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# Therapeutic Children's Mural

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## **Art Therapy in Children with Physical and Mental Disabilities**

### ***Introduction***

This past year I have been working on completing my bachelor's degree in Psychology while being as employed full-time at Emma Pendleton Bradley Hospital, the nation's first children's psychiatric hospital as a milieu therapist. My job description is to support eight adolescents as they learn life skills in a residential setting. This means that this is the child's residence until he or she is ready to transition to another placement or go back to their homes. The adolescents I work with have a range of combined mental, physical, emotional and psychiatric disabilities. Some of these disabilities include autism, mild-moderate mental retardation, fetal alcohol syndrome. However many of these disabilities are also combined with complicated familial backgrounds and/or psychiatric disabilities including but not limited to incest and other forms of abuse, bipolar disorder, depression, schizophrenia, and obsessive compulsive disorder. I am always trying to come up with projects for the kids that they will not only enjoy but that will also help them build their skills.

The teenagers already do a lot of arts and crafts at the house. However, they usually complete very small projects that eventually end up in the trash. I wanted to ignite their zeal for art by coming up with a new and exciting project and I also wanted to keep the project therapeutic. Painting on small canvases has been a hobby of mine since I was a child. My personal passion for tactile art has always made art therapy an aspect of psychology that has piqued my interest. I wanted to use my Senior Honors Project as an opportunity to tie in my interests in both art and psychology, as well as to learn more about the field of art therapy.

A mural seemed like the perfect project to take on and combine my compassion

for children and interest in art therapy. After receiving permission from the Director of the Residential Programs at Bradley the wall selected for the mural was 8' x 24' located in the recreational room of the residence. Each youth had their own 4' x 4' section on the wall. I worked individually with each of the residents to create their own personalized piece of art that contributed to one large permanent piece of art. Before I began the artistic portion of the project I did preliminary research on the topic of art therapy and how it can be specifically beneficial for each of the youth and their disabilities.

### ***What is Art Therapy?***

Art therapy is a form of expressive therapy. (Machioldi, 2003) This essentially means that the emphasis is put on the creation of art instead of the final product. It is rooted in the concept that the creative process of art is healing and therapeutic. It is ultimately a positive contributor to the quality of life. (Machioldi, 2003) Like other forms of psychotherapy, art therapy is also used as tool to help patients develop self-esteem, identity and self-understanding. It is believed that through artistic creation one can relieve stress and resolve conflict. (Machioldi, 2003)

Art therapists believe that every human being is a creative being and that one's individual creativity can be channeled in order to give meaning to their art. They are not wrong in their beliefs. Any person can watch children from a very early age incorporating elements of imagination, originality and inventiveness in their play.

### ***Art Therapy and Adolescents***

Teens can be concerned with their image and popularity any deviation from the norm can be devastating. (Dan, 2006) Many would consider talking to a psychologist as

mortifying, because that would mean that they were “crazy.” The image that the media has developed of “shrinks” for the general public involves talking, couches, and straight jackets. (Dan, 2006) Art therapy breaks away from that stereotype completely and can be less intimidating for some teens who feel uncomfortable talking to a therapist or who cannot articulate their feelings. Art and imagery comes before language and was our raw understanding of the world from infancy. (Dan, 2006) Combining different forms of communication can help a client and therapist understand the client better and potentially find better resolutions for conflicts. (Dan, 2006)

In general adolescents crave validation and acceptance. Art can help give a young adult creative validation. Art can channel healthy, positive, and creative feelings adding to self-worth. (Dan, 2006)

### *Art Therapy and Self-Esteem*

According to Malchiodi, Group art can provide a sense of belonging and identity. The teens in this group have been hospitalized for an extensive period of time, many of them for years. In a residential setting it is easy for children to lose their sense of belonging especially because they are not with their families. Hopefully this project can make them feel as though the home is their home and not a hospital setting. (Machiodi, 2003)

Also, for a teen with disabilities the limitations of the condition are often emphasized. It is important instead to concentrate on what they can do regardless of their diagnosis. Art is something that points out the individual’s creative quality and highlights how special and unique a person is two things that are very important for building self-esteem. For some teens art might be the only thing that they are good at. It makes people

to feel that they are good at something and that they can contribute to something.

### ***Art Therapy and Abuse***

*It is important to see how art therapy directly related to victims of abuse, as four of the children working on this project have been subject to forms of abuse including severe neglect, severe physical abuse and sexual abuse. It is an abhorrent reality that children with disabilities, some of the most innocent members of our society are subject to abuse of any sort. One would like to believe that others would strive to protect our most vulnerable populations. However, the opposite is truth (archrespice.org).*

According to a hospital-base study lead by Sullivan and Knutson (1998), children with disabilities are four to ten times more likely to be the victims of crime and twice as likely to be subjected to maltreatment and sexual abuse. One out of three children with disabilities is subjected to abuse. These numbers are significantly higher than nondisabled children where only one in ten endure abuse (archrespice.org).

Societal views can impact the self-esteems of these children making them more vulnerable to abuse and less likely to speak out (archrespice.org). Children internalize a feeling of worthlessness and a feeling that they deserve the abuse. Unfortunately, it can be more challenging for these children to make bonds with others because of the limitations of their disabilities and they may fail to report the abuse because they do not want to break bonds they feel as though they have made. Another reason that children with needs can often rely heavily on the direction of others. They may not realize that they are being maltreated and they just accept the abuse as another direction (archrespice.org).

Children with developmental disabilities are often perceived as easy targets may

prevent them from being able to discern the experience as abuse. An example of this may be a child with special needs that requires assistance toileting and showering. This may have the child accustomed to being touched in private areas and they may not be able to tell the difference between negative and positive touching. Also, some children cannot speak out and do not have the ability to understand that they are being maltreated.

Because it is sometimes extreme physical signs that signal the maltreatment of a child with severe special needs such as death, pregnancy, venereal disease or physical injury or blatant behavioral signs (archrespite.com).

The artistic expressions of an adolescent can also convey messages to the therapist that the youth has been forbidden to verbalize (archrespite.com). In families with secrets, often of sexual abuse, the message is “don't tell.” The adolescent has been trained by the perpetrator not to *tell*, but no one told him or her not to *draw*. Therefore, adolescents can let the therapist know what is going on in their lives by a visual representation of situations and emotions that focus on the forbidden subject (archrespite.com).

### ***Art Therapy and Depression***

*Two of the adolescents in the group are diagnosed and treated with depression. I have also seen every single, solitary, child in the bunch struggle through a period of depression primarily pertaining, but not limited to, familial issues and visitation. Familial relationships are a topic that is especially depressing for several of the adolescents specifically for those with fetal alcohol syndrome( a condition that occurs when a fetus is exposed to alcohol in the womb and results in physical abnormalities, various forms of mental retardation and developmental delays) that have been taken*

*away from their biological families because extremely limited contact with them.*

During the trying time of adolescence many teenagers find themselves suffering from depression. Depression during adolescence is quite common because of hormonal changes (Dan 2006). Some causes of depression are traumatic life experiences, strained familial and social relationships, romantic breakups and stress. (Dan 2006) Teens with disabilities also face the same these situations as those without. It is my experience that one of the causes of depression for children with disabilities is awareness of their special needs. A disabled child that knows that he is different and strives to fit in not unlike the average teen, that cannot be obtained can become very discouraged and depressed by this. An additional cause is the unfortunate cruelty and unsympathetic nature of kids; teens who are mentally handicapped get teased by their peers.

Machiodi states that art therapy has also been deemed effective for spiritual healing. It is my observation, that teenagers often act out in inappropriate behaviors when struggling with depression it is difficult and uncomfortable for them to express their feelings and art can serve as an alternative means to communicate their emotions. The belief that art therapy is an effective way to release repressed emotion and promote personal growth would prove that it is an effective technique that is effective for treating depression. Clinical observation has concluded that art therapy has improved feelings of depression in adolescents. It has also proven that it can also be used as an instrument to assess depression (Riley, 1999).

### ***Art Therapy and Autism***

*Three of the youth participating in this project fall on various levels of the autistic spectrum. It is important to understand how the creative portion of this project will*

*influence them directly.*

According to leading researcher in art therapy, Cathy A. Malchiodi art because it includes the use of imagination and creativity can help children diagnosed with autism. Autism is a neurobiological disorder that is typically diagnosed in children during the first three years of life. It affects cognition and the way the world is experienced. It is often difficult for children with autism to communicate verbally, nonverbally and interact socially.

Art has proven to be extremely beneficial for those diagnosed with autism in a variety of ways. For example, autism is associated with the tendency for under or overreaction to sensory stimuli (Riley, 1999). Art can directly address this tendency because it typically appeals to autistic children. Paint, clay, paper, brushes and other materials used in artistic creation have very distinct smells, textures, and visual results and can stimulate the senses. Another symptom of autism is tenacity towards antisocial and isolative behavior Art can directly addresses antisocial behavior in that supervised, organized group art projects can help a child positively interact with his peers. Another one of the obstacles that a person diagnosed with autism faces is difficulty using language to express feelings and thought (Riley, 1999). Art can be used as an alternative way for a person to communicate and express himself. Autism is also associated with difficulty in motor skills and art also be helpful in strengthening and learning motor skills and coordination (Riley, 1999).

### ***Art Therapy and Physical Disabilities***

*Several of the adolescents in the group have varying degrees of physical disabilities. For those who are diagnosed with autism there is difficulty with motor skills*

*and coordination. Two of the children diagnosed with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome have clubbed feet which is a birth defect where the feet turn inward. This birth defect can make it very difficult for them to play sports and can also be very painful at times. One female in the group has Cerebral Palsy, a disorder that can affect a person's cognition, sensation and development of the muscles. She has difficulty walking, her gait is poor and she always has to wear a brace to support her leg.*

According to Bach (1996), art is recognized for being therapeutic in helping people deal with physical illness and somatic ailments. Motor skills are strengthened through art therapy (Bach 1996). In the creation of this mural both fine and gross motor skills will be practiced. Painting and drawing will strengthen fine motor skills like the pincer grasp when using paintbrushes and pencils. Gross motor skills will be practiced in that the mural is so large balancing on a stool and turning and lifting ones head will be necessary.

### ***Conclusion***

I am not a certified art therapist and cannot use the psychoanalysis part of the art therapy. It would be unethical for me to interpret artwork and use therapy on the youth involved in the project. The elements of art therapy that I would like to be illuminated through this project are the ones associated with generating self-esteem and self-worth as well as positive social interaction and sensory stimulation. I want the kids to have fun, and see that they are capable of creating something big. I want them to go into the recreation room and look at the wall and find pride in their work and find a sense of accomplishment.

