Using Dance/Movement as a Part of a Self-care Routine to Alleviate Stress in Parents and/or Caregivers of Children with Autism

Lori Reaves
lreaves@lesley.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive_theses

Part of the Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School of Arts and Social Sciences (GSASS) at DigitalCommons@Lesley. It has been accepted for inclusion in Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Lesley. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lesley.edu, cvrattos@lesley.edu.
Using Dance/Movement as a Part of a Self-care Routine to Alleviate Stress in Parents and/or Caregivers of Children with Autism

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

April 28, 2020
Lori A. Reaves
Dance/Movement Therapy
Annette Whitehead-Pleaux
Abstract

Parents and caregivers of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have more stress than parents of neurotypical children (Foster, Swain, and Scarpa, 2018). There is minimal research published exploring the effects of dance movement therapy (DMT) on stress reduction with parents or caregivers of children with ASD. This researcher explored the use of other modalities in studies involving parental and/or caregiver stress. Taking care of one’s self is important but, can be difficult for many people, especially parents and caregivers of children with autism. Movement is our first means of communication and plays an intricate part in our ability to communicate, but many times it is not seen as important (Winther, 2018). Dance movement therapists feel differently. They know that DMT uses movement as a means of expressing the feelings and emotions that are held within the body. DMT can be effective in therapy or as a part of a daily routine. This researcher explored using movement experiences that were self-directed, easily accessible, and minimally time consuming with one parent of a child with ASD, a white female in her early 50’s. Regular participation for one month in the dance/movement intervention reduced the participant’s stress and improved her overall mood.
Created a Method Using Dance/Movement as a Part of a Self-care Routine to Alleviate Stress in Parents and/or Caregivers of Children with Autism

Introduction

Can implementing a simple dance/movement activity as a part of parents’ and caregivers’ daily routines help reduce stress? This researcher, a white 40-year-old married female, who has a niece with ASD, wanted to know the answer. Since movement is the first means of communication, used throughout the lives of every individual, and plays an essential role in the ability to communicate, lead, and overall success (Winther, 2018), it could also help to reduce stress. “Stress is one of the world’s largest health problems, leading to exhaustion, burnout, anxiety, a weak immune system, or even organ damage” (Martin, et. al, 2018, p. 1).

Taking care of one’s self and finding ways to reduce stress are extremely important but can also be difficult for many people, especially parents and/or caregivers of children with autism. A prior study by Foster, Swain, and Scarpa (2018) has determined that parents and caregivers of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have more stress than parents of neurotypical children. Children with ASD have a wide range of abilities and severity of symptomatic behaviors (Shepherd, Landon, Goedeke, 2018). Parental stress begins before the child has been formally diagnosed. Parents typically have growing concerns about their child’s development, ability to communicate, and behaviors, including: tantrums, aggression, noncompliance, self-harm, destruction of property, hyperactivity, food refusal, and difficulty with sleep and toileting (Bearss, Burrell, Stewart, Scahill, 2015). Maladaptive behaviors such as these “may interfere with a child’s response to educational intervention, lead to further isolation from peers, and increase caregiver stress due to disruptions in daily activities” (Bearss, Burrell, Stewart, Scahill, 2015, p. 174). Researchers found that the more parents are involved in their
child’s day-to-day activities, the more stress they may experience especially since parents and caregivers of children with ASD experience many challenges that parents of typically developing children might not face (Foster, Swain, Scarpa, 2018). Social support for parents can help reduce the feelings of stress but, many parents of children with ASD are isolated and have a limited social support system.

According to Table 1, the Center for Disease Control (2019) reported that 1 in 59 children have been diagnosed with ASD. This number was up from 1 in 150 in the year 2000. The DSM-5 (2013) described ASD as “persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts” (p. 50) including difficulty socially and emotionally, trouble with verbal and nonverbal communication, and lacking the ability to form relationships. The specified severity is based on restrictions and patterns of behavior such as repetitive movements or repeated phrases, constant need for sameness, difficulty with change, as well as an abnormal fixation with an object etc. (DSM-5, 2013). In order to be diagnosed with ASD, symptoms cannot be better explained by a developmental or intellectual disability although intellectual disabilities are often comorbid with ASD and symptoms must cause significant dysfunction in important areas of life. This significant dysfunction creates stress for parents and caregivers. The stress can be amplified by the restrictions placed on their own lives such as constant care, the inability to participate in social functions, and advocating for services.

Table 1: Identified Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder

ADDM Network 2000-2014 Combining Data from All Sites
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Surveillance Year</th>
<th>Birth Year</th>
<th>Number of ADDM Sites Reporting</th>
<th>Combined Prevalence per 1,000 Children (Range Across ADDM Sites)</th>
<th>This is about 1 in X children...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6.7 (4.5-9.9)</td>
<td>1 in 150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6.6 (3.3-10.6)</td>
<td>1 in 150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8.0 (4.6-9.8)</td>
<td>1 in 125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9.0 (4.2-12.1)</td>
<td>1 in 110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11.3 (4.8-21.2)</td>
<td>1 in 88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14.7 (5.7-21.9)</td>
<td>1 in 68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14.5 (8.2-24.6)</td>
<td>1 in 69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16.8 (13.1-29.3)</td>
<td>1 in 59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


With the rates of ASD diagnoses growing and the fact that parents and caregivers of this population experience higher levels of stress (Foster, Swain, Scarpa, 2018), more research needs to be conducted to determine specific modes of stress reduction for parents and caregivers. Due to the lack of information available on caregivers and effects of DMT on stress reduction, this researcher created a method and implemented it on a single volunteer participant. Based on the observations made throughout the study it was determined that DMT had a positive effect on stress reduction in the participant who was a parent of a child with autism.
Literary Review

There is minimal research published exploring the effects of dance/movement on stress reduction with parents or caregivers of children with autism. Aithal, Karkou, Kuppusamy, and Mariswamy (2019) conducted the only study available on dance/movement and stress reduction specifically related to parents and caregivers of children with autism. This particular study investigated using dance movement psychotherapy (DMP) techniques. It took place in a group setting, adapting Chacian principles along with cultural elements of music and dance. These researchers found that the participants in the experimental group reported significantly less stress after completing the series of DMP sessions. This study links dance and movement to stress reduction in parents and caregivers of children with autism.

Given the lack of research, this researcher explored stress and the need for coping skills in parents and caregivers of children with ASD. They also researched the use of other modalities in studies involving parental and/or caregiver stress and other populations which could expose methods to help reduce stress in parents of children with ASD.

Parental Stress

According to Dunn, Burbine, Bowers, and Tantleff-Dunn (2001), “parents of children with autism experience more stress and are more susceptible to negative outcomes than parents of children with other disabilities” (p.39). Since parents of children with autism are more likely to have higher stress levels, it is important to further explore the use of dance/movement therapy’s (DMT) ability to aide in stress reduction in parents and caregivers of children with autism.
Researchers found that parents of young children with autism often had high expectations that their child would reach normalcy, but the medical community does not agree (Gray, 2006). According to Gray, the parental presumption that their children with autism would get better played a significant role in stress related to expectations of the child and required more coping mechanisms. This, along with the diagnosis being fairly new and learning to live with the complications of having a child with autism, created the need for more structured coping methods such as therapy. This study explored how families of individuals with autism cope over time. Using ethnographic methods (Gray, 2006). The selected families all had a child enrolled in a treatment center for autism and were asked to participate in this study between 1988 and 1990. A follow up study was conducted 8-10 years later and 28 of the 35 parents from the previous study participated, including 19 mothers and 9 fathers, representing 20 families (Gray, 2006). There were 24 children with autism who participated. They were between the ages of four and nineteen and their symptoms ranged anywhere from mild to severe at the time of the initial study.

In the second portion of this longitudinal study, Gray (2006) discovered that these same parents had “far fewer coping strategies than they had previously” (p. 972). The use of treatment services had been a main way of coping during the previous study with 14 total services selected, along with familial support. During the follow-up study it was found that none of the participants were still enrolled in a treatment center and “the use of treatment services had declined dramatically” (Gray, 2006, p. 973) with only 6 services selected. The need for familial support was also reported less.

This study showed a reduction in coping strategies. This was in part due to the child’s life skills increasing significantly, as well as their parents adapting to their life as parents of a child or
children with autism (Gray, 2006, p. 973). This study explored how families of individuals with autism cope over time. These families learned to adapt to their individual situations, had established routines, and were now living as opposed to coping.

Wei, Wei, and Lai (2014) searched to compile a list of coping skills used by parents and caregivers of children with ASD, including the outside factors and outcomes of using these skills to help healthcare professionals provide resources and support for parents and families of children with ASD. Through their review of 37 research studies on the coping strategies of parents of children with ASD, Wei, Wei, and Lai (2014) found two main coping skills, problem-focused coping and social support. The researchers include that culture or individual worldview could affect reasons for seeking treatment as well as coping methods. Some cultures are more self-focused, and others focus more on group support ((Wei, Wei, and Lai, 2014).

Siu, Yi, Chan, Chio, Chan, and Mak (2018) completed a study with 731 parents with a total of 731 children ages six to eleven, of those 177 had ASD and 554 were typically developing. They all completed screening survey measuring parenting stress and problematic behaviors in their children. The researchers found that autism spectrum symptoms were connected with parenting stress however, the problematic behaviors of the child(ren) were not a source of parental stress. The authors suggested that neither the ASD diagnosis nor the severity of symptoms exhibited by the child increased the level of parental stress. Siu et al. (2018) mention that parents of children with ASD may have a different perspective on stress and what significant stress is. “They may have developed more diverse and practical strategies to cope with their set of multiple challenges than other parents, rendering a higher threshold of perception on significant stress, especially against internalizing problem behaviors” (Siu et al., 2018, p. 867). Parenting stress does not directly cause a low quality of life or poor parental
wellbeing (Siu et al., 2018). This study suggested that creating a “standard protocol for assessing parenting stress” as part of “ASD treatment programs and special education programs” (Siu et al., 2018, p. 868) would be very beneficial to all involved. Teaching parents coping skills to help handle their child’s symptomatic behaviors helps reduce parental feelings of failure. Parents need support to increase effectiveness and encourage a more positive view of their abilities to adequately support their child with ASD. Parents need to be linked to all aspects of possible support available to them including assistance managing daily-life activities (Siu et al., 2018). Lack of support creates frustration which can affect all members of the family.

According to Goetz, Rodriguez, & Hartley, “parents of children with autism spectrum disorder are at risk for poor couple relationship quality” (2019, p. 1). This study looks at how 186 couples with children with ASD report on their interactions over a 14-day period. Each parent was instructed to write an entry in their diary every day, rating their interactions with their partner as positive or negative based on the list and scale stated here:

“parents independently rated their subjective level of daily parenting stress (7-point scale) and reported on their subjective perception of the number of types of positive (e.g., had a meaningful conversation or hugged and kissed) and negative (e.g., avoided, ignored, or made a critical comment) couple interactions they had, each ranging from 0 to 8” (Goetz, Rodriguez, & Hartley, 2019, p. 3).

On days that the mothers of children with ASD reported high parenting stress they did not have the energy or desire to instigate positive interactions with their spouse but when fathers experienced high stress levels, they reported more positive interactions (Goetz, Rodriguez, & Hartley, 2019). This study shows that if both parents perceive a high level of parenting stress then they were more likely to report more negative interactions. This can be attributed to stress
spillover. Both partners in this situation tended to reciprocate the negative actions of their partner when stressed (Goetz, Rodriguez, & Hartley, 2019).

Rodriguez, Hartley, and Bolt (2019) found an association between parent stress and ASD symptomatic behaviors. This study was set on the participants of an on-going study that included 188 families who each had a child diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). These participants were predominately white, cisgendered, heterosexual, middle class families, and the majority of the children with ASD were male. This limits the ability to generalize the findings. The study was designed to determine the association between parent stress (both the mother and father) and the severity of symptoms demonstrated by their child(ren) with ASD. The research shows that there is an association between parent stress and ASD symptoms. The mothers almost always reported a higher level of stress than the fathers. The study suggests that the effects can be felt not only parentally, as stated in previous studies, but that children with ASD may react to the stress of their parents with more severe symptomatic behaviors. The more stressed the parent is the more severe the ASD symptoms were in the children. The findings of this study are important in the planning of interventions and/or sessions dealing with ASD parental stress and ASD symptomatic behavior. Even though this study cannot be generalized due to its small variation in participants it does bring about very useful information for therapists when working with the ASD population and their families. Although symptoms may vary from individual to individual, the likelihood that parents will experience stress due to the symptomatic behavior of their child(ren) with ASD and that the children will react to their parent’s stress is clear. “Family-based interventions that are directed at both parents and children with ASD may be optimal given the reciprocal ties between parenting stress and child functioning” (Rodriguez, Hartley, and Bolt, 2019, p. 1898).
Expressive Arts Modalities

Expressive arts modalities include visual art, music, drama, dance/movement, writing, and other creative arts. They are used in combination with traditional therapy to help facilitate healing and/or change. Expressive arts offer individuals an additional means of expression and communication versus traditional talk therapy where the spoken word is the predominate method used.

Winther (2018) conducted a collaborative project, this art-based coproduced research film focused on embodied leadership, creativity, and innovative education. Each person involved served in multiple roles including the students being studied. The purpose of this study was to explore “how we can develop somatic awareness, creativity, and embodied leadership” through a more innovative process (Winther, 2018. p. 1). Twenty-one college students took part in the process of learning, practicing, and teaching dance in order to develop leadership skills to help them in the professional world. This process was rooted in using the body as a means of communication. Body language is our first means of communication, it is used throughout our lives, and plays an intricate part in our ability to communicate, lead, and our general success, but is many times not seen as important (Winther, 2018). The research process included dance, film, and written narratives. The students were taught a dance repertoire which they learned and then taught to their peers as practice. The finale of the project was what was referred to as “Dance Day.” On this day the students taught multiple workshops to over 200 high school students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. This entire process was filmed and then edited to create a twelve-minute video. Each student also submitted a written narrative of their experience. This experience was about these students “being able to master the experienced contrasts between sensitivity, self-contact, and somatic awareness in relation to the leadership dimension in
teaching” (Winther, 2018, p. 6). They were learning to be the captain of their own ship according to Winther.

Kelliher’s (2019) arts-based research study was exploring the therapeutic relationship between a client and therapist through their journals while participating in music therapy. Verbal journals were used to create songs that highlighted the therapeutic relationship. These songs were analyzed looking for “congruence and conflict between the harmony and the lyrics” (Kelliher, 2019, p. 1). This exploration gives a deeper insight into the relationship between the therapist and the client during music therapy sessions and can help inform future research using music as the modality. (Kelliher, 2019). This was a three-step process beginning with the participant recording their reflection and feelings about their hour-long music therapy session by “speaking, singing, and/or rapping” (Kelliher, 2019, p. 7). Next, the therapist also created a musical portrait of their experience by recording improvisational instrumental responses as well as verbal responses to the sessions. This journal allowed the therapist to connect with the client through “body listening” (Kelliher, 2019, p. 7). Finally, the journals were edited to create a song where they were intertwined in a way that flowed like a conversation. The words and music became inseparable (Kelliher, 2019).

Once this study was complete the songs were played for the client. The client stated that the songs were a good representation of the process. Playing the songs allowed for a stronger therapeutic relationship as well as increased the ability to express feelings verbally and musically. Although this study does not directly relate to parental stress, increased connection and communication between parents and their children by utilizing this method could possibly reduce stress.
A randomized controlled pilot study was completed to determine if the use of writing, written disclosure (WD), would help reduce the levels of stress in parents and/or caregivers of children with autism (ASD). Da Paz, Wallander and Tiemenssa (2018) had 71 subjects who participated. These individuals were all parents of a child with ASD who was between the ages of 3 and 18. The authors found that stress levels reported by participants reduced over time, but not necessarily due to the use of WD. This study failed to provide a direct link between stress reduction and the use of WD. Even though a direct link could not be made there were recorded improvements in stress levels which show cause for further research.

Bräuninger (2012) states that “results clearly indicate that DMT improves stress management strategies and reduces psychological distress and psychopathology and DMT is more effective than non-treatment” (p. 448). This randomized controlled trial included 162 self-selected participants who were struggling with stress. They were divided into a control group and a DMT group. The DMT group participated in DMT sessions for 90 minutes, once a week over a period of 10 weeks. There was no specific DMT approach used in each intervention. It was discovered that stress levels decreased, and mental health improved short-term and over time, therefore DMT reduced stress and negative psychological symptoms. Although this study was limited by its use of self-rating instruments, lack of a control group, the length of the study, and the interpretations of the participants response (Bräuninger, 2012), “a 10-sessions’ DMT treatment format is scientifically evaluated to be efficient in stress treatment” (Bräuninger, 2012, p. 449). This researcher hypothesizes that if utilized regularly dance and/or movement will be an effective method of stress reduction.

It is clear that parents of children with ASD are more susceptible to higher rates of stress due to the many symptoms or symptomatic behaviors that their children exhibit. With little
research directly relating to parental stress and ways to reduce it. These expressive arts options could be very beneficial in helping parents reduce their stress, whether it be through music, writing, or movement.

**Method**

This researcher selected the method option and explored ways to help parents and caregivers of children with autism cope. In addition to the stress that parents of neurotypical children experience, these parents have added stress that comes from advocating for and assisting their children. Helping parents and caregivers reduce their stress could create a more relaxed environment for the entire family.

Having personal knowledge of the restraints that some parents or caregivers experience, this method was created with the intention to be versatile and accessible to as many individuals as possible. This method could be taken advantage of inside or outside of the therapeutic setting, as an individual, a family, or with a group. All movements are done standing but could be adjusted to accommodate individuals who are seated. The movements could also be completed in a small space in a short amount of time.

**Development**

This method was developed through personal exploration. The researcher was in a stressful life situation where time was very limited. Due to a tight schedule, exercise was difficult to fit in and weight control became an issue. These factors also led to frequent headaches and lack of energy. The researcher was searching for ways to take time for their self and help reduce stress. During this same time frame, they began researching ways to help parents and caregivers of children with ASD cope with stress. The researcher decided to complete one of these options Monday through Thursday each week for a period of three months in an attempt to
find a solution to their own stress as well as a method to offer for this research project. The exercise routine described below was created and completed four days per week for the first month. The researcher decided to add alternate activities as choices during the subsequent two months. This experience led to the decision to offer walking and dancing as choices. These three options were activities that this researcher found could be completed in any space, in a short amount of time, at any time of day. During this developmental phase the researcher found that they had more energy and felt better each day that they completed the selected activity. They also had fewer headaches and were able to maintain their weight with less effort than before. These things allowed them to focus on more important things in life and reduced daily stress. For these reasons this researcher selected these specific means of movement. The hope was that completing this activity daily would have similar effects on the participant.

*Participant*

This was a small study with a single volunteer participant, a white female in her early 50’s and the mother to a 13-year-old who has ASD. Her child was diagnosed as a toddler. Prior to this study, the researcher had frequent interactions with the participant in daily life because she is her sister. This relationship could create bias, but this researcher made all attempts at remaining unbiased for the duration of this study. Conversations with the participant were always tense, she spoke very directly, angered easily, and became emotional frequently. This individual was approached about this study. The researcher explained it was to test how or if implementing DMT into their self-care routine could reduce stress therefore benefitting them as a whole. They agreed to participate without hesitation.

*Process*
Before the study began, the participant was given the instructions and a list of options for DMT interventions to use as a part of their self-care routine. The following movements/activities were given:

1) Walking outside for at least five minutes

2) Free (improvisational) dancing to an entire song of choice

3) Exercise routine:
   a. Three deep breaths to start
   b. Standing crunches (20)
   c. Body rolls (10)
   d. Upper body twists (20)
   e. Hip circles (five each direction)
   f. Squats (10)
   g. Wall/Counter push-ups (10)
   h. Three deep breaths to finish

After reviewing the instructions and options with the participant, they agreed to try this activity. They were to select and complete one of these options at least four days each week over the period of one month. A log was created by the participant to track daily activity completion, along with mood and stress levels. The participant tracked their mood and stress levels daily based on the following scale: 1= little to no stress, 2= moderate stress, 3= severely stressed. They recorded these things in the morning and before bed for their own reflection only. This allowed the participant to look back on this experience and see how or if they were affected by this activity. The researcher kept a journal of what moods they witnessed during normal interactions with the participant to compare to the participants moods before participating in the activity.
The participant incorporated movement into their self-care routine for one month, on their own time, at the location of their choice. After completion of the month, they created an artistic reflection of this process and how it affected them. They were asked to use their art to express how they felt before they started this process, during the process, and after. The participant was given the option of using movement or visual art to create their reflection. They chose visual art as the modality for their self-reflection and selected markers and white paper as the medium. The researcher observed the participant’s patterns of movement changing from short and choppy strokes to smoother more circular strokes. The intensity of colors used also softened as the process went on. The participant was asked if they would like to keep their artwork or leave it; they chose to keep it.

After observing the participant’s artistic reflection, the researcher thought about this process in its entirety. After reflecting they completed an artistic reflection of their own.

**Results**

Image 1.
This artistic reflection expressed the shift the researcher witnessed in the participant while they were taking part in this study. The colors represented the following:

- Red - the intensity of the participant prior to the start of the study
- Pink - the shifts from less stressed and more relaxed back to the familiar place of intensity and stress
- Orange - the reduced appearance of stress related responses and behaviors suggesting that the participant was benefiting from incorporating the DMT into their daily self-care routine
- Blue - the encounters with the participant where they appeared significantly more peaceful
- White - the complete lack of stress and total peace which was not achieved

This researcher learned that this particular dance/movement activity had the power to reduce stress in this participant’s life. Based on the researcher’s observation of the participant during regular interactions and observation of their artistic reflection, the researcher found that the participant experienced less stress on days that they participated in a movement activity. Over time, the participant was observed to be less stressed even on days that were not movement days.

**Discussion**

This researcher would like to conduct a more in-depth study with a broad range of participants who are parents and caregivers of children with autism to see how they are affected by daily participation. The researcher would also be interested to learn what other benefits participants experience outside of stress reduction and mood improvement. The power of DMT
is not new, but this researcher believes that this information could open the door to an untapped method of stress reduction for parents and caregivers of children with autism. Future research could bring movement and dance into the lives of individuals who may not otherwise ever experience it.

The number of children with ASD is climbing which raises the question of whether there will be enough adequate support for parents, caregivers, and families with a child with ASD. Will establishing a routine that includes dance/movement as a part of daily life help parents and caregivers reduce stress? Although research directly linking DMT and caregiver stress is limited, this researcher is convinced that DMT could be a powerful coping mechanism. DMT could greatly reduce stress and stress-related symptoms when utilized regularly as a part of a self-care routine. Based on studies using other creative arts therapies and interventions, this researcher believes DMT can be an asset to parents and caregivers looking for a more accessible outlet for their feelings and emotions and ways to reduce stress. The first step is to introduce parents to self-care. Many people are not informed about the need for self-care or what it consists of. When introducing DMT as a means of stress reduction, it is important to explain why taking care of the self is so important and what benefits might be achieved through the process.

This researcher anticipated that they would witness a positive change in the participant’s overall mood and a reduction in their stress level while participating in the activity based on their own exploration. In their study, implementing dance/movement into a self-care routine had a positive outcome for the participant. In the study conducted by Wiedenhofer, Hofinger, Wagner, & Koch, (2017), it was determined that DMT substantially reduced stress in a subclinical population. DMT has been proven to work time and time again. DMT is versatile and can be used as an intervention in the therapeutic environment or just as a part of a daily routine, this
makes it accessible to many different populations. Parents and caregivers of children with autism often times do not take time for themselves. This intervention was designed to fit into almost any schedule to assist busy parents and allow them to take a moment and help manage the stress of their daily lives, specifically as a caregiver for an individual struggling with the challenges of ASD. This researcher personally experienced less stress when utilizing this method and observed less visible stress in the participant.

This researcher focused on parents and caregivers of children with autism but is interested to see how family DMT sessions might be even more beneficial. “Family-based interventions that are directed at both parents and children with ASD may be optimal given the reciprocal ties between parenting stress and child functioning” (Rodriguez, Hartley, and Bolt, 2019, p. 1898). Although symptoms may vary from individual to individual the likelihood that parents will experience stress due to the symptomatic behavior of their child(ren) with ASD and that the children will react to their parent’s stress is clear. “It is important to study parenting stress in the context of the parent–child relationship and consider various factors that might lead to this stress” (Foster, Swain, Scarpa, 2018, p.1081). Including the entire family in the session could help to reduce stressors for all involved.

The body listening that is used in Kelliher’s (2019) study is a foundational quality of dance/movement therapy. The use of dance or movement goes hand and hand with music. This researcher believes that this study could be altered to include dance or movement as the journaling method. These dance journals could then be edited to create a piece of choreography that would also deepen the therapeutic relationship and increase the ability to process feelings, thoughts, and emotions through movement. This could be incredibly beneficial with parents and/or caregivers of children with autism.
Both, Da Paz, Wallander, and Tiemenssa (2018) and Goetz, Rodriguez, and Hartley (2019) used writing as an intervention. Da Paz, Wallander, and Tiemenssa’s (2018) study found that stress levels reported reduced overtime but not necessarily due to the use of WD. It also revealed that there was no effect on caregiver strain and parenting stress. It was mentioned that the WD might have had a greater effect if the participants had been directed to write about their experiences with ASD specifically. WD is a simple intervention that is available to all literate parents and caregivers of children with ASD. This researcher believes that it might be more effective if used in conjunction with another therapeutic method such as dance/movement therapy (DMT). Goetz, Rodriguez, and Hartley (2019) conducted a study using journaling in a diary. This researcher thinks that it would be interesting to see if parents of children with ASD kept journals and shared them with each other literally or through movement, how/if their interactions would change when under stress.

Winther’s research is based on leadership in education, but this researcher believes that it is directly related to individuals and relationships of all kinds. Working with a child with ASD using this same process could be incredibly beneficial. If the child were taught a dance or movement phrase, or created a dance of their own, practiced teaching it to the clinician, then attempted to teach this same dance to their families it would work on building relationships through shared movement. The entire family would hopefully gain a sense of pride in what they have accomplished and their ability to work together.

Darewych, Newton, & Farrugie’s art-based study was focused on the individual with ASD, but it could be used as a tool to help relieve stress for caregivers as well. This could be an activity that caregivers participate in with the person that they care for to help build their relationship and understanding of one another and to learn what each other may dream of even if
these thoughts cannot be expressed verbally. Dance/movement could very easily be substituted for art in this intervention. Creating a routine using drawings or movement as conversation could help build a better relationship that will lead to less stress.

In conclusion this researcher believes that parents and caregivers of children with autism could greatly benefit from the developments of further research. With the number of ASD diagnoses growing the number of parents dealing with caregiver stress will grow as well. There are still many unanswered questions that only further research can answer. Would parental stress be reduced, and would families be more empathetic and compassionate towards one another if they used DMT as a means to gain more knowledge about each other’s experiences and feelings? Would witnessing another’s feelings through movement or expressive art help them to understand one another better and in turn reduce caregiver stress? This researcher hopes there are future studies conducted to find out.

Future research could bring DMT to the attention of individuals seeking parental and caregiver stress reduction. Research including larger numbers of participants including individuals who represent different races, cultural backgrounds, genders, ages, and socioeconomic status would help in generalizing the effects of DMT on this population. DMT is a versatile modality and can be anything from simple breathing to choreographed movement. This broad range of options offers endless opportunities for further research. This researcher believes that future research should include both group and individual interventions, but they should be conducted separately. This would help to determine if DMT alone is effective or as effective or if the DMT combined with the social interaction involved in group therapy have a greater affect. Many parents and caregivers are active participants or are facilitating therapeutic interventions with their children with ASD. Future research could be done exploring how the use
of DMT affects entire families who have a member with ASD. Including everyone in the process could help to establish deeper relationships, create more understanding and empathy, and increase communication skills between members therefore reducing stress and creating a better atmosphere for all involved.
References:


https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1026592305436


DOI: 10.1111/j.1365-2788.2006.00933.x


THESIS APPROVAL FORM

Lesley University
Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences
Expressive Therapies Division
Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Dance Movement Therapy MA

Student’s Name: Lori A. Reaves

Type of Project: Capstone Thesis

Thesis Title: Using Dance/Movement as a Part of a Self-care Routine to Alleviate Stress in Parents and/or Caregivers of Children with Autism

Date of Graduation: May 16, 2020
In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

Thesis Advisor: Annette Whitehead-Pleaux