



# Recovering Emotional Well-Being for Teens and Young Adults with ASD through Art Making

By Jackie M. Marquette, PhD



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**T**rent, a 33-year-old man with autism, walks quickly to his studio, with the sound of his shoes pounding the steps and the shuffling of a large duffle bag containing clean clothes to put on after the art session. It has been over a week, and he is determined to start painting as he meets me at his studio with a big smile. Reaching for the key, he opens the door, steps inside, and suddenly drops his bag in the center of the floor. Immediately, he reaches for a clean canvas leaning against the wall. Lori, his art facilitator, diverts his attention for the moment and engages him in making a checklist of choices on the paintings to work on, colors, the tools, and mixed-media items to use. Trent has limited verbal communication, yet he can express his thoughts and ideas by speaking single words, short phrases, and through writing. The checklist provides a structure that gives him a voice throughout the painting process.

Some of Trent's challenges in the painting process include measuring the right amounts of

gel mediums and acrylic paints. Lori's role is one of support as she sets up the painting products and guides him to pouring appropriate amounts, avoiding waste. Tonight he chooses to apply green and blue paint with large brush strokes to his fresh canvas. His eyes widen with each swoosh sound the brush makes. As he continues painting, his face softens and calms. When he finishes painting, the sounds of scissors cutting paper or of pulling apart dried gel medium mixed with acrylic paint, all tasks for gluing and placing on the canvas, seem to offer Trent deep sensory satisfaction. This process centers him into the moment, allowing him to leave behind the stress of the day.

The colors he chooses become his self-expression so that his paintings often reveal his feelings and emotions. Two years ago when Trent was asked to create a painting for his grandmother who would soon be entering a nursing home, he chose pink and white, her favorite colors. The combined brush strokes and textures provided a soft iridescent piece. On

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another occasion, he painted one canvas all black. It was one of his art facilitator's last sessions with Trent because she was getting married. He said, “Time for going home.” He then walked out of the studio, shutting the door. He clearly expressed—using spoken words, physical responses, and his own art—his disappointment of not having Elaine in the studio.

Overall, his paintings are abstract and expressionistic with blended swirls, shapes, sometimes up to 20 layers on one canvas. The top coats become luminescent, revealing many of the under coats of previous shades and brush strokes. Trent's approach to making art is all about process, just like living his everyday life through a routine and a structure that is safe and predictable.

Turner (2009) defines abstract art through the evaluation of Georgia O'Keefe's work. She notes, “To see abstraction not as a style or movement but as a method—call it a practice of perception within a dynamically new spatial arena” (p. 62). Therefore, Trent's ability to create is enhanced through a *process, a pattern of operating*, in which abstract art has become his specialty and gift. Although he has yet to show the ability or interest in drawing a flower, for instance, he is showing through abstract paintings with mixed-media the images that resemble the sky or a tree. Recently, we were amazed to see that one of his large canvases closely resembled a photo of a garden with purple and yellow flowers hanging in his studio.

The path that led Trent to the place he is today was not easy. After high school ended in 1998, there were few resources connecting him to a meaningful, active life. For 2 years, Trent responded to the inactivity by engaging in obsessive-compulsive behaviors that led him into a downward spiral, making it difficult to participate in simple outings such as grocery shopping. Because of my situation, recently separated from his dad, I was unsure about our future. Understanding the sweeping changes in his life was difficult for Trent because of his limited verbal communication.

*Previous page, top: Trent's Chicago art show Inspire Fine Art 2006.*

*This page, top: Trent with brother Todd, University of Louisville Painting. Bottom left to right: Trent in studio; Trent and Katie*



I interpreted his responses to these confusing events as an expression of fear. I believe Trent was suffering from an emotional hunger, and if he could fully express it, he would ask, “Who am I? Where do I belong? What is my part in my life? What's next for me?”

I felt lost and reached out for help. With a job coach, friends, and some family members, we brainstormed ideas to connect Trent to a life of his own. Eventually at the age of 23, through a state grant and HUD housing, we established community living for Trent. Trent rents the house he lives in from his uncle Craig, who also lives next door. Jason is Trent's paid live-in assistant and friend. Ten years ago when he was 24 years old, with a support team, we also established a part-time

(8 hours per week) job at a retail store – placing security tags on clothing. We negotiated that Trent and Jason would be “hired as a team,” so Trent would have Jason's support right on the job. Although this step was major progress, I realized a job was not enough to fill Trent's day.

In searching for other activities, I recalled how past teachers commented that Trent would have a good day when he got to do art or craft activities. I began the search for art classes; unfortunately, that led to a dead end, as these sessions were either for young children or for adults with higher painting skills. Seeking an artist to assist Trent in doing art or crafts, I placed an ad on the bulletin board in a local art store. The next day a university art student called and was interested in doing fun activities with him. Six months later, Trent began creating some extraordinary art pieces. That was 9 years ago, and since then, other facilitators have been involved. Trent has evolved in his art making techniques and process, has artist friends, and is self-employed in his own art business. He is a juried artist of the Kentucky Arts Council and travels to shows in our region of the United States. He has received awards at these prestigious shows and recently received the Derby Award In Kentucky, having his art placed in the First Lady's Office and then purchased by the





Garden of Flowers

Kentucky Arts Council. When I recall Trent as small child with all his outbursts and withdrawal, I realize I could have never dreamt this outcome.

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Since those days of obsession and isolation, Trent has developed:

- **autonomy** in staying with a task on his job until it is complete. He stocks shelves at a local retail store. Also with the support from his roommate, he chooses grocery and personal items for his home.
- **a sense of responsibility** in managing his clothes, doing household chores, and participating in his own art shows, helping put up his tent or exhibition booth, hanging his paintings.
- **a sense of self awareness and interpersonal/social skills.** Trent shakes hands with people who comment on his artwork and puts away his iPod to be included in the chat, even if he is just listening.

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- **a sense of choice making.** Trent is given options throughout his day. It is not the extent of his ability to make choices independently that is a priority, rather it is the supports by his live-in support person and others who offer options that enable Trent to make choices. He has adapted and understands there are times he cannot make a choice because of a specific uncontrollable situation.
- **a sense of control and endurance in challenging situations.** Trent has adapted “with supports” and has a “stay with it” attitude. Two examples highlight this: he has put up or taken down the exhibition tent in the rain; and 2) he sat in a dental chair for a couple of hours (teeth cleaning only, not cavity filling).

The value of resources and people who provide broad creative supports cannot be overstated. In combination, these enable youth with ASD to adapt and grow across all areas of living. Moreover, is it possible that the process of using resources and broad creative supports enable these youth to draw, play a musical instrument, sing, study facts of interest on a particular subject—such as computer skills—that actually impacts emotional growth, and increases capability and connections to others?

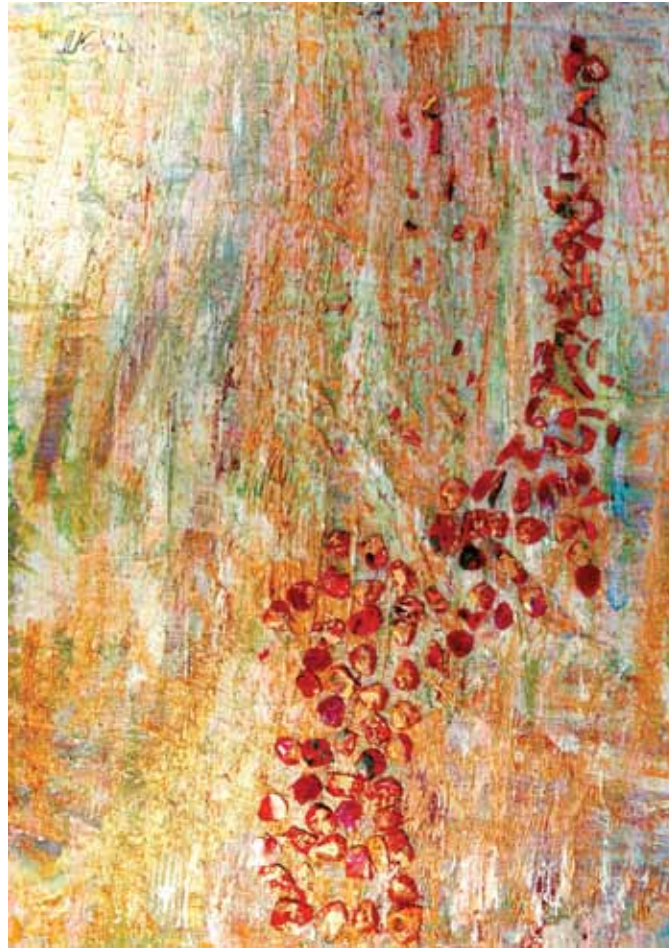
My own curiosity about art making and its impact on emotional well-being in youth with autism started my search. I wanted to examine what benefits, if any, occur for the individual who is involved in the act of creating. I asked the question, “What happens in terms of satisfaction to the person who makes his own art, explores interests, or engages in meaningful activities using talents? Do benefits of art making also pertain to people with autism?” Specifically, I looked at the impact of art making on a person’s self-expression, emotional well-being, and self-acceptance.

The expression theory holds that art communicates something in the realm of feelings and emotions (Freeland, 2001). Tolstoy believed the artist’s job was to

express and transmit his feelings through means of movements, lines, colors, and sounds. Langer noted that the word “feeling” must be taken here in its broadest sense, meaning everything that can be felt, from physical sensation, pain and comfort, excitement and repose, to the most complex emotions, intellectual tensions, or the steady feeling-tones of a conscious human life.

Freeland (2001) shares viewpoints by these theorists. She states that Tolstoy thought the artist had a feeling first and then illustrated it into a work (p. 161). Whereas, Collingwood argued that making art comes, in a sense, before having a feeling. To express the feeling in art is part of understanding the feeling (p. 161). Collingwood (1938) explained, “Until a man has expressed his emotion, he does not yet know what emotion it is” (p. 224). Making application here to youth with ASD, they need to engage in their own creativity in order to explore and discover what feelings they have, whether it is through playing an instrument, singing, or approaching the canvas. In other words, they need venues to express their own creativity that connects them to having emotions. Self-expression through painting extends beyond spoken words. Freeland offers Langer’s quote in Dayton (1998): “Sometimes our comprehension of a total experience is mediated by a metaphorical symbol because the experience is new, and language has words and phrases only for familiar notions... But the symbolic presentation of subjective reality within a painting is not only tentatively beyond the words we have; it is impossible in the essential frame of language” (p. 168). In other words, what cannot be said in words can be painted on the canvas, thereby allowing self-expression of emotions and ideas. Tony Attwood, a leader and researcher in autism, said at a Future Horizons Conference, “People with autism can create with full emotion in music or art that which they cannot show in relationships.”

Color conveys emotions and paying attention to shades and tones in a painting, for example, allows us to see the person’s feelings. I once assumed that bright, bold colors always revealed



*A Pebble Path*

“ I strongly believe that the most important task of parenting is giving your children a foundation of self-respect. Everything else – your happiness and theirs – flows from that. ”

happiness and joy, but not entirely. It turns out that Van Gogh used brilliant color in his painting at a time when he felt most rejected or ill. He also explained the emotion he felt through images in nature, “I almost think that these canvases will tell you what I cannot say in words, the health and restorative forces that I see in the countryside.” (Walther, 2004).

According to Cameron (1998), “making art is an act of connection, but it connects the artist to himself first and second to the world” (p. 178). Making art sets the artist free; it is the doorway to a larger, livelier, and more involved self. The consistent practice becomes the bridge between the self and the world. Van Gogh also said, “I have found in my work something which I can devote myself to heart and soul, and which inspires me and gives a meaning to life.”

Persons with autism who are living their lives through their own unique style of “making art” reflect Van Gogh’s view. First, a 20-year-old man with autism and his family sought assistance through my private practice, seeking to build a meaningful life after high school ended. Trevor (a pseudonym) had an interest in studying dinosaurs and a gift for drawing these ancient reptiles in exquisite detail. Through a strengths-based assessment, designed from my own research and interviews with Trevor and other family members, we discovered options, leading us to the possibility of starting his own business in Paleo Art. Today he is enthused making and selling dinosaur T-shirts, exhibiting his artwork in coffee shops, and pursuing markets in Paleo Art.

Secondly, as part of a larger research study on adults with autism, the findings on emotional stability and increased capability levels of 15 young adults were compelling (Marquette, 2007). Of the 15, 8 were considered high

functioning, and 7 had more significant autism, ranging from an IQ in the low 20s to 50 as reported by their parents. Through qualitative interviews with parents, all indicated a talent or interest that became useful and meaningful in their young adult’s life. Talents ranged from artistic gifts, athletic ability, humanitarian interests, strong memories, statistics, maps, history, or other topics. Two painted on large canvases; another had a part-time job playing the piano for nursing homes; two were excellent swimmers and won awards; one pursued bike riding and also joined a mountain hiking club. One had exceptional interests in graphics and building computer systems; another read and studied geography; another used his strong memory in sports statistics by volunteering in the media department at a state university; still another used math skills and worked at the IRS; another had a gift of making others feel good through his cheer and volunteered at a preschool setting up snack tables. Finally, a student at a Baptist college volunteered after hurricanes Ivan and Katrina and sought to become an officer with FEMA (a federal government agency). The parents unanimously stated that interests, strengths, and talents kept their young adult enthused, connected to others, and diminished the autism characteristics such as obsessive-compulsive disorders, self-



Victorious

abuse, low cognitive ability, depression, and social issues.

Based upon my personal and professional experience, here are tips from my book, *Becoming Remarkably Able*, that you can pursue with your teen or young adult with autism.

**1.** Notice your teen or young adult's strengths, regardless of the world's perception of their value. If pursuing an interest increases his or her self-expression, it serves well. For example, having an interest in labeling and studying insects may appear odd or useless, yet you cannot predict the deep satisfaction it provides the teen or the hobby or possible occupation in entomology.

**2.** Develop a perspective of balance with your son or daughter by acknowledging the challenges and providing supports that enable the process to identify, develop, and use interests and talents. Our youth are reminded all too often of the mistakes they make and the many corrections they receive from the world about their behavior in order to fit in social settings. Although therapies and treatments are needed, an over emphasis on correcting the wrongs send messages they are not good enough.

This jeopardizes self-acceptance and self-expression. Frustration is the result for everyone when there is strong focus on correcting behavior.

**3.** Recognize your son or daughter's need for broad creative supports; environments to discover strengths; technical assistance, such as checklists; structure to enhance the experience; and most importantly, draw people who will support and encourage your teen through areas of challenges, i.e., Trent's art facilitator.

**4.** Provide opportunities for your teen to explore strengths and interests because nothing else brings such clarity, structure, and self-expression. Never think your son or daughter is too old or too disabled to try something that appeals to them in some way. Paul Kahn (2004), an author with a disability, writing on disability rights suggests to parents of today, "I strongly believe that the most important task of parenting is giving your children a foundation of self-respect. Everything else – your happiness and theirs – flows from that."

Behind every brush stroke flows energy and this energy touches oneself

and others too. When we open a door for youth with autism to create in their preferred venue, this allows them to experience the passion in the act of living, where self-expression and emotional well-being emerges (Cameron, 1998).

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