

# The effects of group art therapy in a community setting on parents living with a mental illness: Program evaluation approach

Joo Won (Sophie) Chae

## Abstract

The psychological benefits of art therapy for people living with mental illness have been reported in a number of studies. However, little has been found in relation to improving parental confidence in parents with mental illness. This paper reports on a ten-week, community-based, group art therapy program for parents with mental illness. Mixed-method assessments were conducted at each session, and after ten weeks. The results showed that art therapy improved perceptions of well-being, and decreased stress associated with parenting. Participants also reported gaining more confidence in parenting skills and developing creative coping strategies.

## Keywords

Parents living with mental illness, art therapy, group, community settings.

## Introduction

Winnicott (1951) states that most parents will be 'good-enough'. Contemporary ideals of the parenting role (Craig, Powell, & Smith, 2014) incorporate responsibility for children's education and cognitive development (Wrigley, 1989), in addition to their physical, emotional and social development (Furedi, 2001; Reiger, Garvan, & Temel, 2009). However, for parents living with mental illness, being a 'good-enough' parent can be more difficult than for those who are mentally well (Williams, 2004). Parents living with mental illness do not lack the motivation to parent (Thomas & Kalucy, 2003); rather, they value their parental status and try to be the best parent they can, despite their circumstances (Boursnell, 2014).

Parenting characteristics can, however, be affected by a parent's mental state. It is generally acknowledged that schizophrenic disorders dramatically reduce the ability of parents to maintain close and reciprocal relations with their offspring (Berg-Nielsen, Vikan, & Dahl, 2002). Depressed mothers, in interactions with their children, show more negative affect, and more hostile and coercive behaviour, than non-

depressed mothers (Lovejoy, Graczyk, O'Hare, & Neuman, 2000), are more disengaged (Radke-Yarrow, Nottelmann, Belmont, & Welsh, 1993) and insensitive to their children's cues (Field, 2002). Yet it has been argued that dysfunctional parenting is not directly linked to depressive symptoms, but rather is related to inadequate social functioning (Berg-Nielsen et al, 2002; Mufson, Aidala, & Warner, 1994). Various anxiety problems, personality disorders and eating disorders have also been shown to seriously interfere with adequate parenting (Berg-Nielsen et al., 2002; Franzen & Gerlinghoff, 1997; Silverman, Cerny, Nelles & Burke, 1988).

In Australia, 23.3 percent of all children live in households where at least one parent has a mental health problem (Maybery, Reupert, Patrick, Goodyear, & Crase, 2009). Among this population is a significant proportion of fathers experiencing mental illness who live with their natural, adopted, step- or foster children (Fletcher, Maharaj, Fletcher Watson, May, Skeates, & Gruenert, 2013). Fathers' mental illness – from mild forms to psychiatric illness – can have serious developmental effects on their children (Fletcher et al., 2013).

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