



# Winning arts and minds

**The arts – in the form of music, drama, art and dance – are a lot more than something to do for fun: used therapeutically, they have a host of benefits, from improving wellbeing and self-esteem to even boosting job prospects. Report by Fiona McNeill**

**It's common for people to think** of pastimes such as painting, acting or playing the flute as 'the icing on the cake' – in other words, fun but not that important to everyday existence. But professionals who work with young people on the autism spectrum often hold the opposite view. Taking part in the arts, they say, is essential to wellbeing and a well-rounded life – and can even lead to better employment opportunities.

As Dr Steve Grant, a clinical psychologist and head of therapies at Bladon House School in Staffordshire, points out, there is a subtle difference between creative lessons and using the arts in a therapeutic sense. However, he says both can be extremely helpful in offering people with special educational needs the chance for play and self-expression.

"If someone is studying art or music, the focus may be on acquiring skills with the aim of sharing a finished piece of work with other people," he explains. "With arts therapies, the process is more important than an end product. Creativity is the tool for improving a young person's wellbeing and helping them to make sense of who they are."

## 'Sideways conversions'

The students at Bladon House – who have learning disabilities alongside other conditions, including autism – have access to music and drama therapy. "These offer a different way of engaging with our young people, with more scope for 'sideways conversations' while they're focused on something else," Grant says. "For example, one student, a young lady with autism, has always composed her own lyrics. The music therapist has been using that to help her explore some of her concerns about life.

Grant explains that another autistic student, a young man with a traumatic past, created a womb-like structure out of boxes around himself during his drama therapy session. The therapist interpreted this as the boy expressing his difficulties with trusting people.

Over at Bladon's sister SENAD Group establishment, Alderwasley Hall School in Derbyshire, students

are offered a wide variety of creative lessons – from art, photography and music to textiles, animation and dance. Although staff try to steer children towards qualifications in these subjects, they find that simply taking part boosts the children's self-esteem.

"The lovely thing about the arts is that they're accessible to everyone," says Katy Brentnall, faculty head of Creative Arts at the school. "Children who are struggling in the main subjects can flourish and they can see instant results, just by picking up a paintbox or an instrument."

Students all follow an individualised pathway that the school creates with the support of the therapeutic team. This means that arts activities are planned around any sensory or health issues – for example, a child with fine motor difficulties might be encouraged to draw or paint to work on this. In addition, children are sometimes offered the chance to lead the other pupils in an activity, while regular performances and exhibitions give them the chance to share their developing skills with other people.

Creative pursuits of all kinds offer young people the chance to

**“The process is more important than an end product”**

'lose' themselves in the moment and forget their worries for a while, says Rachel Swanick. She is a creative arts practitioner with Chroma, an organisation that runs art, drama and music therapy sessions in schools and healthcare settings across the UK. Many of the children that Chroma works with have special needs, including autism.

"Drama therapy is good for grounding in the body and mirroring other people's actions, which helps empathy," she explains, "and story-telling is a way of processing events.

"Music therapy connects the two hemispheres of the brain, which helps memory, co-ordination and emotions. Playing with others >>

## Education

encourages turn-taking and co-operation."

Swanick, who is working towards a PhD, says art therapy is useful for developing abstract thought and the use of symbolism and metaphor to describe experiences. She gives the example of one autistic boy she worked with who struggled to connect with people. After many months, he one day invited her to sit next to him. In a subsequent session, he asked her to draw a house next to his drawing of a house, which may have signified his growing trust in her.

She points out that creativity can also be found in everyday activities. "Kids can play with Lego, dig the garden or do baking with mum. It teaches problem-solving and emotional resilience – they learn, 'I can fail but I can pick myself up and carry on'. They also create something tangible, which increases their self-confidence."

Oliver Sanchez-Gameys is a drama lecturer at Beechwood College, a post-16 provision in South Wales for young people on the autism spectrum. Growing up



an anxious young man, he developed self-confidence through acting and music – a benefit he is now keen to pass on to his students.

"Drama lessons are a safe space for them to express themselves," he explains. "It's different to a normal classroom. There are no mistakes and the kids can even swear if they like. We do a lot of work on emotional

**I got rhythm: children playing percussion instruments in a Chroma music therapy session**

recognition using role play. If a young person says they're angry, for example, we firstly explain that it's normal to be angry at times, then the group might act out what this looks like in terms of facial expressions and body language. We might also discuss situations that make them angry."

Sanchez-Gameys points out that the college aims to nudge all students towards paid or voluntary work once they leave. For autistic youngsters who may struggle with social relationships, he says, drama can develop an understanding of teamwork and co-operation that will help them in the workplace.

"Our students have a broad range of challenges, but I absolutely believe all of them >>

**“Children who are struggling in the main subjects can flourish and they can see instant results”**

### 'Without the arts we would have no way of expressing ourselves'



London-based charity Movement Works has been running dance workshops for young people, professionals and parents for ten years, with a special emphasis on working with young people with special educational needs, including autism.

Ali Golding (pictured), the charity's founder and a professional dancer and choreographer, has an MSc in Dance

Science. She is passionate about the role movement plays in children's emotional and intellectual development. In fact, she believes creative activities are an essential part of a fulfilling life. "Without the arts we would have no way of expressing ourselves or understanding someone else's perspective," she says. "It's a way of communicating without needing to explain in words."

Golding recommends a new book, *Art as a Language for Autism: Building Effective Therapeutic Relationships with Children and Adolescents*, by her colleague Jane Ferris Richardson, published by Routledge at £29.99/\$31.96 (pictured right).

She says: "Written with decades of hands-on, clinical experience and a rich, in-depth, academic knowledge of art and play-based therapeutic practice, Jane's work is truly ground-breaking and offers inspiring pathways to follow and discover the potential within each unique child."



One of the chapters features American teacher and musician Jennifer Damian, whose autistic son, Kai, was transformed by Autism Movement Therapy (a programme that is also offered by Movement Works).

"Kai had a lot of sensory issues. He was non-verbal and would run around and slam himself into walls in order to stop running," Damian says. "He had a lot of tics and would spin round or flap his hands most of the time. Practising AMT in a controlled setting with other children, he became calmer and, after a time, the flapping and spinning stopped."

Kai also found comfort in drawing and painting, she says, and had talent in this area. Now aged 20 and fully verbal, he is putting this to use, studying video game design at university.

Damian recommends parents have art materials available at home to give children the opportunity to express themselves visually if this is an area that interests them.

### 'I was completely starstruck!' Hollyoaks comes to college



Derwen College in Shropshire, where nearly half the students are autistic, has a tradition of encouraging creative pursuits. But when staff noticed that the youngsters who studied performing arts were more likely to move into paid employment or voluntary work, they decided to increase their focus on dance, drama and music.

Jessie Vaughan, performing arts lead at Derwen, says these activities improve self-esteem, social skills and foster a sense of community, which spills over into greater employability. "One young man could barely communicate when he came to us, but his confidence improved so much that he eventually took the main role in one of our shows," she explains. "When he left us, he got a job in Tesco – I'm certain he wouldn't have been able to do that without his performance experience."

Vaughan is also in charge of the college's 'Learning for Life' programme, which uses music, art, dance and drama in a more therapeutic way to develop communication, teamwork, problem-solving and self-regulation.

Derwen is also building links with creative professionals in the world-at-large. Thrillingly, actor Gabriel Clark and writer Jaysree Patel from TV soap *Hollyoaks* visited the college in July, following a request from Derwen student Anna Redding. The pair gave an



Soap stars: Gabriel Clark and Jaysree Patel with students (top), and Gabriel does a routine with Amy Jude (above)

inspiring talk to the young performers, offering advice on finding employment in the entertainment industry.

Anna says: "I thought it would be interesting to meet a writer on *Hollyoaks* to hear their point of view. I was so pleased she came to see us and talked about how important it is to include storylines and actors with a range of disabilities. It was so exciting to meet Gabriel Clark, who plays Ollie Morgan. I was completely starstruck!"

Autistic fellow student Amy Jude, who has visual impairment, says: "Meeting Jaysree and Gabriel has made me want to go for it even more! I'm going to make a show reel to send to the show. I want to inspire people with disabilities to follow their dreams. Everyone has obstacles in their lives. We just have to overcome challenges and work hard until we achieve our dreams."



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