

BOOK REVIEW

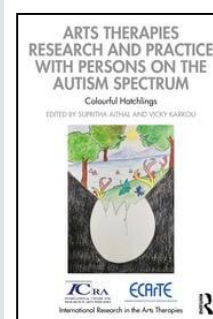
Arts therapies research and practice with persons on the autism spectrum: Colourful hatchlings (Aithal & Karkou, eds.)

Barfin Ayşe Ünügür¹, Thomas Bergmann²

¹ Hospital Königin Elisabeth Herzberge, Germany, ² Hospital Königin Elisabeth Herzberge, Germany

Book information

Title: Arts therapies research and practice with persons on the autism spectrum: Colourful hatchlings
Editors: Supriha Aithal & Vicky Karkou
Publication year: 2024
Publisher: Routledge
Pages: 236
ISBN: 9781032063102



Received: 12 February 2026; Accepted: 17 March 2026; Published 26 May 2026

Editor: Giorgos Tsiris; **Language consultant:** Vuyo Tshwele; **Copyeditor:** Anna G. Castells

This edited volume, compiled by Supriha Aithal and Vicky Karkou (both prominent scholars in creative arts therapies working within international and interdisciplinary context) offers one of the most comprehensive and multidimensional explorations of creative arts therapies for autistic people published to date. Spanning early childhood to adulthood, and covering contexts from schools and clinics to secure psychiatric care and long-term residential environments, the book builds a compelling argument for the centrality of embodied, relational, and nonverbal modes of therapeutic engagement. Across music therapy, drama therapy, dance movement therapy, and art therapy, the authors collectively present autism not as something to be normalised, but as a diverse constellation of sensory, relational, communicative, and cognitive profiles that require flexible, attuned, and multimodal approaches.

The chapters of the book are grouped into three sections framed by an introduction and conclusions. Part 1 focuses on children on the autism spectrum and their families. Across the first six chapters a rich and diverse collection of creative arts therapies is presented, highlighting how relational, sensory, and play-based approaches can support autistic children's emotional, social, and communicative development. A major strength of the chapter is its consistent emphasis on attunement, co-regulation, and individualised approaches, showing how creative modalities can meet

children at their level and help them feel understood, connected, and empowered. The chapters also highlight important themes such as gender differences in autism, the role of family, the importance of emotional safety, and the value of relationship-building as a foundation for therapeutic change. Another strength is the use of case studies and practical descriptions of techniques – metaphor, mirroring, musical attunement, sensory exploration – which give therapists, researchers and special educators concrete ideas they can bring into their own work. Some chapters also offer new tools or assessment ideas e.g., Assessment of Child-Therapist Relationship (ACTR), contributing new perspectives for future research.

All four chapters of Part 2 deepen the book's exploration of creative arts therapies for autistic adolescents and adults, extending the focus from children to more complex developmental, relational, and institutional contexts. A major strength of this section is how it highlights embodied, relational, and multimodal therapeutic mechanisms - mirroring, movement quality, sensory attunement, role-play, improvisation, music-making, and collaborative art. These chapters emphasise the value of therapeutic presence, flexible structure, and nonverbal communication, which are particularly relevant for autistic people who may experience language-based therapy as limiting or inaccessible. The section also demonstrates strong methodological variety – reflective research, phenomenology, single-case studies, thematic analysis – each illuminating different facets of therapeutic change.

Part 3 covers different combinations and conditions and extends the exploration of creative arts therapies across children, adolescents, and adults on the Autism Spectrum, highlighting both innovation and relational depth. Key contributions of this section include the focus on embodied and sensorimotor engagement, attunement and relational presence, and flexible, individualised approaches. Chapters demonstrate how therapeutic interventions can maintain continuity in disrupted contexts (e.g., online therapy during COVID-19), integrate technology thoughtfully, and support nonverbal communication and long-term development. Overall, Part 3 complements the earlier sections by demonstrating how creative arts therapies adapt to diverse contexts, populations, and challenges while maintaining core principles of attunement, embodiment, and relational engagement.

In our view, the core strength of the book lies in the consistency of its therapeutic ethos. Regardless of modality, the chapters return to shared foundations: attunement, sensory integration, relational safety, co-regulation, and creative expression as pathways to communication and identity formation. We find this particularly compelling in light of ongoing critiques of autism interventions that rely heavily on behaviourist compliance models. In particular, intensive early intervention based on applied behavioural analysis (ABA) is a subject of controversy. In a survey of 460 autistic adults and caregivers of autistic children nearly half of the ABA-exposed respondents met the diagnostic threshold for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), indicating harmful side effects (Kupferstein, 2018). Autistic self-advocates believe that ABA is an unethical intervention, and recommend that ABA practitioners listen to autistic people and consider using other interventions in place of ABA (Anderson, 2023). The book offers a strikingly different orientation that is grounded in neurodiversity-affirming, process-oriented, embodied practice. Three major contributions stand out:

Embodied empathy and nonverbal relating. Across multiple chapters, empathy is shown to begin not with cognition but with embodied attunement—shared movement, rhythm, and sensorimotor resonance. These relational foundations form the basis from which emotional and cognitive empathy can develop. Notably, such embodied changes frequently go undetected by standard empathy scales, highlighting limitations in current assessment tools.

Lived-world perspectives: Parents, caregivers, and autistic people. Several chapters centre voices often marginalised in clinical research, including parents, caregivers, and an autistic young adult. Their accounts reveal meaningful changes in motivation, regulation, confidence, family dynamics, and relational trust—forms of therapeutic impact that extend beyond session-based outcomes and are often invisible to standardised measures.

Technology and participatory innovation. The chapters on music therapy technologies (ConTatto, OSMoSIS) demonstrate how digital tools can expand multimodal communication, generate objective movement and sound data, and enhance autistic children's agency by transforming their bodies into expressive instruments. These innovations address both accessibility barriers and longstanding measurement challenges in the field.

Although the book is rich and forward-thinking, there are several limitations from an evidence-based perspective. Large-scale randomised control trials (RCTs) such as the multicenter TIME-A study in music therapy (Bieleninik et al., 2017) and TESIS in dance movement therapy (Matrominico et al., 2018), both of which did not demonstrate significant beneficial effects, are mentioned in the introduction but discussed in one chapter. Additionally, meta-analysis such as the current Cochrane Review on music therapy for autistic people (Geretsegger et al., 2022) are not addressed. We believe that quantitative methodologies are essential for establishing creative arts therapies within healthcare systems, as medical guidelines are largely based on controlled trials. Methodological rigour based on meaningful samples, control conditions, defined outcomes, treatment fidelity, and proper measurement and follow-up is challenging. However, it is pursuing if creative arts therapies are to stand alongside established behavioural interventions and become accessible and affordable for those who could benefit.

Another point concerns current research and concepts, which receive little discussion in the book. In music therapy, biomarkers are increasingly used to link changes in neurological connectivity patterns with behavioural outcomes through imaging, providing evidence of effectiveness (Sharda et al., 2018). Similarly, the multimodal concept of *rhythmic relating* (Daniel et al., 2022), which is based on social timing and social-motor synchrony and related to dance movement therapy, improvisational music therapy, play therapy, and musical interaction therapy, would also have been worth attention and discussion.

Considering the emphasis on both research and practice in the book's title, this publication is rich in practical suggestions that can inspire and inform creative arts therapists, including those from the perspective of related disciplines. The numerous case studies also provide outsiders with a clear sense of how creative methods can support people on the autism spectrum, and they may also encourage practitioners to reflect on their own work and explore it further. For readers primarily interested in research, however, consulting databases and relevant search terms remains necessary to comprehensive overview of the current evidence in creative arts therapies.

Author information

Barfin Ayşe Ünügür (she/her) born in Turkey and began studying the cello at the age of 12. She completed her undergraduate studies at the Academy of Music in Krakow, Poland. She works as an MA music therapist with adults with developmental disabilities and mental health challenges. Her research interests include pre-symbolic interaction, ethics, and multicultural approaches.

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-9010-7844>

 b.uenueguer@keh-berlin.de

Thomas Bergmann (he/him) certified music therapist and supervisor (DMtG), PhD in psychology, co-editor of Musiktherapeutische Umschau (MU), and head of the therapy department of Berlin Treatment. Center for Mental Health in Developmental Disabilities. Focus on clinical research and practice is on creative arts therapy, developmental disability including autism, emotional development, and assessment.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2147-4793>

 t.bergmann@keh-berlin.de

Author contributions

B.A.Ü. contributed to the conceptualisation and investigation of the study, and was involved in writing the original draft as well as reviewing and editing the manuscript. T.B. contributed to the conceptualisation and investigation, participated in writing, reviewing, and editing the manuscript, and oversaw project administration.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) usage

AI tool Grammarly was used for grammar and spelling correction.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report.

References

- Anderson, L. K. (2023). Autistic experiences of applied behavior analysis. *Autism, 27*(3), 737-750. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613221118216>
- Bieleninik, L., Geretsegger, M., Mössler, K., Assmus, J., Thompson, G., Gattino, G., Gold, C. (2017). Effects of improvisational music therapy vs enhanced standard care on symptom severity among children with autism spectrum disorder: The TIME-A randomized clinical trial. *JAMA, 318*(6), 525–535. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2017.9478>
- Daniel, S., Wimpory, D., Delafield-Butt, J. T., Malloch, S., Holck, U., Geretsegger, M. et al. (2022). Rhythmic relating: Bidirectional support for social timing in autism therapies. *Frontiers in Psychology, 13*, 793258. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.793258>
- Geretsegger, M., Fusar-Poli, L., Elefant, C., Mössler, K. A., Vitale, G., & Gold, C. (2022). Music therapy for autistic people. *The Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, 5*, CD004381. <https://doi.org/10.1002/14651858.CD004381.pub4>
- Kupferstein, H. (2018). Evidence of increased PTSD symptoms in autistics exposed to applied behavior analysis. *Advances in Autism 4*(1), 19–29. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1108/AIA-08-2017-0016>
- Mastrominico, A., Fuchs, T., Manders, E., Steffinger, L., Hirjak, D., Sieber, M., Thomas, E., Holzinger, A., Konrad, A., Bopp, N., & Koch, S. C. (2018). Effects of dance movement therapy on adult patients with autism spectrum disorder: A randomized controlled trial. *Behavioral sciences (Basel, Switzerland), 8*(7), 61. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs8070061>
- Sharda, M., Tuerk, C., Chowdhury, R., Jamey, K., Foster, N., Custo-Blanch, M., Tan, M., Nadig, A., & Hyde, K. (2018). Music improves social communication and auditory-motor connectivity in children with autism. *Translational psychiatry, 8*(1), 231. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41398-018-0287-3>