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Self Regulation through Art and Chocolate

Abstract

Josh Banks provided the cover art for the spring 2015 issue of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy*. The cover art is titled “Birthday Party” because the piece resembles images involved in a birthday party: multi-colored balloons, napkins, cakes, and icing. Josh created the piece using oil crayons on watercolor paper. Josh is sensory seeking and has difficulty using various types of materials, which include crayons, street chalk, and markers. After much experimentation, Josh is able to use nibs, a type of marker that does not have a cap. Josh is able to sit for 5-10 minute periods and participate in his artistic endeavors. His normally bright and charming demeanor suddenly turns to one of concentration and focus on his work. He uses short, intense strokes in his artwork. Vicki, his mother, has noted seasonal undertones in some of Josh’s artwork and has named his pieces of art according to the season.

Keywords

occupation, sensory processing, sensory integration, attention, communication

Josh Banks provided the cover art for the spring 2015 issue of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy*. The cover art is titled “Birthday Party” because the piece resembles images involved in a birthday party: multi-colored balloons, napkins, cakes, and icing (Figure 1). Josh created the piece using oil crayons on watercolor paper.



Figure 1. “Birthday Party” by Josh Banks

Josh is sensory seeking and has difficulty using various types of materials, such as crayons, street chalk, and markers. After much experimentation, Josh is able to use nibs, a type of marker that does not have a cap. Josh can sit for 5-10 minute periods and participate in his artistic endeavors. While working, his normally bright and charming demeanor suddenly turns to one of concentration and focus. He uses short, intense

strokes in his artwork. Vicki, his mother, has noted seasonal undertones in some of Josh’s artwork and has named his pieces of art according to the season.

Josh’s Journey

The following comments are primarily from an interview with Josh’s mother, Vicki. According to Vicki, Josh’s presence and personality fill up a room. People who interact with Josh are quickly captivated by his charm. Josh is very affectionate, warm, and giving. He demonstrates these qualities to his family and to people with whom he interacts on a daily basis. These characteristics are demonstrated through his non-verbal communication. Josh has an incredible skill for understanding what is important to different people and shows his own different skills to different people. Those who have encountered Josh say that he “lights up a room with no words,” “has an incredible sense of humor, a very dry sense of humor,” and “capture(s) your heart without saying a word.” In addition to his art, Josh has multiple hobbies. He enjoys horseback riding, gymnastics, hiking, and riding his bike.

Josh is 28 years old and has been painting since the age of 15. Painting allows Josh to express himself, as he is non-verbal. Josh discovered art by serendipity. During a hurricane evacuation in his native Florida, Vicki packed markers in an attempt to have a variety of activities to occupy Josh during his interrupted routine. To her delight, Josh was able to use the markers, and they sustained his attention long enough to create meaningful markings on the paper.

Vicki played a pivotal role in continuing and creating the opportunity for Josh to embrace his

artistic nature fully. In 2007, Vicki secured a grant from an artist in Texas, professor Mari Omori, to create an exhibit at a museum in south Palm Beach County, FL. Once professor Omori saw Josh's work, she encouraged Vicki and Josh to complete 20 pieces of art for submission to an art exhibit. Josh was accepted into his first group art show at the Jupiter Community Center, in Jupiter, FL. The art show had an inclusionary nature because Josh's work was included with the work of typical artists. The following video shows Josh prior to his first art show <http://www.wpbf.com/health/Autistic-man-speaks-through-art/9521676>. Since 2007, Josh has displayed his art in many art exhibits; some of his pieces can be seen at <http://www.joshuasilverbanks.org/about-josh.html>. Josh now lives in a group home and participates in his outdoor activities on the weekends with his parents. In addition, he participates in a new program called the Chocolate Spectrum. A family-owned company, the Chocolate Spectrum employs individuals with developmental disabilities by providing training opportunities (more information can be seen at <http://www.thechocolatespectrum.com/home.html>). Josh volunteers one afternoon a week with three other people. This volunteer opportunity has provided him with structure and accountability, similar to having a traditional job. Vicki has noticed a blossoming effect in her son since he began the program. He is now able to wear hats, gloves, and aprons, which before he was not able to tolerate. A caregiver reports that Josh is able to wait for longer periods of time, and Vicki noticed that Josh washed his hands for a record 20 seconds.

Occupational Therapy and Autism

Josh's work has produced not only beautiful pieces of art, but also a therapeutic effect on him, which Vicki first witnessed during the hurricane evacuation. Art, for Josh, has a calming effect. Josh has a tremendous amount of energy. Vicki describes him as a "lightning bolt" who is constantly on the move. One of the few times Josh is able to sit still is when he is at his desk with a marker in hand creating his abstract artwork; he is able to do so with verbal cueing. Typically, larger pieces of art take two weeks to complete and smaller pieces take a few days. Vicki describes Josh's artistic process as channeling the sensory overload. The one-inch strokes Josh often uses with intense pressure are a representation of his sensory processing.

Josh was diagnosed with autism at 2 years of age. At that time, his nearly 40-word vocabulary diminished. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2015) estimates approximately 1 in 68 children have autism spectrum disorder (ASD), with nearly five times more males affected than females. ASD is an umbrella term that consists of children or adults diagnosed with autistic disorder, asperger's disorder, or pervasive developmental disorder-not otherwise specified (Watling, Tomchek, & LaVesser, 2005).

Occupational therapy has a pivotal role on an interdisciplinary health care team that provides services for individuals with ASD and their families. Children with ASD have highly unique characteristics and areas of deficits; therefore, interventions need to be highly specialized with respect to the individual, the activity, and the

environment (Watling et al., 2005). Children with ASD may have difficulty in the areas of communication, interaction, behavior, and learning (CDC, 2015).

Most children with autism also have sensory processing disorders (Case-Smith & Arbesman, 2008). The occupational therapist is an established member of the interdisciplinary team when working with children with ASD. There are numerous treatment approaches, and therapists often use several different approaches when creating a treatment plan for an individual. A study by Case-Smith and Arbesman (2008) identified six treatment approaches for children with autism from a systematic literature review. The six approaches include sensory integration and sensory-based interventions, relationship-based interactive interventions, developmental skill-based programs, social cognitive skill training, parent-directed or parent-mediated approaches, and intensive behavioral intervention.

One of many goals of the sensory integration approach is to improve adaptive responses by regulating a child's ability to modulate arousal (Case-Smith & Arbesman, 2008). Josh's engagement in painting appears to have a therapeutic effect on him. The ability to participate in proprioceptive experiences through stroking his markers effects Josh's ability to modulate; therefore, he is able to sit still for longer periods of time, as opposed to when he is engaging in other activities.

Sensory processing does not only affect the individual, but can impact functions and familial interactions. Bagby, Dickie, and Baranek (2012)

found that a child's sensory experiences affected "(1) what a family chose to do or not do; (2) how the family prepared; and (3) the extent to which experiences, meaning, and feelings were shared" (81). Josh enjoys consuming a variety of different foods and textures. A meaningful activity and tradition the family participates in is going to different restaurants of varying ethnicities when traveling to a new city. This meaningful activity would be greatly affected if Josh had aversions to certain textures or smells of food. In a study conducted by Schaff, Miller, Seawell, and O'Keefe (2003), a parent reported they were restricted in "their ability to participate in church, movie theater outings, or shopping activities together" (443) with their son who had difficulty with sensory modulation. A randomized control trial conducted on children with autism ages 4-8 years by Schaaf et al. (2014) found that children who received 30 occupational therapy sessions had significantly higher Goal Attainment Scales.

Conclusion

Art has allowed Josh the opportunity to express himself, as he is not able to in the traditional verbal sense. Vicki has been a strong advocate for Josh, paving opportunities for him throughout his life. She has encountered numerous people who have close relatives or friends with a disability. These encounters have provided continued support and encouragement for Vicki, Josh, and their family. Vicki has found it challenging to find opportunities for Josh to participate in such a variety of occupations. Occupational therapy can play a role in establishing the importance of participating in a variety of

meaningful occupations, while understanding the theory and therapeutic effect these interventions have on the individual. As Mary Reilly stated, “Man, through the use of his hands as they are

energized by mind and will, can influence the state of his own health” (2). Josh, with art and his improved sensory processing, has positively influenced his own health and well-being.

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