

Research Paper

Supporting Autistic Children Through Japanese Art Therapy: Integrating Origami, Sumi-e, and Kintsugi-Inspired Practices

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ABSTRACT

Japanese art forms—particularly origami (paper folding) and sumi-e (ink brush painting)—offer structured, sensory-rich, and culturally rooted activities that align well with common strengths and support needs of autistic children. This narrative review synthesizes recent evidence on creative arts therapies for autism and examines the plausibility and practicality of Japanese art modalities as adjunct supports. We outline mechanisms of action (e.g., motor sequencing, joint attention, emotion regulation), propose session protocols adaptable across developmental profiles and sensory preferences, and offer an evaluation framework compatible with school and clinic settings. We also introduce kintsugi as a therapeutic metaphor for resilience and self-acceptance. The paper concludes with implementation recommendations, ethical considerations, and research gaps, including the need for rigorous trials focusing specifically on Japanese art modalities with autistic youth.

Keywords: *Autism, ASD, Art Therapy, Origami, Sumi-E, Kintsugi, Creative Arts Therapies, Occupational Therapy, Education, Resilience*

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is characterized by differences in social communication and restricted or repetitive patterns of interests, often accompanied by distinct sensory processing profiles and motor planning challenges (APA, 2013). Beyond oriented and educational interventions, creative arts therapies can complement core supports by providing alternative, non-verbal channels for engagement, expression, and regulation. This paper explores Japanese art therapy modalities—principally origami and sumi-e—tailored to autistic children, and situates them within contemporary evidence for creative arts interventions.

Aims: (a) synthesize relevant evidence on arts-based supports for autistic children; (b) translate Japanese art modalities into structured session plans; (c) propose objective outcome measures and research designs; and (d) articulate ethical and cultural considerations.

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BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE OVERVIEW

Creative arts therapies and autism

Recent systematic reviews indicate that creative arts therapies (including art and music therapy) can improve social communication, regulation, and emotional expression in populations with neurodevelopmental conditions, with ASD comprising the majority of included studies (Martínez-Vérez et al., 2024). Benefits are typically noted in adaptive, joint attention, engagement, and caregiver- or teacher-rated functioning. Although heterogeneity in study design and outcome measures remains a limitation, the overall trend supports the use of arts-based adjuncts alongside standard care (ASAT, n.d.).

Japanese modalities in context

- **Origami** engages stepwise visuospatial sequencing, bilateral hand use, and fine-motor control. Case reports, qualitative studies, and small-scale investigations suggest feasibility for enhancing attention, frustration tolerance, and following multi-step directions while offering intrinsically motivating, concrete end-products (Anez-Moronta et al., 2021; Yodmon, 2020).
- **Sumi-e** (ink-brush painting) employs simple, highly practiced strokes and attention to breath, posture, and pacing. The aesthetic emphasizes economy of movement and intentionality—qualities that map well to calming routines and graded sensorimotor input (Japan House, n.d.).
- **Kintsugi** (“golden joinery”) is not a child-friendly medium in its traditional form but functions as a powerful metaphor in therapy: visible repair and appreciation of imperfections can support self-acceptance and resilience narratives (Quill et al., 1989).

Related Japanese-origin approaches

Daily Life Therapy (Higashi approach), developed in Japan, emphasizes structured group activities, movement, music, and art in highly routinized daily programs. While historically influential, the empirical base is mixed and dated; nonetheless, its attention to rhythm, routine, and arts integration is relevant when designing arts-infused schedules (Quill et al., 1989).

Theoretical and Mechanistic Rationale

1. **Motor sequencing & praxis:** Origami’s discrete steps target visuo - construction and praxis; sumi-e’s repeated strokes promote motor planning and precision with reduced visual clutter.
2. **Regulation & arousal:** Predictable folding sequences and breath-paced brushwork can be titrated for calming or alerting effects (Yodmon, 2020).
3. **Joint attention & communication:** Shared step-by-step instruction, turn-taking, and choice-making foster social reciprocity (Anez-Moronta et al., 2021).
4. **Self-efficacy & resilience:** Rapidly visible progress reinforces competence. Kintsugi-inspired activities normalize mistakes as part of the creative process.
5. **Cultural learning:** Exposure to authentic cultural practices supports global citizenship and respects origin traditions (Japan House, n.d.).

PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION: SESSION PROTOCOLS

Origami protocol (Foundations → Fluency)

Table 1. Sample Origami Module and Learning Targets

Week	Activity	Motor Target	Communication Target	Regulation Cue
1	Fold a paper hat	Bilateral folding	Requesting materials	“Pause and press”
2	Cup and boat	Crease accuracy	Actions	Breath count before next fold
4	Jumping frog	Sequential folding	Peer teaching	Breaks for tactile relief
6	Crane	Complex sequencing	Commenting/show-and-tell	Deep pressure on folds

Sumi-e protocol (Breath-Stroke-Form)

Figure 1. Basic sumi-e stroke sequence

[Dot] → [Line] → [Leaf] → [Petal] → [Stem]

Each stroke is paired with one breath cycle, supporting regulation.



Kintsugi-inspired activity

Figure 2. Example child-friendly kintsugi metaphor

[Image placeholder: a cracked paper cup “mended” with gold paint]

Represents resilience, reframing imperfection as uniqueness.



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Program Design and Measurement

Table 2. Suggested Outcome Measures

Domain	Measure	Example	Source
Social communication	SRS-2	Parent report	Martínez-Vérez et al. (2024)
Engagement	Partial-interval coding	30-second on-task	ASAT (n.d.)
Emotion regulation	BRIEF-2 Emotional Control	Teacher rating	Clinical practice
Motor skills	Crease accuracy rubric	% correct folds	Anez-Moronta et al. (2021)
Satisfaction	Goal Attainment Scaling	Parent/child interview	Yodmon (2020)

Proposed Study Designs

(See Figure 3 for a simplified logic model.)

Figure 3. Logic Model Linking Inputs → Activities → Outcomes

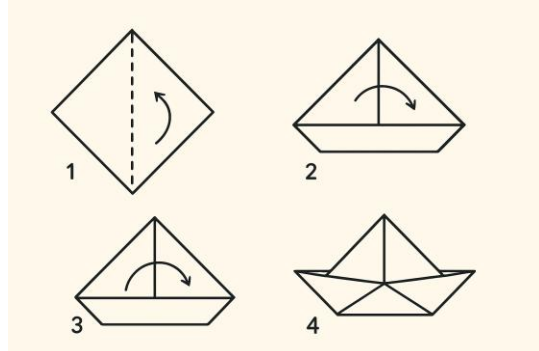
Inputs: Materials, trained facilitator, structured protocol

→ Activities: Origami folding, sumi-e painting, kintsugi metaphor

→ Short-term Outcomes: Improved regulation, engagement, fine motor skills

→ Long-term Outcomes: Increased resilience, communication, and participation

Figure 3. Step by step instructional Origami



Equity, Culture, and Ethics

- Cultural respect: teach origins and meanings; avoid tokenism (Japan House, n.d.).
- Accessibility: adapt materials for motor/sensory differences.
- Consent and assent: obtain child assent in accessible formats.
- Neurodiversity-affirming lens: position activities as supports, not cures (ASAT, n.d.).

Limitations and Future Directions

Evidence directly evaluating origami or sumi-e in autistic children is emergent and often limited by small samples, qualitative designs, or lack of control groups (Martínez-Vérez et al., 2024). More rigorous trials and culturally responsive designs are recommended.

CONCLUSION

Japanese art modalities offer structured, meaningful, and engaging pathways to support autistic children's participation, communication, and regulation. While high-quality, modality-specific evidence is still developing, the convergence of broader creative arts therapy findings and the distinctive affordances of origami and sumi-e justify carefully designed implementations with robust measurement. Embedding a kintsugi-inspired ethos can help children reframe errors as part of growth, enhancing resilience and self-acceptance.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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