



# A Study on Parent's Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Art with Therapeutic Intentions at Awakening Minds Art

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## Abstract

Art therapy is an intervention which utilizes a combination of art and psychotherapy to address a variety of conditions clients may face. Literature shows positive outcomes associated with the use of art therapy in treating mental health conditions and challenges associated with Autism Spectrum Disorder. This qualitative study addressed the perceived benefits of therapeutic art by parents of students at Awakening Minds Art in Findlay, Ohio. The study showed promising results supporting the researcher's hypothesis that at least 75% of parents would claim therapeutic art has shown positive outcomes. Parents were administered a survey and asked to attend a focus group to discuss the impact of therapeutic art on the behavior, mood, and social and tactile skill development of their children. Participation in this study was voluntary and no compensation was provided.

## Background Information

Art therapy is used alone and concurrently with other therapies to treat an array of conditions and to promote the development of skills typically unrelated to art elements and principles. In this light, utilizing art as a vehicle, Awakening Minds Art works with students of all ages and abilities to achieve non-art related goals that aid in their success outside of the studio. Therapeutic art at AMA is used to treat developmental disorders, such as autism, as well as behavioral and mood disorders. Goals addressed by this therapeutic program include the development of mood and behavioral regulation, social and motor skill-building, the ability to follow directions, and confidence building. Although not staffed with licensed art therapists, Awakening Minds Art's therapeutic instructors work with students to meet these goals through personalized plans, often incorporating the student's academic IEP, and regular evaluations.

## Purpose of Study

Students with developmental disabilities and mood and behavioral dysregulation have unique needs that often require therapeutic intervention, such as occupational therapy, speech therapy, counseling, and art therapy. To accommodate this demand, Awakening Minds Art offers personalized one-on-one therapeutic classes with explicit goals set forth by the parents and instructor. The purpose of this study was to identify the effectiveness of art with therapeutic intentions in meeting these goals at Awakening Minds Art as reported by parents. This researcher hopes to further support and contribute to existing literature, as well as to improve the therapeutic art program at AMA.

## Hypothesis

Through this study, the researcher aimed to explore parents' goals for their children and expectations for the outcome of AMA's therapeutic intervention, in relation to the experience they've had since beginning classes. This researcher hypothesized there would be an overall positive response from parents, indicating their children were meeting goals and AMA was meeting expectations, with a minimum of 75% reporting positive outcomes related to therapeutic art after a minimum of two months of classes.

## Methodology

This researcher utilized questionnaires and a focus group for information gathering purposes. The questionnaire included some closed ended questions to elicit a clear and definite answer, followed by an open-ended question inviting the participant to explain; however, most of the questionnaire was open ended questions. The goal of this was to gather as much information as possible about observations and experiences had that would support or refute the hypothesis. Participants had the opportunity to complete the questionnaire on paper or via electronic form. There were three focus group dates and times scheduled, both on-site and virtually. The focus group followed the completion of the questionnaire with very similar, but just slightly different, questions that would evoke thoughts about their child's response to therapeutic art and would encourage discussion amongst the participants. The researcher acted as a mediator to direct conversation and provide clarity if there was any confusion in the group.

## Results

Participants:  
All participants in this study were parents of 1:1 therapeutic students of Awakening Minds Art. There were 6 participants in total, 4 of which participated in both the questionnaire and focus group. The information below describes the children of these parents.

3 male, 3 female  
Age range: 8-22, mean: 13, median: 12, mode: 8

Diagnoses: autism (3), ADHD & anxiety (1), Rett Syndrome (1), severe anxiety & depression (1)  
Age at diagnosis: 1.5-8 years, mean: 4.5, median: 3.75, mode: 3

Accommodations at school: IEP (4), 504 plan (1), waiver (1), speech therapy, cross-categorical classroom, one-on-one aide, resource room, special classes, extra test time

Other therapy utilized: medication, life skills classes, occupational therapy (4), speech therapy (2), equine therapy (2), counseling, play therapy, and therapeutic ice skating

Parent participants reported several reasons for enrolling their child in therapeutic art classes through Awakening Minds Art, in addition to the intent of utilizing the therapeutic benefits. These include the child's ability to get out of the house and participate, the friendliness of AMA's environment, their child's ability to express themselves through creativity, their child's interest in art, and the social benefit of using art.

Benefits of AMA's therapeutic classes include that it is an outlet for expression and creativity, it improves socialization and communication, it promotes self-regulation, it is flexible and can be adapted to challenge students, it teaches more than just art, and it gives students something concrete to visualize their success and to share with others. Parents also shared that there was not a waiting list for AMA as there was with other agencies, so they were able to begin and see results sooner.

There was a consensus by participants that therapeutic programming at Awakening Minds Art is effective for its intended purpose. All reported that they have noticed improvements in mood, behavior, and/or skill level since their child began classes with AMA. However, all participants also reported that they credit the combination of therapies utilized, rather than one therapy over another.

## Conclusion

Due to there being no participants whose children utilized only therapeutic programming at Awakening Minds, it is impossible to claim that therapeutic art classes alone are effective for mood, behavior, and skill development improvements. There is still a lot of research to be done to verify the effectiveness of art therapy, and variations of art and therapy, as a treatment for mental illness and development of social skills in individuals with ASD; however, there have been significant strides in the development of art therapy in the past several decades. There is great potential for the continued growth and expansion of art therapy in the field of mental health and across boundaries.

## Implications for Further Research

Less than 50% of expected participants are represented in the results of this study due to unforeseen circumstances. This researcher hopes to gather more information from parents of Awakening Minds' therapeutic programming students in the future to support the findings of this small-scale study.

To make the data collected from this research more measurable, it may be beneficial in the future to conduct a longitudinal study with new students and to develop an assessment tool to utilize throughout. Although the study would remain highly subjective through the perceptions of the parents, the utilization of the assessment tool would add some objectivity and allow for the researcher to compare results and look at trends.

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