

SENSORY-FRIENDLY ART WORKS!

Helping people with autism relax and self-regulate through art

BY LINDSEY BIEL, OTR/L



Given the number of people with autism who are visual thinkers, it's no surprise that there are several established, self-taught artists such as Jessica Park and Kim Miller who developed their unique style without significant outside direction. There are also a few "savants" such as Stephen Wiltshire who, for example, drew a detailed illustration of the New York City skyline after a 20-minute helicopter ride.

Most people with autism, however, are most successful with structured art projects and guidance. Of all the thera-

peutic activities I do with my clients on the spectrum—whether they're toddlers, teenagers, or young adults—the ones they love most are art projects. They're my favorite too, which makes it fun for everyone!

OPEN-ENDED VS. STRUCTURED

Open-ended art projects can be nice opportunities for people to explore materials and two-dimensional space. Typically people are given paper, inexpensive paint, a paintbrush, and the result is a delightful mishmash. For a gluing project, people may be given a bowl of decorations such as sequins or dry pasta and some glue for a collage.

While free-form exploration of materials can be fun, I emphasize structured art projects that meet my clients' need for predictability while enabling me, as an occupational therapist, to help increase their self-regulation, fine motor control, visual perception, and other skills.

As the visual artist Joseph Beuys famously said, "Everyone is an artist." Art projects are supposed to be cre-

ative, so how do you decide how much structure to impose? The key is noting the level of self-regulation. Is there enough structure and predictability that the person remains calm, attentive and productive? Or is the project so undirected that the person becomes anxious, frustrated, or bored?

As with anything, start at a level that is interesting and just a bit challenging. If the person has a special interest such as animals or transportation, build projects around the favored theme. I usually start clients with exploration of colors and shapes. Then we do step-by-step imitation. You do not have to be a great artist to guide a person through basic shapes and forms such as a smiley face. We then progress to a sequenced drawing, freehand drawing, color by number, or paint by number, *slowly* increasing the challenge. Remember that developing proficiency takes time and repetition!

PREPARE BODY, MIND AND WORKSPACE

Before working on an art project, engage in sensory diet activities that help the person reach an optimal state of arousal. These activities may include deep pressure massage, joint compressions, swinging, bouncing, jumping, using a rocking chair, climbing stairs, chewing gum, or simply drinking water. Speak with an OT and visit sensorysmarts.com for more information on this.

Provide a workspace that is conducive to focus and creativity. Provide a comfortable chair and use a freestanding or tabletop easel or slantboard to reduce neck strain. Remove clutter to avoid visual distractions. Avoid down-cast lights and fluorescent lighting because sensitive people can see and hear the flicker. Opt for full-spectrum light at eye level. Play music or use a white noise machine or CD if that helps the artist to stay focused.

CONSIDER SENSORY ISSUES

When planning art projects, it's essential to think about sensory issues such as tactile and olfactory sensitivity. Some people who refuse to participate are actually trying to avoid what they perceive as an intolerable sensory assault.

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and other developmental challenges. Lindsey is coauthor of *Raising a Sensory Smart Child*, with a foreword by Temple Grandin, and co-creator of the Sensory Processing Master Class DVD program. She is a popular speaker, teaching workshops to parents, therapists, doctors, and others on practical solutions for developmental challenges and sensory strategies at home, school, and in the community. ◀

ART IN ACTION: SENSORY-FRIENDLY STRATEGIES

Here are a few beloved, structured art activities:

COLOR BY NUMBERS—This activity encourages people to use multiple colors and to work slowly and carefully to fill in numbered sections “until the white goes away.” The results are highly pleasing. Color by number kits from Alex Toys have thick lines for boundaries and provide plastic frames. Keep in mind that you can lightly write numbers on any pictures along with corresponding markers, crayons, or colored pencils—either labeling the colors or providing a guide specifying numbers and colors.

PAINT BY NUMBERS—These kits, available in beginner and more advanced versions, have the added challenge of managing paint. The person must learn to pick up the right amount of paint with the brush for the area to be painted (e.g., a tiny bit on a small brush for a small detail, more paint on a bigger brush for a larger area). It’s also a great way to learn to “grade” pressure, e.g. to make a small dot or slender line, you cannot press down hard with your brush. More advanced kits require mixing colors which most people enjoy.

SEQUENCED DRAWING—These drawing books give step-by-step instructions and visuals that can result in marvelous pictures. Some favorites are Usborne’s *I Can Draw Animals* and

Ed Emberley’s book, *Draw a World*. Books like Ed Emberley’s *Fingerprint Drawing Book* are great for those who don’t mind getting their fingers messy. For more advanced artists, consider how-to books like Usborne’s *The Complete Book of Drawing* which breaks images down into fundamental shapes and lines, and then details how to realistically fill them in.

Others ideas:

- ▶ Coloring books with raised lines that provide tactile cues.
- ▶ Kumon’s *My Book of Cutting and Easy Crafts* and other books. Though scissoring is a craft, these beautifully designed workbooks make users feel like artists.

[A note about scissors: Opt for scissors with a round hole for the thumb and an oval hole for the other fingers and teach “thumbs up” grasp. Fiskars or Crayola brands work best. If unable to manipulate standard scissors, use self-opening scissors from therapy catalogs.]

- ▶ To teach needlepoint, start with a small, wide-mesh pre-painted kit. Artists can eventually design their own on plain needlepoint mesh.
- ▶ Try Shrinky Dinks, Spin Art and other kits.

Avoid invalidating a sensitive person by saying, “It doesn’t smell.” It *does*. Everything smells like *something*. Even if the label states the item is certified nontoxic, recognize that it may still be “toxic” to an individual’s sensitive nervous system. Always work in a room with good ventilation. Allow people to wear soft, oversized shirts instead of smocks which may be unbearable because of the fabric texture or scratchy neck closures.

If the person cannot tolerate the smell of traditional markers or tempera paint, try alternates such as Scented Mr. Sketch markers or liquid watercolor paint. Col-

ored pencils and crayons may be best tolerated. If a person refuses to touch play-dough or regular clay, try fruit-scented Lakeshore dough, unscented gluten-free Wonder Dough, or low-scent, low-residue Crayola Model Magic. Older kids and adults might like Sculpey which hardens when baked to make beads and other objects.

The goal here is self-regulation and participation—sensory issues should not prevent that. If a person refuses to get messy, offer gloves and a long-handled paintbrush or glue sticks instead of liquid glue. Sometimes having

a damp cloth nearby for wiping hands can make all the difference. Once people find pleasure in what they’re doing, they are usually more willing to deal with the sensory aspects of different materials. ◀

FIND OUT MORE

- ▶ **Jessica Park’s artwork** at purevisionarts.org/artists/jessica-park
- ▶ **Kim Miller’s artwork** at thegirlwhospokewithpictures.com
- ▶ **Stephen Wiltshire’s artwork** at stephenwiltshire.co.uk
- ▶ **Color by Number and beginner needlepoint** at Alextoys.com
- ▶ **Paint by Numbers** for beginners at Alextoys.com. Intermediate and advanced kits by Royal & Langnickel and others available on Amazon and in some art supply stores.
- ▶ **Cardboard shapes (animals, people, vehicles), fruit-scented dough, nontoxic stamp pads**, and more at Lakeshorelearning.com
- ▶ **Gluten-free Wonder Dough** at Greatwhitebottling.com
- ▶ **Raised line coloring books** at Maxiaids.com and raised line coloring sheets at Therapro.com
- ▶ **Online art supplies** at Enasco.com and Discountschoolsupply.com
- ▶ **Books mentioned** are in bookstores and online
- ▶ **For more sensory smart ideas**, please see *Raising a Sensory Smart Child* and visit sensorysmarts.com.

ARTIST PROFILE: JULIA MAIDMAN

Julia is a teenaged artist in NYC, pictured here with her occupational therapist, Lindsey Biel. Julia especially enjoys Paint By Numbers, adding her own special artistry to each painting. She likes to listen to music while painting, especially to Phillip Glass playing piano. When painting, she is relaxed, calm, and focused. She says, “I love to paint. I like all the colors and it makes me feel good.”

