

## **“An Examination of the Impact of Integrative Arts Therapy on Preschoolers Diagnosed with Autism”**

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### **Description of Project:**

Pervasive developmental disorders, which consist of autism, Asperger Syndrome, and atypical autism, are estimated to afflict as one in 166 children. Autism in particular is believed to afflict one out of 100 youth, and is characterized by deficits across areas including language, communication, cognition, attention, behavior, and social interaction.

Considering that the prognosis for this disorder is poor, developing and testing interventions to improve functioning among children with pervasive developmental disorders such as autism is a crucial endeavor. One approach that shows much promise yet has not been subjected to empirical study is Integrative Arts Therapy (IAT). IAT was developed by the Arts For Healing organization, a non profit center in New Canaan, Connecticut, and is their standard treatment for children with pervasive developmental disorders. IAT incorporates experiences with music and art for the purpose of improving behavior, language, communication, and social connectedness.

This approach is based upon the premise that a creative process that uses music and visual art as a means of self-expression leads to changes in how an individual with developmental disabilities processes information. In essence, IAT is a method for using the arts to provide a new language of self discovery for children with special needs, which can help in teaching new concepts, enhancing self-awareness and self-confidence, and compensating for gaps in neurological development.

Given the dearth of empirical research evaluating the effectiveness of psychotherapeutic approaches for autism, examining the effectiveness of IAT as a treatment for children with special needs is of paramount importance. Accordingly, in collaboration with the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, Arts For Healing will begin this groundbreaking undertaking. Arts For Healing aims to achieve four major goals:

- 1) To demonstrate the effectiveness of IAT as a treatment for children with pervasive developmental disorders such as autism. It is expected that children treated with IAT will evidence improvements in some or all areas of functioning

- (i.e. behavior, social interaction, communication, attention, and language. We will assess functioning at 12 month intervals for children enrolled in the Arts For Healing program.
- 2) To compare the effectiveness of IAT as a treatment for children with pervasive developmental disorders with the effectiveness of Speech Therapy and Occupational Therapy alone. We will identify a comparison group of children to accomplish this goal and examine their progress at 12 month intervals.
  - 3) A secondary goal of this project is to broaden knowledge and use of this therapeutic approach to other programs and settings that serve children with pervasive developmental disorders, such as therapeutic and mainstream school settings. To accomplish this goal, we will develop a manuscript delineating the core components and application of IAT as a therapeutic approach. Through this endeavor, we hope to impact and improve the treatment of children with special needs across existing systems.
  - 4) Finally, although we will initially restrict our scope to preschool children, we hope to be able to suggest additional groups who may benefit from this approach, such as adolescents with pervasive developmental disorders, and children afflicted with other affective and behavioral disorders.

In closing, we believe that studying the effectiveness of IAT is vitally important for filling a gap in research, and hope that through this endeavor, we can improve the lives of many children with special needs.

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