/2015, (c) 08/04/2015, (d) 23/05/2015, (e) 25/05/2015, (f) 25/05/2015, and (g) 25/05/2015

so on Fig. 3. There is a complex pathway one must trace through to understand another human; you must be able to perceive the method in which they are trying to communicate with you and then interpret and analyze the information to comprehend it. Often those with ASD can get lost somewhere along this trail. It is noted that the sensory inputs are often atypical in autistics; a balanced sensory system is necessary for appropriate social communication [7]. The problem may also lie with how the input is processed by the individual and the meanings they draw from them. Difficulties in communication can also stem from the motivations to communicate.

Communicating through the medium of art in a therapy session can provide an alternative route. An art therapy session Fig. 4 can help alleviate the stress of a sensory system in disequilibrium by providing something to focus on and put their efforts into [8]. Evans and Dubowski discuss many cases of using art therapy with autistic children, and how over time communication with their clients developed. Much of their sessions revolve around learning the rhythms of a child, and by adjusting to them, building a relationship. This subtle involved methods of non-verbal communication, such as body language, respect of space, attention, and use of eye contact [9].

CONCLUSION

Raising a child with autism can be a challenging endeavor. This is something I can attest to, as my brother Fig. 2 has profound autism that said there have been significant advancements in the understanding of the condition, from a scientific and social perspective. Now when ASD is detected, much can be done to aid the child through their development. There is a good evidence base [10] to suggest that art therapy may be useful components in helping autistic children reach the most of their potential.

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