

# Dance and movement as a therapy for autistic children

*The effects of dance on our body and mind are immense – from improving your heart rate, muscle strength, balance and coordination, reducing depression to instantly boosting one's mood, it does it all!*

Saanya Jain | New Delhi | June 26, 2019



(Representational Photo: Getty Images)

Oxford dictionary defines autism as “a developmental disorder of variable severity that is characterized by difficulty in social interaction and communication and by restricted or repetitive patterns of thought and behavior”. Dance as a stimulus can largely benefit and impact autistic individuals, especially children, with behavioural disorders.

Dance is one of the purest forms of self-expression, creativity and ingenuity. It can help one's exposure from the outer as well as the inner world and give them a sense of liberation. The feeling of peace between the inner and outer self is one which can be expressed freely by expressions, movements and unsaid communication with self and the audience. Mental stimulation and a feeling of freshness give newer dimensions to one's mind.

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The Centre for Disease Control states that one out of every 68 children has an autism diagnosis. The families of the autistic children spend huge amounts of money finding the best medical treatment for them. Dance and movement therapy has started to emerge significantly because of its unique characteristic of working directly with the core deficits of children with autistic disorders. According to Professor Pramod Kerkar in '*Benefits of Dance Movement Therapy for Autism*', it is the “psychotherapeutic use of dance and movements to enhance communication of emotions and behaviors and improve motor ability”. It takes place with a “credentialled therapist” and uses the expressive and creative elements of dance and movement as a mode of assessing and intervening.



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The degree of autism can vary from person to person. People often tend to lose their awareness of the mind and body. Dance therapy focuses on re-structuring this connection of theirs. The teaching is stylized where the steps and routines are not the main focus areas or the ultimate goals, but is a “carefully attuned process” where the therapist focuses on the individual’s needs in a small group, involved in a shared focus, social engagement and interaction. They are also open to working with the parents of the child, helping them to create a positive parent-child relationship.

Apart from the benefits of music and movement, it allows the children to become more connected and social. Making new friends or reconnecting in an old relationship can also be a wonderful side effect of dance on them. These social interactions are a supreme factor in improving mood and mental health, which can contribute majorly to their overall sense of happiness.

Now of course, as mentioned by Jenna N. Ellis in *‘Applying Elements of Contra-Dance to Reduce Symptoms in Children with High-Functioning Autism’*, “all kinds of exercise release endorphins, but dancing has an increased effect in this realm” because it is not only the physical activity that they’re asked to perform – but it is also the soothing music that affects the mind.

The Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) has a huge effect on the social interactions and communication including the behaviours and interests of the children. It is one of the “most common forms of developmental disabilities of childhood, rooted in a typical language and social development in conjunction with repetitive and patterned behaviors” (American Journal of Dance Therapy). There are hardships in “capturing and sustaining correlative social interactions, and difficulty with receptive and expressive languages.

Dance and movement therapy has several impacts and benefits on autistic children, including improving concentration and memory that helps them in their education, developing the movement vocabulary that helps them in their communication and social skills, empathy and adaptation to different situations in a well-defined manner. To fulfil all of this, it is essential for a therapist to understand their language and mode of communication.

Dance is an amalgamation of asymmetric motions projected in an undefined manner. It is the only non-verbal and universal language that helps transmit a stimulus through the body and movement and perhaps the only language that almost everyone (irrespective of whether they face the autistic spectrum disorder or not) has encountered in their life.

Even though currently, there is no “biological treatment” for autism, the “dance/movement therapy addresses the ‘human effect’ of autism which can help support parents in forming a warm, joyful and satisfying relationships with their children” (Christina Devereaux, *Dance/Movement Therapy and Autism*). The first step of forming a human-human connection is through our bodies and dance therapy facilitates this in an easy and beautiful manner.

There are several techniques that are used in dance and movement therapy to improve the symptoms of autism. In a few sessions, the therapist might leave the child on their own with the music playing, giving them the freedom to explore the stimuli, react to it and perform their own movements. While, in some other sessions, they might have a prepared set of goal-oriented movements. Some of the important techniques that are incorporated are – the usage of thera-bands or playing balls to promote extensive movements; simple imitations or touch therapy – where the therapist gently touches the patient, directing them to form their own set of unique movements that are important to carry out basic day-to-day activities; and the mirroring technique where the child is required to emulate the movements of the therapist, thus helping them to enhance their vocabulary.



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Dance and movement therapy is also a great tool that could be used to enhance one’s emotional understanding and empathy for others. Lavinia Machado says that “dance as a form of therapy may stimulate the integration of sensation and perception, and thus, predispose action. Coordinated activities are important for the progress of the neuromotor system”. Motor therapy, that is mainly associated with music can help make social interaction and communication much simpler including many systems that interfere in the perspective of movement and are thus profusely vital for the emotional development and also for the linkage of places that are accountable for the association of an individual’s movement.

There is another process known as the empathic reflection that is extensively used by dance therapists. Empathic reflection is an effective process that consists of reading the client, responding to and then re-reading as a way to keep a track of changes and support the growth of clients. Dance and movement therapy can be grouped to form and modify a set of uncoordinated movement patterns. As Fischmann states in *‘Therapeutic Relationships and Kinesthetic Empathy’*, “human movement patterns involve emotional tonalities that have intrinsic meaning”.



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Lastly, for a greater impact, dance therapists could also join hands with other creative therapists, in the field of music, art, drama, poetry and dance. This can help them explore common goals, target similar interests that can have an overall impact on the autistic children and young adults.

Visual art, music, drama, poetry and dance therapy have homogeneous advantages. Each of them promotes mental and emotional growth by constructing life skills, tackling shortfalls and fostering healthy self-expression. Each of them is a form of distraction that involves mental exercises that stimulate the mind to impact the overall health and well-being of one's body.

It is the process that is important, the experience of following each other's rhythm (therapist and the patient), pacing and the trusting therapeutic alliance that is paramount to any treatment process. As Homann rightly said in '*Embodied Concepts of Neuro-biology in Dance/Movement Therapy Practice*', "by engaging the client in relational experiences and expressive communication through non-verbal interaction, the therapist can become a part of the client's world".

The creative therapists may help in offering a unique combination of therapeutic interventions for autism that throw light on the physical, mental, cognitive, communication and social needs of individuals of all ages.

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