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Music and art prove calming combination for autistic children

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Children paint to the beat of music at the Children's Institute in Kennedy Town. Photo: K. Y. Cheng

Seven children were in Jacqueline Nilsen's classroom. One was screaming, another rolled on the floor. Others jumped around. Then the music started, and the atmosphere changed. The screaming, rolling and jumping gave way to colourful strokes of paint on paper.

It was the Paint the Music class at the Children's Institute in Kennedy Town, a private school for children with special educational needs. In the class, autistic children paint to the beat of different kinds of music, from classical to pop.

School director Dr Jeremy Greenberg started a study on the class' influence on autistic children in November 2011. In May, he and Nilsen will present the results at a world symposium on behaviour analysis in Chicago.

Four children were observed in the study, but one left the school midway. They were put into various settings - in the classroom with music and Nilsen's instructions and in the same classroom with easels but without music and instructions.

Greenberg found the children painted 70 to 80 per cent of the time when observed with Nilsen and music present. But when she and the music were absent, they did not paint at all.

The children were also removed from the class for as long as a month, but as soon as they returned, it took them no time to readjust to the environment and learn to paint again.

"They've obtained a lifelong skill," Greenberg said, adding that the children were a lot calmer during Nilsen's class. "It's a magic combination - the music, movement and painting."

But he said the study could not show if the effect of Nilsen's efforts extended

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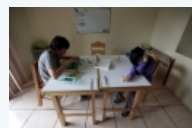
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outside the class, because while he saw the children's conditions improving, other activities at the school could also have contributed.

Nilsen said she was impressed by improvements in the children's social skills.

"I played *Gangnam Style* in class once. At the next class, a pupil asked for it," she said. "That's social. It's significant for them."

Pupils usually start showing behavioural improvements after about four classes, when they start to follow her instructions and paint largely on their own, she said.

Nilsen said she emphasised the use of hands in her class. "So they understand how powerful their hands are, instead of just flapping them," she said.

This article appeared in the South China Morning Post print edition as Calming combination of music and art

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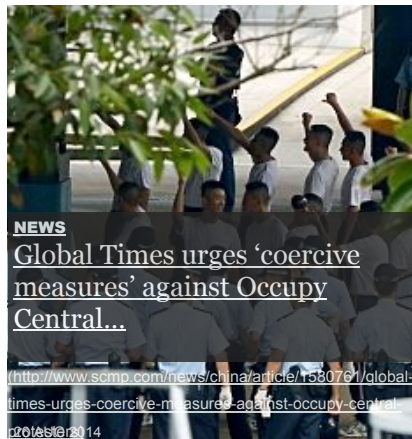
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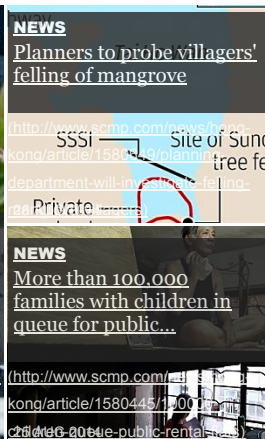
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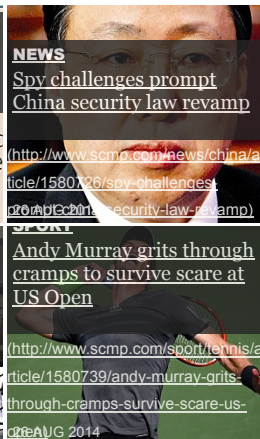


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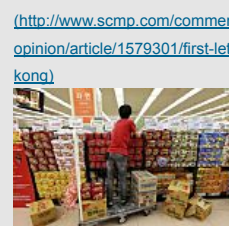
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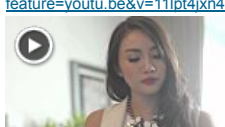


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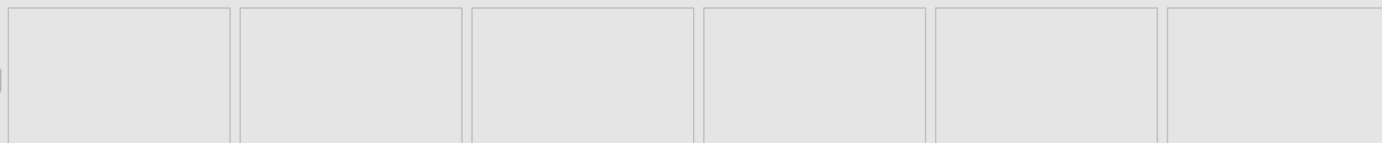
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