

ΣΟΦΙΑ—SOPHIA

Investigation Article

Art-therapy and Asperger Syndrome: Why and what for?

D. Pedro José Regis Sansalonis

PhD. of the Department of Didactics of Musical, Plastic and Body Expression. Universidad de Jaén, Jaén, España. (pregis@ujaen.es).

Recibido: Enero de 2016, Revisado: Marzo de 2016, Aceptado: Junio 2016

How to cite: Regis,P.J (2016) Art-therapy and Asperger Syndrome: Why and what for? *Sophia* 12 (2): 187-194.



ISSN (electrónico): 2346-0806 ISSN (impreso): 1794-8932

Abstract

This article intends to clarify why and for what it is important to use art therapy with the collective of Asperger syndrome. The above through an exercise of bibliographical revision, especially in secondary sources as research work. At the end, it is acknowledged the scarce bibliography found, and the need to continue investigating art therapy in this social group that is still unknown by most of society.

Key words: Art therapy, capacity, collective, education, Asperger's syndrome.

Art Therapy: Why to use it?

The inclusion in the use of art therapy in the group with Asperger's syndrome, is interesting from a social, educational and therapeutic perspective. The aims expressed by this discipline exemplify in an empty and truthful manner the objectives sought in the research.

As it is well expressed by Klein, art therapy:

It is the meeting between two projects, one artistic and the other therapeutic. It is an accompaniment to people with social, psychological, physical, educational, existential difficulties, through their artistic productions (...) in such a way that the work done from their creations generates a process of transformation of themselves and helps them integrate into their social reference groups in a critical and creative way (Klein, 2008: 9).

Art therapy offers a multitude of possibilities in the social group of Asperger, allowing them to discover an intrinsic capacity of their thoughts, transforming the product that they perform and, moreover, it is connected with their interior; that is, their personality. The individuals carry within themselves a project of person, of change, that causes a journey where the subject will discover new aspects and utilities of art as an audiovisual, creative, socio-educational and therapeutic tool, according to Eisner:

The arts invite us to pay attention to the qualities of what we hear, see, taste and palpate in order to experience it; what we look for in the arts is the ability to perceive things, not just the fact of recognizing them. We are given a license to slow perception, to examine carefully, to savor the qualities we normally try to tackle so effectively that we barely notice that they are there. (Eisner, 2004: 22).

It is not intended that art therapy be limited only to a specific catharsis in the daily activity of individuals, but to help in their daily activities to confront the problems that there arise.

Although for this, subject and object must relate to each other, as a response to a specific personal or professional challenge. An example of this may be to identify when another person is talking to us ironically or commenting made phrases. Knowing how to detect these situations requires a previous work that must be worked with the art and its different techniques.

According to Rosal (1996, 2001), the guided use of images, mainly used in the adult population and in children with behavioral problems, is presented as a resource to reduce stress and increase the safety and control of the affected person. Thanks to techniques such as collage or photomontage, along with the integration of various materials such as wax pencils, felt-tip pens, waxes ... they turn out to be a revulsive to get the exposed.

Several studies affirm that art therapy has benefits in people with Asperger's syndrome, enabling them to better develop their social and communicative skills, being able and knowing how to deploy personal situations among their peers and, thus, develop social interaction circumstances, in addition to decreasing certain levels of stress and anxiety (depending on the particularity of the subject) that can be found in daily routines (Emery, 2004, Elkis-Albuhoff, 2008, Epp, 2008).

Art therapy has the potential to improve communication, expression, and of building personal relationships when applied to adolescents with Asperger's Syndrome. There are models of artistic therapy directed to Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) (Gabriels, 2000; Evans and Dubowski, 2001).

Artistic therapy offers a way to solve problems visually. This forces them to be less literal and reinforce self-expression, and offers a non-threatening way of dealing with rejection. This replaces the need for tantrums or interpreting behaviors as an acceptable means of emotional discharge, and allows the child to calm down (Henley, 2000).

Due to an intransigent non-existence in following habitual routines, creative therapies are a multidirectional form in the therapeutic relationship that enables the internal expression of a person to which we must also add the possibility of a rediscovery in interpersonal relationships ([Duarte & Simoes](#) 2011).

Art encourages people to represent their reality and their experiences through these means. Forms are represented in objects and the very act of drawing, for example, encourages an intention to relate to the world around them, that is, with others.

Adolescents with Asperger's syndrome tend to lack the need to relate, but not all. However, artistic therapy can serve as a path to increased self-consciousness. I think, therefore I am, as Socrates (Descartes) would say. Being able to experiment with the self is a process of development. It can be very difficult for some children, and it is particularly feasible or, perhaps easy, for others.

They must learn to experience the act of drawing, painting, modeling, cutting, pasting, expressing, etc. Art will always prove to be an evolutionary process leading to the next stage. Art therapy for children and/or adolescents with Asperger's syndrome can be an important intervention based on their activity to encourage their growth, not only personal but also professional ([Emery](#), 2004).

Despite the challenges that can result in adolescents with Asperger's syndrome, and the emotional and cognitive creation of representative images through the use of audiovisual instruments (as in our case, photography and video), these means are for them a clear example of being able to obtain those socio-educational objectives that are effective as a solution to those problems that are faced in their environment.

Why to use it?

These adolescents have common deficits in socialization areas, lack of cognitive flexibility, monothematic interests, executive functions (such as being organized in a given activity) and emotional regulation (Schultz, Romanski and Tsatsanis, 2000). Faced with these deficits, what is intended is that they build their behaviors regarding the relationship and interactive process that produces artistic therapy, emphasizing the specific needs of each subject.

Intrinsic motivation

Intrinsic motivation is an innate action of the human being of compromising one's own personal and subjective capacities and interests to achieve an end, that something that one wants to obtain ([Deci and Ryan](#), 1985). The subjective interests that define us and that we pursue determine a true "panacea" of what we intend to achieve it, leading to psychological satisfaction. This is one of the most important aspects that should be used to work with these adolescents. According to [Martín Borreguero](#) (2004), in one of his various case studies, Luke, a nine-year-old subject, has social difficulties, behavioral problems, and big hints of aggressiveness. After an evaluation and observation by the psycho-pedagogical team of the center where he studies, they present the following: "Luke presents severe problems of attention, difficulties of self-regulation of his behavior, and a lack of interest and intrinsic motivation to accomplish the assigned tasks."

The World Health Organization (WHO) affirms that people with Asperger's lack intrinsic motivation, and this affects them in learning, since this dearth is due to the deficient adaptation of educative contents directed to this social group. What does this entail? That, perhaps, those tasks intended towards the education of Luke, where the issuer plays a very important role, would have had very different consequences to those that Professor Martín Borreguero exposes if, in this case, they had known the interests of the child, in order to channel the proposed activities to those things that arouse an interest, and therefore, a motivation in him.

However, it is confirmed by an intervention program on Asperger's syndrome carried out at the University of Málaga by Inmaculada [Carrasco Juárez and Adrián Guerrero Atencia](#) (2005), in which these researchers reaffirm that enhancing their interests in the curricular contents will help them to show an intrinsic motivation towards those proposed activities.

Creativity

Creativity must be understood as a process in which, not only ideas are generated from the inside to the outside, but also to be sensitive to certain external stimuli (those that can affect us) and give a solution (or several) to those stimuli. On the other hand, creativity must also be understood as a product that we want to obtain, that is, although we think that what is important is the end result of our creativity, it is not our intention, but to set

a series of guidelines or procedures to achieve that final product.

According to [Goñi](#) (2000), creativity in the product is accessible when it is aimed at an audience at some point in time, demonstrating the interests, needs, etc. of individuals. However, the characteristics of a person with Asperger's Syndrome have nothing to do with one that we consider as creative. [Fernández Añino](#) (2003) states that according to Paul Harris's studies, people with autism have difficulties when it comes to developing a creative or symbolic game (it may also be spontaneous), although adolescents with Asperger's have "cognitive rigidity", if they can be considered creative to the high IQ of the individuals reaffirming the theses of Harris.

Next are some reasons that determine why people with Asperger's Syndrome are creative, according to Parada Camelo (2012: 33):

In fact, some of the most important personalities in history like Isaac Newton or Albert Einstein had Asperger's syndrome, which seems to show that it did not limit them in their creative actions. Recently, Scottish singer Susan Boyle¹, winner of one of the most famous British music contests (Britain's Got Talent) has recognized that she has Asperger syndrome (she was diagnosed a year ago and is currently 52 years old) and in her words she feels "relieved" and "relaxed".

Executive functions

According to Delgado and Etchepareborda:

They are cognitive abilities of their own (...) that allow to establish goals, to design plans, to follow sequences, to select appropriate behaviors and to initiate activities; as well as to self-regulate behavior, to monitor tasks, to select behaviors, and to have flexibility in the cognitive work and the organization of a task proposed in time and space. ([Delgado and Etchepareborda](#), 2013: 95).

Characteristics	Benefits
· Normal intelligence.	· As Fernández Añino proposes, normal intelligence would allow the individual to be a creative person.
· Fixation with a certain subject, becoming experts in the same.	· Because of this fixation, they come to dominate all aspects of a subject. This broad knowledge allows them to perform new creations.
· Unusual memory to capture certain details.	· Thanks to this ability, they are able to analyze small details and discover things that others miss.
· Routine and organized people. Need for rituals	· They tend to be very methodical, which gives them a good way of working to investigate.

Source: self-made

The basic cognitive capacities on which the executive functions are based are the following:

Flexibility: To establish the ability to choose between different ways of acting, since sometimes, it is necessary to change the behavior due to the action or task that requires us.

Planning: To achieve an end or goal, it must be established a sequence plan (routines) at sensory and motor level.

Inhibition: Interruption of an automated response.

Monitoring: Supervising procedures or actions that are being carried out in an activity.

Working memory: To absorb certain information sent by the issuer, which is necessary to develop it in a specific space of time. ([Coolidge and Winn](#), 2001).

Executive functions are necessary for the improvement of new behaviors, based on dynamic and creative activities, enabling the creation of guidelines, procedures or steps to reach a specific goal. For example, when establishing a routine or simply what steps I must take to be able to study a theme in a particular subject (the concept map is an example of one of the most useful tools).

Within executive functions, it is very important to know cognitive flexibility. It is conceptualized by the Rosario Neuroscience Research Center (CINR, for its initials in Spanish), in the Faculty of Psychology of Universidad Nacional de Rosario as: The ability of subjects to detect the ineffectiveness of their behaviors on particular occasions, and the consequent ability to replace them with others more adjusted to the circumstantial requirements. Flexibility indicates a capacity for cognitive alternation, as opposed to rigidity². ([Tirapu-Ustárrroz](#), 2002).

Regarding the evaluation of executive functions, we must take into account social cognition, that is, support through the theory of mind, in which the subject refers to the subjective cognitive ability with respect to what others are feeling and thinking.

It is important to use visual supports with people who have Asperger, as they stand out for their processing, understanding and assimilation of the information that they are visually appreciating. Therefore, it is important to translate the visual into any context (everyday life skills, learning, teaching skills ...).

Other aspects to emphasize are: to promote general learning; to assure them a stable and predictable environment; to avoid changes that hinder their active process; to perform tasks in simpler steps, with little difficulty; to offer different possibilities when developing an activity or help them organize their free time, avoiding physical and mental inactivity, or simply limiting their dedication in terms of their interests.

Social skills

Social skills are the ability to behave in a way that is rewarded, and in case of not doing it, being punished or ignored by others ([Libet and Lewinsohn, 1973](#)). However, others define it as the ability to interact with others in a given social context in a given way that is accepted or valued socially and at the same time personal and mutually beneficial to others. ([Combs and Slaby, 1977](#)). Adolescents with Asperger's syndrome lack social skills, being limited in establishing a reciprocal conversation, and they seem not to understand what are the "rules" (or tools) of communicative social behavior with their peers, learning through mere observation of others.

Therefore, they are at clear disadvantage compared to the society around them. But what can be done to achieve that communicative social behavior that is so necessary for them to develop a communicative act with any of the persons with whom they live?

The most important areas to solve this "stagnation" in terms of social skills are:

- To manage feelings and emotions.
- To identify those feelings and emotions.
- To manage stress.
- To solve problems and/or conflicts.
- Conversation skills.

According to Amparo García:

The school psychologist plays a critical role, championing these services for students as well as providing direct instruction to students and training teachers and families in various strategies, such as using social stories or the use of conversations in the form of comic strips ([Amparo García, 2012: 27](#))

In order to evaluate social skills, we must base them on various types of observations and records. A

prior interview with parents will provide first-hand information about their characteristics and current circumstances. It is also important to structure an interview with the subjects' teachers or psychologists, providing data for their functioning with their peers.

In addition (to) the use of self-reports in the case of adolescents, we will have the so-called Scale of Social Skills, proposed on the website of the Federation of Asperger of Spain³, in which they recommend its use. With children we can use self-reports. The Social Skills Scale (EHS, for its initials in Spanish). It may also be necessary to assess the child's level of self-esteem. Often, the lack of social resources is attached to demotivation, under self-concept and even depression.

Conclusions

Asperger's syndrome is still unknown in many sectors of society, it is vital to make it known in different fields (institutes, colleges, companies, universities, media, etc.) starting from the work that is being carried out in associations, until we can achieve a better adaptation of this group in today's society.

It is important to disseminate and publicize the different and diverse communication and language systems that are used in this Generalized Developmental Disorder (GDT), showing which are the most apt, for a greater promotion of learning of individual with Asperger, starting in their childhood, so they may have a better adaptation to adult life.

There are also numerous audiovisual tools that can be helpful for the social, emotional and communicative development of individuals with this syndrome. To cope with daily tasks, whether at school, at Asperger's association of a certain city or at home, it should be stimulating to learn those daily activities using these artistic and socio-educational tools that have been commented throughout the text.

In conclusion, the visual is always more attractive than the theoretical when talking about learning and teaching; therefore, do not be fooled by appearances and less, by the abilities expressed by these individuals; as Brassai said⁴ "There are many photographs that are full of life, but they are confusing and difficult to remember. It is the strength of an image that matters."

Footer

1. Extracted from the article <http://www.lavanguardia.com/cultura/20131208/54395297527/susan-boyle-rev-ela-que-padece-sperrome-de-Asperger.html>.

2 Concept chosen from the blog at the following address <http://neurogimn.blogspot.com.es/2008/10/flexibilidad-cognitiva.html>

3 www.Asperger.es

4 This Hungarian photographer and professor of literature developed most of his academic life in Paris, being one of the better known Hungarian photographers.

Bibliographic references

- Carrasco, I. & Guerrero, A. (2005). Programa de Intervención en el síndrome de Asperger. Universidad de Málaga. España.
- Combs, M. L. & Slaby, D. L. (1977). Social skills training with children. En B.B. Lahey y A. E. Kazdin. (Eds): *Advances in clinical child psychology*. Vol. 1, New York, Plenum.
- Coolidge, F. L. y Wynn, T. (2001): Executive functions of the frontal lobes and the evolutionary ascendancy of Homo sapiens. *Cambridge Archaeol. Journal* 11: 255-260.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. New York: Plenum.
- Delgado, I. & Etchepareborda, M. (2013). Trastornos de las funciones ejecutivas. Diagnóstico y tratamiento. *Revista Neurología*, 57 (Supl 1).pp. 95 – 103.
- Duarte Santos, G. & Simoes, M. (2011). Mediadores artístico-expressivos e Interacção Social – Estudo com crianças com Perturbação do Espectro do Autismo. *International Journal of Developmental and Educational Psychology*, XXIII, Nº 1 (1).
- Eisner, E. W. (2004). *El arte y la creación de la mente: el papel de las artes visuales en la transformación de la conciencia*. Barcelona: Ed. Paidós.
- Elkis-Albuhoff, D. (2008). Art Therapy applied to an adolescent with Asperger's syndrome. *The arts in Psychotherapy*, 35, 262-270.
- Emery, M. J. (2004). Arte Therapy as an intervention for Autism. *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*, 21, (3), 143-147.
- Epp, K. M. (2008). Outcome-based Evaluation of a social skills Program using Art Therapy and Group Therapy for children on the autism spectrum. *Children and Schools*, 30, (1), 27 – 36.
- Evans, K., & Dubowski, J. (2001). *Art therapy with children on the autistic spectrum disorder*. London, UK: Jessica Kingsley.
- Federación Asperger España. Tomado de: <http://www.asperger.es/asperger.php?t=3>.
- Fernández Añino, M^a. (2003). Creatividad, arte terapia y autismo. Un acercamiento a la actividad Plástica como proceso creativo en niños autistas. *Revista Arte, individuo y sociedad*, 15, 135-152.
- Gabriels, R. L. (2000). *Art therapy with children who have autism and their families*. En C. A. Malchiodi (Ed.), *Handbook of art therapy* (pp. 193-206). New York: Guildford.
- García, A. (2012). Habilidades sociales: una aplicación al síndrome de Asperger. Practicum de la Facultad de Psicología. Universidad Oberta de Catalunya.
- Gray C. (1994). Mi libro de historias sociales. (Recuperado el 14/12/13). <https://skydrive.live.com/?cid=cc39baa414d088bd&id=C-C39BAA414D088BD%21177>.
- Goñi, A. (2000). *Desarrollo de la creatividad*. San José: Euned.
- Henley, D. (2000). Blessings in disguise: Idiomatic expression as a stimulus in group art therapy with children. *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*, 17, 270-275.
- Klein, J.P, Bassols, M. y Bonet, E. (Coord.) (2008). *Arteterapia. La creación como proceso de transformación*. Barcelona, Octaedro.
- Klein, J.P. (2006). *Arteterapia. Una introducción*. Barcelona, Octaedro.

Libet, J . & Lewinsohn, M. (1973). The concept of social ski with special reference to the behavior of depressed persons. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 40, pp. 304-312.

Martín Borreguero, P. (2004). *El síndrome de Asperger: ¿Excentricidad o discapacidad social?* Madrid: Alianza Editorial.

