

Effective Therapies

MUSIC THERAPY FOR AUTISM

“Music is food for the soul” as an adage has already proven its point in so many forms and aspects of our lives that music undeniably becomes an invaluable part of our existence. The benefits of music apparently differ from one person to another, recognising our profound uniqueness and varying physical makeup. Some of us would listen to music to boost our productivity at work and studies, while many others turn to music to free themselves of doubts, fears, and worries caused by the harshness of life. It is also through music that many of us find some sense of belongingness, by realising that we share the same taste and preference with other people.

Those in the medical field, however, regard music as a promising tool that can help treat several neurologic disorders. It is not news that music has been used to improve our cognitive, physical, emotional, and social development but most of these past research are focused on observing the effects of music therapies in neurotypical individuals. With more new studies aimed at understanding how music affects the condition of people suffering from neurologic disorders such as autism, our perception of music therapy may even change to a greater and more positive manner. But what do health experts and medical research have to say about music therapy in autistic individuals? The following insights could be what you need to finally convince yourself and your loved ones that music helps treat autism-related symptoms.

Music Improves Communication Skills

For children with autism, at least a third of the total known cases have speech challenges, which makes it very hard for them to communicate their needs to others. What makes this situation worse is the fact that they can also have difficulties understanding other people’s articulations especially for children who have low-functioning autism. Many autistic children also have a hard time understanding how to react in social situations because they cannot effectively

read body language and other social cues.

A research article published by Catherine Y. Wan and her team entitled Auditory-Motor Mapping Training as an Intervention to Facilitate Speech Output in Non-Verbal Children With Autism: A Proof of Concept Study, showed that associating sounds to speech gestures can be greatly improved when music is introduced in the training for autistic children. When auditory-motor mapping training is repeated and successfully reinforced with music, there is a great chance that autistic kids will find it easier to trigger their speech responses when situations necessitate.

Music Stimulates Social Interaction

Encouraging autistic kids to engage more in social interactions can be a very tough task for parents and even therapists. But a study conducted by Kim, Wigram, and Gold in 2009 pointed out that music therapy is one of the more productive sessions for autistic children in terms of the level of social interaction. The research talks about the increase of emotional response that autistic children express when they are in music therapy as compared to other types of sessions. There is also a heightened degree of social engagement found in music therapy over other periods, even play sessions, which only means that music is indeed a powerful tool that improves social interactions.

There are many ways how music therapy can achieve an observable increase of social engagements in children with autism. For instance, the therapist can use a set of musical instruments as the medium for interpersonal exchanges, by letting the children try and pass them around. Games that involve connecting motions to sounds, and learning to sing basic and familiar songs can also be a fun and effective way to improve social interactions.

Music Improves Autism-Specific Behaviours

In a 2012 research paper published by University Saints Malaysia in the leadership of C M See, the overall behaviour of autistic children was seen to improve following a successive set of weekly music therapy sessions. Despite lasting only for an hour, such music therapy sessions showed positive results to the 41 children who've undergone the test for a period of over ten months. See

divided the 41 children into two groups based on their age, one group aged 2 to 10, while the other group aged 11 to 20. See and his team also developed a special behavioural checklist to be used in this research and introduced two types of music therapy sessions alternately. Behaviours of the children are then assessed at the end of each month through the checklist.

The overall results of the study indicated an improvement in the inattentive behaviour types in both groups of children, specifically on aggression, restlessness, noisiness and tantrum tendencies. More than half of each group showed one to two points of improvement in the behavioural scale which signified that the music therapies can possibly correct undesirable autism behaviours in ideal set ups.

Music Relieves Anxiety

Because of sensory sensitivity issues, autistic children are more vulnerable to anxiety attacks than their neurotypical peers which can pose more serious health risks and social adversities if not addressed quickly and effectively. For this specific topic, the University of Wisconsin La Crosse conducted a 4-week study in 2006 to identify if there's a positive relationship between music therapy and anxiety levels of autistic children. Using rhythmic music for their 20-minute sessions, subjected children were observed to exhibit lower levels of anxiety which led to improvement in their overall behaviour. Throughout the 16 music therapy sessions, the study also emphasised that the type of music which provided the most positive results is classical music, along with other genres that have a steady rhythm.

With these research findings trying to establish a positive connection between music therapy and autism condition, parents and intervention institutions are encouraged to introduce music to their programs and training for better results. However, it must be considered that not all children will respond positively to such therapy sessions and music in particular. There have been cases of ineffectiveness and regression because of certain underlying factors, so it is much better to know first whether the child is interested in music in general or not.

- FIDGET SPINNER

Fidget Spinners: Everything You Need to Know About the Newest Toy

Trend

Ease your nervousness. Control your patience. Calm your agitation. These are just some of the mentioned benefits of one of today's highly trending toys – fidget spinner. This remarkably simple yet revolutionary take on a stress-relieving object has gained popularity in the market today because of the said positive health effects it brings to users. Its appearance can be divided into two main components: an orbiter made from plastic, wood or metallic material and a bearing where the orbiter moves around. But what really is the mechanism behind the use of fidget spinners that makes the toy a potentially health-improving product today? How was this toy created or discovered? Will this trend last a couple of years or will it fade away without reaching a year's milestone? These are just some of the most common questions that people ask after having heard of fidget spinner and what it does.

The History of the Fidget Spinner

It may come as a total shock to you, but the fidget spinner is not something that has been introduced to the market from last year's or last month's innovative minds of big toy companies. The truth is that the fidget spinner has already existed since the summer of 1993 when Tulsa, Oklahoma native Catherine A. Hettinger decided that her autoimmune disorder Myasthenia Gravis won't be the thing that would stop her from playing with her daughter in that summer. Suffering from such autoimmune disorder, it became difficult for Catherine to pick up her daughter's toys and play with her so she managed to assemble together something made from taped newspaper and other objects. But her daughter was playing with the new toy on a different manner, and that's where she came up with the idea of repurposing and redesigning it. She was able to sell her upgraded versions on arts and crafts fairs all around the state of Florida, selling thousands of units. In May of the same year, Catherine applied patenting for her

spinner and was able to secure the same in 1997. Hasbro, a toy manufacturing company, was able to test Catherine's spinner design but forgone the production. Since Catherine herself is not financially stable enough to renewal fee of \$400 for her patent, she decided to surrender it in 2005. It was only later on that several manufacturers caught up with Catherine's invention, and started mass producing the spinners in a wide range of designs and shapes.

Health Effects of Fidget Spinners

Since its creation, there were already claims of the spinner's potential to help persons with autism and ADHD perform much better and develop more progressively from their condition. Fidgeting, along with other repetitive motions (Stims), is behavioural symptoms of these disorders which can be lessened and controlled by the fidget spinner, as many special needs institutions have reported. By using a fidget spinner, persons with autism can be able to focus more on the tasks at hand with the toy on the background occupying their need for sensory input. An interview by WTOP radio (103.5 FM), a Washington DC broadcasting station, with two occupation therapists, made it clear that the fidget spinner as a toy for kids with special needs is indeed helpful. Stephen Poss and Katherine Ross-Keller, as the interviewees, however, stressed that there still should be rules imposed by therapists and educators when it comes to the use of such toy. However, with the constant increase of the toy's popularity, the need for more extensive research and conclusive reports have not yet been met, and many people especially concerned parents are still left undecided whether or not to buy a fidget spinner for their kids or even for themselves.

Becoming the Trend

A feature article written by James Plafke for Forbes on December 23, 2016, has opened up the market to fidget spinner domination, branding the product as the "must-have office toy of 2017". It wasn't long before social media websites were bombarded with the hot topic of Fidget Spinners. Several YouTubers and Redditors started posting videos and reviews regarding the use of the spinner as well as some bonus tricks you can do out of the said toy. The Boston Globe claimed that the fidget spinner wasn't alone as it climbed from the unknown to

being mainstream, with its related product Fidget Cube also gaining the same momentum. E-commerce websites like Etsy and Amazon are filled with different models and designs of fidget spinners, even occupying most spots in the top selling toys. By spring, the toy has been officially called a new fad in many publications and fidget spinners are currently being sold at different prices, ranging from one dollar to a whopping £1,000 in physical stores and online shopping sites.

Why Fidget Spinners are Banned in Schools

Becoming popular majorly because of its posed health benefits that can help improve the condition of persons with ADHD and autism and many other health issues, fidget toys have been used by a majority of children and teenagers in most schools. The toy is said to help them achieve better focus in studies and school-related stuff. It was even reported that students started selling the said toys inside the campus thereby helping spread the fad much faster. Because there was too much concentration of the number of fidget spinners in schools, many educational institutions decided to ban the toy. Such conclusion was reached upon after recognising that many students are not really aware of the toy's usage in the context of increasing focus and productivity. Instead of using the toy to relieve stress and heighten their level of focus to other things, students end up focusing too much on the toy. In more specific reasons, school faculty stressed out that the toy's appearance is too distracting and playing the spinner also creates noise that doesn't really help much in a classroom setting or other environment for studying. Unlike those that are suffering from specific disorders that can really get some help from the fidget spinner, normal students can get little to no benefits from toys, making it more like a tool for fun rather than an aid.

- OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

One of the most debilitating effects of Autism Spectrum Disorder in many diagnosed individuals is the impairment of their executive functioning skills and other capabilities which are very important in many aspects of their daily living. Because of this impairment, many simple daily tasks that don't require other people's help may end up as difficult to accomplish by autistic individuals on their own. Their motor skills, emotional and psychological responses, and social awareness are also very likely to be affected, reducing their self-esteem and overall quality of life. For this reason, occupational therapy has become an invaluable treatment program to help autistic people achieve a normal life despite their condition.

Occupational therapy aims to help individuals with disabilities widen their range of capabilities so they can participate in more activities at home, school, in the workplace, and throughout the community. Those who are injured and incapacitated are also given the chance to recover from their injury and regain their skills. Persons who are experiencing cognitive and physical changes caused by old age and other conditions causing regression are also given the much-needed support through occupational therapy. In the case of autistic people, occupational therapy helps them improve many aspects of their life, in a series of assessment done by the therapist. Like other professions specialising in a specific area of expertise, an occupation therapist is required to pass a licensure exam before they can legally practice. Occupational therapists also work hand in hand with other specialists, like physical therapists, speech therapists, nurses, and social workers to improve the health care system.

Occupational Therapy Evaluation

Before an autistic individual undergoes the actual occupational therapy sessions, they must first be evaluated by the therapists through a series of standardised examinations. The therapist will ask the person to perform numerous daily tasks that are expected of their age, to see which part the person has difficulty completing alone. Aside from actual observation, the therapist can also set up to record the person's daily activities and see how they perform actions and interact

with their environment. These assessments will help determine the degree of the person's impairment and the appropriate therapy procedures to address their needs. The therapist will focus their findings in the following areas:

- Posture that the person is most comfortable
- Skills in holding and manipulating small objects
- Ability to maintain balance
- Play skills, either involving other children or performed alone
- Attention span to objects of interest
- Stamina to sustain activities

- Response when new activities are introduced
- Desire to have a personal space
- Reaction to different sources of sensory stimuli
- Autism-related behaviours
- Interaction between the autistic person and the parent or guardian

When sufficient data is gathered to conclude that the autistic individual is in need of occupational therapy treatment, the therapist will then come up with the ideal program design tailored to the person's needs. It isn't encouraged for therapists to apply a single program to all participants because every autistic person is unique in their own ways, and that includes their needs. The approach that proves to be the most effective is structuring each program based on the specific person's assessment. In individualising the program, the therapist can introduce a combination of several strategies, namely:

- Adaptive strategies, which focuses on improving the participant's response to changes and the introduction of a new element into their life. The participant is also taught with coping techniques while they undergo transition stages.
- Play activities, which will help improve the individual's skills in interacting with other people (especially for autistic children) and communicating with them.
- Physical activities, designed to enhance the autistic person's motor coordination, strength, sense of balance and spatial awareness.

- Developmental activities, which trains the participant to establish routines that help them become more independent as they grow, especially personal matters such as maintaining personal hygiene. This includes combing the hair, trimming fingernails, and brushing teeth.

Benefits of Occupational Therapy

Through the cooperation of parents, educators and other experts, the occupational therapist will provide the necessary avenue for the autistic individual to improve their quality of life. The therapy sessions will introduce new skills that the participants can make good use of, help them maintain both new and inherent skills, and possibly improve these skills to the best of the participant's abilities. Effective occupational therapy will lead the autistic individual to show signs of improvement in many aspects of their life which include:

- maintaining proper posture and positions while sitting and standing
- remembering and properly performing routine tasks such as fixing the bed, taking a shower, using the toilet, and grooming
- gross motor skills needed to perform actions that require limb coordination, such as running, climbing, and riding
- fine motor skills needed to perform smaller actions such as writing with a pen, tying the shoelaces, and using scissors
- problem-solving, reading, writing, and distinguishing shapes and colours
- social skills and communication

If these improvements are developed further and reinforced through continuous therapy sessions, there is a great possibility that the autistic person can finally achieve living a relatively normal life despite the disorder.

The effectiveness of the occupational therapy also depends on the willingness of the autistic individual participating in it. If you have an autistic child whom you plan to register for an occupational therapy program, it is encouraged that you first consult your child about your plan and tell them the importance of the therapy in changing their lives for the better. To ease any tension that your child might feel, you can make the therapy a rewarding experience for them by asking them what they want to do after every session.

Like other health care services, most school districts and public intervention program providers will perform the occupational therapy service for free. Your health insurance coverage may also take care of the total cost of the therapy or a portion of it, depending on the range of the coverage.

- PETS AND AUTISM

HOW PETS IMPROVE THE CONDITION OF AUTISTIC PERSONS

There's virtually no reason to contend the logic behind why people all over the world keep pets in their home and place of work. From cute and fuzzy fur balls to majestic and rare animals, we are naturally drawn into caretaking this variety of creatures in a list of good perceptions and positive outlook that anyone can easily come up with. Many of us find our pets very adorable that we decide to keep them on the spot, and such irresistibility is the main reason why we end up keeping cats, rabbits, hedgehogs, hamsters, and guinea pigs in our homes and offices. But more importantly, there are also instances when we think of our animal companions as the answer to some of our specific needs, which is why a lot of families opt to keep dogs, parrots, geese, and sometimes snakes to guard their homes in one way or another. But these special needs are not only limited to security and safety, and can also include emotional and psychological aspects as well. Through the years, researchers and medical experts have studied a wide range of human disorders and the effects of environmental variables in worsening or improving their condition. One of the more controversial topics of interest is autism spectrum disorder, and several reviews tend to establish a positive relationship between pets and autism.

If you already have a pet in your home, but you don't want them to be close to your autistic child, partner, or relative, you need to somehow change this mind-set and instead make way for both the pet and the autistic person to interact with each other from time to time. On the other hand, if you don't have any pet in your place, now's the right time to keep one especially if you or anyone in the household is diagnosed with autism. But when it comes to recognising the value of pets for purposes of aiding autism condition, there are still many factors to consider first before letting the autistic person mingle with your existing pet, deciding to buy one from a pet store, or asking one from your friends.

Reminders In Pet Keeping for Autistic Persons

It isn't wise to just directly choose any animal to keep as pet based on your own preference or that of the autistic person's because every pet has its own pros

and cons in a household setting. Health risks must be factored into the choice of pet, such as asthma, allergic reaction, and phobia. If the whole family is already tied up in certain things, keeping a pet might not be a good idea because they also have needs to be met, such as food, grooming, and attention which might get neglected. As much as possible, you must also determine whether the autistic family member has an interest in animals by letting them see one up close because forcing an autistic person to engage with things they don't like will not provide positive results.

What Pet to Keep?

Dogs and Cats

It is also crucial that you consider the outcome of the studies made on this specific topic. A research conducted by Gretchen Carlisle, a College of Veterinary Medicine fellow of the Centre for Human-Animal Interaction at the University of Missouri, has published some very useful observations regarding the benefits of pets to the conditions of autistic children. The test population was comprised of 70 families with autistic children aged between 8-18, where 70% of them owned dogs, and 50% owned cats. She found out that in general, children who have pets exhibited better social skills than those who don't, such as introducing themselves to others, inquiring people about something, and answering questions. Dog owners are also observed to be more socially active compared to other pet owners, which makes these canine companions one of the best, if not the best, type of pet to have. It must also be noted that among dog sizes, children prefer smaller dogs because bigger ones tend to be intimidating and not as adorable.

However, another crowd-funded research called Feline Friends from the same centre and institution, is emphasizing the impact of cats in aiding autistic individuals, with the theory that the calm and quiet nature of these feline friends and their therapeutic, soft coat, can provide certain positive effects that cannot be found from any other pets.

Other Pets

Aside from dogs and cats, researchers are also affirmative that other pets can

also provide the same benefits as to the aforementioned pet types. Arachnids, birds, fish, farm animals, and rodents can also be chosen for pet keeping depending on the preference and behaviour of the autistic individual and the family's knowledge in keeping the pet.

Benefits Provided by Pets

After knowing the type of pet to introduce to your autistic family member, it is only right that you delve into properly understanding how such pet can help the autistic person feel better. Among many things, the following points are the most convincing reasons why pets are great for autistic people.

Erases Feeling of Alienation

Autistic individuals can easily feel a sense of alienation because of their oddness from their neurotypical peers. With a pet on their side who also have its own needs and peculiarities, they will be able to share this uniqueness to their pet and understand that even unique creatures can love and be loved.

Helps in Socialising

Although autistic persons find it hard to communicate directly to other people around them, it is observed that they will respond and engage in conversations whenever their pet is the topic of interest. Even when there's a guest visiting in the house, or some strangers approaching in public places, as long as they ask questions regarding the pet, the autistic individual will almost have no trouble speaking with them.

Addresses Sensory Needs

Most autistic persons have sensory seeking symptoms, which make them crave for specific sensations. This may trigger autism tantrums when these cravings are not met. Touching their pets can help address their sensory cravings.

- PHYSICAL THERAPY

PHYSICAL THERAPY FOR AUTISTIC PEOPLE

Upon hearing the term Autism Spectrum Disorder, or simply autism, many people would immediately think about cognitive impairment and problems associated with communication and socialisation. What they don't know is that autistic individuals are also susceptible to physical irregularities which may include poor motor coordination, delays in response time, and lack of muscle strength. These physical conditions can adversely affect an autistic person's daily life by hindering the person from doing the things that they want to do or completing the tasks that can normally be accomplished even without other's help. When these issues are not immediately addressed, it results to lower self-confidence which ultimately affects other aspects of the autistic person's life, such as emotional and psychological stability.

Parents of autistic children are highly encouraged to sign up their kids to a physical therapy program because it is during this stage of an individual's development where physical disabilities can be rehabilitated and irregularities can still be corrected. Like many other autism early intervention services, a physical therapy program heavily relies on the capacity of the participant to apply what they have learned and adapted to these introduced changes. The strong point of physical therapy is that the training is performed through sports activities, gym classes, and other fun and enjoyable methods.

Physical Therapist

Like many other medical practitioners who specialise in a specific area of treatment, a physical therapist cannot possibly practice without successfully complying a set of requirements and standards. The least level of educational attainment that a physical therapist should obtain is a Master's Degree from an accredited institution that offers Physical Therapy education program after which they need to pass a national licensure examination. They also have to gain sufficient experience in the field by working as an intern in a certified health institution before they can finally practice. This is to ensure the quality of services that participants can get from a standard physical therapy program. Physical

therapists are taught and trained with the most specialised educational set up to become the leading provider of strength building, mobility enhancing, and motor skills refining programs for people in need. For autistic people, a physical therapist can help provide a lasting solution to many physical issues which cannot be addressed by other health specialists.

Understanding Physical Therapy

Physical problems related to autism are often detected when a baby becomes a toddler because it is in this stage of development where more complex motor skills are expected to develop. These issues range from simple muscle weakness to lack of coordination and sense of balance. An autistic child may have the desire to do a specific thing such as playing with a swing and has the necessary motor skills to accomplish it, like climbing the belt sit and holding on to the chain. But when it comes to the actual attempt, the child will most likely fail in getting the swing to move while in the right position because their muscle coordination is not spot on and motor planning is not carried out successfully. For these reasons, the parent may find it necessary to consult a physical therapist who would assess the child's physical condition and determine the necessary strategies and procedures in helping the kid become more physically able. The therapist can offer a wide range of therapy sessions, which include:

- Dance and Movement Therapy – This program utilizes the therapeutic effect of music and dance in the improvement of the participant's motion control and body coordination through the release of tension built up in the muscles.
- Aquatic Therapy – This includes all types of water-based treatment with the aim of rehabilitating lost or impaired physical functions, and improving other basic motor skills that are not fully utilised. The activities stimulate relaxation and fun while the participants are told to stay afloat, partially submerged, or fully submerged in the water.
- Hippotherapy – This type of therapy is most effective for autistic participants that are lacking spatial awareness and sense of balance. Hippotherapy introduces horseback riding as a means to obtain these physical skills, along with the improvement of coordination and strength.

- Recreational Therapy – This is also an ideal therapy type for children because it employs recreational activities in achieving the same goal. While most children hesitate to perform specific tasks or activities in therapy sessions because of the lack of interest and motivation, they will have fun while in a recreational therapy.

- Play Therapy – A type of intervention program that relies on the effectiveness of play sessions in opening up an autistic person's self to other people. Through play therapy, an autistic child can naturally share their thoughts and feelings to the therapist.

There are still more physical therapy programs for autistic children aside from the above-mentioned popular ones. It should be noted that the type of physical therapy to be performed will mostly depend on the therapist's assessment of the autistic person's physical condition and their willingness to participate. These services may not usually be covered by health insurance but they are proven to be effective in the treatment of autism-related issues.

Finding a Physical Therapist

Asking your child's school district and other early intervention program providers will most likely give you a positive response about the availability of physical therapy. There are also physical therapists in most hospitals and other health centres that you can find in your locality, but it's most likely that the therapist you'll find in these institutions does not specialize in autism-related problems. Most physical therapists will require the cooperation of parents in performing specific activities so the latter must always be open-minded and understanding about possible procedures and approaches that the therapist may propose to them. They may also collaborate with other types of therapists and health workers for a more convenient, reliable, and fast-paced service. The work of a physical therapist does not end inside the clinic. By following an hourly-based rate of service, the physical therapist has a more flexible schedule, which enables them to follow and observe the participant in other places of interest, such as in the school, or in the participant's home.

FUN AND BENEFICIAL SENSORY GAMES FOR AUTISTIC KIDS

There is nothing more important than knowing that your autistic child finds happiness despite their condition. Raising an autistic child is undeniably a challenge, but seeing smiles on their face will always bring that rewarding feeling and that great sense of parenthood. Like normal kids, autistic children love to play games, not just for the fun of it, but to quench their deep interest and fascination. However, the fact that they have special needs means that kids with autism may look at games quite differently compared to their non-autistic counterparts, mostly because of their motor issues and sensory problems.

Movement-intensive games can easily discourage autistic kids that have poor motor coordination and weak muscles. If your child is still undergoing physical or occupational therapy, it is not advisable to let them join in this type of games. On the other hand, games that stimulate sensory responses are good for your kid if they are sensory-seeking, otherwise, introduce games that minimise sensory inputs as much as possible. In the topic of sensory games, many autism communities have come up with highly enjoyable and beneficial setups that your child can play at home. The best part is, some of these games are DIY, which means you don't have to buy an expensive set of toys or tools for the game to work. You can create the necessary tools from scratch.

Multi-Coloured Beans

Autistic kids who are sensory deprived can get a lot of stimuli they need just from playing with beans that are multi-coloured, specifically for the sense of touch and sight. All you need is a handful of dried lima beans or any other variety of similar-sized beans, and a set of vibrant food colouring. In a container, put a cup of beans and follow it up with 15-20 drops of the food colouring of your choice. Cover the container with the lid, or seal it if you're using a plastic bag then shake it well for a good 10-30 seconds until you see the beans evenly coated with the food colouring. After that, get all the beans out of the container and straight into a paper towel to dry.

To increase your child's interest in playing with the beans, you can try multiple

batches of beans with different variants of food colouring, until you make a full rainbow set of coloured beans. The colour in the beans can last as long as three months or even more. If you are planning to introduce this game to your child, you need to make sure that they are way past the stage where they put everything into their mouth, because beans are classified as choking hazard for kids.

Layered Ice Tower Mine

This game is ideal for hot afternoons or summer days when children want to touch and feel something cold. The concept of the game is pretty simple, which is to free the trapped items inside a huge block of ice that stands like a tower made from a layer of multiple objects. Your child will be given the tools needed to extract the objects, which include salt, eyedropper, and paintbrush as if they're role-playing the work of an archaeologist.

To make the block of ice, you need to find a cylindrical container and freeze each object in different time frames. The first object should be submerged in just the right amount of water and frozen, after which more water is poured and the second object is put in place, and so on. The objects you can put may include candies, small toys, jewellery, and similar colourful stuff that will increase your child's interest in playing with the ice. Arrange the objects according to colour or your child's level of interest as you visualise how they would look like when they are frozen and the block of ice is made to stand. You would be surprised by just how much focus and effort your child will put into this game. What's great about this game is that you can call it a day after your child manages to extract one or two objects, and leave the rest of the ice tower for tomorrow, giving you more time to come up with new game ideas.

Slime and Polka Dots

Playing with slime is a fun and sensory-filled game for autistic kids. With the addition of pom-poms into the slime, your child will surely spend the rest of their play time stretching and squeezing the slime and the pom-poms inside it. It should be noted, however, that this game is not intended for children who are still mouthing.

To make the slime, gradually mix liquid starch into 10 ounces of clear glue in a container. Stir the mixture well until you make a thick slime that doesn't stick anymore to the sides of the container. Add in the pom-poms of your desired number into the slime and knead it until they are bonded together. Your child can play this game for weeks if you keep the slime in a sealed container after your child is finished playing with it.

Foam-Filled Bath Tub

Playing in a bathtub full of colourful foams will surely perk the interest of your autistic child especially if they are a fan of bubbles. Your child is free to add any toys or objects into the tub and make their own concept of the game.

To make the foam, all you need is a mixer, 2 tablespoons of dish soap, 1/4 cup of clear water, and a set of food colouring. To make multiple colours of foam, you have to make batches mixed with different food colouring. Pour in a bit of the water and the dish soap, as well as your chosen food colour. Choose the highest setting for the mixture for a more stiff foam. Repeat this process for different coloured batches and put all the foam into the tub for your children to play. Be there to supervise and to make sure that your kid will not ingest the foam or have it rubbed into the eyes.

- SOCIAL SKILLS THERAPY

SOCIAL SKILLS THERAPY FOR AUTISTIC PEOPLE

One of the more pronounced features of Autism Spectrum Disorder is the person's lack of social skills. Autistic people often find themselves having great difficulty in interacting with others and putting themselves in the middle of a social engagement. No matter how much they try, there are limits to what autistic persons can do, and most of the time, they will need the help of intervention services such as a social skills therapy in order to improve their interpersonal skills and build a relatively normal life.

Being socially awkward can lead to some serious life issues such as bullying or public ridicule that degrades a person's self-worth. When an autistic person feels more alienated because they don't have friends or due to the fact that only a very few people understand them, they will easily feel lost and discouraged. Without the presence and help of an experienced specialist, those who suffer from social withdrawal may not see the light at the end of the tunnel and will be forced to accept the way they are even though they are capable of so many things. A social skills therapist is there to help autistic persons build their basic social skills and provide solutions to more complex social issues.

Why Social Skills Therapy?

One can say that social skills are a naturally-acquired set of basic knowledge that is needed by everyone to interact and survive in this ever-challenging world.

Although social skills are not directly related to building and fostering relationships, they are needed in managing daily routine and in matters of self-preservation. Things like maintaining eye contact while talking to another person, using polite words such as "please", "sorry" or "thank you" and observing formalities when required, are just some of the basic social skills that a neurotypical person is expected to learn from simple observation. But for autistic individuals, these basic social skills can be hard to learn and understand, especially when there's a lack of guidance and education to reinforce these skills in their daily activities.

Social skills and communication skills are not interchangeable. You can't just say

that a socially aversive autistic person will not be able to communicate verbally. As a matter of fact, there are many cases of very verbal persons with high-functioning autism who can speak fluently to other people. The problem arises when the autistic person fails to read social cues and respond appropriately, which can make them offend the other person's feelings, disrespect their opinions, and ask them inappropriate questions. Through social skills therapy, autistic individuals are made more aware of their own need for social interaction and the importance of socialisation in improving their condition. Most importantly, they are trained to develop these social skills in a variety of therapy methods and activities.

How Does a Social Skills Therapist Work?

Unlike other types of therapists who need to follow specific standards and requirements to be able to practice, social skills therapists may have varying degrees and types of educational background and experience. This is mainly because social skills therapy is still a growing field of specialty that was born from the increasing demand for skill-based training for persons with disorders, including those with ASD. Hence, every social skill therapist existing today is working through their own standards and expertise, without directives from a common association or governing body.

The knowledge and expertise of social skills therapists may come from different sources and mechanisms. They could have read about published training materials written by well-known expert therapists and researchers and utilised these materials in developing their own practice concepts and techniques. It could also be that these therapists, who have a major background in other types of therapy programs, were able to learn more about the nature of autism from constantly interacting with autistic participants. This special experience may have paved the way for them to develop fundamentals about social skills therapy that they are now applying and constantly improving in their own practices.

Because of the lack of standardised approach or methodologies, every social skills therapist may employ their own style of training. They will design the program according to their own assessment and personal knowledge about

social problems associated with autism. In a school-based setup, for instance, it is common for social skills therapist to introduce group activities in the sessions where autistic students are mixed with their neurotypical peers. These activities can be done inside the classroom, in the playground, in the canteen, or any other area where external distractions are eliminated. These activities are generally composed of games, sports, and recreations that are designed to stimulate interaction, communication and social responses out from the fun and enjoyment. Other types of social skills therapy may not provide the same level of enjoyment, but can still be equally effective. Drama therapy, for instance, employs the use of theatrical elements in encouraging autistic individuals to channel their feelings into their scripts and roles in outlined situations. It will also build their empathy, as they try to figure out what their character must feel and behave in a given context. There are also video-based therapies where a specific video is shown to the participants, where the actor portrays a set of behaviour or skill. The viewers will then be asked to imitate what they saw in the video, or share what they have learned in the video.

Finding a Social Skills Therapist

Like physical therapy services, programs provided by a social skills therapist may usually be excluded from your health insurance coverage. And unlike other therapists working in autism-related issues, finding a social skills therapists can be very challenging due to the fact that there is no standard criteria or qualification given for a practitioner to become an official therapist in this field. Even school districts and early intervention providers do not cover the area of social skills therapy hence it's also least likely that they can refer you a therapist. But if you find more than one social skills therapist practicing in your area, it would be ideal to attend a session or two yourself, so you can assess whether that therapist can indeed address your child's needs.

- SPEECH THERAPY FOR AUTISM

SPEECH THERAPY FOR AUTISM

Individuals who fall under the autism spectrum have the tendency to become non-verbal because of issues related to speech. This makes it even harder for them to communicate their thoughts and needs to other people which may complicate into more health and social issues if not addressed the soonest possible time and through the most effective method. If you're a parent of an autistic kid, it would be ideal that you register your child for a speech therapy program as early as possible.

Autistic persons with speech difficulty have varying degrees of problems related to speaking. There are those who can only utter a single word or two in a specific situation where they meant more than what they said. If they say "watch", it could mean that they want to view a TV program or movie but you can't figure out what specific channel or movie title they would want to watch. There are also non-verbal autistic persons who can speak a complete phrase or sentence, but will likewise fail in communicating what they really want to say because they only reproduce articulations that they heard from media channels and the people around them to use as a calming tool when they get agitated. There are also those who can't speak any word but are able to communicate well through other means like writing or typing, sign languages, and other visual materials. This being said, speech therapy programs are designed to address different speech challenges manifested by autistic individuals. A speech therapist does not only limit the effectiveness of their program into one type of non-verbal autism case alone, knowing the fact that even highly verbal autistic persons also need speech therapy sessions to fully understand the use of language in communication. Speech therapy is commonly misinterpreted as training for people on how to correctly pronounce words and minimise stuttering, which is plainly undervaluing its scope of work. While these procedures can indeed be found in many speech therapy programs, such training only touches a portion of the whole concept of speech therapy. Because it is a wide-ranging field of expertise, speech therapists are required to earn a master's degree before they can finally start their practice.

They employ a variety of tools and strategies according to the individual's needs.

For sessions that involve autistic individuals, a speech therapist's areas of work include:

- **Improving Nonverbal Skills** – This training focuses on mastering non-verbal communication tools such as social gestures or body language, facial expressions, the use of picture exchange cards (PECS), and electronic devices that facilitate communication.
- **Improving Conversation Skills** – Things like starting a conversation and sustaining it, are likewise thought in a typical speech therapy program. The therapist and participant will simulate a real-life conversation and maintain a back-and-forth exchange of statements.
- **Improving Conceptual Skills** – It is very common to find an autistic person as very practical or straightforward. They usually find abstract concepts such as “success”, “freedom” and “equality” hard as tough topics to talk about. A speech therapists will also train the autistic participant to develop conceptual skills and improve the extent of their conversational effectiveness.
- **Building Speech Pragmatics** – As a fundamental aspect of speech, pragmatics emphasizes the need to understand context in conversation. Things such as observing speaking turns, decoding the meaning of the spoken words in a given context, and identifying implications of such words that are not explicitly given, are just some of the main focus in speech pragmatics training. This will help autistic individuals correctly analyse ambiguous statements and respond properly to such conversations.
- **Improving Social Skills** – Even very articulate autistic persons, like those with high function autism or diagnosed with Asperger's, find it hard to engage in social conversations due to the fear that they might appear awkward in front of other people because they cannot easily detect the dominant mood, or correctly make questions, or deliver answers. With the help of a speech therapist, the autistic person will be taught the ways to read the atmosphere of the conversation, and the proper positioning of oneself relative to the distance of the people they are talking to.

How to Avail Speech Therapy

Finding a speech therapy program in your area will not be that hard due to the fact that it is a very sought-after service in many countries. You can check your child's school district if they offer this kind of service, or any intervention service provider in your area. To make your search more convenient and accurate, you can try consulting your child's paediatrician or doctor and ask for referrals. These referrals will most likely lead you to private medical practitioners and clinics which are quite more expensive. However, the advantage in opting for such services is that these people are highly specialised in certain fields, and can cover many other autism-related issues that most school programs and intervention service providers do not cover.

It is also highly likely that your child's school district or a public intervention service provider will provide the whole therapy program for free which is ideal for parents that are not financially flexible. For those who would opt for private services, they can check their health insurance coverage and see if it covers such treatment service which is also very likely that it would, in most cases.

Going into speech therapy may be stressful for your part, but you must also think the same for your child. Both of you will have to allocate a portion of your time for the speech sessions, and while you observe the whole activity and monitor your child's progress, the latter is also trying their best in applying what they have learned through the whole process. Many speech therapists who are effective for non-verbal cases may not deliver the same results in dealing with verbal autistic participants, or vice versa. That is why it is vital that you find the appropriate kind of speech therapist for your child in order to not put all of your time, effort and money to waste.