

# **SATYA SPECIAL SCHOOL** **SPECIAL EVENTS – BULLETIN** **February 2009**

## **ART FOR AUTISM WORKSHOP**

Satya Special School, Pondicherry in association with Velvi, Madurai organized a two day - Art for Autism workshop for children with autism spectrum disorder on the 6<sup>th</sup> & 7<sup>th</sup> February 2009. Mr Parasuram Ramamoorthi , School of Performing Arts, Madurai Kamaraj University and Director Velvi, Madurai and Ms Srilatha, Special Educator were the facilitators for the workshop.



A first of its kind workshop in Pondicherry, Satya Special School had sent one of their children for a similar workshop at Madurai in January 2009. The difference & the impact the training had had in the child's life, inspired the organizers to invite Prof Ramamoorthi so that more children in the city could get benefited. Around 20 children belonging to the spectrum along with their parents & teachers participated in this workshop.

### **Various Aspects of training:**

**It is observed that children with autism suffer from 3 impariments :**

1. Impairment of social relationships
2. Impairment of Communication
3. Impairment of Imaginative & creative expression

Since these three areas Communication, imagination & creative expression are fundamental to Drama and Drama training in acting schools, Mr Ramamoorthi thought the methods of actor training could be used to facilitate children and adults in the spectrum. While Mr Ramamoorthi was working with a group of children at a school in Norwich, UK he found one kid totally different and not responding to any of my suggestions and commands. Later he was told by the class teacher that the kid is autistic. That was the first time in 2003 he heard the term Autism and later in 2005 he was invited by the Hochschule fur Musik and drama Rostock, and the Universitat Rostock, Germany to



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participate in a project called Drama and Autism. It was in 2005 he took the subject of research seriously and in the last three years he has evolved three models of innovative practice which is now being followed in some centers in India and USA.

1. **Drama for Autism:** A conscious and intentional use of Drama and techniques of Drama to help children and adults in the Autism Spectrum to improve their communication abilities and socializing skills. Using mirror exercise the child is taught to communicate with his parents, siblings & surroundings.

Social relationships: Kids and adults in the spectrum refuse to have peer relationships at schools, colleges and at home. They refuse handshake, eye contact and social communication. Even when they are verbal they do not have clues and cues about social conversation. They like to be left alone and while playing they play alone. They are not happy with group noise and they create tantrums and violent behavior if they are forced to play in groups. They develop gaze aversion, fail to understand the other person by looking at the other person in the eye and often lost in their eyes with no glow. To address this problem we searched for the techniques in actor training and found one game very effective. Mirror Exercise is a game used in drama schools to help actors face each other. Actor A stands face to face with Actor B and at a distance of one foot from each



other. A gazes at B directly into his eyes and starts the communication process through eyes. They smile, they frown and they express emotions without speaking through facial gestures. This exercise is the beginning for Drama for Autism. This exercise proved that eye contact could be established without even speaking. Still many kids in the spectrum refuse to look at the person facing them. An idea out of this was the **USAGE OF MASK** to control tantrums and hyperactivity of children. With the

mask on they cannot run faster. With the mask on their movements are controlled and mask has been found effective for reducing hyperactivity



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**2. Mask for Autism** Masks are traditionally used in theatre for self-projection and to heighten the awareness of actor and self. Most Kathakali artists use facial masks drawn on their faces. Therukootu artists use masks to enlarge the self projection. Masks have been used in therapeutic settings too. Earlier in my work with the schizophrenia patients I had used masks for role-play and self-awareness. Probably Mr Ramamoorthi was the first to discover the use of Mask for Autistic kids and adults.

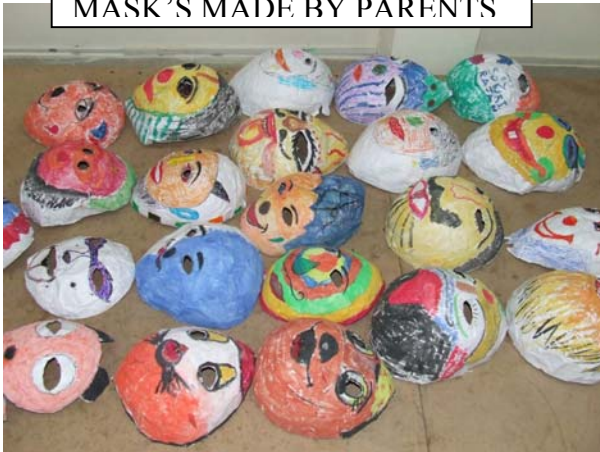


MASK THERAPY

He found masks very effective with kids in the spectrum to promote eye contact. Masks act like blinkers and prevent them from getting distracted. Masks force them to look only through the eyes and hence direct eye contact with another person becomes easier. It helps in focusing clearly and prevents them from looking in all directions.

There are all kinds of masks available in the market, animal masks, human figures, spider man, batman and these masks are made in different textures and materials. Paper-Mache, plastic, leather masks and balloon masks are readily available. Children also enjoy the colours and figures in the masks. It is an added attraction. Once they wear the mask then eye contact is almost forced on them.

MASK'S MADE BY PARENTS



Most kids in the spectrum are hyperactive. They tend to run about or jump around in classrooms and halls. It is difficult to control them when they are hyperactive. Mask has been used with hyperactive kids to control their tantrums and hyperactivity. With the mask on they cannot run faster. With the mask on their movements are controlled and mask has been found effective for reducing hyperactivity. Parents and siblings are

also trained in the use of masks and if every one at home wears a mask then it becomes normal in the family setting and it is not unusual to wear a mask.



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Masks are tools of creativity. Children enjoy the animal figures and stories of Spider Man/Batman. It enhances their imagination and helps them to recreate scenes from the stories. It also enables them to create stories of their own. The Hindu God Ganesha is the earliest example of the mask in theatre and kids love the elephant mask of the God. When children are told that even Gods wear masks they begin to see the fun element of the mask.

Playing with the mask leads to the idea of painted masks. When we paint our faces with lines and circles of different hues like a katahakali artist we are creating masks. Children enjoy splashing colours on the face. Even a simple thing like fixing a bindi can be turned into a mask game. The North Indian festival of Holi encourages people to smear the faces with color powders as a festivity and holiday spirit. This is carnivalesque in theatre terms. Kids and adults in the spectrum enjoy painted masks and painting the faces with masks. This method, introduced by me is now being followed in some special schools in Hyderabad, Cochin, Chennai and Bangalore and at the Autism research centre of Marshall University West Virginia and many parents have found the mask very effective and fun.

MASK THERAPY - between 2 students



MASK THERAPY between a parent & child

**One more moot issue with the masks. The human face is unpredictable. It keeps changing. The mask is fixed and it has only one dimension. Kids in the spectrum do not enjoy the change, sudden change of face and hence mask helps as a tool for socializing.**



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**3. Soundscape for non verbal children and adults:** how to use sounds for communication and developing a Home Dictionary of sounds for the use of people in Autism Spectrum Disorder

**4. Focal points:** training in the use of focal points for improving attention and focus and learning to be alert to details.

**5. Drama techniques for social skills:** use of drama and role play for helping the participants to face life situations and manage situations of crisis. How to meet strangers and how to behave in public.

**6. Body sculpting:** to create awareness about body and body consciousness and express emotions through Body. Element of fun in daily life and learning to work in a group through body sculpting is also planned.

**7. Painting and drawing** skills for improving communications and painting as a means of self expression and possibly a career option

**8. Music** for self expression and artistic expression.: music is used to reduce hyperactivity and music is used as a possible career option. They are musically intelligent and hence could be trained as drummers/flautists.

FOCAL POINTS



Body sculpting



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On the 8<sup>th</sup> of February 2009, a general awareness workshop on Art for Children with Special needs was held. Around 75 children and their parents participated in this workshop. Group therapy & mask therapy were demonstrated and parents were asked to use this therapy as a tool to tackle inactivity or hyper activity based on the child's needs.

A booklet on Autism in Tamil was released during this workshop. This booklet would be used for awareness creation and as an information booklet by parents with autistic children. Copies of this booklet can be obtained on request to the school.



The school proposes to implement the mask therapy & group therapy activities of every Saturday between 10.00 am and 12.00 noon at the school premises. These therapy sessions are free for any child with special needs and their parents irrespective of their disability or their level of activity.



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