

Colors of Expression – Project Proposal

Expressive Arts Workshop for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder & Their Parents

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects an individual's social communication and behavioral patterns (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In Hong Kong (HK), 1 in 621 children under age 15 are diagnosed with ASD (Leung, et al., 2023). Children with ASD often have difficulty understanding emotions and expressing themselves (Seltzer et al., 2003). Such deficits in communication may elevate parenting stress while lowering their perceived competence, which in turn decreases the quality and frequency of parent-child interaction, inhibiting the formation of positive parent-child relationships (Del Bianco et al., 2018). Hence, understanding this issue is crucial for facilitating support for children with ASD and their families.

1.2 Rationale

Although there are services provided to support children with ASD and their families in HK, they are more focused on symptom reduction and parent education (Liu et al., 2020; Yu & Zhu, 2018). On the other hand, improving the parent-child relationship of children with ASD is relatively less addressed in a local context. Since parent-child relationship is a crucial factor for the socioemotional and cognitive development of children with ASD (Frosch et al., 2019; Wang & Fletcher, 2016), our proposed project aims to enhance the relationship between children with ASD and their parents through expressive arts.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

The efficacy of expressive arts on our target population is evident from the literature. According to the transactional theory of child development, behavioral functioning can act as a predictor for the subsequent quality of the parent-child relationship (Hickey et al., 2020). Schweizer et al. (2019) has found that the sensory processing, emotional regulation and behavioral functioning of children with ASD can be improved through art, as it serves as an alternative medium for self-expression, while offering them a safe space to communicate through extensive sensory experiences produced from art materials. Therefore, a parent-child expressive arts workshop will likely achieve this goal.

Additionally, art-based clinical interventions such as the *Joint Painting Procedure* (i.e., a dyadic painting created by the parent and child on the same paper) are shown to have salient positive effects on parent-child relationship (Gavron & Mayseless, 2018). This dynamic process is expected to occur as long as parents and children engage in art activities together, with or without a therapist's involvement due to the intrinsic and non-judgemental nature of art-making (Armstrong & Ross, 2021). As a result, arts can serve as a means to enhance parent-child relationship, hence meeting the workshop's objective.

1.4 Added Values

This workshop focuses uniquely on the current service gap, enhancing the parent-child relationship in families of children with ASD. Unlike other expressive arts therapy services provided in HK, no therapist involvement is required. Participants can thus replicate the content of the workshop in their home environment from time to time, transferring the learned experience of connected art making to shared art activities at home, so that the positive effects of the workshop on parent-child relationship can be sustained.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

The target number of workshop participants will be 8 to 10 persons, composed of 4 to 5 parent-child pairs. In view of the increasing caregiving burden with children's age, this workshop aims to recruit children with ASD aged from 6 to 8 years old, so that healthy coping strategies can be introduced at an earlier developmental stage (Cadman et al. 2012). As the medium of the workshop is Cantonese, both children and parents must be able to speak and comprehend Cantonese. For exclusion criteria, children having comorbid ASD and language delay, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, intellectual or physical disabilities will be excluded; parents with a history of mental disorders will also be excluded.

2.2 Workshop Setting

This expressive arts workshop will take place on Saturdays or Sundays, serving as a parent-child activity for the participants during the weekend. All sessions will be held in the same venue.

2.3 Distribution of Manpower

There will be 2 group facilitators, and 5 family assistants respectively. Group facilitators will be responsible for leading the workshop, whereas each family assistant will be exclusively assigned to one parent-child pair, guiding them throughout the whole workshop, providing technical support to ensure a safe and non-judgemental art-making process.

2.4 Time Allocation

Each session will last for 2 hours, where the rundown for each session is as follows:

Duration	Activity	Purpose
10 minutes	Check-in	Allow participants to settle down
15 minutes	Warm-up	Introduction of topic & art materials
40 minutes	Art-making	Creating artwork under a theme
10 minutes	Sharing	Presentation of artwork
10 minutes	Check-out	Summary of the activities
5 minutes	Preview	Sneak peek of the next session

2.5 Session Plan

Each session of the workshop will have a distinct art form; listed below is the session outline:

Session No.	Art Form	Agenda	Materials
1	Portrait drawing	Exploration of self-image	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Drawing paper - Oil pastel (24 colors)
2	Mask decoration	Understanding the perspective of others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Paper mask - DIY materials - Oil pastel (24 colors)
3	Collage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Envisioning the future - Building family resilience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Family photo (self-prepared) - Colored cardboard - Oil pastel - DIY materials - Glue stick

4	Handcraft	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creating a “safe place” - Making memories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Small wooden box - Light clay (24 colors) - DIY materials
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2.6 Expected Outcome & Evaluation

A questionnaire with 30 self-reporting items on a 6-point Likert scale, inspired by the *Children-Parent Relationship Scale* (Driscoll & Pianta, 2011) will be provided to the participants, both before and after the workshop in order to measure the changes in parent-child relationship. Besides, a focus group interview will be conducted with the parents before the workshop for more insights about the dynamics in families of children with ASD. In similar fashion, a post-workshop interview will also be conducted after the conclusion of the workshop to gather the participants’ feedback for subsequent further evaluation. Upon explaining the purpose, data usage and potential risks of the project, informed consent will be obtained from the workshop participants. All data collected will be kept confidential through delinking the participants’ personal information in order to ensure their privacy. Based on the empirical evidence on the efficacy of expressive arts above, it is expected that the participants will experience a positive change in parent-child relationship after the workshop.

3. Potential Challenges & Solutions

3.1 Sensory Overload

Children with ASD often exhibit abnormal reactivity to sensory input and interests, with difficulties in filtering irrelevant distractors and regulating arousal/alertness levels (Klintwall et al., 2011; Teder-Sälejärvi et al., 2005). These can be addressed through cautious selection of a venue that offers moderate lighting, temperature, and noise levels to reduce excessive sensory stimuli (Kinnealey et al., 2012; McAllister & Sloan, 2016). Each child's special needs will also be enquired from their parents, so as to help them adapt to subsequent activities.

3.2 Communication Barriers

Children with ASD may struggle with processing and following verbal instructions, making it challenging for them to focus, comprehend conversations, or understand social cues

(Ibrahimagić et al., 2021). To overcome these obstacles, we aim to incorporate role-play demonstrations and visual aids to deliver instructions to increase attention and understanding, with the help of family assistants (Remington et al., 2019). Preview of transitions will also help anticipate changes and reduce anxious feelings for the children (Brewer et al., 2014).

3.3 Parents' Over-involvement

Some parents of children with ASD may display overly controlling or directive behavior due to their desire for predictability and routine, which they believe provides a sense of stability for their child (Jordan et al., 2020). They may also feel obligated to ensure that the child's artwork has a specific message, due to their desire for social acceptance and to protect them from criticism or exclusion (Crowell et al., 2019; Faja & Dawson, 2013). However, excessive parental involvement restricts children's liberty and creativity, possibly preventing them from discovering their own artistic expressions, hence prompting the need for a collaborative relationship between parents and the facilitators (Garbacz et al., 2022). By holding a pre-workshop briefing session specifically for parents, the value of individuality and self-expression in art can be presented to them, coupled with friendly reminders from the facilitators throughout the course of the workshop.

3.4 Participant Recruitment & Retention

Hectic schedules may often be a factor in the hesitation to commit time and energy towards additional extracurricular activities. Meanwhile, unforeseen circumstances may also lead to a decrease in continued involvement. It is thus crucial for clear communication, a supportive atmosphere, and consistently engagement with the target service users throughout the whole process. Last but not least, as a group of non-clinicians organizing the project, collaboration with professionals or established organizations specializing in services for children with ASD may also enhance the project's credibility and garner trust from service users.

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Appendix 1: Budget Plan

Item	Cost (HKD)	Remarks
Venue	\$3000	- 3-hour session x5 (pilot x1, official x4)
Materials & supplies	\$1000	- Drawing paper x10 - Oil pastel (24 colors) x10 - Paper mask x10 - Colored cardboard x10 - Small wooden box x10 - Light clay (24 colors) x10 - DIY material package x6 - Glue stick x6 - Wet tissue paper x6
Remuneration & giveaway	\$750	- \$100 cash coupon x5 - Moon lamp x5
	\$4750	Total Expenditure

Appendix 2: Working Schedule

Period	Content
January 2024	- Workshop promotion - Participant recruitment
February 2024	- Pilot session - Pre-workshop focus group interview (parents) - Pre-workshop briefing session (parents)
March 2024	4-session expressive arts workshop
April 2024	Post-workshop interview & evaluation

Appendix 3: Child-Parent Relationship Scale

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Closeness							
1.	I share an affectionate, warm relationship with my child.						
2.	If upset, my child will seek comfort from me.						
3.	My child values his/her relationship with me.						
4.	When I praise my child, he/she beams with pride.						
5.	My child spontaneously shares information about himself/herself.						
6.	It is easy to be in tune with what my child is feeling.						
7.	My child openly shares his/her feelings and experience with me.						
Conflict							
8.	My child and I always seem to be struggling with each other.						
9.	My child is uncomfortable with physical affection/touch with me.						
10.	My child easily becomes angry with me.						
11.	My child is resistant/remains angry after being disciplined.						
12.	Dealing with my child is draining.						
13.	When my child is in a bad mood, it will be a long and difficult day.						
14.	My child's feelings toward me can change suddenly/be unpredictable.						
15.	My child is sneaky/manipulative with me.						