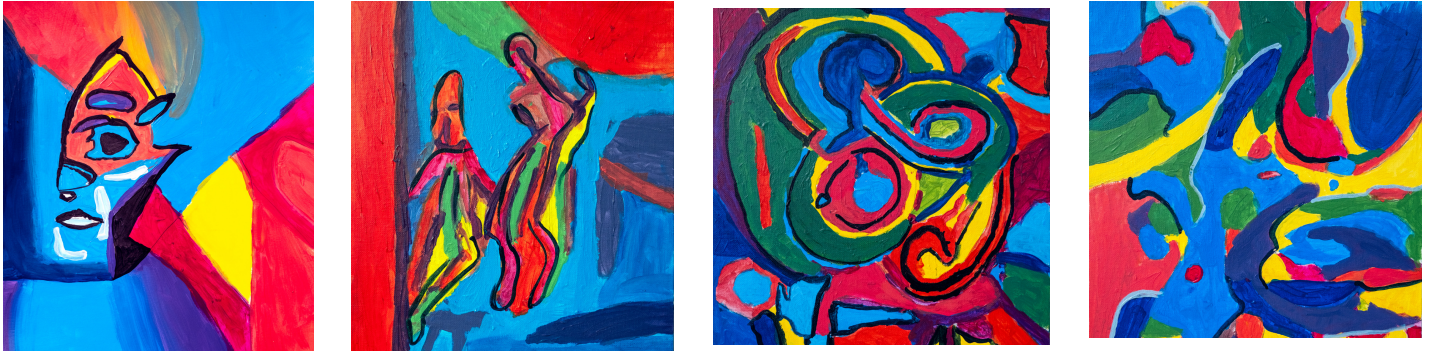


Understanding Creative Arts Therapies



A guide by | **Autism**ONTARIO



“This artwork was crafted by young artists at the SAAAC Autism Centre as part of our visual arts engagement and training program. With guidance from the program instructor, each artist experimented with various digital mock-ups to spark their creativity. The final artwork was meticulously hand-drawn and painted using acrylic paint.”



“These pieces were created by Yakonikulanestka Evangeline John (she/her) who is an On^yota’a:ka (Oneida) multi-disciplinary artist. Yakonikulanestka’s art has always been Indigenous-focused, bringing awareness to Indigenous issues, and giving positive representations of Indigenous Peoples through art. The first piece is of our grandmothers digging for the future, which is a representation of how we draw our hope and strength from them. The 2nd piece represents transformation and how our hope comes from within ourselves. These pieces each carry elements of Haudenosaunee stories, teachings, and ways of being.”

Introduction to Creative Arts Therapies:

What are Creative Arts Therapies, and why are they different from art as recreation?

*"Art can permeate the very deepest part of us, where no words exist"-
'The Girl Who Spoke with Pictures' by Eileen Miller (parent of an autistic youth)*

What are Creative Arts Therapies?

Creative arts therapies are becoming more popular in the autistic community. However, it's important to recognize and understand that creative art as a therapy and creative art as recreation, employment, or a hobby is very different. Art, by definition, is "the conscious use of skill and creative imagination."¹ Art can be produced in many forms, including writing, drawing, music, painting, acting, dancing, and crafting. Alternately, "creative art therapy combines the creative process and psychotherapy, to facilitate self-exploration and understanding."² Creative art therapists use creative processes such as imagery, colour, shape, rhythm, movement, melody, etc. to help their clients express thoughts and feelings that may be difficult for them to communicate verbally.² Creative art therapies include art therapy, dance/movement therapy, drama therapy, and music therapy.

What is the difference between Creative Arts Therapies and art as recreation?

The key difference between recreational creative arts versus creative art therapies is that creative art therapy uses the arts purposefully within a therapeutic relationship. In Canada, creative art therapists must complete a degree (often at a graduate level) and meet the certification requirements of their provincial and/or national association. In addition to this, most creative art therapists complete psychotherapy qualifications and register with the College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario (CRPO).³

Creative Arts Therapies for autistic people

Creative arts therapies are uniquely effective for autistic children, youth, and adults because they provide a different method of expressing oneself, that does not require verbal communication. Participants can use music, drama, visual arts, etc. to gain a different perspective about themselves, others, and the world around them.⁴ Art also creates a safe space where individuals can feel comfortable communicating in whatever form they find most natural, without worrying about social norms or expectations.^{5,6} Research shows that this type of intervention can be effective in targeting behavioural, cognitive, and mental health concerns in autistic children and youth.⁶

Art Therapy

“Art is the tool for communication, self-examination and healing” - Ontario Art Therapy Association

What is art therapy?

Visual art therapy uses imagery, colour, and shape to combine the creative process with psychotherapy. Art may be used to explore and express thoughts and feelings, and to support understanding.² It facilitates sensory experiences, focuses attention, and allows participants to share their experiences.⁷

How can art therapy support autistic children, youth, and adults?

Art therapy is uniquely able to support autistic people in the following ways:^{4,8}

- Drawing or painting allows children on the autism spectrum to express themselves and communicate indirectly.
- Art does not rely on verbal communication skills, but rather uses symbols (including colours and shapes) to express thoughts and ideas.
- Art therapy provides opportunities for sensory experiences related to sight and touch, as well as a flexible approach with no “right” or “wrong”.

Research has shown that art therapy can have a positive impact on both an individual’s skills and their emotional/psychological well-being. Here are some of the identified benefits:^{7,9,10}

- Improvements in social communication skills, including improvements in responsiveness and social reciprocity.
- May contribute to positive changes in behaviour.
- Supports reductions in symptoms of anxiety and depression.
- Allows for the expression of negative emotions, in a safe way, to improve overall mental health.



Art by Jathusan (Age 11)

How to access art therapy

In Canada, art therapists are trained and certified professionals with education in both fine arts and psychology. Only those with a graduate degree or diploma may advertise themselves as an Art Therapist. Additionally, to be a Registered Canadian Art Therapist (RCAT) in Ontario, the therapist must have completed additional training, been supervised for a minimum number of hours, and be involved in the art therapy community. They may also be registered with the College of Psychotherapists of Ontario.²

Places to look for a qualified art therapist:

- [Art Therapist Directory](#)
- [Ontario Art Therapy Association](#)

Note: To qualify as an eligible service under the new OAP - Core Clinical Services program, the art therapist must also be a registered social worker or psychotherapist, providing psychotherapy or counselling services.

Art Therapy Resources

- [Art Therapy for Children Brochure](#)
- [Art Therapy Activities for Autism](#)
- [15 Art Therapy Activities and Ideas for Kids](#)
- [Journey Through Art Therapy](#)- Introductory video

At-Home Art Activities

- [Draw Me In- Sesame Street Art Activities](#)
- [Arts and Crafts Projects to Build Skills for Kids with Autism](#)

Dance Movement Therapy

"It's okay to dance to your own beat" - Unknown

What is dance movement therapy?

Dance movement therapy (DMT) combines dance and movement in a therapeutic context. Dance and movement can serve as a diagnostic tool as well as a supportive intervention. The DMT approach combines psychotherapeutic approaches, psychology, sensorimotor and developmental movement, movement analysis, and neuroscience.¹¹

How can dance movement therapy support autistic children, youth, and adults?

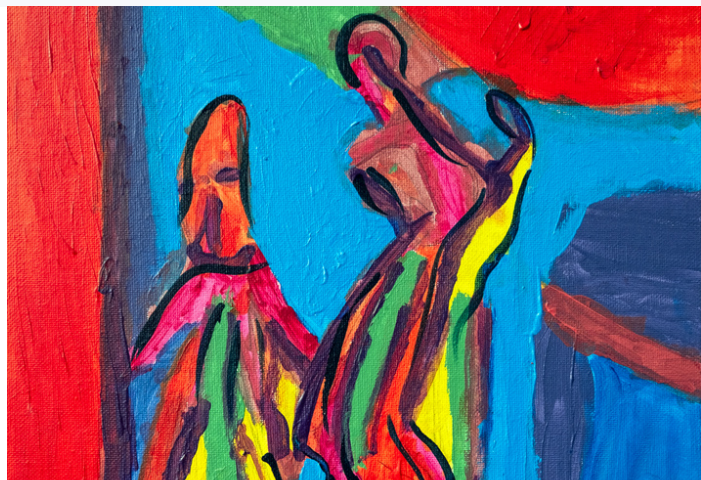
DMT is a relatively new treatment that may benefit autistic people in the following ways:¹²

- Creative dance has been shown to promote social interaction and communication skills by sharing ideas and physical space.
- Dance movement therapy teaches the importance of physical activity, including movement and fitness.
- Dance allows for the expression of feeling and emotion using rhythm and body positions.

Research on DMT is only just emerging, but recent studies have shown promising results for supporting the emotional and social well-being of autistic people.^{12,13,14,15}

Important aspects of dance movement therapy for autistic individuals may include:^{12,16}

- **Mirroring:** mirroring involves imitating the actions of another, as though looking in a mirror. Research has shown a strong relationship between mirroring activities and the development of social and communication skills.
- **Rhythm:** studies show that paying attention to the rhythm and timing of music and patterns during dance therapy can positively impact sensory and neurological processes related to social and communication skills.



Art by Ashok (Age 10)

How to access dance movement therapy

Dance movement therapists are members of the psychotherapy, counselling, or social work colleges in Ontario. Although the Dance Movement Therapy Association of Canada is developing a process for registering qualified therapists, currently, Canada does not have a regulatory body for dance therapists. However, dance therapists do adhere to the Codes of Ethics of the UK and American dance therapy associations (i.e., the American Dance Therapy Association and the Association for Dance Movement Psychotherapy UK).¹⁷ Only those who hold the title of psychotherapist in Ontario may advertise themselves as a dance movement therapist. Places to look for a qualified dance movement therapist:

- Dance Movement Therapy Ontario: [Find a therapist – DMTO](#)

Note: To qualify as an eligible service under the new OAP- Core Clinical Services program, the art therapist must also be a registered social worker or psychotherapist, providing psychotherapy or counselling services

Dance Movement Therapy Resources:

- [Dance Movement Therapy Ontario](#)
- [Dance Movement Therapy Association in Canada](#)
- [Dance Movement Therapy and Autism](#)

At-Home Dance Movement Activities

- [Dance/Movement Therapy for Autism- DMT Activities \(hes-extraordinary.com\)](#)

Drama Therapy

"The theatre is a reflection of life and a space where truth flourishes"- Centre for Creative Arts Therapy

What is drama therapy?

Drama therapy is the intentional use of performance activities including storytelling, role-playing, movement, dramatization, and improvisation to promote meaningful change and development.¹⁸ Through these actions, participants use empathy to project and embody various emotions and roles.¹⁹

How can drama therapy support autistic children, youth, and adults?

Research on drama therapy is limited; however, emerging results have shown various benefits for autistic people:^{18, 20, 21, 22}

- Some success has been shown with using behavioural strategies and theatrical techniques to focus on improving reciprocal social interaction in autistic youth.
- Drama therapy has been shown to promote emotional well-being and improvements in self-esteem.
- Drama therapy can also improve social skills and peer-to-peer communication.



Art by Zaara (Age 9)

How to access drama therapy

Registered Drama Therapists (RDT) must have a degree in Drama Therapy, or a related field, as well as complete an internship to apply to the North American Drama Therapy Association. Applicants must have expertise in dramatic, theatrical and performance media, as well as an understanding of psychotherapeutic processes. Registered Drama therapists combine the artistic aspects of drama therapy with psychological and mental health support.²⁵

In Ontario, drama therapy also falls into the category of psychotherapy, which is a protected title, regulated by the College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario (crpo.ca/).

Places to look for a qualified drama therapist:

- [Find a drama therapist: nadta.org](http://nadta.org)

Note: To qualify as an eligible service under the new OAP- Core Clinical Services program, the art therapist must also be a registered social worker or psychotherapist, providing psychotherapy or counselling services

Drama Therapy Resources

- North American Drama Therapy Association
- Drama Therapy- Autism Connect
- Drama Therapy Techniques, Activities, and Exercises

Music Therapy

"Where words fail, music speaks"- Hans Christian Andersen

What is music therapy?

Music therapy uses music purposefully to support development, health, and well-being.²⁶ The participant and therapist have a therapeutic relationship and work to support goals within cognitive, communicative, emotional, or spiritual domains. The rhythm of music can organize the sensory system, making it also helpful for sensory-motor, gross, and fine-motor goals.²⁷ Sessions may include listening, singing, playing instruments, or composing music, depending on the therapy goals.²⁸

How can music therapy support autistic children, youth, and adults?

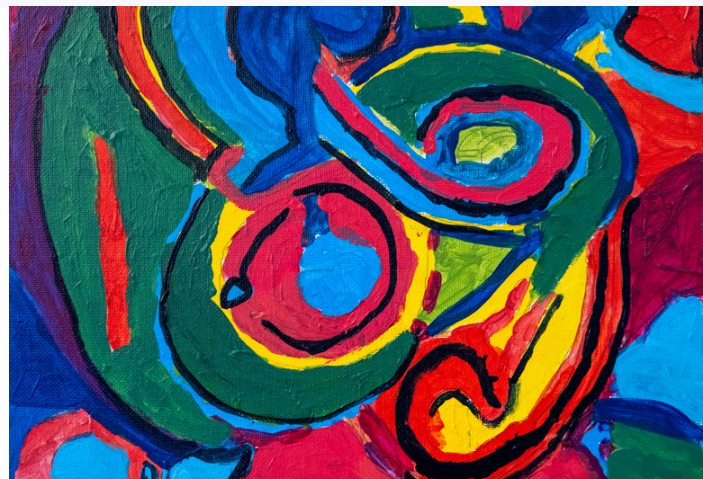
Research suggests that most autistic individuals respond positively to music, making it a unique and effective therapeutic tool.²⁷

Music therapy may support the development of the following skills:^{27, 29, 30}

- Social interaction and social adaptation skills; social-emotional reciprocity.
- Verbal and non-verbal communication.
- Initiating behaviour (including initiating joint attention, imitating engagement frequency, requesting behaviour).
- Reducing self-stimulatory behaviours.

Music therapy may also have these positive impacts:^{27, 28, 29, 31}

- Improvements in mental health, including decreased feelings of depression and anxiety and improved mood.
- Promotes the quality of familial relationships, including parent-child relationships.
- Promotes relaxation, learning, and self-expression.
- Changes in brain connectivity.



Art by Angel (Age 10)

How to access music therapy

In Canada, music therapists are accredited through the Canadian Association of Music Therapists after completing a Bachelor's or Graduate Certificate in music therapy and a supervised clinical internship.²⁶ Only those who have completed this educational and clinical training can advertise themselves as a music therapist (MTA) in Canada.³²

Places to look for a qualified music therapist:

- Music Therapy Association of Ontario: [Find a Therapist - MTAO Music Therapy Association of Ontario](https://www.musictherapyontario.com) ([musictherapyontario.com](https://www.musictherapyontario.com)).

Note: To qualify as an eligible service under the new OAP- Core Clinical Services program, the art therapist must also be a registered social worker or psychotherapist, providing psychotherapy or counselling services

Music Therapy Resources

- [How the Brain Responds to Music](#)
- [Music Therapy for Autism Spectrum Disorder- Video by McMaster University](#)

At-Home Music Activities

- [Calming Music Ideas](#)
- [Music and Autism: Music Ideas](#)

Indigenous Expressive Arts

"My people will sleep for 100 years, but when they awake, it will be the artists who give them their spirit back" - Louis Riel

What are Indigenous expressive arts?

While we recognize that “Indigenous” is a global term used to describe First Peoples around the world, this resource is specific to Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island (North America/Canada), and our use of the term will be referencing First Nations, Inuit, & Métis peoples

“Indigenous expressive Arts are rooted in spirit and ceremony.”³³ They are based on the theory that the land is a person’s “teacher, therapist, helper, and healer.”³³ Examples include land-based, storytelling, visual mediums (e.g., painting, photography, nature collage), dancing and performance (e.g., Powwow, poetry), drumming, and sensory experiential (e.g., smudging, making medicine bundles). It is important to note that the Indigenous expressive arts are “deeply interconnected with spiritual traditions” and emphasize the importance of respecting nature.³⁴

How can Indigenous expressive arts support autistic children, youth, and adults?

“Indigenous ancestors called upon these modalities for spiritual guidance in navigating complex situations and problems” and promoting healing.³³ For example, in drumming, the “spirit of the sound moves and impacts emotions and calls upon and engages with sacred ways of being, knowing, understanding, and healing.”³³

For non-Indigenous individuals practicing or accessing Indigenous expressive arts, it is important to work respectfully and collaboratively with Indigenous community members. Be sure to ask about protocols specific to the knowledge keepers you will be engaging with (i.e., many knowledge keepers require an offering of tobacco).

Indigenous expressive arts can include:^{35, 36, 37}

- Cultural practices (e.g., embroidery and storytelling)
- Traditional medicines and services from First Nations traditional healers
- Ecology-focused art therapy

Indigenous expressive arts may benefit children, youth, and adults in the following ways:^{35, 36, 37}

- Improvements in well-being and mood.
- Increased sense of safety and connection within their community.
- Supports self-esteem and a more positive self-concept.
- Increases self-awareness and understanding of one’s relationship with nature.
- Provide an important means of communication, different from verbal communication.



Art by Yakonikulanestka Evangeline John

How to access Indigenous expressive arts

Indigenous expressive arts therapists must acknowledge their social location and position of power and privilege when working with Indigenous communities.³⁴ They must understand and reflect on their own experiences and understand how the intersection between these experiences and the history of trauma and oppression within indigenous communities. Finding an appropriate and effective therapist may require looking outside the traditional mental health service communities and connecting with the Indigenous community in your area.

Indigenous Mental Health/Wellness Providers:

- [Health Through Love Art Therapy \(London\)](#).
- [Waabishka Miigwan \(Virtual/phone - province-wide\)](#).
- Local Friendship Centres across the province have mental health & well-being support that is free to access. They also would be able to support with resource coordination to support community members in locating services such as Indigenous counselors within the community.

Note: To qualify as an eligible service under the new OAP- Core Clinical Services program, the art therapist must also be a registered social worker or psychotherapist, providing psychotherapy or counselling services

At Home Indigenous Expressive Art Resources

- [Colouring Pages by Urbaniskew](#)
- [Positive Affirmation Rock](#) – Heal Through Love Art Therapy YouTube channel

Additional Resources

- [Special Forms of Occupational Therapy- Ontario Adult Autism Research and Support Network](#)
- [Ontario Expressive Arts Therapy Association - Ontario Expressive Arts Therapy Association \(oeata.ca\)](#)
- [Creative Arts Therapy- Sick Kids](#)
- Creative Arts Therapies Canada
 - [Creative Art Therapies overview](#)
 - [Organization database](#)
- [Enhancing Well-Being and Happiness for People on the Autism Spectrum Through Fine Arts- Autism Awareness Inc.](#)

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