

Researcher develops art therapy best practices for children with autism

July 21 2017, by Amy Farnum-Patronis



Theresa Van Lith, assistant professor of art therapy in FSU's Department of Art Education. Credit: FSU Photography Services

A Florida State University researcher is working with art therapists to find better ways to treat children who have Autism Spectrum Disorder

(ASD).

Theresa Van Lith, assistant professor of art therapy in FSU's Department of Art Education, led a study that surveyed art therapists working with children with ASD to develop a clearer understanding of their techniques and approaches. The study was published this month in the journal *Arts in Psychotherapy*.

"I had noticed that there is a high number of art therapists working with people who have autism, but I wanted to understand what their practice wisdoms were in terms of how they go about facilitating art therapy sessions," Van Lith said. "We want to make it a transparent process for the client or the parents of a client, so they know what to expect."

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that one in 68 children is diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder by age 8 each year. As that population grows, more parents and educators are seeking out art therapists to address social development and sensory issues that generally accompany ASD.

The research team compiled and analyzed the art therapists' expert opinions on topics such as what worked with ASD clients, their objectives during a session, their most preferred theoretical approach and the considerations they had to make when working with children with ASD.

"We realized there wasn't a consensus with the theoretical approaches they used," Van Lith said. "They were having to use a number of theoretical approaches together, and we wanted to understand what that would be like in practice."

While the survey results varied, the researchers were able to develop a

set of guidelines for delivering art therapy to children who have ASD. The proposed guidelines will serve as a basis of successful practice for new art therapy professionals and for further studies.

"We used these practice wisdoms from art therapists around the field to understand the most effective and beneficial way to use art therapy with child with ASD," Van Lith said.

Some of the best practices found were: use the same routine to begin each session, explain instructions in a consistent manner, spark curiosity to teach new skills and be aware of transitions between activities.

The researchers also outlined aspects of practice that were found not to be useful. They warned art therapists on a handful of factors that could have adverse effects on clients such as being overly directive or too loose with direction, using over stimulating art materials and forcing or being restrictive with communication styles.

"That's important because sometimes there is the assumption of 'why can't anyone do these techniques?'" Van Lith said. "People wonder why art therapy can't be conducted in a much less formal situation. However, they don't realize there are nuances in the way we deliver the art therapy directive—a lot of that is about knowing the client and the way a client responds to communication."

Based on these guidelines and consensus, Van Lith is rolling out a larger study to demonstrate the efficacy of that working model.

"The idea is that, over time, we can build up the evidence that art therapy is effective for these children, and we can demonstrate how and why that is the case," Van Lith said.

The ultimate goal is to educate art therapists about best practices as well

as inform clients, parents and teachers about possible benefits of art [therapy](#) for [children](#) with ASD.

"As a result of more transparency, the clients can appreciate or understand some of the changes that might be going on for them as they receive [art therapy](#)," Van Lith said. "We don't want it to be a mysterious process."

More information: Theresa Van Lith et al. Discovering good practice for art therapy with children who have Autism Spectrum Disorder: The results of a small scale survey, *The Arts in Psychotherapy* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.aip.2017.01.002](#)

Provided by Florida State University

Citation: Researcher develops art therapy best practices for children with autism (2017, July 21) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-07-art-therapy-children-autism.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--