



6 Ways Art Can Benefit Individuals with I/DD

"Art is something that anybody can do," says board-certified art therapist Lori Mackey. "It's not about how good it is; it's about bringing people together with purpose and connection." For individuals with I/DD, creating art not only encourages socialization, but also provides a host of other benefits as well.

In Mackey's role, she guides her patients as they create artwork both individually and in groups. These are 6 ways she's seen art benefit individuals with I/DD:

1. Offers an outlet for expression

Art, whether music, dance, or painting, is all about expression. And while Mackey notes that art therapists don't try to interpret their patients' artwork, it can help individuals express themselves and work through their emotions. "Depending on their level, if they can label their emotions, they may be able to process them more effectively." She also notes that using certain materials, like modeling clay, can provide a safe space for working through emotions like anger or frustration.

2. Offers a tactile experience

Using a variety of different materials like paint, clay, or paper offers a tactile experience that can benefit individuals who need more stimulation. It can also be a soothing experience, helping to desensitize individuals who are overstimulated.

3. Encourages socialization

Whether they're working on individual projects or coming together as a group, art is an effective way to foster socialization. When Mackey recently guided an art project with adults with autism, one of the group's caregivers noted that this was the first time she had seen members of the group socializing with each other. "They were able to let their guard down when they were working together and doing something with their hands," she says. "They had a sense of purpose, both as individuals and as a group."

4. Provides a sense of freedom

Individuals with I/DD often lead very structured lives with predictable routines. When art is built into that structure, individuals get a chance to play, make a mess, and enjoy themselves without disrupting the routines that help them stay centered. "It's a place where it's okay to be messy," says Mackey. "It's okay to splatter the paint; it's okay to tear the paper." And when individuals want to do their own thing? "As long as they're safe, let them," she says.

5. Develops skills

Art can help individuals with I/DD hone the skills they need to navigate daily challenges and enhance their independence. Creating art involves fine motor skills, hand-eye coordination, and special awareness, and can help individuals improve their dexterity and muscle control. Art can also help with cognitive skills, like problem solving and decision making, as they choose materials and work toward an individual or shared goal.

6. Helps staff connect with their clients

In her work at Advocate Children's Hospital, Mackey often invites nurses and other hospital staff to join in on art activities with their patients. It can help them process emotions or relieve the stress of a challenging job. The biggest benefit, however, is the connection a shared art experience can foster between caregivers and their clients.

See page 2 for tips on bringing art into your programming.



6 Ways Art Can Benefit Individuals with I/DD, continued

If you're looking to incorporate art into your programming, Mackey offers these tips:

1. Use safe, appropriate materials

Consider materials like crayons and markers that are controllable and can be easily cleaned for infection control. Make materials available during designated art times rather than leaving them out.

2. Consider individual art kits

Building a kit of safe and appropriate materials for each individual prevents conflict and gives everyone the responsibility for taking care of their own supplies.

3. Bring in an art therapist

Art therapists must complete a master's degree in art therapy and are required to complete a minimum of 600 clinical hours. They have a background in both art and psychology and are trained to work with groups and individuals who have special needs. Understanding that funding to hire a full-time art therapist might be difficult to obtain, Mackey suggest connecting with schools in your area that have an art therapy program. Graduate students need to gain experience and may be looking for a place to complete their clinical hours.

4. Engage staff

As noted above, staff can benefit from art therapy and may also be able to assist the therapist. Staff members who enjoy the arts on their own may be perfect for this opportunity.