

# An Exploratory Single-case Study on the Use of Expressive Arts Therapy on a Primary School Child with ASD

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## Background

Official statistics showed that the number of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is increasing in Hong Kong. Under local arrangement, students with ASD without accompanying intellectual and language impairment normally attend ordinary primary school. This may mean situating them in a setting that they may find difficult to cope with. Among services available to them, Expressive Arts Therapy (EXAT) is not usually available.

## Objective

The objective of this study is to explore the benefits of using Intermodal approach of EXAT on a child with ASD studying in Hong Kong ordinary primary school setting.

## Method

This study adopted a pretest and posttest design. Participant received an EXAT intervention of 8 sessions. The data was collected from the clinical observation, the parent-administered Autism Treatment Evaluation Checklist (ATEC) and semi-structured interviews with parents, as well as report from school Social Worker and teacher responsible for Special Education Needs (SEN) students.

## Case Background

The participant, Luke (pseudonym), was a 8 years old primary school student with ASD. Luke was having difficulties in making friends, conflict with classmates, maladaptive social behaviors and temper tantrums.

### Understanding the helpless situation of Luke

The experience of the participant Luke (pseudonym) can be understood by the concept of 'restriction' (Knill et al., 2005), :

#### Situational restrictions

1. School:
  - Social rejection, lack of friends;
  - discouragement of expression of negative emotions
  
2. Home:
  - Discouragement of expression of negative emotions;
  - received less attention from parents since little brother's birth;
  - disapproval on academic result.



#### Individual restrictions

- ASD: lack of adaptive social skills;
- low self worth;
- overwhelming anger and lack of ways of emotional regulation.

Luke's social and emotional development was restricted by the sense of inability resulting from the helpless situation.

## EXAT intervention with a play-orientation

Play is the way children commonly used to connect self and the world. Luke's ability of connecting —which in this case, play— is limited or restricted by the sense of inability; Knill et al. (2005) called this a 'restricted/limited play range' (figure 1). EXAT helps children with ASD to free from restriction by expanding their play-range.

EXAT Intermodal approach with a play orientation empowers children by:

- allow emotion expression in a safe way which the form of artistic play became the container of emotion (figure 4, 5);
- facilitate awareness and sense of control and ability in artistic play and creating art work (see figure 3, 6);
- facilitate learning of ways to make friends in play (figure 6);
- enable the child to suggest what he or she would like to play (figure 2, 5).



Figure 2. Luke suggested to play magic tricks

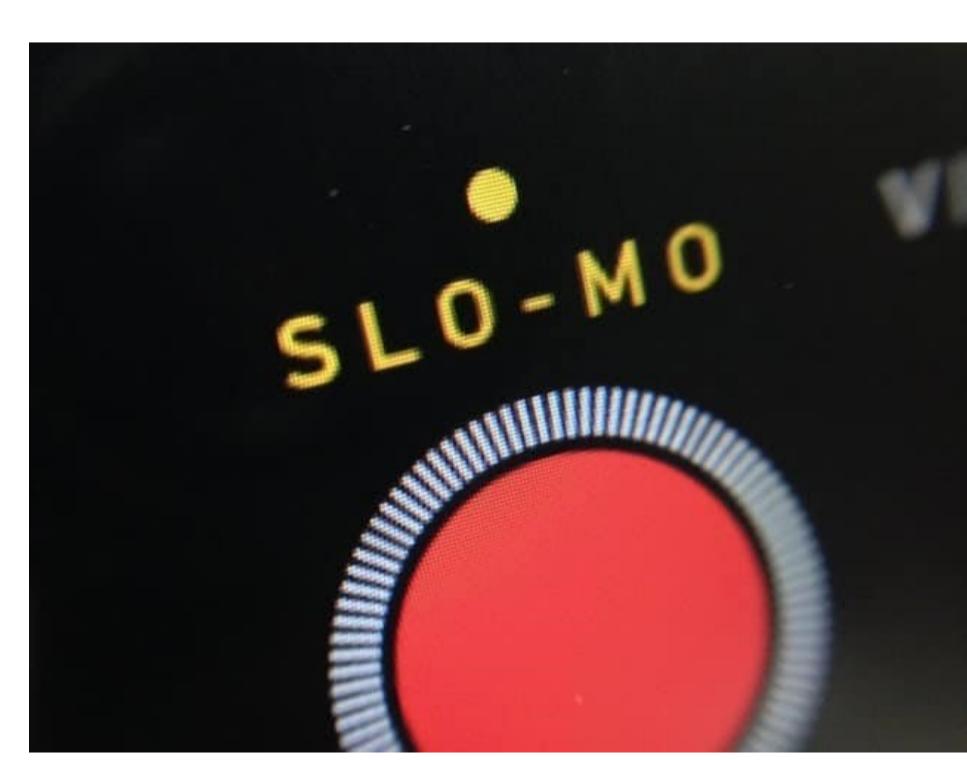


Figure 3. Slow motion video taking, an art form that transforms time and space, was used to facilitate Luke's awareness of body image and impulse control



Figure 4. Luke was drawing to express his anger

In play, Luke learned socially adaptive ways to interact with people e.g. take turns and respect other's space in movement games

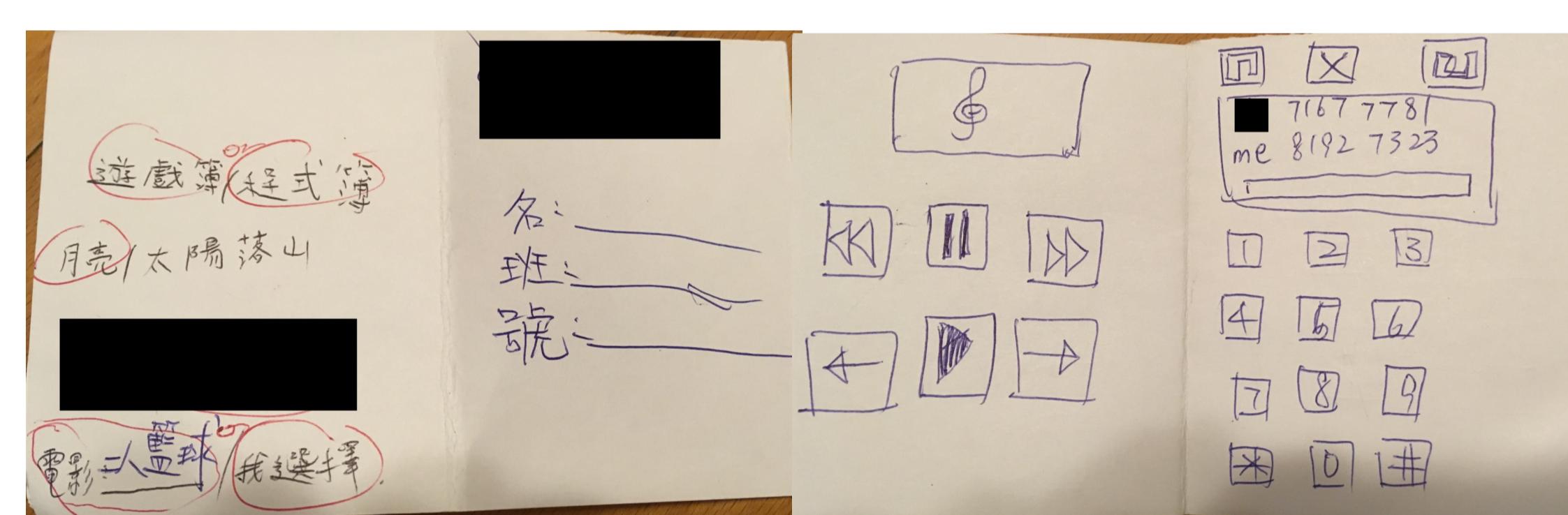


Figure 6. Luke drew a paper game book for the therapist. Luke empowered himself by creating imaginative functions in it, e.g. control the moon rise or fall, play movies and music, play games, phone call etc. He also used this game book to play with therapist.



Luke learned multiple ways to express his anger safely e.g. drawing, pounding the drum, dramatic role play, dancing

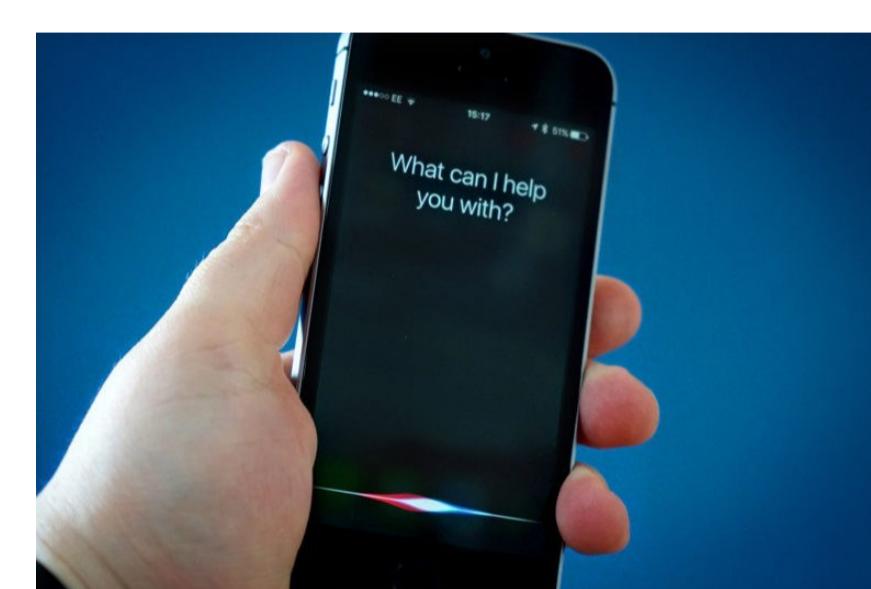


Figure 5. Luke was interested in computers and related products. He played dramatic role-play with the Siri, allowing him to express the emotion that he cannot express in daily life

**PLAY PROVIDES AN OPPORTUNITY TO CHALLENGE LIMITATION, BE CREATIVE, DEVELOP PROBLEM SOLVING SKILLS TO COPE WITH THE HELPLESS SITUATION.**

## Findings

### In Parents' Report in ATEC and Interview that Supported the EXAT

Findings in parent-administered ATEC and semi-structured interview supported Intermodal approach of EXAT might be beneficial to participant's development of communication, sociability and imagination.

#### Autism Treatment Evaluation Checklist (ATEC)

The parents reviewed in ATEC that the participant improved in the following aspects:

- using successive sentences,
- carrying on fairly good conversation,
- ability to communicate
- shared more and showed more affection;
- became less dislike to be held/cuddled;
- more successful in greeting parents
- became more active in initiating activities
- showing more imagination

Parent reported in the interview that comparing with the time before the therapy, Luke:

- became more actively engaged in interaction with family members;
- became more actively engaged in conversation,
- initiated more suggestions, and also
- showed more care towards his mother.

The mother confirmed that Luke had made new friends in school.

#### Parent interview

## Recommendation

The author recommended further research using this approach to build up a solid body of knowledge. From policy perspective, the author recommended more sources for EXAT service and suitable school arrangements to support such service.

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## Reference

Knill, P. J., Levine, E. G., & Levine, S. K. (2005). Principles and Practice of Expressive Arts Therapy: toward a Therapeutic Aesthetics. London; Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.