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Music and paint are a perfect mix

Ada Lee

ada.lee@scmp.com (mailto:ada.lee@scmp.com)

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The children are the picture of concentration, swaying their bodies to the musical beat while making strokes and dots on their canvasses with their paintbrushes. They listen to instructions attentively, and draw with focus.

The workshop is a regular course at the Children's Institute of Hong Kong, a private school for children with learning disabilities. Music, from nursery rhymes to pop music, is played, and children paint to the beat.

The results can be startling. One child, just finishing a painting of the Hong Kong skyline, is asked by a visitor to name his favourite colour. 'I like white,' he said.

That may seem like a simple answer, but for a child with autism, talking to a stranger and asking her name are things he seldom does outside of this 'Paint the Music' classroom.

The school's director, Dr Jeremy Greenberg, and class instructor Jacqueline Nilsen said they were seeing great improvements in the children. They are so impressed by the results they are taking it a step further by conducting the world's first study of how painting to music can help autistic children improve their social skills.

Nilsen is an artist who was born in Colombia, lived in the United States and moved to Hong Kong in 2008. This teaching method, she says, was inspired by the late US artist Marvin Posey, who would paint in front of an audience while listening to live music. She hopes their first formal study of the teaching method will lead to its spread to other parts of the world.

'[That way other artists] can be certified paint-the-music teachers and teach it worldwide,' she said. 'We will see changes, dramatic changes, from the kids.'

The study, which started five weeks ago, will observe children's behaviour and evaluate how it changes.

Children in the class are given acrylic paints in only four colours - white and the three primary colours, red, blue and yellow - and they mix the other colours by themselves. They paint when the music starts and stop when it stops, and they are encouraged to move their bodies while painting.

'It involves your mind by blending colours fast, to the beat, letting the music inspire your strokes, moves, listening to the different styles of music I play,' Nilsen said. 'It impacts self-expression and engages the mind in a new way. It's an accessible language, which autistic kids lack.'

Nilsen and Greenberg said they had seen rapid improvements in some children.

'One was screaming in the first class. But by the second class, he was fine,' Nilsen said.

She hopes the improvements seen in class will help the children in their daily lives. 'It may help them when they start getting dressed on their own, because of the colours. It helps them with their colour concept and how to put things together.'

Nilsen, who is the mother of a 25-year-old son with learning disabilities, first

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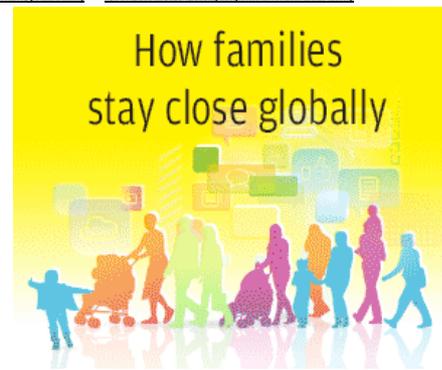
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started the 'Paint the Music' class in 2009 for children without disabilities, and since then parents whose children have differing degrees of autism have enrolled the youngsters in it.

Then she noticed the children were showing a 'fascination and focus' in the class that they did not display elsewhere, so she started looking into what was engaging their attention.

'When we do 'paint the music', we use three of the five senses - hearing, sight and touch. That's why it's so effective,' she said.

Nilsen and Greenberg were amazed by the sense of achievement the children displayed when they showed off their own framed artworks.

'It's making you feel, 'I created something'. For them, having done something that is framed and put up is a big achievement,' Nilsen said.

That means a lot to parents, too.

Greenberg said: 'They're proud that their kids are doing something that they can put up to a wall and show other people. Regular kids do it every day. From the parents' perspective, it's important their kids are doing the same kind of things that regular kids are doing.'

Nilsen teaches in English at the school and the Academy of Performing Arts, but artist Li Pui-shan, a class instructor, plans classes in Chinese.

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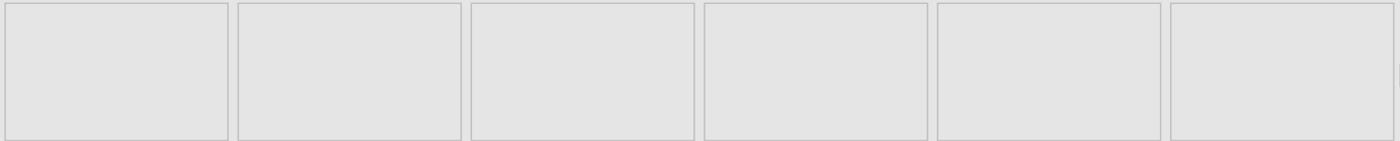
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