Autism and the Arts
- Inspire
- Teach
- Grow

Hope and Help for Autism Families

Boost Creativity...
...And transform your child

Engage the Brain
Change a Life

Lift the Spirit
Discovering
- Art Museums
- Camps
- Therapies
Look around! It’s fall, and that means color, color everywhere. From the red and yellow hues of changing leaves to the golden autumn light, it’s impossible to lack artistic inspiration in this most vibrant time of year. Fortunately, some of the more creative holidays on the calendar fall in this delicious season, offering opportunities for children of all stripes to express themselves, learn a little something, and have a bunch of fun.

GET EVERYONE INVOLVED

Children on the autism spectrum receive all kinds of therapies depending on their level of involvement, and for some this means not only physical, occupational, or speech therapy, but also art therapy, which “uses the creative process of art making to improve and enhance the physical, mental and emotional well-being of individuals of all ages,” according to the American Art Therapy Association. They further claim that their practice can increase self-awareness, help people deal with stress and traumatic situations, enhance cognitive abilities, and foster a positive, happy environment.

For ASD kids, many of whom have trouble communicating verbally, art therapy might just be the thing. Whether by painting, drawing, or using a computer program to create digital art, this non-verbal mode of expression seems particularly well-suited for the autism community. In fact, a 2008 study published in the *Children & Schools* journal showed that art therapy helped children with autism improve social skills and resolve problem behaviors.

So much of art is sensory, and as the parent of any child on the spectrum knows, sensory overload or deprivation can send even the mildest of children into a tailspin. Art offers a chance for every kid to find a comfortable amount of stimulation, whether by kneading clay, finger painting, or watching a creation come alive on the screen.

Luckily, art therapy is not the kind of activity that can only be applied clinically. Parents, grandparents, caretakers, teachers, and siblings can provide their loved ones with autism the pleasure of a creative outlet in the home, at school, or anywhere the child is comfortable. And wouldn’t you know Halloween and Thanksgiving, holidays that practically beg for artistic expression, are right around the corner!

HINTS FOR A HAPPY HALLOWEEN

Halloween can scare off even the most mainstream child. Haunted houses, grotesque costumes, and groups of adolescents trolling the streets are all capable of making a person feel wary. While some kids on the autism spectrum might enjoy the exciting practice of trick-or-treating, others will be downright petrified of the break in routine, interacting with strangers, putting on a mask, and hearing the doorbell ring every 15 minutes.

The key is to prepare your child for what to expect on Halloween, and to make the experience as positive as possible. The website AutismSupport.org suggests exposing ASD kids to Halloween traditions early and often to help them better understand it, and so they will know what to expect in subsequent years.

Also of paramount importance is selecting the right costume—and I don’t mean whether to dress up as a witch or a construction worker. Children with autism can be sensitive to fabrics and uncomfortable clothing, and this physical discomfort can lead to behavior problems that will ruin the day for everyone. Rather than force them to wear a restrictive, unfamiliar, full-body costume, the Autism Support Network advises adding a silly hat to an otherwise...
Getting dressed up can be fun, and a great imaginative outlet, but it’s not for all special needs kids. AutismSupport.org recommends telling kids who prefer not to wear a costume that there’s nothing wrong with that decision. They can get involved in the fun of Halloween in other ways: decorating the yard or the house, painting pictures of a scene from a Halloween story, or handing out candy at the door.

For some kids on the autism spectrum, interacting with strangers is about as scary as it gets, to say nothing of the bizarre range of costumes trick-or-treaters are liable to wear. Keep the lights on outside so that your child can witness some truly stunning costumes, and perhaps recognize there is nothing to be afraid of.

Experts also suggest Halloween trial runs for kids with autism—taking them through the routine of going door-to-door, or answering the doorbell and interacting with people, a few days in advance so that when October 31st arrives they will know what to expect.

Once Halloween is over, seize the opportunity to create an art project with your ASD child—a collage, a diorama, or a drawing—detailing what the experience was like for them. You can reinforce the non-threatening nature of the day, and provide your loved one the chance to let go of some of the anxiety they might have felt, or are still feeling, and begin to prepare for next year!

**THANKSGIVING THERAPY**

As another autumn holiday can attest, artistic ability and creative thinking need not be expressed merely by traditional means like painting or drawing. Thanksgiving offers not only the chance for the entire family to come together, but to also use food and history as creative forces.

Children on the autism spectrum often receive occupational therapy to instruct them in various life skills, and cooking is no exception. Fortunately, it can also come in handy as a therapeutic outlet: who among us has not zoned out while chopping an onion, allowing the mind to wander and the day’s stresses to fall away? What’s more, devising a menu, shopping for ingredients, and assembling a meal on the plate are all collaborative, finite tasks that special needs kids can participate in, and feel good about completing.

Fortunately, Thanksgiving provides the perfect opportunity to combine creativity and function in the kitchen. As with any meal, selecting healthy, organic, whole foods specific to your child’s dietary needs is crucial. Infusing each dish with a dash of seasonal color can’t hurt either. Some of the most gorgeous vegetables are in season this time of year, like winter squash, broccoli, carrots, and various leafy greens. Remember, the act of eating is as visual as it is flavorful.

Though we tend to gather together on Thanksgiving for the purpose of indulging our taste buds, it’s also a great excuse to come up with a hands-on project for your kids. Chances are, most of them have learned all about the history of Thanksgiving in school, and while the older generation is busy assembling the table for the grand feast, the younger crew can put on a play reenacting the story of the pilgrims and the Native Americans. Put the oldest kids in charge, and make sure your child on the spectrum is included, whether by constructing a costume or with a part in the production. Feeling included in a group activity can do wonders for any child’s self-esteem, but can be particularly uplifting for a child accustomed to feeling left out.

**COLORFUL ALTERNATIVES**

The options for artistic expression in the fall are endless, whether they are holiday-related or not. Visit your favorite scenic spot to take in some foliage, and have your kids draw a picture of the surroundings. Collect leaves from the yard or from a park and make a collage of all the different, beautiful colors. Though the visual beauty of autumn is fleeting, its joys can make your entire family feel warm and fuzzy all winter long.

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**Healthy Seasonal Snack Ideas**

Some of my favorite vegetarian, gluten-free options for the season include holiday snacks. Try mixing goji berries with raw organic pistachios and you’ve got a little handful of healthy holiday cheer. Or make mini pecan pies with vegan cream cheese, organic pecans, organic maple syrup, sea salt and Earth Balance butter. Other fun snacks are organic empanadas made with organic cranberries, cinnamon, and sweet potato, with Bob’s Red Mill gluten free baking flour.

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**Toxin-Free Trick-or-Treating**

Make sure the costumes, makeup, and hair products all of your children use to enhance their Halloween style are free of the toxins that can make everyone sick, exacerbate allergies and cause other health concerns. Ingredients to avoid include: unhealthy plastics containing lead and PVCs, phthalates, parabens, aluminum, and artificial colors and fragrances. Opt for costumes made from natural fibers, or be even more sustainable and throw together an outfit from supplies you’ve already got in the house. Think outside the box, and encourage your kids to participate in the creative process.