

Evaluating a creative arts program designed for children who have been sexually abused

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KEY WORDS

Child Sexual Abuse; Creative Arts Therapy; Qualitative Research.

ABSTRACT

This research study was designed to evaluate the use of creative arts classes as an adjunct to therapy, to enhance recovery for children for whom there had been an allegation of child sexual assault. Children who were attending therapy in a rural Australian town were invited to free after-school classes in clay modelling, African dance and drumming, mosaics, and Aikido. Twenty-two interviews were conducted with non-offending parents and teachers. The teachers and the therapist observed the children's behaviour during every class. Data was analysed using a thematic approach. The program proved very popular with children, parents, and teachers alike. There were many benefits for the children, who grew in self-confidence, demonstrated improved social skills, formed trusting relationships, and experienced a reduced sense of isolation. The possibility of increased disclosures and the impact of external events on recovery are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Belief in the healing power of the creative arts dates back thousands of years (Karkou & Sanderson, 2006). The Ancient Greeks believed in a mind-body connection and linked art and medicine. Lost during the Dark Ages, this belief re-emerged when Jung advocated the use of the imagination and creativity as a healing force (Karkou & Sanderson, 2006) and recognized the importance of the creative arts as a medium for expressing the unconscious in therapy (Schaverien, 2001).

A distinction needs to be drawn between the use of creative arts in therapy with children (in this project) and creative arts therapy (Levine, 1999). Using the creative arts in a therapeutic setting is a form of behavioural therapy, that can also be educative and help children and young people to gain insight into their current

behaviour and feelings (Karkou & Sanderson, 2006). However, this is different from creative arts therapy with traumatised children which uses art in an intentional way 'within a relationship that makes sense of transitional experiences' (Levine, 1999:272), and is designed to help children recreate themselves through play.

Over many decades, clinicians have been publishing case studies demonstrating the effectiveness of using the creative arts in therapy with traumatised children (Axline, 1964; Carey, 2006; Miller, 1991; O'Brien, 2003). The consensus among clinicians that the use of creative arts can be healing for the child, either as an adjunct to therapy or through the use of creative arts therapy (Rogers, 2000). However, there is a need for more quantitative and qualitative research evidence to support

this in practice. This project uses the creative arts as an adjunct to therapy for disadvantaged children and aims to provide evidence about the possible effectiveness of this approach.

METHOD

The Child Sexual Assault Counselling Service in a rural Australian town caters for children for whom an allegation of child sexual assault has been made. The service received approval from the NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS) to conduct a creative arts program with children who are currently in therapy or who have completed therapy within the last year.

Extra-curricula classes, based on creative arts, were offered on a weekly basis, free of charge, to twelve current and recent clients of the service. The classes were two hours long and included children of mixed ages from 4 to 18. Experienced creative arts teachers taught the classes in suitable venues in local schools.

Their therapist attended all the classes in order to reassure the children and their parents, ensure the well-being of the children, and monitor their recovery process.

There were three sources of data in this study:

- 1) observations of the children's progress;
- 2) the views of the parents about their children's recovery process; and 3) the views of the creative arts teachers. Both the therapist and the teachers monitored the progress of the children in the classes. The therapist also monitored their recovery process in therapy. In addition, the researcher conducted telephone interviews with the teachers and the non-offending parents. It was decided not to interview the children directly.

1) Children

Each child was between 4 and 18 years and was currently in therapy or had completed therapy at the Child Sexual Assault Centre within the last year. They were assessed for suitability for the project by the therapist and were excluded if they were considered too vulnerable, had a serious mental disorder such as autism, or were currently under the care of a psychiatrist. Attending classes was voluntary and the parents needed to give informed consent. In addition children over ten also needed to give informed consent.

2) Parents

The parents were approached, personally or by phone, by the therapist who explained the purpose of the study, its voluntary nature, the need for informed consent, and that participation, or otherwise, would not affect the existing therapy process. The telephone interview process was also explained.

3) Teachers

Four teachers with the appropriate skills were invited to participate, once police checks and public liability insurance formalities were met. At an initial briefing they were told about some of the signs and symptoms of distress to look for, the possible physical and emotional responses that the children might demonstrate, and the best way to handle challenging behaviours. At the end of each class, the teachers discussing their observations of each child's progress and any concerns they had. Three teachers were interviewed in person at the end of term.

Ethics

The study received ethics approval. Careful consideration was given to the issue of touch and how to manage the unlikely situation in

which a child became triggered. Having the therapist present alleviated many potential concerns.

Funding

DoCS approved funds for the provision of creative arts classes, covering the cost of the teachers, materials and suitable venues.

Research sample

The project ran for one year. During that time, 13 children attended classes (nine girls and four boys). The age range was 5 to 18 at the start of the project. Eight children went to secondary school and five attended infants or primary school. Two came from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background. Nine attended clay modelling, five African dance and drumming, six mosaics, and nine Aikido classes. Every child was given a pseudonym to protect their identity.

Twenty-two interviews were conducted at the end of terms one, two and four, including three interviews with teachers. Nineteen telephone interviews were conducted with non-offending parents and foster parents.

Creative arts teachers	3
Non-offending parents (Term 1/2)	10
Non-offending parents (Term 4)	9
Total	22

FINDINGS

The findings are presented in the form of three case studies which demonstrate the range of progress made by the children. The main themes to emerge are then discussed in detail. The children's ages are given at the start of the project: Belinda 6; Sophie 8; Bea 13; Helene 14; Nina 14; Tania 14; Ruby 18; Shakia 18; Serena 18; Chris 7; Dean 7; Ollie 9; Wayne 11.

Case studies

Tania (14)

Tania lived with a foster family, following allegations of sexual abuse within her family of origin. During the mosaic classes, Tania's older brother died of a drug overdose. Her grandfather also died. These events triggered memories of her mother's death by a drug overdose when Tania was 6.

Initially Tania was very withdrawn, mistrustful and wary in the classes. She isolated herself and worked alone. Over the course of the project she gradually interacted more, became more open and relaxed, gave the teachers more eye contact, initiated conversations, and demonstrated a high level of empathy for the younger children.

When her brother died, Tania decided to make a mosaic in his memory. She was able to talk about him in the class and worked through her grief for his death and her mother's death, using symbolism in her artwork. She went on to make further disclosures about the abuse that she had been subjected to.

Tania responded particularly well to clay modelling, mosaics and Aikido, but also enjoyed the African drumming. Unfortunately she left the program abruptly when she absconded from foster care. This was a shock to all involved.

Sophie (7)

Sophie witnessed the death of a sibling when she was younger. There were also allegations of child sexual assault against some of her family members. During the year, Sophie left foster care and was reunited with her brother and her natural father.

Like Tania, Sophie was initially withdrawn and mistrustful. She demonstrated some fear of the

male teachers and appeared to be dissociative, unable to recall her age at times.

Sophie attended all the classes and enjoyed them all. She experienced significant breakthroughs in several classes. In the drumming class, as one of three children attending regularly, she had lots of personal attention and encouragement. She gradually gained in self-confidence and concentration, became more co-operative and trusting of the teachers, and gaining a sense of pride in her work.

Sophie also made significant progress during the Aikido classes. She was looking forward to moving into a new home and being reunited father and her brother. At that time, she made new disclosures of child sexual assault in therapy, saying “I can look after myself if X (alleged CSA offender) tries to get me again” (Therapist’s report).

Ollie (9)

Ollie witnessed near-fatal domestic violence between his parents at a young age. He had a dual diagnosis of Asperger’s Syndrome and ADHD. Ollie was on medication at the time of the project. He had an abundance of energy and had demonstrated low impulse control and poor affect regulation in the school environment.

Initially Ollie’s behaviour was challenging for the clay modelling teacher. It was difficult to get him to work co-operatively with other children. At times the teacher needed to contain his energetic behaviour by applying firm boundaries.

Ollie responded positively and gained in social skills and confidence. He began to work better with other children, albeit taking the leading role. He worked in a prolific manner and thoroughly enjoyed the classes. He was allowed

to create large numbers of pieces in clay, and his impulse control and affect regulation improved.

According to his mother, Ollie became agitated in the African dance and drumming classes. He found it difficult to follow instructions and decided to stop attending. His decision was made with a self-confidence that had been previously lacking. Shortly after this, he moved to live in a new area and left the program.

MAIN THEMES

There were numerous benefits to the children, as described by their parent, foster parents, teachers and the therapist. Very few negatives emerged in this study.

Children enjoyed the classes

It was clear that the children enjoyed the classes and their parents were very supportive of the program because of this. Several parents commented on the smiles on their children’s faces during the classes.

He’s got a smile from ear to ear and for me... that is enough. And it’s a real smile, it’s not like anxious or frightened ... it’s actually a smile like “this is great, I like being here, I’m relaxed, I’m happy... I don’t feel threatened in any way” (Ollie’s mum).

Not all of the children enjoyed all of the classes. African dance proved challenging for many, although some enjoyed the drumming aspect. Ollie found this class challenging “probably the noise and the hyperactivity itself. There was a lot of drumming and the movement of the body so I think he found it a bit overwhelming” (Ollie’s mum). Dean found the Aikido class too difficult and chose not to attend, but he felt empowered by making this choice for himself.

Increased confidence and sense of mastery

Most parents believed that “it’s good for their self-confidence” (Tania and Sophie’s foster mum) to attend. Ollie thrived and, even though he still experienced difficulties at school “actually developed confidence in terms of his ability to create. That was probably the best thing” (Ollie’s mum). Most of the children demonstrated a sense of mastery and pride in their achievements. For example, Dean “was confident in what he’d done, he was very proud of what he’d done in mosaic, and knew that what he was doing was a good thing” (Dean’s mum).

One father described how this increased confidence had enabled his children to be more open and willing to talk about what had happened to them.

It did benefit them a lot because it brings them out of their shell a little bit more, gives them that little bit more confidence, more able to express themselves in their art, a little more confident at talking about things which I’ve found extremely helpful. They are more talkable (sic) about it (Sophie and Chris’ dad).

Improved social skills

Many of the parents commented on their children’s new-found social skills. Ruby’s mum had been concerned about her withdrawn daughter who rarely left the house. Since attending “it’s given her, just a little bit more confidence. Since she’s been going to the group, she’s actually going down town on her own, you know, her own decision as well ... that’s really cool. Really cool. You have no idea” (Ruby’s mum).

Reduced anxiety and distress

Belinda was being assessed by the Family Court and was unable to attend counselling.

Her mother was therefore happy that she was able to attend the program instead. She believed that when the classes stopped for holidays, the child’s behaviour regressed.

...the clay work has been absolutely beneficial. She’s really actually missing it... since she’s stopped, she’s been getting angry again. During school holidays she seems to have regressed, anger, crying, just crying at the drop of a hat (Belinda’s mum).

Tania’s foster mother believed that Tania had become less anxious and distressed. She explained: “she is letting herself go and being more involved and... she seems to be more able, more comfortable... about talking, in voicing her own opinion” (Tania’s foster mum).

Reduced sense of isolation

Some parents commented that their children felt less isolated as a result of attending classes with other children who had similar experiences. Dean told his mother that he was lucky and he told the therapist that it was good that other children had had the same things happen to them and that he was not alone.

He said to me that “I’m lucky actually that X has done this to me so that I can go to these classes”. So I said “well okay, well it probably would have been nicer if you could have done it without something bad happening to you” (Dean’s mum).

Belinda’s mother described how: “they all seemed to come together and form an understanding” (Belinda’s mum). Wayne’s mother thought it was helpful for her son to see other boys in the class and to know that he was not the only boy who had had such difficult experiences. This may have been particularly useful for the boys; given that there is still a strong societal view that child sexual assault happens only to girls.

It was good that there were other male children in the classes. He realizes that he's not alone. There are other children of my gender who have had these experiences too. I'm not alone... it saddens me to see other boys there but it gladdens me too, because he can see that he's not alone (Wayne's mum).

Many parents believed that it was beneficial that all of the children had been through similar events in their lives. Dean's mum explained: "they are not the only ones that are suffering from something ... it helps them to get through it ... it doesn't have to affect them for the rest of their life" (Dean's mum).

Opportunity to form trusting bond with (male) teachers

The opportunity arose to develop new relationships, especially with adult males as three of the four teachers were male. When asked directly about this issue, none of the parents were concerned and many saw having male teachers as a positive. It was seen as "a great opportunity for them to find that you can still feel comfortable around adult males, that they're not all going to cause you problems" (Tania and Sophie's foster mum).

Serena was comfortable with a male teacher: "I've had more time to get over my stuff and ... I'm older as well. And I've learned over the last couple of years not to associate the ... entire male ... community" (Serena). Wayne's mum believed that it was very important to have male teachers as good role models.

It's important to have male teachers. It shows him that not all males are viruses. There are some decent role models, males who are strong and powerful and have good boundaries, really good examples of humanity (Wayne's mum).

Opportunity to mentor younger children

The oldest person attending the classes was Serena who had a baby herself after the first term. Serena saw her job as looking after the younger children and took on a mentoring role. She believed she was a positive role model, having survived child sexual assault. She explained: "Because I was probably the oldest there, I'd like to think that I was a good influence on the younger kids. I think they need to see someone who is coping well and someone to look up to" (Serena).

Even the younger children sometimes took on the role of mentor within the classes. Dean's mother described how Dean had set a good example to Ollie: "there was another little boy there in particular who had a bit of trouble settling and focusing and Dean tended to ground him and make him feel more stable" (Dean's mum).

Enjoyment of freedom of self-expression

Parents believed that the classes mainly helped their children by allowing them freedom of expression, thereby giving them "an absolutely brilliant outlet" (Sophie's foster mum) for pent up emotion. The classes allowed for spontaneous creativity without the constraints imposed at school. Ollie's mum described this process.

He enjoyed getting his hands dirty and doing things that are creative and a bit more spontaneous ... he was given instruction as to what he was going to make but not actually told "oh that's too big or that's too small". He had a lot of freedom to be himself (Ollie's mum).

Beneficial for all children

The parents were thrilled by the advances made by their children and were unanimous in their support for the program. Many believed

that it would benefit all children and should be in the wider school curriculum. Ollie's mother summed it up well.

The kids have been through a whole lot of terrible things. Actually to see them smiling, that's got to be a good thing. Kids like that don't smile if they don't mean it. You can't pretend to be happy if you are a kid. You are or you are not. A genuine smile, heart-felt, laughing, seeing their eyes light up, seeing them happy (Ollie's mum).

Response from the teachers

The three teachers interviewed thoroughly enjoyed the program and felt that it had been a worthwhile experience. All were keen to continue their involvement. They thought it important that the therapist attend each class. It was reassuring to know that, if the children became distressed, she was available. It afforded both the teachers and the children some protection. The children could leave the class temporarily, if necessary. The teachers found the debriefing session with the therapist highly beneficial, since reviewing and monitoring each child's progress was not something they did routinely.

I actually like having the opportunity to mark off the kids each class. I think that is really good, to know how they are going... and it is very good that the therapist is a part of every class, to observe and they actually have that exit if they find things getting too challenging (Aikido teacher).

Response from the therapist

The therapist felt enlightened and inspired as a result of observing the children's progress and getting to know children in a different context. She gained insight into the social development of the children, which is not normally available in therapy. She was able to integrate her work in therapy with events as they unfolded in the classes.

The possibility of increased disclosures (of child maltreatment) was highlighted by the therapist. It is acknowledged that these disclosures may have been made in the normal course of therapy. It is not possible to provide evidence that they were made as a result of the creative arts program. However, the therapist believed that they may have become possible due to the increased confidence that the children developed or as a result of developing a trusting bond with a male teacher.

After attending the classes, Helene disclosed allegations of child sexual assault not previously disclosed. I wondered to what extent her experiences in the classes, such as being treated with respect by an adult male, could have prompted her disclosures... to my knowledge, the teacher was the first adult male she has felt safe with (Therapist's report).

Management issues

Management issues which were anticipated included: challenging behaviour requiring firm boundaries; sexualised behaviour and conversations in class; the issue of touch; and the importance of preparing all those involved. Management issues that arose and were not necessarily anticipated were: the need for care in the choice of teachers; and the need to control the publicity for the project in order to protect the anonymity of all involved. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss these issues in greater detail.

SUMMARY

The results from this pilot research project suggest that overall the creative arts program was successful in enhancing the recovery of children for whom there was an allegation of child sexual assault, most of whom were also attending therapy. These children, including

two Aboriginal children, came from relatively deprived family backgrounds and lived in a small country town. The program was popular with the children, and both the non-offending parents and the teachers could see genuine benefits to the children from attending the classes.

The children gained in self-confidence over the course of the project. They enjoyed gaining a sense of mastery over each creative art and took pride in their work. They gained social skills and some children experienced a reduction in anxiety and distress. Many children enjoyed the fact that the other children in the classes had had similar experiences to their own, which seemed to reduce their feelings of isolation. This may have been particularly true for the boys involved in the project. The children also benefited from the opportunity to form a trusting relationship with the (male) teacher, to mentor younger children, and to enjoy the freedom of self-expression afforded to them in the classes.

There was some evidence of an increase in disclosures of child maltreatment during the project. However, it is difficult to know whether or not these disclosures would have been made anyway during therapy. It must be recognised that the biggest influence on the children's recovery process was external events, rather than either therapy or attending the program. Events such as the outcome of a court hearing, the death of a family member, or absconding from a foster home had far greater impact on the children in this study.

Some important lessons have been learned. These include the importance of the therapist attending every class and of the weekly monitoring of each child's progress by both the teachers and the therapist. It was also important

for the teachers to maintain firm boundaries, and to intervene early if the children resorted to sexualised behaviour or began inappropriate conversations. Teachers need to be made aware of the issue of touch and of the vital importance of maintaining the confidentiality of all involved.

DISCUSSION

There is increasing evidence of the impact of traumatic events on the development of the brain in young children. Van der Kolk and his colleagues recommended the use of creative arts therapies that are not reliant on language in order to help children and adults express their somatic responses (van der Kolk, McFarlane, & van der Hart, 1996). Creative arts therapies can be used to help traumatised children learn to: regulate their emotions; experience a sense of mastery; repair trauma-related developmental difficulties; process traumatic memories; learn to self-soothe; and find new meaning in their lives (Crenshaw, 2006). Art therapy has been used with children experiencing grief and loss (St Thomas & Johnson, 2007), with at risk youth (Camilleri, 2007), with sexually abused children (Gil, 2003; O'Brien, 2003), and with Indigenous children in care (Linnell, 2009) and may work at the unconscious level (Karkou & Sanderson, 2006).

Creative arts therapy may be effective for traumatised children, partly because it enables them to play spontaneously in a safe environment where they feel free to express themselves (Levine, 1999). Stirling (2006) argues that educationalists and therapists should work together because parents see art therapy conducted in schools as non-intrusive and non-stigmatising. In this project we used creative arts as an adjunct to therapy with disadvantaged children, who would not

normally have been able to afford to attend creative arts classes after school. Although the classes were not designed to be therapeutic, they did appear to enhance the recovery of these children.

We believe that there were three main ways in which the children benefitted. First they were able to develop self-confidence and a sense of mastery by attending the classes and learning a new skill. Secondly, being in a group situation helped them to develop their social skills, develop a trusting bond with others and a sense of belonging, or begin to see themselves as mentors to the younger children. Finally they felt less anxiety, distress, and isolation than before, partly because the other children had had similar life experiences. These findings are similar to those for adult consumers in in-patient mental health care (Lamont, Sutton, & Brunero, 2009; Walsh, 2009). We believe that four factors were crucial to the success of the class: the growth of trust between all involved over time; the composition of the class; the presence of the therapist; and the thorough briefing and debriefing received by the teachers.

There is some evidence for the power of group therapy in the literature. Much arts therapy is conducted in a group setting as this adds another dimension to the therapeutic relationship (Hansen, 2006; Lacy, Michaelson, & van Laar, 2007; St Thomas & Johnson, 2007). Not only do the children have a relationship with the therapist but with others in the group. This, in itself, can encourage the development of social skills and reduce feelings of isolation (Karkou & Sanderson, 2006). Many creative arts therapies are used with traumatized children including psychodrama (Camilleri, 2007), puppetry and video play therapy (Frey, 2006a, 2006b). Dance therapy has been used to

help children to distance themselves from events and to reduce anxiety or arousal (Glass, 2006).

It is important to remember that not all children who experience a crisis are necessarily traumatised. In crisis intervention work, therapists teach children relaxation techniques in order to manage their anxiety before providing them with toys to help them to recreate or re-enact the crisis at their own pace (Webb, 2006). The therapist emphasises the child's strengths as a survivor of an event that is in the past, and that they are safe now. In this situation, the creative arts classes may have enabled a reduction in anxiety to occur which enabled the children to use their therapy sessions at a deeper level. Given the known danger of retraumatisation of the child (Dripchak, 2007), it was important in this project that therapeutic interventions took place in individual therapy, and not in the creative arts classes.



Figure 1: After hearing a story about a waterfall, the children all made a clay waterfall together.



Figure 2: This shows the children working together to make a waterfall.



Figure 3: Tom, 12, was proud of this depiction of a horse.

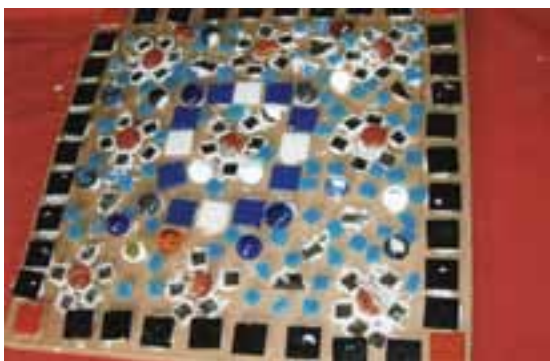


Figure 4: Bea, 13, made this mosaic using Aboriginal colours.



Figure 5: Helene, 14, made this wigwam after listening to the teacher tell a story about Indigenous peoples of America.



Figure 6: Making this clay pot gave Sophie, 8, a great boost to her self-esteem.



Figure 7: These drums were among those used in the African Drumming and Dancing class.

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