

Art Therapy: Drawing Outside the Lines

What is art therapy?

Drawing outside the lines of conventional practice, art therapy is evolving as a popular mode of psychotherapy. Art therapy combines therapy with art-making to embrace the creative aspects of self-expression, self-awareness, and problem-solving. The intention of art therapy is to help children use art as a way to express and communicate feelings and to work through the issues and concerns that brought him/her into therapy. As the old saying goes, every picture tells a story; art therapy allows children to tell a story they may have been unable to otherwise express.

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. 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. 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. 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.

What can be expected in an art therapy session?

In an art therapy session the child is given the opportunity to use simple art materials such as pastels, paint, paper, and markers to engage in the creative art-making process. No art experience or talent is required as the process is focused on therapeutic underpinnings such as self-expression, rather than on creating an aesthetically pleasing art product. The child can choose to freely create art or the art therapist can assist the child in the art-making process by giving him/her a directive. For example, the child may not know what to draw so the therapist may give a directive such as “draw your family as trees in a forest.” This engages the child’s imagination and fosters a new approach to thinking about his/her family. Depending on the child’s concerns, the directives are suited to help him/her move towards his/her goals.

Once the child has completed making art he/she can choose to let the art speak for itself by witnessing and honouring its presence or the child and art therapist can engage in

discussion about the art product. The art therapist may lead the discussion by being curious about the art piece and may ask a number of different questions, for example: (a) What was the art-making process like for you? (b) What do you notice about your art? (c) What is going on in this part of the picture? (d) What title would you give this picture? Client needs are met by exploring life issues and concerns through the interplay of art-making and verbal discussion.

What are some benefits of art therapy?

Art therapy benefits children, youth, and adults by offering an outlet for authentic self-expression that reduces stress and alleviates emotional distress. Research shows that making art itself can have a healing effect physiologically and psychologically on the mind and body by engaging the body's relaxation response and inducing a meditation state. In addition, art therapy targets the core issue quickly and effectively allowing individuals to see the problem from a different and new perspective. Thus, art therapy offers a space for holistic healing while providing an enjoyable, safe, and effective approach.

Rachela Buonincontri, BA, MC:AT, CCC
Certified Counsellor and Professional Art Therapist
Phone: (403) 921-7848
Email: art-therapy@shaw.ca
Website: www.livingincolor.ca