

## Art Therapy in Children and its Effectiveness

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### ABSTRACT

Art therapists are professionals who have training in clinical skills and art therapy theories. They use art materials and the art-making process to improve the emotional, psychological, and physical well-being of children and their families. Although there can be an educational part of art therapy, the focus is on the creative process. Art can help children express themselves to work through pain, fear, stress, and other emotions.

Keywords: Art therapist, psychology, and education.

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### INTRODUCTION

A child naturally communicates through art and play. But, it can be hard to talk about one's feelings surrounding a diagnosis, treatment, and hospital stay [1]. Art Therapy is described as a form of expressive group therapy that helps people express themselves in ways beyond words. It teaches service users the basics of artistic expression and allows them to use new mediums to explore their inner emotions. Art therapy is also a mental health profession in which clients, facilitated by the art therapist, use art media, the creative process, and the resulting artwork to explore their feelings, reconcile emotional conflicts, foster self-awareness, manage behavior and addictions, develop social skills, improve reality orientation, reduce anxiety, and increase self-esteem [2]. A goal in art therapy is to improve or restore a client's functioning and his or her sense of personal well-being. Art therapy practice requires knowledge of visual art (drawing, painting, sculpture, and other art forms) and the creative process, as well as of human development, psychological, and counseling theories and techniques. Cathy Malchiodi, author and art therapist, states that "art therapy asks you to explore your inner experience, your feelings, perceptions and imagination. While art therapy may involve learning skills or art techniques, the emphasis is generally first on developing and expressing images that come from inside the person, rather than those he or she sees in the outside world"

[3]. Based on this understanding, TOP offers one of the arts therapies. Art therapists work with people of all ages: individuals, couples, families, groups and communities [4] [5] [6]. They provide services, individually and as part of clinical teams, in settings that include mental health, rehabilitation, medical and forensic institutions; community outreach programs; wellness centers; schools; nursing homes; corporate structures; open studios and independent practices. Children are more readily inclined to express themselves visually than verbally as visual language is an inherent part of our human expression and children are naturally creative and artistic [7]. Thoughts and feelings that may otherwise be difficult to express find a cognitive-linguistic voice through the visual arts. Unlike traditional counselling whereby talk therapy is heavily relied upon, art therapy engages all of the senses in the creative process [8] [9]. It utilizes art media, symbols, metaphors, images, imagination, and creativity to explore problems and concerns. Where words alone may not capture the heart of the concern, crayons and markers in the art-making process can help children speak volumes. Art therapy is an appropriate and safe approach to use with children experiencing a wide array of general health and mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety, behavioral problems, grief and loss, family/divorce issues, developmental disorders, eating

disorders, abuse, trauma, cancer, and psychosomatic concerns (e.g., irritable bowel syndrome), to name a few [10]. Art therapy requires specialized training in the art therapy process that is beyond the training required for counselors, psychologists, social workers, and nurses. An art therapist will consult with parents to make sure that art therapy is appropriate for their child [11].

### **The Art Therapy Process**

We encourage kids to explore a range of art materials and create artwork to express themselves and their experiences and feelings. While your child engages in the creative process, the art therapist offers support [12]. At times in a session, we may ask your child about his or her art-making process and artwork. Other times, we may only talk to you and your child, and not engage in the creative process. Most often, both art-making and conversing will happen throughout the session. Art therapists have the training to honor the creative process [13]. They know the best way to connect with children to help them cope and heal.

### **Uses**

Art therapy can be used to treat a wide range of mental disorders and psychological distress. In many cases, it might be used in conjunction with other psychotherapy techniques such as group therapy or cognitive-behavioral therapy [14].

Some situations in which art therapy might be utilized include [15]:

- Adults experiencing severe stress
- Children suffering from behavioral or social problems at school or at home
- Children or adults who have experienced a traumatic event
- Children with learning disabilities
- Individuals suffering from a brain injury
- People experiencing mental health problems.

Some conditions that art therapy may be used to treat include [16]:

- Aging-related issues
- Anxiety
- Cancer

- Depression
- Eating disorders
- Emotional difficulties
- Family or relationship problems
- Medical conditions
- Psychological symptoms associated with other medical issues
- PTSD
- Psychosocial issues
- Stress
- Substance use

### **Benefits art therapy**

Art therapy has been around since the 1940s [17]. Two pioneers in the field, Margaret Naumburg and Edith Kramer, used art therapy as a way to help clients tap into their inner thoughts, feelings and experiences through creative expression. Therapist use patients' free form art expressions to encourage them to talk about the images and to begin to look to themselves for meaning and insight. Combined with talk therapy, it can help people deal with strong emotions, increase self-awareness and self-worth and decrease stress and anxiety [8]. Art therapy can involve a variety of creative expression including drawing, painting, coloring or sculpting, to name a few. Over the decades, art therapy has been used mainly by mental health practitioners for patients ranging in age from the very young to the elderly, war veterans, prisoners and people with diagnosed mental disorders. By the 20th century, art therapy was a recognized field requiring certification and training in both art and therapy. Art therapy has also moved outside of mental health facilities and into other community settings such as schools, shelters, nursing homes, residential treatment facilities and halfway houses. In more recent years, researchers have explored the benefits of art therapy for treating a variety of physical health difficulties. Some of their findings show art therapy [9]:

- Helped reduce pain, decrease symptoms of stress and improve quality of life in adult cancer patients.

- Improved ability to deal with pain and other frightening symptoms in children with cancer.
- Reduced stress and anxiety in children with asthma.
- Stimulated mental function in older adults with dementia.
- Indicated a reduction in depression in Parkinson's patients.

In her book, *The Art Therapy Sourcebook*, Cathy Malchiodi, a leading expert in today's art therapy movement, states that, through art therapy "people may find relief from overwhelming emotions, crises or trauma. They may discover insights about themselves, increase their sense of well-being, enrich their daily lives through creative expression, or experience personal transformation" [10]. Michigan State University Extension recognizes that overall human health encompasses many aspects, and positive health outcomes involve integrated mental, physical, social/emotional and environmental approaches [11]. Art therapy is one approach that has proven to benefit both mental and physical health.

#### **Trauma and Treatment**

There is a large range of different types of trauma that one can experience, and each type of trauma, whether it is acute or chronic, can cause a variety of symptoms that can be unique to each person [12]. Children who have experienced either types of trauma can experience feelings of loss, fear, anxiety, depression, displacement, confusion and anger, among others. With such a large range of symptoms, it is important to be aware of how to properly treat them so the child is not re-traumatized. Art therapy, if used correctly, can be altered to fit children individually to best suit their experience and symptoms. With that, it is extremely important to be aware of the issues that can be caused by inaccurately treating a child in therapy. When dealing with children, it is essential to understand the process of working with them so that you can help with their recovery in a constructive way [13]. If the therapist is not aware of the implications of

incorrectly administering treatment to children, then it can exacerbate or intensify the psychological trauma for them which can carry on throughout their lives. One of the issues that [14] discusses is that, it is important to view artwork within the client's context, and be aware of developmental, environmental and other influences, before any impression is formed about a client's expressive therapeutic output. Perceptions from artwork should be verified with the client if possible so the evaluations are contextual [7]. The different developmental stages are exclusive to each child, and can affect their treatment and how they are processing the trauma. If this issue is not taken into consideration, then the therapist could develop an inaccurate perception of what the child has created. By being able to learn about each individual child, it will ensure for a more accurate and effective therapeutic experience [15].

The relationship between the therapist and child can become quite strong and important in the healing process. Often, this relationship is the only thing that is constant and stable within their lives since the trauma, especially, as stated earlier, with refugees and cases where they have been displaced from their homes and families [14]. The use of the artwork develops rapport between the client and therapist because the art work acts as an intermediary between them [14]. In this process, transference can develop with children becoming attached to the practitioner, or counter transference, where the practitioner treats the children as their own [2]. Transference can make the termination of the therapy a very complex moment for the child who has a history of loss of attachment from someone. Termination that is handled properly can help children manage the ability to enter and leave relationships in a way that does not disrupt their lives with previous traumatic responses, and for this to occur, they should help the child prepare for the time when treatment comes to an end [16]. If transference develops between them and it is not resolved in an

appropriate way, the children can develop problems coping with the loss or change of something in their life. In contrast to transference they can also go the opposite way and develop resistance towards the entire therapeutic experience. Sometimes this can be a result of being influenced by the parents because they might be fearful that their child is being exposed to the trauma again and being put into more distress because of the therapy [17].

Parents intuitively want to protect their children from sadness and pain, so they are cautious when it comes to opening up the conversation about difficult situations that have previously caused the child stress. Being aware of these potential situations, as well as having a background in art, can bring a more thorough understanding of any issues that may arise during the therapeutic process.

#### CONCLUSION

While research suggests that art therapy may be beneficial, some of the findings on its effectiveness are mixed. Studies are

often small and inconclusive, so further research is needed to explore how and when art therapy may be most beneficial.

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