

A BRIDGE TO THE MIND

Art provides a powerful means for your child to form connections between his world... and yours.

BY DEBRA HOSSEINI



KEVIN? OR GAUGUIN?—Part of Kevin Hosseini's journey toward the arts involved emulating artists he liked. But the exposure to different artists is enjoyable for the whole family.

Having autism is mentally, physically, and emotionally stressful, and those affected by it often can't express their anxiety and frustration verbally. Here is where art therapy can come in to provide your child with a visual format in which to express his feelings and, just as importantly, his creativity. Your child definitely doesn't have to be "convention-

ally" talented to benefit from art—in fact, he may well gain even more if creativity or graphic skills are a deficit for him.

Art therapy helps because it plays to the tendency among children with autism to be visual-spatial and sensory oriented. They're able to use art to explore their experiences, and the act of creating art helps in acquiring self-direction, industriousness, and patience: all important life skills. In young children with autism, it can help hone fine motor skills and also contribute to the development of social skills.

From the time my son Kevin was diagnosed with autism at age four, a revolving door of therapists came and went, each offering a skill or a part of

themselves that Kevin integrated into his own repertoire. Keith brought his dog, Bella, who accompanied them on long walks along the bluffs overlooking the Pacific. We called Bella the autistic dog, as she ran around in circles. I know if Bella had arms, she'd have been a flapper! Kevin has since painted three portraits of Bella.

ART ENHANCES SOCIAL COMMUNICATION With artwork serving as a bridge to knowing what is going on in his mind, a child with autism's communication with you, his siblings, and other family members or caregivers may improve. It's a strategy I've used to great effect with Kevin. When he was five, out of all the bright colors in the crayon box, he always picked the black one. Instead of holding it between his forefinger and thumb, he grasped it tightly in his right fist and scribbled black circles all over the paper. Because of his fine motor issues, his occupational therapist ordered special pencil grips to help him hold pencils correctly, and we concluded that art definitely wasn't his forte.

Then, when Kevin was nine, his therapist Colin noticed that he enjoyed watching others create art, so he introduced painting as a means of enhancing social communication. The first week Colin brought watercolors, and as Kevin painted, they talked about what he was creating. The next week, Colin brought acrylics, and in week three he brought oils. Right then, Kevin was hooked. He liked that the oils were messy, and enjoyed the sensation of the thick paint spreading across the canvas. He loved to squeeze the tube and watch the glob of color grow and spread on the palette. "Lots of texture," he'd say, jumping up and down—and soon we had a bucket of paint scrapings from his palette that he used to texturize his paintings.

EXPLOSION OF CREATIVITY Sometimes Kevin and Colin went outside on scavenger hunts for sticks and pieces of wood Kevin integrated into his paintings. Each painting became an

DEBRA HOSSEINI...



...is the author of *Artism: The Art of Autism* (available via www.artismtoday.com), and is the mother of three children. Her youngest, Kevin, is featured in the book, and also in this issue's *Mind's Eye* (page 3).

Debra now writes and curates art exhibits for people with autism and developmental disabilities. ◀

ART IMITATING LIFE—A big benefit of an artistic life is getting your budding Matisse off the couch and out into the world.

adventure—and it was beyond messy! We covered Kevin from head-to-toe in painter whites, put gloves on his hands, and covered the floor around the easel with sheets. Even so, globs of paint would end up on the walls and tiles, sometimes the furniture too. Oil paint isn't easy to remove, and we learned to live with lots of imperfections!

Colin brought art books to the sessions and he and Kevin discussed the pictures, and then Kevin would try to emulate the different styles. I'd go to thrift stores and bring home big books full of photographs and Kevin would scan the book for interesting things to paint. He would also search the Internet for things he liked (he painted a lot of trains, as that was one of his obsessions). It was during this time that Kevin painted what we referred to as Kevin Van Goghs, Kevin Matisse's, Kevin Gauguin's, and Kevin Picasso's.

When he was 11 and had been painting for a couple of years, we took him to see a Cézanne/Matisse exhibition at a museum in Los Angeles. He stood in front of a large Cézanne for many minutes, pretending he had a brush in his hands, trying to capture the brush strokes of the master from over a century before. He walked through the exhibit very quickly, and any time a painting caught his eye, he'd repeat this motion. After that we noticed he had integrated those styles and brush strokes into his paintings.

During adolescence Kevin experienced a regression, losing language and many of the abilities he'd gained over the years. At age 14, the only thing he would do on a regular basis was paint, and during this time he created 75 paintings: underwater scenes, cityscapes, landscapes, animals. At that time I was compiling my book *Artism: The Art of Autism*, and living in an artist's loft. Kevin's paintings filled the walls up to the high ceilings. One day, he walked in and, as if seeing what he had created for the first time, said, "Cool place, Mom! I like the art."

Now Kevin is 16 and has regained many of the skills he lost during early adolescence. He continues to paint, and

in April 2011, he had two paintings of Iran (a country he has visited) on display at a NeuroDiversity exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art of the Ukraine. He also has 55 paintings on regular display at the UCSB Koegel Autism Clinic in Santa Barbara.

We don't know what the future holds for Kevin, but he now talks of

being an artist for a living. Kevin enjoys the process of creating but has never been attached to the completed paintings. As you can imagine, I am! ◀



8 WAYS TO ENCOURAGE ART

- 1 Try different mediums: crayons, pastels, watercolors, acrylic, oil.
- 2 Make it fun—go on a scavenger hunt for materials in your own community so you can create a collage or model.
- 3 Visit museums and art galleries to engage your child's interest.
- 4 Check out art and photography books from your local library, or buy them second-hand.
- 5 Google pictures and photos of images your child likes to reproduce: trains, food, etc.
- 6 Put on music and have your child "paint" how it makes him feel.
- 7 Buy a cheap camera and have your child photograph what he'd like to paint.
- 8 Never force your child to create. It should be fun!

5 WAYS TO KEEP IT CLEAN!

- 1 Set aside a dedicated space where your child can create, to avoid messes all over the house.
- 2 Protect your child's surroundings with plastic shower curtains or old sheets (buy sheets second-hand at thrift stores).
- 3 Buy second-hand men's shirts at thrift stores to protect clothing.
- 4 Rubber gloves can be bought at hardware or drugstores.
- 5 Use nontoxic painters' soap (from hardware stores) to clean up afterwards.

5 WAYS TO ENCOURAGE COMMUNICATION

- 1 Invite other neighborhood children to participate in creating art.
- 2 Enroll your child in art classes.
- 3 Encourage your child to talk about what he is creating.
- 4 Encourage your child to initiate finding subjects to paint—learn about different places, animals, and architecture.
- 5 Talk to your child about different artists and art styles.

