

USING ART IN TRAUMA RECOVERY WITH CHILDREN

From the American Art Therapy Association & prepared by Cathy Malchiodi, LPCC, ATR

About Art Therapy

Art therapy can be beneficial to people of all ages, but it is especially useful for children. Art is a natural form of communication for children because it is easier for them to express themselves visually rather than verbally. This is particularly true for children who have experienced a traumatic event, such as Hurricane Katrina or other natural or man-made disasters.

Art therapists are mental health professionals specifically trained to use art with individuals of all ages who are emotionally stressed or traumatized. Members of the American Art Therapy Association hope that this information will give those working with traumatized children and their families a greater understanding of how art therapy can be used to support trauma recovery.

Art therapy is an established mental health profession that uses the creative process of art making to improve and enhance the physical, mental and emotional well being of individuals of all ages. It is used with children, adolescents, adults, older adults, groups, and families to assess and treat the following: anxiety, depression, and other mental and emotional problems and disorders; mental illness; substance abuse and other addictions; family and relationship issues; abuse and domestic violence; social and emotional difficulties related to



disability and illness; trauma and loss, physical, cognitive, and neurological problems; and psychosocial difficulties related to medical illness. Art therapy programs are found in a number of settings including hospitals, clinics, public and community agencies, wellness centers, educational institutions, businesses, and private practices.

Art therapists are professionals dedicated to the belief that the creative process involved in art making is healing and life enhancing. For children, the opportunity to draw, paint, and construct with an art therapist can help them to communicate difficult issues, reduce stress, and reconcile feelings.

Understanding Children's Trauma Reactions

Children who experience catastrophic disasters and events show a wide range of trauma reactions. Some children have worries and bad memories that gradually disappear over time with emotional support of caregivers and communities. Other children may experience more long-term problems, stress reactions, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Emotional reactions -- fear, depression, withdrawal, or anger and physical complaints or symptoms with no medical basis -- can occur immediately or appear weeks and months after the traumatic event. Worries and concern can interfere with a child's ability to pay attention and concentrate and cause difficulty in school. Loss of trust in others and fears of the tragedy happening again are common responses in many children and adolescents who have experienced a traumatic event.

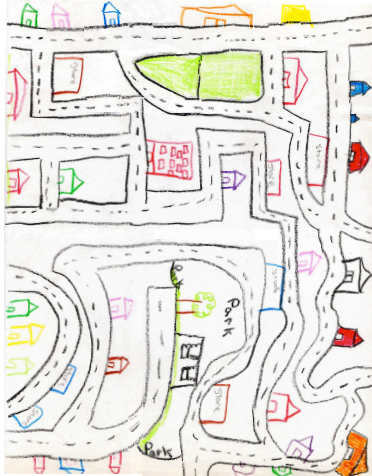
Some children are more vulnerable to the effects of traumatic experiences for reasons that we still do not completely understand. For example, children who have experienced previous traumas or who already have a mental health disorder may be more susceptible than others to problems following traumatic events. Also, children who witnessed or directly experienced the disaster are believed to be more at risk than others who are less directly affected. But even second-hand exposure to a disaster (through media reports or hearing vivid stories about the event) can be traumatic for some children. A child whose caregiver is having a hard time coping with the disaster will also likely face more challenges. In all cases, children who have experienced a catastrophic disaster, such as the recent hurricane, need support from others to avoid long-term emotional problems.

Working with Emotionally Traumatized Children

- 1) Be supportive and compassionate in talking with children to help them feel safe. Children who have been displaced from their homes by a disaster, have been separated from family members, or who have lost loved ones are particularly vulnerable. Help children share in maintaining their feelings of safety by asking them about their specific needs for comfort and self-care. Help them develop a personal "safety plan"-- information about where to go and whom to contact to feel more secure.
- 2) Discuss what is being done and what will be done to help in the future. In the case of a disaster such as the hurricane, reinforce that while no one can predict the future, it is not likely that another hurricane will happen again.
- 3) Encourage children to express their feelings and listen without judgment. Allow children to cry, be sad, or be angry. Do not force expression of the traumatic event, but let children know that it is normal to feel upset, angry, or afraid when something bad happens.
- 4) Provide structure and routine whenever possible while being flexible to children's needs. Let children make some decisions about routines and other aspects of daily life to the extent that it is possible.
- 5) Realize that children who have lost a parent, sibling, relative, teacher, friend, or pet will need additional support and for a long period of time. Be aware that memories and feelings about these losses are recurrent and can be triggered by everyday images and reminders of the person or the hurricane, other events, holidays, or anniversaries.
- 6) Offer meaningful creative activities to encourage children to express their feelings and become active participants in their own process of recovery (see next section).
- 7) Be open to ongoing discussions. New questions and feelings develop over time. Look for opportunities to bring up issues and create an open environment that encourages children to talk about their concerns at any time.
- 8) Be sure to manage your own feelings about the disaster or traumatic event. Take time to understand your own feelings and prepare yourself emotionally before you attempt to reassure or work with children.
- 9) Be sensitive to cultural differences among children who have experienced traumatic events or losses. For some children, expression of emotion or art making may not be acceptable or comfortable.
- 10) Help children and families feel connected to peers and adults who can provide support and decrease isolation. Be aware of local resources to help children and families obtain additional help if it is needed.

Art and Trauma Recovery in Children

In the aftermath of the events of September 11th, 2001, and the recent tsunami disaster in Southeast Asia, art expression has proven to be a very important part of the recovery process for children who have survived these traumatic events. Art offers a way for children to express their feelings, thoughts, and memories in ways that words



cannot. With guidance and support, it can help traumatized children to make sense of their experiences, communicate grief and loss, and become active participants in their own process of healing, beginning the process of seeing themselves as “survivors” rather than as “victims.”

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For professionals using art activities with children, the experience of interacting with children who have experienced traumatic events may be a new one for you. The following guidelines may also be helpful in beginning your use of creative expression:

1) First, encourage children to express whatever they would like to express in their art. Some children also like to express themselves in other ways, such as in songs, stories, play, drama, or writing. Following a trauma it is important for children to be given choices. Because culture influences self-expression, some children may feel more comfortable with one way of expressing over another.

2) Keep in mind that a child’s age, ability, personality, interest, and skill influence their creations.

The focus should be on the experience and process rather than the product.

3) Provide a safe and structured environment for creative expression to take place. Be empathetic, listen, encourage storytelling about art produced, and accept whatever is communicated about art created. Refrain from trying to interpret art and simply accept and encourage participation and self-expression. Engaging in a dialogue by simply asking a child to describe the elements in a picture can be helpful and supportive.

4) Use art activities to promote self-reliance and problem solving in children. Provide opportunities for experimentation with art materials, learning new art skills, and making decisions about what to draw, paint, or make during an art session.

5) Be aware that children may use art expression in a variety of ways after experiencing a traumatic event. Some children will repeat images of the event in their drawings, paintings, or play activities; others may resist memories of the actual event, preferring to use art activities to soothe and reduce stress. If trauma stories are expressed, remain calm, listen, and respond without judgment or interpretation. It is particularly important for you to normalize any feelings expressed by letting children know that what they are experiencing is being experienced by many other children, too.



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6) Significant and personal feelings may be shared in the art making. It is important that children feel calm and in control at the end of an activity. Mak-

ing time to clean up or having a closing activity can be reassuring.

About Art Activities & Materials

Professionals who have not used art activities with children who have experienced trauma often wonder where to start. Using art in trauma recovery with children involves both non-structured and structured activities. Non-structured activities are those that encourage children to create from their imagination—in other words, to draw, paint, model, or build anything they would like. Many children already have ideas about what they would like to make in art and if they do, allow them to experiment freely with materials in safe and structured environment and enjoy the soothing and rewarding experience of creative expression. Try not to be tempted to draw or paint for them, but be attentive and supportive and provide help if the child does not know how to use a material, brush, or tool.

Other children, especially those who may be shy or withdrawn, may need a structured activity or theme to stimulate their participation and imagination. For example, you might ask the child to draw a picture of a “worry.” Many children who have been traumatized have worries and fears since the tragedy happened. Making a picture of the worry or showing how big, what color, or what shape a worry is helps children to begin to identify fears and gives us a tangible image of what worries children find difficult to tell about with words. Use this as an opportunity to help the child find ways to express feelings through art—ask the child to show you through color, lines, shapes, or figures “what your worry looks like.” “Safety” is another common issue that can be turned into a structured activity for art making. Help children to create a painting or drawing of a real or imaginary “safe place,” where one can go in one’s imagination when one is afraid or upset.

Wherever possible, it is helpful to have the following materials for creative expression:

Materials for drawing-- pencils, colored pencils, oil pastels/Craypas, felt pens, and paper. Drawing materials help children to express and tell stories and experiences because they allow for control and detail.

Materials for painting-- watercolor sets and tempera paints, and watercolor or card stock. Painting helps children express stories and experiences, but also encourages expression of feelings through color and brushstroke.

Materials for collage-- pre-cut magazine images, construction paper, tissue paper, string, yarn, glitter glue, and white glue. Collage is easy to control, provides structure, and stimulates the imagination.

Materials for modeling-- Model Magic, Play-Doh, plasticine, and water-based clay. Modeling with clay provides the opportunity to work in three dimensions and to rework and reconstruct.

Remember— not all children are familiar with art materials. Be sure to show them what each material can do. For example, teach children basic skills about how to hold a brush, how to mix paint, and how to apply it to a surface. Be sure to create a structured environment for creativity that is safe and supports children’s freedom to express themselves through art.

To locate an art therapist, please contact the American Art Therapy Association, Inc. at arttherapy@covad.net, visit our web site at www.arttherapy.org, or contact us at:

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