

INTRODUCTION

If you ask a parent what the most important goal is for their child, they would probably say being happy and healthy, yet few supports and plans are developed around this goal; most tend to be developed around the diagnosis of autism and its symptoms. How do we design services or assess quality of life for someone on the spectrum? How do we provide an environment that fosters happiness and why is that important?

Having a positive sense of well-being will help an autistic person in numerous ways. A person who feels happy and fulfilled tends to be more flexible, adaptable, calm, content, and resilient.

Supporting a person's interests and passions are important because they are motivating, engaging, conversation starters, friendship builders, skill building, employable, meaningful, calming, enhancing, and expandable. Being able to pursue interests and enjoyable activities adds meaning and pleasure to a person's life.

There should be time allotted in the day for leisure activities. Leisure activities connect us to family and community, develop skills, increase independence, and reduce stress. For people on the autism spectrum, developing leisure interests and skills can be more challenging because skills are often not learned through the informal observation of others or by imitation; however, we can provide the structure and support for the successful pursuit of interests. Examples of structure would be the use of visual supports, a well-defined beginning and end, or a predictable or repetitive quality to the activity.

Daily physical activity, time outdoors, exposure to the arts, participation in sports, reading or being read to, opportunities to try new things, and having creative outlets can lead to greater life satisfaction which fosters happiness and well-being. Everyone needs things to look forward to. New experiences and a variety of daily activities encourage personal growth and wellness.

A happy person will feel positive about themselves and optimistic about their life, moving them beyond just surviving to thriving. The entire family will feel the effects too.

Sincerely,



Maureen Bennie

Director, Autism Awareness Centre Inc.



ENHANCING HAPPINESS AND WELL-BEING FOR AUTISTIC PEOPLE THROUGH FINE ARTS

The fine arts are a wonderful outlet for self-exploration, creativity and self-expression. They are another channel for communication, showing us a window into a person's world. Experiences in the arts play a valuable role in helping a person to participate fully in the community and in society as a whole. They provide enrichment in life and can be an excellent teaching tool.

Introducing the arts into the education and life experience of an autistic person can be daunting if you have not had any training in the fine arts. Don't be afraid because [music](#), visual arts, literature, [dance](#), photography, film and [drama](#) can foster a sense of well-being and happiness, adding to the quality of life of an autistic person. There are lots of materials, resources, instructional videos and websites to help you.

Fostering a love of the arts and making them feel familiar gives a person on the spectrum a lifelong activity and pursuit. The arts are like a good friend – always there when you need them and something you can go to in those down or lonely moments.

Where Do I Start?

All fine arts activities should have structure to them. To just give paints and say, “make a picture” may be too overwhelming. You may have to give some ideas of what to paint and then break the task down. Help them to see the parts of an object or subject of a scene and how it comes together to make up the whole. For example, our adult daughter takes a weekly community art class. We have to prepare ahead of time what things she might paint because she finds it very stressful to have to come up with an idea once she gets to the class. We send books and objects that she is interested in and loves for her to paint.

Plan out an art project with a child and then gather the materials together. This will make a child feel that they have some control over choosing materials, colours etc.

Know what the sensory difficulties are. If a child hates getting their hands dirty or wet, finger-painting will not be a good choice. If they have an auditory sensitivity, playing a drum may not work or it may work wearing noise cancelling headphones.

For [art projects](#), break down each step of the project through visuals and have those steps listed in sequence. Assist the child, but don't lead. Sometimes hand-over-hand can help the child at first until they can do the project themselves. Don't overwhelm a child with a project and keep an eye out for frustration. Start with simple ideas and build from there as skills increase.

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What Can I Do with Music?

A woman who worked with a nonverbal, visually impaired young man with autism asked me an interesting question. She was told the young man had low cognitive ability but when he heard music, he came alive. Sitting in his wheelchair, he would rock back and forth in time to the music and hum along to songs. When the music was no longer

playing, he would hum the songs and everyone around him recognized the tunes. She was wondering if there was a way she could explore this connection to music in some way to enhance his life and maybe teach him some things too. As a classical musician and former music teacher, my response was an enthusiastic yes!

I think what was happening with this man was he felt a connection to music and could communicate through it. His support team can pursue and build on this interest. Often when a person is blind, their other senses become more acute such as hearing. With autism, many of our individuals have a heightened sense of hearing even without a visual impairment.

There is a great deal that can be taught using music. Use certain songs to cue association with tasks. For example, choose a song that you can use for [transitioning](#) to another activity. Play it every time you move to something new and an association with that song will happen with that transition. You can pick songs for cleaning up, end of day, lunchtime and the list goes on. Experiment with all kinds of music to see what appeals the most. YouTube is a huge source for music, especially classical. Mozart, Beethoven and Bach are great composers to start with. For Mozart, have a look at Symphony #40 in g minor, Beethoven's Fur Elise, and any of the Bach Preludes and Fugues. Scarlatti is also wonderful. Vivaldi is also great, mathematically precise music.

For academics, try and follow a story like Prokofiev's Peter and the Wolf. This has both the spoken word with music. For math, grab a pair of claves and tap out 2 (2 taps) and say plus 3 (3 taps) and ask the person what does it equal – they can tap back 5 times.

Get the individual playing simple rhythm instruments like claves, finger cymbals, triangle, tambourine or a hand drum. Does your school have a music program? Are there [Orff instruments](#) about or ones you can get on loan from a school board? Get a hold of a xylophone. This is a simple instrument to learn to play and it develops hand-eye coordination. Explore patterning and memory with a xylophone. Play a simple tune and have the person play it back. Create rhythmic patterns for playback.

If you are not a musician and need more guidance in music, consider contacting the [Canadian Association of Music Therapy](#). Most provinces have their own association and you can find them through this website. Their [links section](#) lists other music therapy associations worldwide.

Music Resources

Ryan Judd, music therapist, has created a great series of [YouTube](#) videos for autistic children. Here is [one](#) for teaching how to use simple instruments. Ryan's website is called [The Rhythm Tree](#). You don't have to be a musician to use these materials. [Coast Music Therapy](#) also offers wonderful free resources on their website.

You can read more about the benefits of music therapy through the [Autism Science Foundation](#) or this article entitled [Music Therapy as a Treatment Modality for Autism Spectrum Disorders](#).