

Wendy Fidler - NASEN book review
'Art as an Early Intervention Tool for Children with Autism'
August 19 2009

NASEN - BOOK REVIEW

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Art as an Early Intervention Tool for Children with Autism

Author: Nicole Martin

Jessica Kingsley, 2009, 240pp

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Art as an Early Intervention Tool for Children with Autism is newly published by Jessica Kingsley. Nicole Martin is a registered art therapist and founder of *Sky's The Limit Studio* in Lawrence, Kansas, which provides art therapy, music therapy, and counselling services tailored to the specific needs of individuals with autism spectrum disorders and other communication, attention, social-emotional, or neuro-developmental issues.

This book is a response to the lack of resources on art interventions for young children with autism. The pre-school years are the most important and productive time to intervene, just when children are understandably busy working on other pre-school skills. If art skills are not properly adapted for children on the spectrum, self stimulatory scribbling, or graphic perseveration (a persistent theme or topic) will persist and opportunities to work on good habits with the materials will be missed.

Art is an interesting 'crossroads' for children with ASD because it is an activity in which strengths (visual learners, sensory interests) and deficits (imagination, needs for sensory control) merge. Children often desire art making but have difficulty engaging in it appropriately. Nicole has adapted standard art therapy methodology to suit the early years and she encourages creativity and flexibility skills which she sees as the

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beginnings of self expression. Simply presenting children on the spectrum with art materials will not work; the activities need to be integrated with behavioural skills and behavioural finesse. As with musical instruments or any other creative activity the children are understandably going to use the materials in ways that feel natural to them which is not necessarily age-appropriate or productive. Children can get off track or overwhelmed in a sensory way and so activities are honed down, broken into component parts so as not to overwhelm them.

As each child with autism is different, activities are individually tailored to different places on the spectrum. Nicole emphasises the importance of building a strong relationship with the child, adapting social and communication interactions, making the child comfortable and organising the child's working space, all this before adapting the art activity itself.

Intervening early in art activities is *'just about knowing the kids, tailoring materials, space and demands to their needs'* and can result in improved flexibility, reciprocity and collaboration skills. Low functioning and aggressive children can begin to make their first scribbles once their bodies are regulated and their behaviours are under control.

Compassionate love for the child is cited as one of the most important aspects of working with children with autism. This is not a book about psychoanalysis (children's drawings created in therapy are often mythologised or pathologised by the media) but a lovingly compiled description of the art therapy told through the lens of

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professional and personal experience. Its target audience is anyone who is doing art with children.

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