

Dance/Movement Therapy & Autism



“Dance/movement therapy can serve both as a bridge for contact and provide a vehicle for communication with individuals with autism.”

Dance/movement therapy focuses on movement behavior as it emerges in the therapeutic relationship. Expressive, communicative, and adaptive behaviors are all considered in group, individual, and family treatment formats. Dance/movement therapists' unique facility for understanding, reflecting, and expanding nonverbal expressions can help those with autism to improve socialization and communication, build body awareness, and can directly affect motor deficits.

By utilizing a technique called “mirroring” that involves reflecting the autistic individual's body rhythms, movement patterns, and vocalizations, the dance/movement therapist can assist the individual in beginning the process of relationship formation. As more awareness of self develops, those with autism learn to become aware of other people. Recognizing and responding to another, increasing eye contact, participating in shared experiences and engaging in shared focus, breaking through isolation, decreasing the interpersonal distance that is part of the social isolation, and developing trust are all treatment goals in dance/movement therapy with individuals with autism.

As well as echoing the child on a movement level the dance/movement therapist will, from time to time, translate what the child is doing into simple language. Verbalizing the movement explorations in this way is another means of positively reflecting how the child appears, improving body image as well as helping the child to cognitively organize and structure his or her experiences. An increased integration of his or her own body parts and awareness of others expands the autistic individual's movement vocabulary, thus increasing their ability to communicate their needs and desires. The movement can serve both as a bridge for contact and provide a vehicle for communication between the dance/movement therapist and the individual with autism.

Dance/Movement Therapy & Autism Resources

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Torrance, J. (2003). Autism, aggression, and developing a therapeutic contract. *American Journal of Dance Therapy*, 25(2), 97-109.

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“Dance/movement therapy is the psychotherapeutic use of movement which furthers the emotional, cognitive, physical and social integration of the individual.”

—American Dance Therapy Association

**For additional DMT & Autism resources please visit www.adta.org