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DALLAS FORT WORTH

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A RESOURCE FOR FAMILIES LIVING WITH LEARNING DIFFERENCES AND SPECIAL NEEDS

**5 FALL
EVENTS
FOR THE
WHOLE
FAMILY**

80
**MUST-HAVE
SPECIAL NEEDS
RESOURCES**

+

**DATE
NIGHTS
WITH
RESPITE
CARE**

**MEET MOM
NEXT DOOR
DINA ALSAID
& SON ABE**

**HOW NOT TO
GET EXPELLED**

**WORKING TOGETHER
TO KEEP YOUR CHILD
IN SCHOOL**

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Better With a Beat

For kids with disabilities, creativity is power

WORDS HANNAH BUSH

GINAFAER GRAY WAS LOSING HOPE. The Mesquite mom had visited countless dance studios and was no closer to finding the right fit for her daughter.

By the time she stumbled upon Lakewood Conservatory of Fine Arts, Gray had spent five long months studio shopping.

"We tried many different classes but they were either too packed or teachers would tell me she wasn't ready for lessons," Gray recalls. Olivia, 7 years old and uncomfortable in group settings, was diagnosed with high-functioning autism last year.

After a long phone call with Anna Sessions, LCFA's director of dance, Gray took Olivia to try a class. It was a hit. "She went in to that first class and was shy for about 10 minutes," Gray says. "She was doing things she was instructed to do ... made her first friend, and it just flowed from there" Gray says.

Olivia is one of many students with disabilities thriving in standard classes at LCFA.

Fundamentals including movement, balance and rhythm are taught through a variety of activities tailored to the abilities of the students. A class favorite is "animal action," where students emulate a specific animal while clapping to the music.

"By taking things kids are familiar with and having them act like that thing, they are telling their bodies what to do," says Sessions. This game of association enhances the students' coordination and gives them the ability to use different parts of their brain all at the same time.

According to research published in *Adapted Physical Activity and Kinesitherapy* in 2014, dance activities also help people with disabilities develop autonomy and a sense of identity. By exploring different movements and seeing what their brains and their bodies *can* do, dancers become more self-aware—and ultimately more

confident in their abilities.

Whether it's dance, music or theater, Nicki Cohen, a professor of music therapy at Texas Woman's University who has a doctorate in music education, says it is essential for all children to be involved in the arts—especially kids with disabilities. "The arts provide a sense of otherworldliness that is not found in other experiences, which is so imperative for children who live in restricted settings," she explains.

Dance and other art forms are accessible means of self-expression, a freeing realization for kids who may struggle with communication.

Madison Michel, a third-generation music therapist at Heart and Harmony in Fort Worth, uses music to help her clients communicate and build other skills.

"For a student working on speech, we'll use songs to help with sound ... for a student with impulse control, we'll work with drums ... for a student working on cognitive skills, we'll color-code the piano keys," she explains. And for the kid who loves hard rock, Michel will frame the session around AC/DC. "My main focus is getting the child motivated so we can then work on response through activity," she says.

That's one of the main advantages of the arts as a vehicle for learning a skill: It's a great motivator. Kids *want* to dance. They *want* to play music. They *want* to create.

But don't be fooled by the fun. "The foundations of music therapy are so much more advanced than just showing up to a session and listening to music," says Michael Zanders, who has a doctorate in music therapy and is coordina-

tor of music therapy studies at Texas Woman's University. "We know that music affects the brain. Elements of music—rhythm, harmony or melody—access areas of the brain that are not normally used."

He goes on to add that the success of music therapy is not dependent on musical ability but rather creativity. Like dance, music gives kids with disabilities a sense of autonomy and the tools and confidence to express themselves creatively.

Michel believes that creativity is power: "The most powerful thing [is] giving our clients the ability to take control and create music." ●

Magic & Music

Though students with special needs can join typical classes at the **LAKWOOD CONSERVATORY OF FINE ARTS**, the studio launched a special needs program this fall. Two specialized classes—Magical Music and Magical Movers—teach kids ages 2-5 the basics of music and dance at a pace to match their abilities. 7328 Gaston Ave., Suite 130, Dallas, 903/390-1712; lakewoodconservatory.com/special_needs_program.html

Fort Worth-based **HEART AND HARMONY** provides adaptive music lessons and music therapy in a home studio or in the student's own home. Individual music lessons and therapy sessions are 30 or 60 minutes, typically once per week; prices start at \$35 for a half-hour music lesson and \$40 for a half-hour therapy session. Contact the studio to schedule a free phone or FaceTime consultation. 817/458-8813; heartandharmony.com