

# AUTISM

AND RELATED DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

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## Recreation and Leisure



### My Own World

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*My Own World* is the title of a special art project, funded in part by the Rhode Island Council on the Arts (RISCA), which consists of a series of carefully designed photography lessons for students with autism at the Groden network. The project's uniqueness is that it uses photography as a medium to foster positive psychology themes, in particular resilience, in students with autism. Positive psychology aims to increase humans emotional strengths to promote health, well-being, and fulfillment in individuals, and to promote successful coping with one life's challenges (Linley & Joseph, 2004). The infusion of positive psychology ideas into the curriculum and philosophy of the Groden Center, a program for children and adults with autism and other developmental disabilities (DD), was developed by the Clinical Supervisor team. The program was aimed at fostering areas of positive psychology and especially resilience, optimism, self-efficacy, humor and kindness for students with autism and DD within the moderate to the severe range of functioning.

*My Own World* was aimed toward fostering resilience, by identifying and supporting the expression of areas of strength or "islands of competence". "Islands of Competence" are hidden capabilities that are not regularly observed by the individual or by others, (Brooks & Goldstein, 2001; Brooks, 2001). Expressing these capabilities provide the individual with a sense of self-worth, self-expression, and increases his/her appreciation by others. Since many individuals with autism manifest scattered skills, and show relative strengths in the area of photography, we became enthusiastic about revealing our students' "islands of competence" in this field and increasing their resilience through the *My Own World* photography project.

#### "My Own World" Project Goals and Description

*My Own World* project was developed by a team that included the authors, a photography instructor, an art teacher, a RISCA consultant, and public relation and marketing consultants, and began July, 2006. The pragmatic goals of the project are (1) to develop a behavioral based curriculum for fostering "islands of competence" through photography that is suitable for individuals with autism in all ranges of capability (2) to maintain the students' freedom of expression through this media given the structured nature of the program, (3) to develop a curriculum and supporting materials to be disseminated to other schools specializing in the education of individuals with autism, (4) to display our students' work in art shows open to the public, (5) to increase awareness and appreciation of the capabilities of individuals with autism by the community, and (6) to increase the feeling of contribution to the community by individuals with autism.

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The project targeted about 50 children and young adults in the Groden Center special day school program and the young adult day program. The age range of the students participating in the program is 9-37 years old with an IQ in the severe to moderate range. At the beginning of the project the school staff were presented with the project goals and philosophy. Also, before each lesson the staff was provided with directions by the photography or the art teachers. The lessons took place in the Groden Center Greenhouse, the Groden Network art center, on field trips, and at the outdoor school area. Each class consisted of 3-10 students, 1-3 students were grouped with 1 staff (either a teacher or a treatment teacher) and were all supervised by the photography instructor.

The program used 5 Kodak Easy Share cameras, which are easy to use, have a large screen view finder, and can produce professional quality photographs. The cameras have their own easy to use photoprint dock independent of a computer. For modeling the process of photography, and to provide instant gratification for students who needed it, we used Polaroid cameras. The program also purchased 2 desktop computers with photo processing programs, and 2 photo printers, one of which is a professional large format photo printer. We found the camera's viewfinder screen crucial for teaching students with autism photography, as it captures their attention easily and provides an easy way to focus using both eyes rather than be challenged with closing one eye and focusing with the other. Using printing docks eased the process of printing and required minimal skill to push a button. For students who were more capable, a program analysis that guides through the actual operation of a computer attached printer (how to feed the paper, check ink levels, etc.) was developed.

The photography project was set around 5 themes all designed to increase the awareness of the students to their capabilities and to the supportive relationships available to them from an ecological perspective: "Things that I like" (relationships with the inanimate world), "Friends" (relationships with peers), "Me" (the individual's understanding of self), "People who I love" (relationships within the family), and "Celebrating Nature" (relationships with nature). The students were asked to photograph landscapes, objects or individuals, according to the theme, however they were also free to take photographs without redirection or instruction to allow free expression. The staff was directed to support, but not to intervene, with the actual aiming of the camera. If aiming and shooting by the staff were used for modeling, the staff or the photography instructor deleted the photograph.

Several lesson plans were developed for each theme to help students generalize the concepts learned. For example, the "Things that I like" theme focuses on teaching students to express their preferences to become more autonomous, and therefore resilient. Studies done with individuals with DD revealed they have significantly less opportunities for making choices, less autonomy, and less decision-making regarding managing their free time compared to the general population (Sheppard-Jones, 2005). The photography lessons in this theme were aimed at developing technical pro-

iciency with the camera, while at the same time applying concepts of choice making. The students were asked to take photos of things they like in the natural world, in an urban setting, or at school or at the adult program. Next, they were asked to make choices regarding their photography, such as what they would choose to print, what to crop, etc. The choices involved the understanding and discrimination between likes and dislikes. Therefore, as a first step, a lesson plan was developed by the authors and the speech and language pathologist to help students to express their likes and dislikes by sorting photos of food items, leisure activities, chores, and other free time activities into those categories. Only after teaching the concept of likes and dislikes were the students presented with the photography printing and editing assignments.

The photography lessons are broken down into small steps that are subjected to two different kinds of program analyses. After printing their photographs, the students fill out a "how did I do with photography?" program analysis with their teachers. The purpose of this step is to help students link their efforts with successful results. Staff provides positive feedback and encouragement, and helps the students appreciate their achievements and progress to increase their self-efficacy and resilience. The staff and photography teacher also use a task analysis to teach and evaluate the process. The teachers record the students' independence in the task of asking for the camera, placing a strap around the neck, aiming the camera, taking the photos and sharing the camera with others.

The staff of the *My Own World* program communicated with parents about the skills, activities and the pictures that were taken and by sending home newsletters with program updates, photography artwork, and by creating special shared projects at home and school. Parents were also invited to the photography exhibitions.

#### **Discussion of the Project progress and outcome**

Many photography projects were developed to empower populations at risk, however there is a dearth of literature targeting individuals with autism. For individuals with autism who often struggle with communication, photography provides a new means of self-expression, to show how they view their world. Although structured, the program promotes self-expression by encouraging students to focus on different subjects and yet allows freedom in the actual photography. With their cameras, students capture light, color, shapes, textures, reflections, landscapes, objects and structures in the world around them. Those who are more capable also share ideas, humor, and special interests through photography.

About 50 students participated in the project this year. About 2/3 of the students needed some verbal, non-verbal, and/or physical support to be able to use the camera at the beginning of the school year, yet only 22 needed it by the end of the program year.

Most of the students are very interested in participating in the photography classes and seem to see the photography and the printing as intrinsically reinforcing to them. So far

about 700 photographs were taken, and about 80% of those were aimed purposefully. The students' photographs show us what they perceive as interesting, or important to them. Since the students were given only general but not specific directions regarding the content expected, their photographs represent their insight regarding the topic. Analysis of their photographic content finds no common idiosyncrasies, as was also documented in children with various kinds of disabilities (Dyches, 2004). However, we found that some students hold specific interests. One of the students, a 37 year-old male with autism, is interested in photographing cylinders and photographs many poles and street lamps. On the photograph of the Rhode Island state house (photograph A) his main object was the street lamp. A student with Down's Syndrome and hearing impairment mainly focuses on photographing trees (photograph B C D). A 20 year-old student with autism is interested in naturally created geometric shapes and patterns (photograph E). A 16 year-old non-verbal student in our program expresses humor and creates illusions in his photographs. For example in a series of photographs in a graveyard, he took photographs of tombstones with the last names of "graves", and "still" on them (photograph F). He also photographed stone hinges from an angle that provides the illusion that they are sky-scrapers (Photograph G).

One of the obstacles in understanding the ideas expressed in the photographs is the deficit of verbal expression of students with autism and DD. In the project the descriptions of the photographs are documented using journals which are written either by the student, or by the teacher who elicits a description from the student if possible. We found this step crucial to understand the photographs since our interpretations of the photographs were sometimes completely different from the student's perspective. For example, S. is an 18 year-old woman with autism, whose language is limited to 1-2 word sentences. S. is capable of capturing the whole object of attention in her photographs. Therefore, the photography instructor was surprised to find that in the photography assignment titled "My friends", S. captured only half of the face of her favorite teacher (photograph H). At the journal assignment, S. described her focus in the picture by saying the name of the teacher and the word "pen". Until that point the pen seemed to be irrelevant to us. However, since S. labeled it, and since the pen is located in the center of the photograph, we believe that the student was actually aiming at the pen and not her teacher. In another occasion this student was reinforced to participate in the photography lesson by using a lollypop as the object of focus, which she found as amusing and gladly photographed it (photograph I).

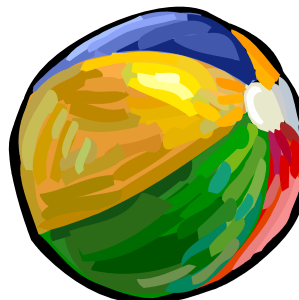
Presenting our students' photographs in art exhibitions increases the sense of mastery, achievement, and the feeling of contribution to the community by the students and their parents. The students' photographs are an immense source of pride for many of our parents who share the photographs with relatives and friends and are enthusiastic about going to exhibitions where their children's art work is praised and purchased by individuals in the community. Since the project started, the students' photography work has been

presented at the Autism Society of America's (ASA) annual meeting in July 2006, in Providence, Rhode Island, and in the Rhode Island Spring Flower and Garden Show, in February 2007. The photography work was also presented in numerous exhibitions and holiday art sales within the Providence area. At the exhibitions, students represent their artwork and if they can, discuss their work with individuals from the community. The students and the parents also help in the photography sale, and its revenues benefit the art program. While allowing students to discover their own potential, and then revealing those capabilities to their parents, to us, and to the community, we hope to contribute more to the well-being of our students and their parents.

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**A**



**B**



**C**



**D**



**E**



**F**



**G**



**H**



**I**

