



Art Therapy Adds to Growing Understanding of Autism *More Families Are Learning About Art Therapy's Unique Benefits During Autism Awareness Month*

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Contact: Cathy Malchiodi, ATR-BC, Professional Relations
American Art Therapy Association (AATA)
5999 Stevenson Avenue, Alexandria VA 22304
1-888-290-0878 or info@arttherapy.org

Alexandria, VA--- Autism spectrum disorder (ASD), also more commonly called "autism," is a neurodevelopmental condition that includes cognitive impairment of social interactions and communication. According to the American Psychiatric Association, individuals with autism may also have restricted, repetitive, and/or stereotyped patterns of behaviors. April is Autism Awareness Month to call attention to the condition and to people who have autism.

For reasons not fully understood, individuals with autism experience difficulties in interacting with the faces of other people. Autism is one of few conditions characterized by this particular problem. In the latest issue of *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association* (V.25, #1), art therapist Nicole Martin, MAAT, LPC, set out to study how people with ASD approach drawing portraits to see if she could find out more about people with autism and their patterns of social interaction. "Art can provide a way to express what is more complicated," said Nicole Martin, who received her graduate education in Chicago, IL.

Martin developed a Portrait Drawing Assessment (PDA) to look for possible trends and characteristics in the drawings of children and adolescents with ASD. Portrait drawings were collected from children and adolescents with ASD and from a group of children and adolescents roughly matched for age. The intent of the initial study was to add valuable information about how people with autism attend to faces and to contribute to growing knowledge about artistic development across the spectrum of this condition.

Martin hopes Autism Awareness Month will let families know that there are resources for children with autism and, more importantly, that art therapy may be a good fit for their children. "Art tends to play to their natural strengths and interests," said Martin, because individuals with autism are "very visual-spatial and sensory oriented." Early intervention through art therapy with children with autism is one helpful way to release stress and get to know who they are", she added. "If you don't intervene sensory-wise then you may miss opportunities to alleviate anxiety," she said.

A presentation on art therapy and autism was recently made on Capitol Hill as part of a public education program to emphasize the importance of art as intervention and treatment for ASD. For information about art therapy and the treatment of autism, please visit the AATA website at www.arttherapy.org or *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association* at www.arttherapyjournal.org. The American Art Therapy Association, Inc., was founded in 1969 and develops and promotes educational, professional, and ethical standards for the practice of art therapy. The AATA provides information to its members and the public regarding the field of art therapy through publications, a scholarly journal, and an annual conference.

American Art Therapy Association, Inc. (AATA) 1-888-290-0878
5999 Stevenson Avenue, Alexandria, VA 22304
www.arttherapy.org info@arttherapy.org
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