

# Sculpting A Healed Mind: The Impact of Art Therapy on Children with Mental Disorders

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Art therapy has been used in mental health practices for decades and has been shown to be beneficial to encourage internal growth, heal emotional deficits, and understanding oneself. Other commonly used therapies, such as physical therapy, are effective at healing physically injured patients. Art therapies have become increasingly popular and have been used in various places worldwide and utilized with a wide range of populations and age ranges. Art therapy may be a particularly beneficial therapy for children as they may serve as a preventative measure to risk experienced later in life. Children experiencing mental health disorders may especially benefit from art therapy as opposed to alternative therapies as it allows them to express their ideas and thoughts without any limitations. This paper will explore differences in art therapy expression amongst children with varying mental disorders and differences in outcomes once therapy sessions have been completed.*

**Keywords: Art Therapy, Children, ADHD, Autism, PTSD.**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Therapy, by its definition from Oxford Languages, means a “treatment intended to relieve or heal disorder”. Many therapies, such as psychoanalysis, cognitive therapy, humanistic therapy, dialectical behavior therapy, and behavioral therapy, have helped a multitude of patients. However, among these therapies, art therapy emerges as one of the unique therapies because it allows patients to engage their mind, body, and spirit in methods that

are distinct from using verbal articulation alone. In fact, art therapy’s method of not requiring verbal articulation greatly appeals to patients who have trouble expressing their emotional and mental states with words. Sensory, perceptual, and symbolic opportunities allow novel aspects of communication, lowering the barrier of entering the world of therapy. This feature of art therapy is particularly appealing and helpful for patients who are less skilled when confronting stressful situations with children. As children are at their developmental stage, it may be hard for them to confront their stress and share them with adults other than their trusted ones. Moreover, it may be hard for them to use words fluently to accurately express their emotional state. For these reasons, art therapy, a method that requires less verbal interaction and can be a stress reliever itself, is particularly beneficial to children. This paper will explore differences in art therapy expression amongst children with varying mental disorders, such as autism, post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and outcomes once therapy sessions have been completed.

## **2. Why Art Therapy?**

As we live in a world with diverse perspectives on mental illness, various groups have a multitude of stigmatizations of mental illness. According to Adullah and colleagues (2011), some Native American tribes do not stigmatize mental illness at all due to a lack of psychological knowledge. However, in other regions such as Asia, value is placed on conformity to norms and mental illnesses are stigmatized as a source of shame. Like these instances that demonstrate that mental illness can

vary by different barriers, art therapy emerges as an appropriate treatment for mental illnesses.

Art, an activity that is widely accepted and used as a hobby or as an occupation. Art therapy can be effective for children. Children can show basic expressions using verbal or physical interactions, but due to the lack of vocabulary knowledge it might be challenging for children to fluently express their emotions. Emotional expressions can be a significant challenge to children who are psychologically distraught or suffering from mental or developmental disorders (Schouten, 2014). For children, art therapy can function as a new source of communication to the world. Art therapy is effective not only to children but also to adults. A study conducted by Karin Alice Schouten and colleagues (2014) showed that a group of adults ranging from ages 18-22 showed significant decrease in depression along with PTSD after receiving an art therapy intervention. This example is significant as it shows that art therapy's effectiveness is not only confined towards young patients.

As art therapy does not require a verbal interaction between individuals and as such, it helps to focus on one's inner mind and think deeply about oneself. Art therapy has also been shown to be effective for physical illnesses. According to Andrea Di Cataldo, art therapy has helped young patients, who are hospitalized due to Leukemia, to reduce their anxiety and cope better during painful procedures (Cataldo, 2001). Similarly, a randomized trial conducted by Anya Beebe at National Jewish Health at Denver, showed that art therapy has helped young patients with asthma to reduce their anxiety and increase their overall quality of life (Beebe, 2013). From the examples provided in this section, it is clear that art therapy is unique in its ability to help individuals from different cultural backgrounds as well as aid in treating a variety of mental and physical illnesses.

### **3. What are the benefits of Art Therapy?**

Art therapy can lessen the burden of speaking and constantly interacting with people for those with mentally and physical disabilities. According to a literature review by Diane Waller (2006), art therapy has proven its effectiveness in a case study with a child named Amanda. Amanda is a self-

harming patient, who suffered violence and abuse, and to treat this condition, she was assigned to an art therapist to conduct art therapy sessions. Doing simple ink monoprints from potatoes, Amanda was able to concentrate on her emotions on why she is in an agitated state that eventually results in self-harming. From this process, Amanda was able to trust people, recognize her pain, and face her vulnerability. Additionally, as she got minor feedback and awards for her work, Amanda was able to increase her confidence and self-image. Art therapy has also increased Amanda's frequency of interacting with her therapist and learning that she is not "dirty" nor "unwanted".

Marygrace Berberian (2012) introduced the three keys of art therapy that benefited Amanda and other children during their sessions. First key was that art therapy allows "assessing and mitigating conflict memories and affect". The first key seemed to benefit Amanda, as she was able to alleviate her anxiety from violence and abuse. The second key is that "attuned relationship with the art therapist aids in the mirroring and repair of disruptions in attachment". The second key is also shown in Amanda's case, as she learned to trust others because her art therapist accepted and trusted her. The third key states, "rewards gained from engagement in art-making lead to both pleasure and mastery". The last point is also applicable to Amanda's case, as she gained a better self-image and confidence from the art therapist's compliments. Juxtaposing Amanda's case and the three important keys, it is clear that art therapy not only provides communicational comfort to the patient but multitude of benefits that increase the effectiveness of the therapy and mental state that ultimately benefited the patients.

Art therapy further benefits children because it can help them to learn about and understand their feelings. According to John Matthews' *How young children give meaning to drawing*, a simple scribble from a child can mean something important. It can be a symbolic substratum because children are not trying to represent a specific object but trying to represent their understanding of the objects operating in the world. As these mechanisms are behind children's brains when drawing, art therapy can induce an effective outcome with children because it allows the therapist to recognize the genuine emotion from a

child's drawing and provide the best treatment (Matthews).

Given the prevalence of mental disorders without the limitation of age, gender, and nationality, art therapy serves as a potentially promising treatment to attain effective treatments to as many patients as possible.

## **4. Uses of Art Therapy**

### **4.1 PTSD**

In the United States, over 2 million children require hospitalization due to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD has been extensively studied for over 15 years, however, there is little research available about the efficacy of treatment interventions. Rooting from this issue, Linda Chapman and her colleagues conducted an art therapy study at a large urban hospital trauma center. Chapman aimed to evaluate the efficacy of art therapy in reducing PTSD symptoms one week, one month, and six months after patients were discharged from the hospital. Participants in this study were children ages 7-17 years old who had been admitted to a level I trauma center for traumatic injuries. Unlike adult PTSD patients, pediatric patients' incidence of PTSD is affected by the severity of the trauma, and this is why samples must contain children with similarly traumatized children. The art therapy method used in this study was a kinesthetic activity designed by Chapman to stimulate the formation of images in the cerebellum. Series of carefully worded directives were given to the patients so that they could draw in order to complete a coherent narrative. Each narrative was followed by an opportunity for the child to give a verbal explanation related to their image. As a result, examination of individual symptoms showed that intervention produced reduction in PTSD levels in children that were discharged after one week to month (Chapman, 2011). Chapman's method to utilize kinesthetic activity was especially useful for PTSD patients because along with the chance to express their negative feelings through drawing as well as the opportunity to verbally explain their images and communicate with their therapists.

Research reviews by Nadine and colleagues, and Eaton and colleagues, both acknowledge the complexity of child trauma and the lack of research about the specific interventions for PTSD (Nadine

2014; Eaton 2007). In Eaton and colleagues' review, they discussed a clinical trial that aimed to test the efficacy of art therapy mediums such as pencil drawing, coloring, painting, and clay. Chapman's trial used limited art materials for the kinesthetic activity, but the trial in Eaton's review utilized various mediums, thus stimulating multiple parts of the brain. Similar to Chapman's method, after patients finish their works, they are given a chance to tell a story about his or her piece and the therapist facilitates interpretations. It was found that art therapy clearly demonstrates efficacy in reducing symptoms, but the results varied by how the research conductor executed the therapy. The variations usually came from the difference in measuring outcome variables and the lack of art therapists training in experimental research methods.

As an overall review of PTSD art therapy interventions, drawing methods accompanied with minor verbal explanations were the most prevalent method used for PTSD patients because this method activates the limbic system, the center for emotional processes. Activating this part of the brain allows patients to reveal their genuine emotions and provide better guidance to the therapist. A multitude of research has also shown that art therapy can lead to self-discovery and cathartic release.

### **4.2 Autism**

Autism, commonly called autism spectrum disorder, is characterized by impairments in social, communication, and imagination skills accompanied by the presence of restricted or repetitive behaviors. Because of these characteristics, autistic children commonly show little interest in drawing or even scribbling. When these children are given the task to draw an object, they usually experience an inner sense of chaos and constantly struggle to name the objects (Brook,2008). For these reasons, art therapy is considered to be a complementary form of therapy in the autism treatment fields, as various approaches from developmental, behavioral, and psychotherapy fields also include object relations. An example of art therapy as an effective tool is demonstrated by a case study conducted by Melinda J. Emery. During early sessions with a six-year-old autistic child, Emery encountered troubles engaging the child to participate in art therapy

because the child showed typical symptoms of autism: lack of motor skills and object connection. However, with consistent sessions with the patient, gradual improvements came along, making the child engage in clay activities and learn about the connection of the objects and shapes. In addition, the child showed great improvements in using his voice and eye movements. The child's orientation in pencil drawing also improved. His early figures were highly disconnected and did not show an understanding of object relations, but after receiving frequent treatment, he started to draw more detail in the figures such as a neck connected to a body.

As seen from this case study, art therapy can serve as a complementary treatment and patients are able to make improvements in a variety of areas. However, few difficulties remain in the relationship between art therapy and autism. Similar to the difficulties of PTSD, the U.S. lacks an understanding about how art therapy is used with individuals with autism (Brook, 2008). Moreover, general or vague descriptions of art therapy are provided and there is no universal description of how art therapy should specifically be conducted. Despite these difficulties, art therapy is a desirable tool with the added benefit of jointly working with the patients, skillfully providing visual feedback, and building meaningful relationships. Also, as autistic children are vulnerable to stress, the low stress level characteristic of art therapy is advantageous to patients and their families (Brook, 2008).

From the examination of the case study and methodology, one characteristic of art therapy for autism that stood out is that autistic patients need more sensory activities in comparison to other types of disorders. As autistic patients can be easily stressed from external stimulation, they need more sensory relief. This can be achieved with the use of clays for example. Lastly, building a strong therapist and patient relationship can be important, especially for autistic patients who prefer not to interact with unfamiliar people.

### **4.3 ADHD**

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a fairly common psychological disorder in childhood. Common characteristics of ADHD are hyperactivity, inattention, and impulsivity. Due to

its prevalence, many treatment options have been developed, such as drug therapy, psychotherapy, and social rehabilitation training. Although the exact cause of ADHD is still unknown, finding the most effective treatment is a remaining task for physicians (Tang, 2021). Drug therapies have shown to be beneficial for patients, other treatments have had a negative impact on patients. ADHD patients show great emotional distress even with little disturbance. The key point of ADHD therapeutic intervention is to reduce stress levels. Reducing stress is crucial because patients treated with this disorder have short attention spans and having high stress levels can hinder their attention even more, resulting in negative outcomes (Tang, 2021). Considering this key point of ADHD, art therapy has been considered an effective method for helping to stabilize emotional disruption. According to Yunpeng Tang's research about ADHD and art therapy, as art therapy has the ability to interact with colors with different hues, saturations and values, the vibrancy of some colors can be a good tool to capture one's attention (Tang, 2021). Moreover, Tang's research has found that art therapy can be useful for individuals with ADHD as the visual neural systems of these individuals are highly sensitive (Tang, 2021). Using artistic animations with exciting pictures, interesting characters, and funny actions can attract individuals' attention. Treating patients with digital art, animation, pottery, sand tray, and calligraphy therapy, Teng has received results that demonstrate increased attention span among patients.

In a research review from C. Dere-Meyer et al., they introduced other promising results of art therapy for children with ADHD. Rosal (1993)'s trial in C. Dere-Meyer's review compared experiments that utilized behavioral art therapy over the course of 10 weeks. Behavioral art therapy used in this trial focused on how children interacted with each other and behaved when put in specific groups. The results showed that cognitive behavioral art therapy had positive effects on behavior of young ADHD patients and led to an increase in perceptions of emotional control. Similarly, in a study by Munley (2020), they found that art therapy can be used to diagnose ADHD. In his study, Munley performed the Draw a Person Picking an Apple from a Tree (PPAT) test and used Gantt's Formal Elements Art Therapy Scale (FEATS). These instruments were used to compare

the artwork of ADHD patients and non-patients to identify if characteristics like “fewer details of objects and environments” and “reduced level of qualities” were showing up in non-patients’ artwork as an indicator of ADHD symptoms (Munley, 2020). This novel function of art therapy is especially promising as it shows that art therapy proves its legitimacy to serve as an intervention that induces effective outcomes.

Art therapy’s unique feature to embody various artistic components function as an effective treatment for ADHD patients to capture their attention and induce positive outcomes. As research has shown, art therapy has great potential to become an effective and stress reducing treatment for ADHD.

## 5. Conclusion

This review explored the meaning and benefits of art therapy and examined applications in a variety of mental disorders such as: ADHD, autism, and PTSD. Art therapy can be a method that can give advantages to both the children and their parents. It has the ability to reduce stress levels and provide easy access to anyone who is in need of guidance. Moreover, examining case studies and different conditions of specific mental disorders show that art therapy can function as a useful alternative to medication. Art therapy’s application across various mental disorders is helpful to understand that art therapy can be adjusted in diverse settings to meet the individual needs of patients. As I examined in this paper, art therapy is able to activate an important emotional system that is crucial for PTSD patients, provides sensory relief for autistic patients, and can serve various functions for ADHD patients. Although not all mental disorders were covered in this review, overall, art therapy shows promising results that may be helpful for a multitude of other mental disorders.

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