

ArtAbility: Using Multi-genre Arts Programming to Support Creative Engagement and Social and Emotional Learning in Middle-School Students with Autism

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Abstract: *This paper describes ArtAbility, a multi-genre arts program for middle-school students with autism. The evaluation of program outcomes used behavioral checklists, interviews with program staff (including teaching artists, administrators, and neurotypical teen mentors), parent surveys, and interviews with participants. Findings indicate that the program positively impacted participants' creative engagement, as well as their social and emotional learning.*

ArtAbility is a collaborative arts education endeavor involving local arts organizations and a special education school in Montgomery County, Maryland. ArtAbility was launched 4 years ago with the aim of offering a multi-genre arts program for middle-school students with autism. Many individuals with autism struggle with significant social cognitive challenges, as well as difficulties engaging in pretend play (Sigman & Capps, 1997). We hypothesized that a multi-genre arts program would not only provide a rare opportunity for students with autism to experiment with a wide range of artistic genres—including drama, music, puppetry, visual arts, and movement—but also to develop social and emotional skills in the context of a safe and highly motivating learning environment.

Each summer, ArtAbility has served approximately 20 middle-school students with autism. The 3-week summer program is taught by a multi-disciplinary team of teaching artists. Instruction is also supported by special educators and behavior specialists and a group of approximately 10 neurotypical teen mentors.

During Year 3 of the ArtAbility program, we evaluated program outcomes via a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures. Our preliminary findings suggested that by the end of the 3-week program, participants demonstrated gains in creative engagement, as well as improved self-advocacy, social interactions/friendships, emotion regulation, flexibility, empathy/support for others, and self-confidence.

The purposes of this paper are to (a) review the literature on autism and arts-based education and provide a justification for why multi-genre arts education makes sense for this population given the social-cognitive challenges often associated with autism; (b) provide a detailed

description of ArtAbility; (c) summarize program evaluation findings from Year 3 of the program, and (d) share insights gleaned from administering the program for 3 years