

Colouring outside the lines

By Sonia Mendes

When Sarah* registered her five-year-old daughter for drawing classes this year, she had a bit of an ulterior motive.

“My main objective was, of course, for her to have fun with it, but I was also looking to help her develop her fine motor skills and gain more confidence in her abilities,” Sarah explains.

Get creative!

Emily Sheehan, a part-time instructor with the Young Rembrandts program and an educational assistant with the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, offers a few ideas to engage kids in creative play:

- **Paper the walls:** Moving from a horizontal to a vertical surface can change the experience of drawing — try taping large sheets of paper along a wall and encourage little ones to get artsy.
- **Take it outside:** Set the kids up with a cup of water and some paint brushes and allow them to “paint” the bricks of the house or the sidewalk.
- **Chalk it up to fun:** Buy some large, colourful sidewalk chalk and let kids get creative on the driveway.
- **Bend the rules:** Art can come out of simple, everyday objects. Put out some straws and let kids twist and bend them to create something new.
- **Paint a daydream:** Encourage kids to tell you how they perceive things around them. Lie down in the grass and spend a few minutes watching the clouds — looking for shapes. Back inside, talk about what you saw and have kids duplicate their “cloud art” using paints or pencil crayons.

Her daughter, Emily, is on the autism spectrum — a psychologist diagnosed her with Pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) when she was three years old.

The PDD-NOS diagnosis is given to those with difficulties in social interaction, communication and/or stereotyped behaviour patterns or interests.

“We believe that Emily has a mild form of autism,” she says. “For her, it was more of the social part — she was not really engaging in play and wasn’t having conversations like other kids in her age group.”

Sarah also recalls Emily coming home frustrated from junior kindergarten because she couldn’t draw princesses as well as some of her classmates.

“I don’t ever want her to feel that what she’s doing is not good enough,” says Sarah.

So when she heard about the Young Rembrandts drawing classes (www.youngrembrandts.com/ottawa), she jumped on the idea, registering Emily and her younger sister at a class offered at Dovercourt Recreation Centre.

Sarah says the drawing sessions seem to be a hit with both children — and she has already noted improvements in Emily’s skills and outlook.

“Every time she comes back from her class she’s all excited,” says Sarah. “They’re learning to draw spatial objects — a pizza or a house, for example.”

Drawing something like a house teaches children how to make inferences, says Emily Sheehan, a part-time instructor with the Young Rembrandts program and an educational assistant with the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board.



Ottawa art program hones children's developmental skills through creative play, particularly for those on the autism spectrum

"This is an important aspect of procedural thinking, or learning to think in a sequence," says Sheehan.

Sheehan, who has worked with special needs kids for eight years, says an art program like Young Rembrandts teaches kids to develop their attention span, spatial awareness, perspective and fine motor skills.

"They learn to follow directions, to pace themselves and to wait for others to receive their next instructions," she says. "They also learn how to put things in context, such as what comes next when we're drawing a face; it's putting parts to a whole."

While these are developmental skills all children must develop, some can be particularly challenging for kids who fall on the autism spectrum.

"I once taught a 13-year-old girl with autism in one of my Young Rembrandts classes," Sheehan recalls. "She was very

Research supports art therapy

The Autism Canada Foundation promotes the concept of art therapy. Children on the autism spectrum tend to be more receptive to information that is experienced visually, as it does not rely primarily on words to communicate feelings and thoughts, according to the Foundation's website.

"This enables children to be heard on a new level of communication. Having fun and engaging in this experience can ultimately help regulate the senses, emotions and behaviours."

Visit www.autismcanada.org (look under the 'Treatments' tab and click 'Other Therapy') for art material suggestions and other online resources.

fixated on the time — she kept asking when the classes started and when they ended."

For some autistic children, Sheehan explains, there can be a lot of anxiety and nervousness about learning the routine of a new class. The program addresses this by laying out the lesson plan in the same way every week.

"If a parent tells me that their child has a challenge like autism, I'll take some extra steps to support them," she says.

Sheehan says it's often little things that can really make a difference for a child with autism. For her 13-year-old student, Sheehan reiterated the timeslot of the class — the start and end times — and wrote it on the board to help ease her anxiety.

Drawing and other creative play doesn't have to take the form of a formal class — you can engage kids in all sorts of activities at home, too. Sheehan — who worked with an Ottawa treatment centre called Emerging Minds — remembers one autistic little boy who responded beautifully to creative play.


"Matthew just loved anything tactile," says Sheehan, who began providing intensive therapy sessions when the boy was just two years old.

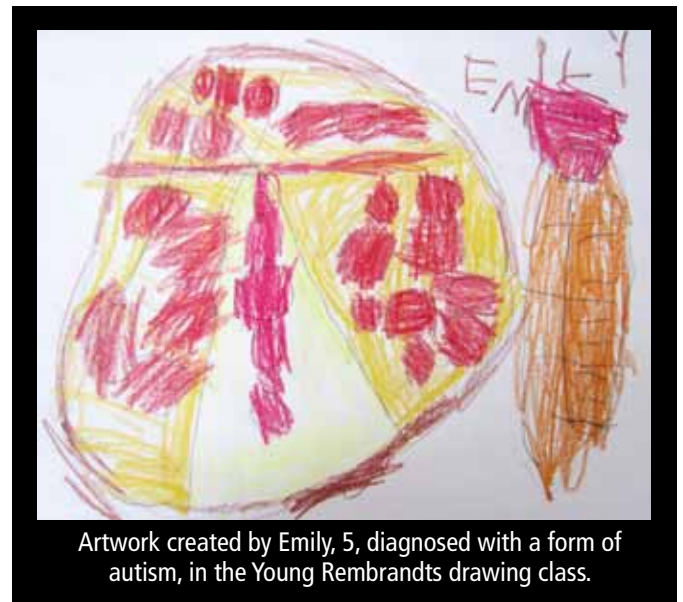
"His mom would put big pieces of paper up on the walls, to give him a different perspective for drawing. You could really see him getting into art projects — seeing the colours and feeling different textures."

Matthew would sometimes obsess about numbers, writing them over and over in the exact same sequence. Sheehan would sit with him and playfully add her own numbers all over the page, breaking his pattern.

"Eventually, he began to see that it was OK to break out of the box and do things differently — it helped him to push his boundaries and get more creative."

Young Rembrandts offers after-school classes in cooperation with both school boards, as well as weekend classes. For further information, contact program director Robin Dewe at 613-889-8531 or visit: www.youngrembrandts.com/Ottawa

**Name has been changed to protect the privacy of the source.* 



Artwork created by Emily, 5, diagnosed with a form of autism, in the Young Rembrandts drawing class.