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## Going Deeper Than Words...

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*Art can provide kids with an easier way to express themselves since children are more naturally artistic and creative.*

Rohan (12 years) was at it again that morning.

He hates external noises. Another child was crying and this had set him off (an over stimulated environment). Screaming and throwing his school bag he was looking for more things to fling... Teary-eyed he looked up at me ...in despair. I slowly led him away to the art room and handed him a large sheet of paper and some crayons. He was excited to see the blank sheet and a whole box of crayons. He gave up crying, sat down immediately and took out a crayon, and started to draw....

He was full of concentration, smiling to himself and totally immersed in his creation. And in just five minutes he had drawn, coloured and finished his work. It was an airplane on a runway... Thai Airways, cockpit and aerodrome in the background. A perfect picture had emerged from his artistic hands. He said he liked to be in the cockpit it was quiet there.

This whole exercise for him was a release of his frustration; his intolerance to external noise was expressed in a complex drawing of a cockpit. With pride we put the work up on the school notice board. His face lit up and he walked away with a big smile on his face and a waltz in his walk. This is what ART can do to these differently abled children.

Rohan, an autistic child, has many issues and throws tantrums daily. But art somehow calms him down, eases his mood and makes him cope with every day. Art can be not only a coping mechanism but also therapeutic. Art for him is not a hobby but an extension of his thoughts. Art can provide kids with an easier way to express themselves since children are more naturally artistic and creative. Not every child may be as creative as Rohan, not every picture is going to be as perfect... but that's the larger goal of art. It should not be result oriented. The spot light here is not the drawing but it is the process that heals.

Why do we not see this more often in our schools? One reason could be because art in most schools is taught once a week; and during that time, the kids are forced to draw an apple or a coconut tree with mountains in the background - such pre-determined creations which are so standardised that it does not even portray the creativity of the 'art instructor'! Art needs to be part of an everyday process of learning. Children with special needs thrive on routine, so a regular interception of art in the curriculum would be greatly helpful.

Most children with special needs have innate visual powers. A question and answer type of format can be daunting and intimidating for a child, especially when



they have to try and explain themselves with their already limited vocabulary. Because of this, art for children can be a much more viable solution for communication than simply having a conversation and talking about things.

How can we create such an enriching art based environment for children with special needs? Here are six simple steps that anyone can take to bring art into the life of ‘special children’ in a meaningful manner. These have worked for me as an art consultant and I don’t think why it should not work for anyone – be it a regular teacher in an inclusive classroom, a parent of an autistic child or a volunteer in a special school.

- **Familiar Space:** Children are often comfortable with people who are familiar to them – faces they recognise – and through time they realise that these people pose no threat. It is important to be around for them to see and silently watch the kids. Each of these children’s needs are different and by watching them we understand that art for each of them has a different meaning.
- **Right materials:** It is important to keep in mind the developmental phase of the child when choosing materials. One already knows that the child’s physical limitations do not always correspond to his/her developmental level. For example, if a school-age child has difficulty manually grasping objects, offer him or her more sophisticated art materials that you would give a younger child; e.g., large oil pastels are as easy to grasp as big crayons but tend to look and feel more mature.
- **Be objective:** When children share their imagery with us, they are showing that they trust us enough to let us into their inner world. We can help them add verbal language to describe their internal experience by reflecting what we see in non-

judgmental terms: “I see you drew a green tree. I see a little girl who seems sad.” By being objective, we’re allowing the child to feel comfortable about sharing. Children with autism who engage in one-on-one sessions show an improved ability to imagine and think symbolically, enhanced ability to recognise and respond to facial expressions, new ability to manage sensory issues such as a range of texture and greater fine motor skills.

- **Create a dialogue:** The approach should not be one wherein too many questions about the work is asked. But allowing time for them to answer and building the conversation on those ‘nuggets’ is what has succeeded for me.
- Having patience and being supportive of the process is as important as any other. Of course it is easier said than done, but for art to work it does take time and effort.
- **Have fun:** Art making with a child can be a wonderful way to strengthen the relationship. Don’t put too much emphasis on the final product, the ‘mantra’ is to relax and have fun. The creative process itself will empower children to safely explore their limits and reach their full potential. Art fosters pride in themselves and their creations.

Self expression through art-making is a powerful yet safe way of allowing children to express their feelings in relation to their limited ability. Although in certain situations it is wise to seek out a trained art therapy professional, as individuals working or engaging with special children, one can incorporate some of the same tools professionals use.

Children may never develop a sense of aesthetics for their work, but what we need to recognise is the honesty of approach, the power of being able to express feelings and emotions through art. This



is in itself ground breaking, especially for children such as Rohan for whom we have failed in creating a 'normal' environment. Lets' not think of art for artists and art as an elitist hobby.... for special children art is a language to communicate, art is a medium of expression. Lets' go deeper than words!!

Like Elbert Hubbard said "Art is not a thing; it is a way".



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