

**GROUP ART THERAPY USING PHENOLOGICAL PSYCHOLOGICAL  
TOOLS FOR CHILDREN DIAGNOSED WITH HIGH FUNCTIONING AUTISM  
SPECTRUM DISORDER: DESCRIPTION OF PHENOLOGICAL DISCUSSION  
IMPLEMENTATION AND OUTCOMES.**

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***Abstract:** The current research examined the effects of a group art therapy intervention, using phenomenological psychological methods, on the emotional and social skills of children with HFA and to what degree can they reflect on their own and others' artwork. Thirteen children (6-12 year old) with high functioning Autism, in three small age groups, who attend special education classes in regular schools in Israel, participated in an eight-month weekly intervention. The current article focuses on the phenomenological discussion at the end of each session, where the children learned to observe and reflect on their own and others' artworks using the phenomenological language. All the children, even the younger ones, eventually adopted this language and some even continued to implement it after its conclusion. All of them exhibited improved emotional understanding and expression, and social skills. Focusing on the concrete artworks, in a safe environment with clear and consistent settings and rules helped them achieve these changes.*

***Keywords:** High functioning autism; phenomenology; group art therapy; emotional competence; social skills*

**Introduction**

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by social (Hyman et al., 2020) and emotion regulation difficulties (see Jahromi et al., 2012). High functioning autism (HFA) refers to an ASD condition in an individual presenting with a developmental age close to his/her chronological age and/or whose IQ is above or equal to 70 (Carpenter et al., 2009). Treatment of children with ASD is designed to maximize functional independence by learning adaptive skills and minimizing core deficits. A wide variety of individual and group treatment methods are offered to these children. Many on them focus on improving children's social skills and have limited effectiveness (i.e. Reichow & Volkmar, 2010).

Art therapy is increasingly being used with children diagnosed with ASD/HFA. The existence of a concrete art product can help them stay present at the here and now (Schweizer et al., 2019) and feel motivated to interact with other participants. This can strengthen their social skills (Lasry, 2010). For example, a group program, including visual reflection, with children 10-12 years old diagnosed with HFA, improved their social and emotional skills (D'Amico & Lalonde, 2017). The current intervention implemented the "Haifa Art Therapy" method which combines philosophical and phenomenological psychological principles. Its basic premise is that the visible concrete artwork represents the patient's psychological inner world (Berger, 2014; Simon, 1992). In this approach, the therapist conducts a phenomenological assessment of the client, their process and art product, by observing them while they work. By asking himself/herself questions such as how is the art making process develop over time, how are different art materials combined in the artwork, what does s/he see and what underlying issues are behind the artwork. The goal of this phenomenological exploration is to understand the client more deeply, what he/she needs, what are his/her difficulties and strengths and what it might mean in general (Hazut & Siano, 2008). The therapist also uses the understandings he/she gleans from these observations to direct the phenomenological interpretive process the client conducts during the creative process and after its completion. This process helps him/her become aware of the meaning of what he/she created and gain a deeper understanding of themselves, their emotions and their inner world (Berger, 2014; Orbach, 2019). The Haifa approach can be especially meaningful for children with ASD as it allows them to get to know themselves and share parts of themselves in front of others, from a safe, non-threatening emotional distance, using projective methods and the tangible artwork (Hazut, 2014). This type of intervention was implemented in group art therapy with kindergarten children (Dudai, 2019) and with several adolescents (Gilboa, 2013). These interventions demonstrated that this approach could trigger the children's emotions and self-awareness.

The objectives of the current study were: to examine to what degree are children with HFA able to discuss their own or their group's project (their thoughts, feelings), receive feedback and provide feedback to others; How are these processes change over time and differ between age groups? In addition, the study examined in what ways does group art therapy intervention, using phenomenological psychological methods, improve the emotional and social skills of children with HFA.

## **Participants**

Thirteen children diagnosed with HFA from three age groups (6-7, 8-9, 10-11) and attending special education classes in one of two regular public schools in northern Israel participated in the intervention pilot. The decision which children will participate in the intervention was made in collaboration with their teachers, the class team (teacher assistants or supports, an art therapist) and their parents. Aside from an HFA diagnosis, children were included if they consistently attend school, to allow for group stability.

### **Pre intervention**

Before the start of the program, the research was approved by the university ethics board, the ministry of education and the schools' principals. In addition, teachers and parents signed informed consent forms for them and their children. The specific social and emotional skills the intervention in each age group focused on was determined based on recommendations made by the class staff, researcher observations of the children during school recess, and an intake interview with each child's parents. The issues decided upon were verbal emotion regulation and negative emotion expression in the younger group and low self-esteem and improved emotional responses in the other two.

Before the beginning of the group intervention, the art therapist met individually with each child to get to know him/her and provide explanations about the group processes. This was designed to lower the child's anxiety at the start of the program. Such individual sessions were recommended when working with children with special needs (Krasteva-Ivanova, 2021).

Each intervention group was guided by the researcher who is an art therapist and psychotherapist, with ten years of experience working with children diagnosed with ASD. The younger group was also joined with their teacher and teacher assistant, who took care of any discipline issues, helped preserve the therapeutic setting and supported the children as needed. In the older group, an art therapist student joined the main therapist as a co-group leader and as a support for the children. The intervention included a weekly session lasting 50, 60 or 90 minutes (depending on age group) for eight months. This length of time stemmed from school schedule needs and adaptation to the children's age and nonfamiliarity with group therapy. The first few sessions of the young group were 35 minutes and then gradually extended as the children were better able to concentrate and participate in the session.

Each session always included:

1. Opening ( $\approx$ 10 min) – a guided movement activity designed to bring the children's body into the joint space and enter the room in a softer, gentler manner, as they had control over whether and how much to participate.

2. Check in ( $\approx 10$  min) – including a projective exercise, to allow each child to be heard and learn to consciously listen to others without judgement.

3. Creative intervention ( $\approx 60$  min).

4. Phenomenological observations on their own and others work with the therapist's guidance ( $\approx 10$  min).

From the outset, the therapist focused on creating a safe environment by creating a consistent, stable, constant therapeutic setting, including the physical setting, the therapist, a set of clear rules and the sessions' structure. The intervention included five stages, each with five sessions, designed to gradually shift from individual projects to group projects and back to individual ones at the end, through the art material and art therapy techniques. The current article will focus on presenting the process and outcomes of the phenomenological discussion section of the intervention. See the article of Krasno & Krasteva-Ivanova (2025), for full details of the intervention process and outcomes. In the first session, the art therapist modeled how to use the phenomenological language. For example, after children drew a closed "characteristic shape", the art therapist reflected on their drawings (i.e. *"I see you chose to draw a shape of... and that your shape is placed in the... of the page... and in ... location in the joint space"*) and asked them questions (i.e. *"is the shape known and has a name? What does it remind you of? How did it feel to draw inside it?"*)

### **Research methodology**

The intervention assessment implemented a longitudinal multi case study research approach (Yin, 2009) – using data from different sources (the therapist, teachers, parents), different research tools (semi-structured interviews with the parents, therapist ongoing journal and teacher questionnaires) and the comparison between before and after the intervention. Case studies will be presented for each of the three groups. The use of multi cases and multi sources strengthened research reliability (Greene, 2007). The current article will present only the qualitative data collected. The current study presents only the findings collected with the qualitative tools.

### **Findings**

**In the 6-7 year old group**, the phenomenological discussion developed gradually. At first, the therapist modeled to the children how to react to others and the class staff participated in the discussion. With time, the children joined in. Two of the children, Lior and Arik, enjoyed this discussion and wanted from the start, to talk about their artwork and receive feedback. Towards the end of the year, Lior was able to talk about his relationships with the other children and what he saw in their artworks. For example: *"I wanted to play with Aviel in his big house*

*but at first he didn't listen to me. Eventually Aviel invited me to his house, and we played in our bridges together".* It seemed that he enjoyed Aviel's invitation, and it was important for him to be part of the group. When the artworks were connected to each other. Dan struggled to concentrate during this section and to take part in the group discussion and it took him a long time to participate. During the social game, he wanted, at times, to play alone but was also very interested in joining the others but didn't know how to initiate social relationships. In the phenomenological section, Dan stated: *"today I went to a lot of friends, but I didn't have time to be in my own house. I had fun playing in another friend's house"*. In the following session, Dan already described more social openness by saying: *"Arik has good ideas, so I wanted him to come over and that we plant a vegetable garden"*. Aviel was passive during the first half of the program but towards the middle of the year, he started both responding to his own artwork and to the other children's. Moshe enjoyed observing and talking about his own artwork but struggled with receiving feedback from others and it took him time to comment on others' artwork. However, when he felt safer and started to open up to two of the children, these discussions helped him connect to them. For example, when building their houses, Moshe told Arik: *"It is nice that you made a big door like mine, this way we can visit each other"*. Arik responded saying: *"You are open to me, I can connect with you"*. Moshe answered him: *"When you come to me, we will make a meal and invite anyone who wants to have a party with us. I want friends to come over. This is why I have a big house"*.

**The 7-9 year old group**, gradually learned how to use the phenomenological language and express their feedback respectfully to the other participants. Two of the children, Gavriel and Ina, struggled at first to cope with others' reflections of their work, as they experienced them as intrusive. Over time, with support, they were able to accept others' reactions. Tali struggled to give positive and respectful feedback to Nofar, who she struggled with but gave artificially sweet reactions to the other two. Nofar continuously complemented the other children's artworks.

In the social game, the phenomenological discussion helped some of them understand better what they are going through. For example, Tali kept, at first, a distance from the others and played by herself, even though they invited her to join. When bridges between the houses were added to connect between them, Tali seemingly agreed to participate but her bridge was small, fragile and full of obstacles which made it hard to reach or walk on. During the phenomenological section, the group reflected: *"It was very difficult to reach your bridge"; "Why is it so small?"* Tali replied by saying: *"It is great that nobody will get on it because it can break. You can only see it or be next to the rocks around it"*. The art therapist talked with

the group about Tali's need for a safe space and the importance of letting her choose when to get close and participate. Following that, Tali was willing to accept the group members' invitation to participate in the joint game. At the end of the intervention Tali said: *"I really liked the art creation, sometimes I struggled with the other girls, but now less so"*. For Nofar, the phenomenological discussion helped to cope with a crisis that erupted in the group. She imitated Ina when building the bridge, but didn't have the patience and skills to pull this off. When her bridge collapsed, she also fell apart. In the following week, Ina reflected to her: *"You took pinecones that were too big and heavy, the glue couldn't hold them, so they fell"*. Ina emphasized in her reflection the two themes that were apparent in Nofar's behavior: too big and heavy=unregulated=unbalance and disconnected and eventually crushed. From that session onwards, Nofar started creating out of her own world, after getting confirmation and support to bring herself to the group.

**In the 10-12 year old group**, one child, Kfir, really enjoyed the phenomenological discussion and reflecting on both his own and his friends' artworks. The other three children struggled to talk about their artworks in a way that would be understood by the others. Some of them also struggled to accept the feedback they received and didn't show interest in giving feedback to others. Over time they learned how to use the phenomenological language. For example, when Gill created with clay, which he enjoyed experimenting with, one of the other children told him: *"the horse looks strong and happy"*. Such statements helped Gil understand that others see and understand him well. Yonatan chose in the leaf exercise a large green leaf with sharp thorns that he folded and hid inside and drew a colorful Mandela around it. In the phenomenological section, Kfir told him, *"The leaf was big and scary and now it looks strong. I noticed that this is the first time you draw with colors. I love drawing with a lot of colors, this is the most fun for me. Finally, you are becoming like me in some aspect"*. Kfir was talking about Yonatan's agreement to be part of the social emotional encounter. Yonatan smiled hearing that which made Kfir happy.

When each child (of the three groups) presented his artworks to their parents, most of the children were able to share with their parents the process they underwent in the group, using phenomenological language. For example, Moshe's mother responded to the house he built and asked him: *"would you want us to have such a big house, as the one you built"*? He answered: *"Because the house is big, I invited friends over, I am better with friends in class, mostly with Dan and Arik.... I like our house, it is big enough for us"*.

The children in the three groups exhibited improvement in their abilities to understand and express their emotions and what they are going through, to express their wants and needs

and to talk and listen to others. They also exhibited improvements in empathy, emotion regulation and social skills.

### **Discussion**

One of the most important findings of this study, which was found in all three age group, was the improvement in the children's ability to understand and express what they were going through. The intervention was able to improve one of the most common difficulties experienced by children with ASD, emotional competence. These children's difficulty in emotional understanding, expression and regulation (Saarni, 2000), often results in them feeling anger and frustration (see Mazsfsky et al., 2013). This improvement was the result of the phenomenological section of the program. Through the reflection and discussion of the visible concrete artwork, using the phenomenological questions, the children were able to discover their inner world and connect it to their outer world in a safe space. This process helped them understand themselves better and express themselves directly, with less self-judgment (Berger, 2014). Especially at later stages of the program, when the children were coping with difficulties which came up during their creative work or social interactions, the phenomenological discussion enabled breakthroughs. These situations were also used to provide the children with tools of how to cope with anger and frustration and improve their emotion regulation.

During the intervention, it was apparent that even children who struggled at first with learning how to use the phenomenological tools, eventually adopted them and some even continued to implement them to some degree after its conclusion. In addition, some of the parents adopted parts of the phenomenological questions and tools to help their child advance their progress even further. These findings are supported by a previous group art therapy program that included a reflective discussion (D'Amico & Lalond) and extended them by demonstrating that even young children with HFA are able to use phenomenological language and benefit from it.

In addition, the phenomenological process conducted in this program also improved the children's social skills, including their ability to understand another's viewpoint and ability to talk and listen to other. Difficulties in these social skills are common among children with ASD (Hyman et al., 2020). Similar improvements were found previously (D'Amico & Lalond, 2017; Epp, 2008), but the current study was able to achieve them in younger children with HFA and without direct training in specific social skills. The phenomenological discussion helped improve these skills, by encouraging the children to find ways to connect to the other children through their tangible artwork. This helped them bypass their core difficulty in identifying others' emotions and what caused them (Ben Shalom, 2006). This process was found as

particularly important in the second group, as it allowed the girls to learn to interact with each other with less aggression and find a positive way to communicate with each other.

The current study demonstrated that a group art therapy that includes a phenomenological reflection discussion can be effective in improving their self-awareness, emotional competence, self-regulation, social skills, and self-confidence, both in the group and outside of it. In order to achieve such changes, there needs to be clear structure, setting and rules to create a safe space and to have additional staff and another therapist to take care of any discipline issues, to help the children feel safe and to support them when needed. The study also demonstrated that, in contrast to common perception, children with HFA, even young ones, are able to take part in a phenomenological discussion – in receiving and providing feedback to others related to their emotions and mental process. The use of the tangible art project and the questions offered to them at the end of each session, helped them learn to use this language themselves in regard to their own and others' artworks. In future interventions it is recommended to have the parents more involved and provide them with guidance how to continue the work with their child at home. This is especially important in regard to the use of the phenomenological language. It is also recommended to try to avoid including aggressive and unregulated children in the groups to improve participants' sense of safety

The current study had a number of methodological limitations: The sample was very small, as a pilot study; the schools included in the study do not necessarily represent this population as they were chosen at least partly out of convenience; the younger children just started school and did not know each other, the class staff and how to behave in school. As a result, the group processes took more time and were harder; the study was conducted shortly after the October 7<sup>th</sup> attack on Israel and during the "Iron swords" war that followed. This could have affected the children's stress and mood.

It is suggested to conduct a longitudinal follow-up study to examine the long-term effects of this program and to include varied research tools, such as observations of the children in social situations, as well as interviews with their teachers. Such a study will allow examining whether and how the children continue using the phenomenological language and in what ways it helps them. If with time children slowly use it less and the effects of the intervention lessen, it might be recommended to conduct a short fresh-up intervention to remind them of it and how to benefit from it. It can also be important to examine the degree that the parents adopt similar language and how does that contribute to the children.

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