

Art as a healing pr

Val Huet of the British Association of Art Therapists (BAAT) explains the role of art therapy, with case study examples from **Amanda Dudley** and **Kate Guscott**.

Art Therapy is a form of psychotherapy that uses art as its primary mode of communication. It is particularly well suited to children who may have problems communicating verbally, not only because of their age but also because when upset; it is very difficult to find words to express emotions. Art Therapy offers a non-verbal, art-based mode of therapy where clients are actively engaged in the process by producing their own artworks. Being good at art is not a requirement to benefit from art therapy: expertise or experience in art

are not needed and usually, simple and easily useable art materials are available to use. Images enable the development of a therapeutic relationship between the client and the art therapist. This three-way process gives clients space to explore and reflect on their emotions.

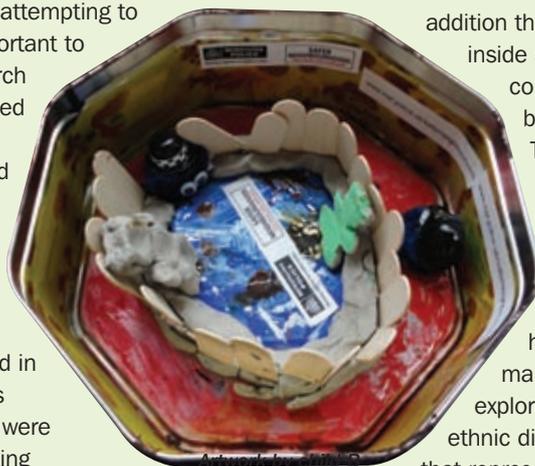
For young children, art therapy offers a therapeutic intervention that uses a medium usually loved and enjoyed in their daily lives: it is extremely rare to encounter a child who does not like art making. Children are expert in making images full of stories and events and although to the viewer the end result may look like a big brown mess, in the



Case vignettes from Amanda Dudley:

With a year 5 boy in mainstream Primary School

W struggled to be in school. He was unable to focus long enough to remain in class for longer than a few hours. His head seemed so full with tragedy that there was no space for anything else, certainly not academic learning. Disaster seemed to surround him and followed in his wake. W resonated strongly with the Titanic tragedy. He had seen the film countless times and wanted to act it out during our sessions. We embarked on making a clay version of the Titanic. During the process of making he became focused and was able to manage an hour's session without attempting to leave the room. In this instance detail was important to him and he was able to focus enough to research the Titanic's physical details. Together we created a model of the Titanic over many weeks. It was something that he was able to take pride in and to gain praise from the school community who were up to this point frustrated and reticent regarding this child's ability to do or be anything other than trouble. Following this we spent many sessions working with his Titanic, sailing it around an ice burg filled ocean created in the art therapy room. Characters were made as additions and personal disasters and tragedies were re-enacted and safely contained by his art making process and product.



With a year 6 girl in mainstream Primary School

K used clay to form tablet shaped lumps, which she painted and then placed in a small pot with a lid. She literally made medicine. When she had finished she explained that these were truth pills. With the truth pills clutched in her hand she told me that her mother sniffs white powder when she thinks she is in bed. She

went on to say that she has to look after her younger siblings because her mother is often asleep during the day. The making of the truth pills enabled her to tell the truth about her life and enabled me to inform and work with external agencies, social services and her father and stepmother to improve her life and keep her safe.

With a year 5 boy in mainstream Primary School

B discovered his father was really his stepfather and his biological father had been in prison since his birth, with the addition that he was mixed race. B worked inside a container to create a prison, complete with an internal container of bars, police, himself and his father. There was a literal and symbolic double containment offered by the art materials. He was able to communicate without words what he had experienced, what he wished for, and gained a sense of holding within the limited and manageable frame of the container. He explored and demonstrated his thoughts of ethnic difference by painting the clay teddies that represented himself and his father different colours. The 'art-e-fact' was revisited and held in great value. It described his preoccupations and the facts more eloquently and meaningfully than any words, and acted as a permanent witness that was imbued with his life experiences and feelings. It gave form to feeling and safely contained the child while he used it to explore and make sense of his feelings.

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child's eyes the image will be full of events and meaning. Art within art therapy can therefore provide a really direct way for children to express worries and preoccupations when they would find doing this verbally really difficult.

Art therapy can have great benefits: if provided within a school it not only helps the child but also has a knock-on effect on the class, the teachers and the family. School attendance, academic grades, decrease in bullying and classroom difficulties are all noticeable improvements. Very often, behavioural problems are a common way to communicate distress or anxiety for children; unfortunately, within educational and social settings, behavioural problems tend to attract punitive responses that in turn aggravate the initial issues.

In the UK, art therapy is state regulated by the Health and Care Professions Council and training is at MA level, following a primary degree (often but not always in art). There has been growing interest in providing it within education, including pre-school nurseries, primary and secondary schools. Art Therapy is also provided in some Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services.

For more information contact www.baat.org

BAAT's 2013 Attachment and the Arts Conference 'Neuroscience, Attachment and Creativity' is on Saturday 5 October.

Val Huet is Chief Executive Officer of the British Association of Art Therapists; Amanda Dudley and Kate Guscott are both Art Therapists

Case vignette from Kate Guscott:

As an Art Therapist, when asked to think of children I've worked with for whom the art making part of art therapy has felt so vital and vibrant, each session full to the brim of activity that there is little time/space for the thinking/reflecting side of art therapy. What I notice in such children however, is that nevertheless their capacity for reflection increases. I believe that this is due to what is subconsciously learnt through their relationship with the physical (art) materials within the container (the time and space) that art therapy provides and that this is witnessed and therefore validated by a trusted other (the art therapist). Not only does this model the maternal 'looking together', identified by Winnicott as a fundamental component for child development and good attachment, but it also empowers the child to formulate their own healing substances. They become both recipient and creator of their own medicine. Children who are living in very adult worlds that they have no control over have an arena in which they are the ones making the decisions (within the boundaries set out by art therapy to ensure their sense of security).



the death of Polly's brother, her mother's change in behaviour as a consequence, and the numerous house moves the family were currently undergoing. I therefore would re-visit these issues every two or three weeks so that Polly kept in touch with her reasons for having Art Therapy. It felt as if whenever I attempted to do so, I would get little response from Polly and she would merely perceive this as wasting valuable time when she could be creating beautiful things.

Case Study

An example of this is a 7 year old girl, whom I will refer to as Polly, who had been referred to Art Therapy due to the recent traumatic death of her baby brother and the disturbing effects this had had on her family, particularly her mother, who's own mental stability and ability to parent was being supported by several services. During this time the family were being re-housed and were living in temporary accommodation.

Polly's need for the consistency and trusting relationship Art Therapy provides was apparent in the speed at which she developed her own way of using it. She quickly became immersed in playful use of art materials and spoke about wanting to make 'beautiful' things and how she 'loved' Art Therapy and wished



could stay here and that the Art Therapy room was her bedroom. I remember thinking that her art work was indeed beautiful and feeling quite caught up/mesmerised by it: for example Polly made a doll from lolly pop sticks and lacy scraps of material, she made a train from pink card and coloured it with a rainbow design and gave it gold wheels and a colourful crest, she named it the 'happy train'.

I was conscious that there was little talk about

In retrospect however, I see that the further into the therapeutic relationship we went the more the art work became responsive to these issues. In one session she created a life size Wendy house from a giant roll of paper and string and card. It was her own house and I called round for tea. The house seemed to perfectly represent her wish for a home that she could be in charge of but the reality of the impossibility of this and the vulnerability she felt in her current 'home' situation. Her wish to be in control also seemed to be expressed in role play activity in which she would adopt the role of a very attentive/bossy teacher and I the pupil.

Still further into Art Therapy Polly was increasingly able to experiment with materials which seemed to demonstrate her growing trust in the security of Art Therapy and her increasing capacity to let go of control. As many children I have seen for Art therapy like to do, she filled a big yogurt pot with a mixture of whatever messy materials she could find (paint, clay, plaster of Paris, PVA glue). She added each material with care observing its unique effect. She worked on it for three weeks putting a lid on it at the end of each session, the more we returned to it, the more the mixture developed both physically and symbolically until at some point she named it 'magic'. Often such mixtures are likened to mud or poo or slime or goo. I was struck by Polly's ability to hold onto something positive and potentially transformative through the destructive process of creating the mixture. Physically it went through stages of looking brown but ultimately she created an art work which I believe is truly beautiful.