

More Than Enrichment: Why the Expressive Arts Are Essential for People with Developmental Disabilities

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What if the most powerful intervention for people with developmental disabilities was found in the lyrics of a song, the creation of a painting, or learning a new dance?

We believe the expressive arts are essential and we must ensure access is expanded.

To act on this belief, Easterseals Serving Chicagoland and Greater Rockford held an evening salon at The Arts Club of Chicago to bring arts champions, educators, philanthropists, and disability advocates

together.

Our panelists made clear that expressive arts therapies are not a supplement to special education. They are a core intervention, and the gap between what we know, what we implement, and what we fund is a problem we can no longer treat as acceptable.

Consider what Bryan Lindskog, Music Therapist and Administrator at Easterseals Academy, has witnessed over years of working with hundreds of students. There is never just one story, he said. But there is a through line: connection. With younger students, it is the moment they do something they are proud of: an excited smile that says *I did it, without you*. With older students, it is a classroom moving to music together, making eye contact, responding to one another. And then there is the talent show, where parents worn down by years of navigating the special education system watch their child belt out a song, express themselves, and connect with a crowd.

The scale of need is significant. Nearly 1 in 6 children in Illinois now receives special education, a 17% increase since 2009. As Easterseals President and CEO Sara Ray Hallman said, arts programming remains chronically underfunded and too often treated as optional. "At Easterseals Academy, where we serve students ages 3 to 22, we know it isn't optional. The arts reveal abilities that traditional education often misses."

Dr. Marilyn Griffin shared evidence that supports what practitioners are observing every day. A review by the World Health Organization examined more than 3,000 studies and found that arts-based interventions consistently improve emotional regulation, social interaction, and overall well-being. Music, movement, visual arts, and drama create an alternative pathway for children who may struggle with traditional language-based therapies because there is no prerequisite to engage. These interventions meet students where they are.

The impact extends into adulthood. Denise Fisher, co-founder and executive director of Arts of Life, an arts collective for artists with intellectual and developmental disabilities, described an artist who came to them labeled nonverbal. He joined a band, began to sing, then to speak, then, years later, to advocate for where he wanted to live. "Art gives them agency," she said, "and you start to see changes in other aspects of their lives."

Conversations like this one matter, and so do funding decisions, advocacy efforts, and the questions we are willing to ask about who gets access and who does not.

Learn more about some of the people and organizations already involved in the movement to make art accessible to all and get involved:

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Read the World Health Organization's review of arts-based interventions—the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being: who.int

- Connect with Arts of Life, a professional arts collective advancing the creative practice and leadership of artists with intellectual and developmental disabilities: artsoflife.org
- Learn about evidence-based art therapy practice and find a credentialed therapist through the American Art Therapy Association: arttherapy.org
- Explore the work of Martha Nippert, a celebrated artist known for her vibrant use of color, whimsy, and joy. A former Lead Women's Designer at Michael Kors, she has been featured in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, and *Better Homes and Gardens*, and is now working to help foster and illuminate the creativity in all. www.marnani.com
- Learn more about Music4Good, a group of student musicians from Naperville on a mission to demonstrate the power of music to heal, connect, and transform lives for individuals with autism: mu5ic4good.org.
- Follow Mrs. Blue, who has taught art to children and adults for decades, as she make interactive arts experiences accessible to all through her YouTube channel, [Let's Make Some Art](#)
- Reach out to Easterseals Serving Chicagoland and Greater Rockford to learn more about our programs and how to get involved. Visit eastersealschicago.org or email us at communications@eastersealschicago.org. If you want to help make the expressive arts accessible to more of our students, we would love to hear from you!