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[ADA and Communication Accessibility in Theatre – Elena SV Flys](#)

## Fine Arts Museums and Occupational Therapy Collaborations Promote Inclusion for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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**Tina Fletcher, Jon Eckberg, Amanda B. Blake**

### Introduction

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This program description details an ongoing collaboration between Texas Woman's University (TWU) master of occupational therapy students and the Dallas Museum of Art's (DMA) Autism Awareness Family Celebrations (AAFC), which provides inclusive museum visits for children with autism spectrum disorder. These young visitors and their families participate in programs that interconnect opportunities to view and learn about art, engage in creative expression, and participate in a novel community event. During these events, TWU students create a sensory haven and provide activities that enable children to more fully experience the art museum while also managing the behavioral, communication, and social challenges they often experience during community outings. Students also provide parents with relevant information about autism spectrum disorder and with opportunities to connect with others. In conjunction with these events, students and faculty conduct research, make evidence-based program planning recommendations, and provide museum staff with educational supports relevant to their participation planning goals.

### A New Point of View

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Allen (a pseudonym), an 8-year-old boy with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), loves to draw. He does it every day. But day after day, the subject is always the same: machines and vehicles, never the human form, drawn in black and white. That changed one day during an AAFC event at the DMA. During this experience, Allen's understanding was framed from a new point of view. After drawing another machine in the Center for Creative Connections' gallery space, Allen joined other children in the outdoor Fleischner Courtyard. Here, he used a multicolored streamer to move along to music played by a Dallas Symphony Orchestra

string quintet. He promptly came inside to continue sketching in the gallery. When his mother looked at his latest creation, she was overcome with joy. For the first time ever, Allen drew people, surrounded by colorful streamers flying through the air.

Occupational therapy students at TWU and museum educators at the DMA collaborate to enable this kind of breakthrough for visitors with special needs. The DMA has wide community involvement, access to an encyclopedic art collection, and a team of talented educators who collaborate with master of occupational therapy students. These students, in turn, have knowledge of health promotion, enhancing social participation, and know how to conduct, analyze, and utilize research. This collaboration has resulted in an increasingly popular fine arts museum experience for growing numbers of children diagnosed with ASD and their families. As a result, attendance rates for AAFC events have steadily climbed, culminating in the Spring 2018 event hosting over 450 enthusiastic visitors.



Figure 1. Children playing in Fleischner courtyard at DMA Autism Awareness Day

## Museums and Occupational Therapists are Guided by Complementary Purposes

The success of the DMA's AAFC is due in part to its strong commitment to building and sustaining partnerships with community organizations. One of the DMA's missions is to place art in diverse communities, and is central to the activities they promote (Dallas Museum of Art, 2018). In keeping with this mission, DMA educators design programs for children with ASD and their family members, visitors of all ages with visual impairments, adults with developmental disabilities, individuals in the early stages of dementia and their care partners, and groups from care facilities in the advanced stages of Alzheimer's disease.

The relationship of museum educators and occupational therapy practitioners represents a unique and innovative synergy. Museum educators specifically design access programs with goals to connect visitors with special needs to the DMA's collection and enable their own creative expression. These goals align with the American Occupational Therapy Association's (2015) core values and attitudes for occupational therapy practice. These include honoring an individual's *freedom* to choose the activities in which they desire to participate and recognizing the *dignity* that comes from being given this choice, regardless of the challenges they may face. Additionally, when participating in museum-based autism access programs, TWU students exemplify the vision of their own school of occupational therapy, which

promotes pioneering diverse practice areas, influencing the direction of the profession of occupational therapy, and using and creating research evidence (Texas Woman's University, 2015).

For their pediatric service learning, TWU students focus their participation on the programs for children with ASD. According to DMA educators, the museum benefits from collaborating with TWU students who offer their occupational therapy expertise in modifying and adapting activities to enhance autism awareness events. For children with ASD, this frequently includes providing activities that accommodate a variety of cognitive abilities, varying degrees of physical coordination and dexterity, and frequent sensory sensitivities.

## **Museums Strive to Meet the Needs of Visitors with ASD through Outreach Programs**

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The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that ASD affects one in 68 children in the United States (Christensen, Baio, & Braun, 2016). Children with ASD often demonstrate difficulties with language-based self-expression and social interaction, and many express themselves more effectively through the arts. During AAFC days, children with ASD and their families, friends, and caregivers visit the DMA at no charge and participate in activities in the Center for Creative Connections before opening hours. During these quarterly events, and in keeping with their goals to help visitors view and learn about art and engage in creative expression, museum educators provide activities including sketching from works of art, art making in the studios, and gallery tours to teens with autism. A music therapist leads an interactive song and dance performance. TWU students and faculty provide art and movement-based indoor and outdoor activities, and create and run a sensory haven designed to provide a respite for children and family members who may become overwhelmed by crowding and noise.

Students compile user-friendly information sheets for families about the aims of sensory havens and activity areas, and about best practices for managing communication, sensory, and behavioral differences. In concert with museum educators, students also provide children who possess limited language and communication skills with visual prompts, picture schedules, and picture stories to explain and structure the museum's schedule and social expectations. The emphasis is on promoting desired behaviors such as having "walking feet," looking with eyes rather than hands, respecting the museum experience of others, listening to gallery docents and attendants, using an inside voice, and preparing for the end of event to avoid upsets associated with unwanted transitions or changes (Ashburner, Bennett, Rodger, & Ziviani, 2012). After students conclude their museum experience, they complete a service learning report with accompanying recommendations. A faculty member synthesizes these recommendations and shares an aggregated report and recommendations with museum educators (Fletcher, Blake, & Shelffo, 2018).

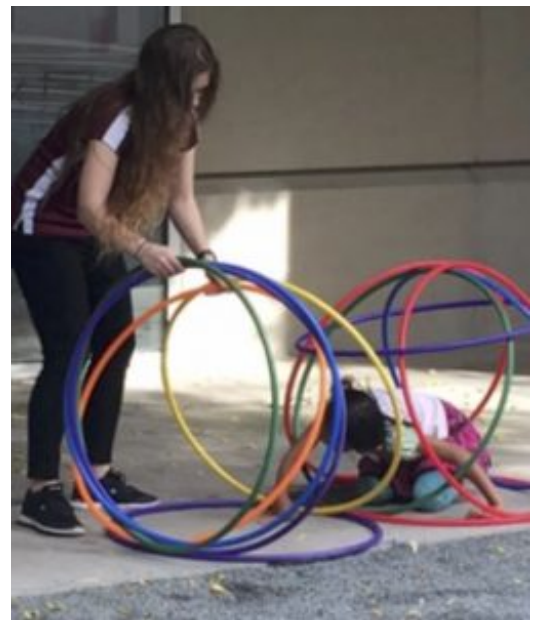


Figure 2. Child creating artwork

## Parents Share the Benefits of Autism Awareness Family Celebrations

Parents of children with ASD who participate in DMA's Autism Awareness Family Celebrations have shared some of their experiences. They have reported the event "brings us together with others who are facing the same struggles" and "We like it so much because there are so many families with autism here, without the pressure of how your child will act. We've tried to go to the museum at normal times, but it doesn't work" (personal communications, February 17, 2018). This underscores a recurring theme of enjoying the company of an understanding community of like-minded individuals. When talking to students, parents also consistently express appreciation for the variety of offerings, and how these events provide exposure to new experiences outside their child's usual, often narrow range of interests. Parents have often noted that activities at the AAFC are fun because their children can participate in activities that fit both their abilities and interests. Other parents have spoken about the appeal creating art has to their children, and the progress they make in socialization, community involvement, and participation in activities when attending AAFC events.

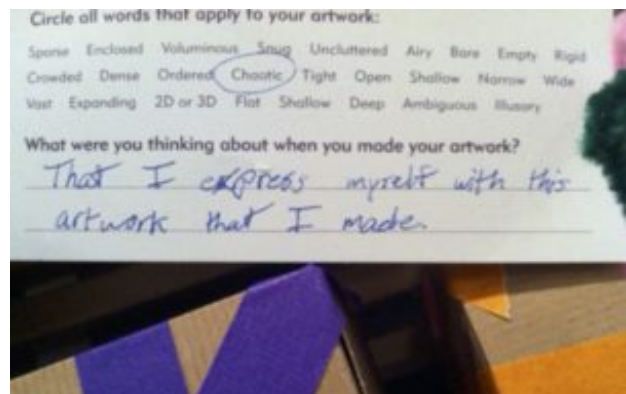




Figures 3-5. TWU students interacting with children in the Fleischner courtyard

## AAFC Benefits Occupational Therapy Students

Service learning in an art museum is an evolving experience. Beginning students focus their efforts on planning adaptable and modifiable activities for children. Advanced students create and provide educational supports to personnel, particularly gallery attendants, regarding visitors' exceptional conditions, along with strategies that can help bridge gaps between observed and desired behaviors, and how to help children with ASD more fully engage in activities that are geared



toward typical museum visitors. Advanced students and faculty also collaborate to obtain perceptions from parents, museum staff, and the children themselves. Using research methodology, these perceptions are collected and systematically analyzed. Results are reviewed with museum planners and are used to create staff training programs, facilitate parent and child experiences. Additionally, results are integrated with existing research findings to create effective museum education curriculums designed to meet the needs of all learners (Breslin & Rudisill, 2013; Thompson, 2011; Langa, Monaco, Sabramaniam, Jaeger, Shanahan, & Ziebarth, 2013). Results are also disseminated to a larger community of museum and cultural arts venue educators, along with occupational and physical therapists interested in promoting therapy activities in community settings, through publications and presentations (Antonetti & Fletcher, 2016; Fletcher, Blake, & Shelffo, 2018; Kulik & Fletcher, 2016).

Figure 6. Child expresses himself through artwork at the DMA Autism Awareness Day.

Participating in the AAFC not only benefits visitors, but students as well. Museum-based service learning has broken new ground for the occupational therapy students, who more typically work in hospital, rehabilitation clinic, and home health settings. Leaving the borders of the classroom walls encourages students to blend creativity and innovation with clinical reasoning to support children and families seeking interactive and inclusive experiences. Additionally, by integrating occupational therapy into community settings such as art museums, students are challenged to think about how they can promote health and wellness while using resources that differ from those found in traditional medical and rehabilitation settings.

According to Innella (2010), service learning is a logical fit with art galleries because it entails a real-life setting and offers experiences to the learner in ways that can be used beyond academic settings. Reasoning that the purpose of art establishments is to share knowledge and communicate with the community at large, TWU students are ideally situated in an environment that strives to promote learning for all visitors, including the occupational therapy students themselves (Langa et al., 2013).



Figure 7. TWU professor, Dr. Tina Fletcher, with TWU occupational therapy students at the DMA.



Figure 8. Sensory haven at the DMA Autism Awareness Day

## Conclusion

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From their beginning collaborations in 2011, TWU master of occupational therapy students have contributed to DMA Autism Awareness Family Celebrations in a variety of ways.

Museums typically have great influence with the larger community. As schools of occupational therapy work to integrate their students into worlds beyond the classroom walls, the logical partnering of a museum with a university meets a tandem goal of providing services available to visitors with ASD and their families, friends, and caregivers, along with educating university students.

To enhance their programming and reach underserved visitor audiences, museums can reach out to universities with healthcare majors such as occupational, physical, and speech therapy to team up and explore opportunities to serve the community and engage visitors who find participation challenging. Museums will benefit from this partnering by learning ways to systematically adapt and modify activities, manage medical and behavioral emergencies, and communicate with children and families experiencing the challenges associated with ASD.

These collaborations can be achieved in many ways. One strategy to consider is designating a point person who can participate educational opportunities detailing the nuances of participation planning and share information with colleagues. Other strategies include educating therapists and students about museum goals and programming needs in conference venues or local therapist meetings, providing a museum residency program for a therapy intern, collaborating with museums who use community experts, and sharing information and experiences amongst museums.

These collaborations are clearly beneficial to cultural arts venues, therapists and students, and – most importantly – the programs’ participants, as they participate in community experiences that support their ability to engage in and benefit from the power of the arts.

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Figure 9. Dr. Tina Fletcher with TWU occupational therapy students at the DMA.



Figure 10. Artwork from the DMA Autism Awareness Day

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## Authors

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