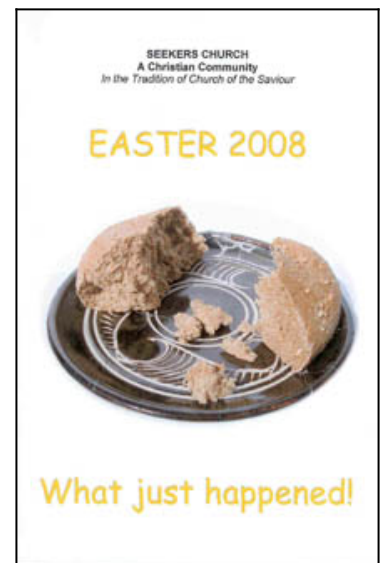


"Art for Autism" by Carmen Smith-Estrada

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Carmen Smith-Estrada, and classmates Philip M. and Cristina M. spoke to the community about their project which Seekers is helping to support.

As you know, the goal of our project is to expand outreach efforts to the local autism community. And you may be thinking "Why Autism?" Ten years ago autism was considered a rare disorder, diagnosed in 1 out of 10,000 children. Today, autism is diagnosed in 1 out of 150 children—a growing epidemic with no cure. Not many people are aware of that. Before researching, I had a vague idea of what autism was, but I associated autism with mental retardation, when in fact it's a different phenomenon. And contrary to popular belief, many children and adults with autism may make eye contact, show

affection, smile and laugh, and demonstrate other emotions, although in varying degrees. So one goal of our documentary is to dispel the myths about autism as a learning disorder.

When we were first developing the curriculum for this, we planned on having only autistic kids. But later we realized that we should bring normal children into the class. While autism affects each child differently, most children with autism do not learn by observing and imitating what they hear and see. Children with autism lack the ability that typical children have in learning how to communicate, behave and play. Therefore, they must "learn how to learn." So in our art workshop we plan on having five autistic children and then bringing in five normal kids as well, so that the autistic kids can learn a little from their behavior.

When we first came up with the curriculum for our two art workshops, we got really into it. We had read that autistic kids needed a highly structured, intensive education plan. We had every day planned down to the second. We had a Monet Day, and a Picasso Day. We were going to read aloud to the children for 10 minutes, then take them outside for 10 minutes, then bring them in and have them paint their own landscape interpretations. So we call up our friend Cathy, who has an autistic son, and ask her to review the curriculum. She takes one look at it and goes "No...It's way too structured."

And that's when we got our wake up call. There are so many elements of autism that we had to take into account, like the fact that the kids would already be overstimulated in a new environment and some kids might be more interested in exploring the classroom than sitting down to a painting. Cathy also told us that it would be important to find a group of

autistic kids who knew each other, because it can be very scary for an autistic child to be thrown into a new setting with a bunch of new people. We decided to have kids ages ten to 12, so that they're young enough to get into the projects but old enough to understand certain verbal cues. Another factor we hadn't considered was that the parents or therapists would probably need to be there for each workshop.

Although we may have assistance from a few teachers at the Silver Spring childcare center, we learned that this is not a "drop off your kid for several hours" kind of thing. We need the parents or therapists of the children to make the setting comfortable and to help us work around their kids' needs. Autism is a spectrum disorder. The symptoms and characteristics of autism can present themselves in a whole variety of combinations, from mild to severe. So, for example, one child may be attached to a certain object, while another child insists on sameness, drawing the same picture, using the same crayon. Traits may include physical over-activity or extreme under-activity. So what I'm trying to say is that two children, both with the same diagnosis, can act very differently from one another and have different skills.

With this in mind, we went over the curriculum and simplified it. Each workshop is still inspired by a certain artist. So we used Monet for his landscapes and Picasso for his paper collages. But instead of having the kids go outside on Monet day, which may be overwhelming, we'll have plants in the classroom for the children to draw. And then on Picasso day, we'll cut out the whole Picasso read aloud and have the kids and parents bring in pictures of their families to make their own collages that have a special meaning for them. At first we wanted this to be a whole elaborate collage project, with beads and glue and feathers and tissue paper. But we had to

trim down the project a little because we don't want anything to be too messy or over-stimulating for the autistic kids. We made sure that each child will have their own individual materials and their own workspace.

Another thing we had to come to terms with is that not every child is going to want to make a collage. Some autistic children prefer to be alone, or have trouble mixing with others. So we'll have a couple "quiet corners" with books and games as an alternate activity. And each child will have their own "art buddy", a member of the group to sit with them and work with them. The only way to make this the kind of structured environment that is needed for autistic kids is to have plenty of teachers and parents around who have experience with autism. Because, ultimately, no amount of research will prepare a group of high school kids to supervise autistic children by themselves.

And yes, as a group of 15 and 16 year olds who have never worked with autistic kids, this will be as much of a learning experience for us as it is for them. But we're trying to prepare ourselves as much as we can. We're interviewing parents and teachers who have experience with autism, and tomorrow we're going to the IvyMount school to observe a class of autistic kids.

We want to base our workshops off a very successful treatment program called the Denver model. The Denver model is basically a developmental approach to teaching autistic kids and it has two main focuses, one on intensive teaching and the other on developing the social skills that are so affected by autism. So there's a lot of emphasis on affective connection and relationship building between the child and teacher. Because

many of these kids already get intensive one-on-one teaching at home, we'll focus more on developing social skills. We liked the Denver model because it can be done in many settings since it focuses on inclusive settings, like a typical classroom group. In the inclusive classroom the child is a part of group activities, but his or her teaching is being carried out directly by an adult inside the group activity. So in our art workshops, each autistic child will be working within a group, but the activities will be tailored to the individual child.

We're also using the "Applied Behavior Analysis", or ABA model, which is used to reduce tantrums and communication problems. Many teachers in the ABA program use a method called Discrete Trial Teaching to teach kids with autism. This technique involves breaking down normal skills into small sub-skills and teaching each sub-skill, intensely, one at a time. So think of something that comes naturally to you, like painting a flower. For an autistic child who may be unresponsive to normal teaching and who have uneven motor skills, such a task could be a lot harder. We would break down the project into smaller lessons, like how to use the brush and how to dip it into the paint. And in teaching any skill you use positive reinforcement and repetition to insure the child's success. We've learned that this can't be a typical art class where you throw the kids some glue and feathers and say "make a collage". Everything has to be broken into smaller steps.

So now that I've told you way more than you need to know about Autism teaching methods let me update you on where we are in the project. So far, we've secured the building to be used for the art workshops, interviewed a few parents, and raised enough money for art supplies. But we still have quite a few

challenges. We're still trying to find a group of autistic kids of the appropriate age, who are comfortable with each other. And before starting the workshop we'll have to talk to each parent to find out as much as we can about their child. It is so important for us to identify how the child interacts socially and determine what situations are difficult for them. We want to avoid situations that are frightening, produce tantrums or crying, or make a child withdraw or want to escape, which can happen in a new setting with a bunch of people they don't know.<

Again, we're only talking about two art workshops, each one being an hour and a half. So we don't have any wild hopes about miraculously teaching these kids the social, play and language skills that take a lifetime to develop. We're not here to try and cure autism, but we are trying to give these kids an opportunity to use their imaginations in a group setting. Children with autism have a difficult time learning to play and socializing with their peers; play is not a trait which comes naturally to them. Our group wants to address this and do our part for the autism community.

Through a series of free art workshops, our goal is to provide a small group of autistic children with the opportunity to learn new skills and form meaningful friendships. After two extended art sessions, we will hold a small art show for the children and their parents to celebrate their creations.

Mission Statement: Art for Autism strives to create a haven for children with autism to be able to express themselves in a judgment-free environment. Through one-on-one art lessons that will guide each child step by step, we hope to raise their self-esteem and creative confidence.

About Us: Our group consists of nine students from Montgomery Blair High School's Communication Arts Program. Together, we were concerned that children, especially in public schools, needed more opportunities to develop their creative and artistic skills. We were even more concerned that special attention needed to be paid to students who have a more difficult time trying to fit in. Each member of our group has had experience either working with elementary-age children or with art.

The Art Show: We hope that by the end of our lessons, we will be able to display the children's art work in some sort of gallery setting. Family, friends, and members of the community will be welcome to come and enjoy the beautiful works of art created by the children. By showing off their hard work, made by their own two hands, the children will feel a sense of pride and accomplishment for what they did.