



HOW CREATIVE ARTS THERAPY HELPS CHILDREN THRIVE

WORDS DR EVELYN LEWIN ILLUSTRATION NATHAN JOHNSON

In September last year, nine-year-old Emily Tyson was diagnosed with an intestinal parasite. While the bug cleared and caused no long-term physical problems, Emily developed a psychological fixation on germs. She began washing her hands obsessively, 10 to 15 times a day. She withdrew from her friends and became reluctant to leave the house, because she didn't want to risk catching germs from others. "At one point she even began limiting her food consumption based on a fear of germs," says her mother, Regina.

Regina – a professional in the mental health field – knew her daughter needed help. She booked her in to see both a psychiatrist and an art therapist. While the psychiatrist offered a medical perspective, the methods he recommended weren't effective. "Em didn't have the capacity to turn off the constant anxiety and fear," Regina notes. Art therapy, on the other hand, proved successful. Emily was able to draw her feelings and then refer to them as aids when she became anxious at home.

Emily's not the only child to benefit from the field collectively known as creative arts therapy. It seems like child's play; making shapes out of play-dough or canvases dripping in paint, but it's actually a tool that offers the full benefits of counselling. Because – here's the clincher – it is therapy.

"The aim of creative arts therapy is the same as the aim of any counselling or therapy," says registered Art Therapist, Justine Wake. It's about supporting someone in 'meaningful expression', so they can understand themselves and be better equipped to resolve emotional distress.

Let's be honest, creative arts therapies are often viewed as an 'alternative' to traditional therapies such as cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT). This happens when people confuse the role of 'creative arts therapist' with 'art teacher', says Justine. Rather than teaching artistic skills, creative arts therapists are trained professionals in mental health with a master's level qualification. They aim to engage clients in the act of creating, gaining therapeutic benefits in the process.

Why would a child see a creative arts therapist over a more 'traditional' form of therapist? Child psychologist Sharon Draper says there are many reasons. Firstly, she says creative arts therapies are well suited for children as they're "less invasive" than talking therapies. By focusing on creating (instead of just on talking), children can express themselves through the medium of choice.

Qualified play therapist Ray Medhora explains that children don't necessarily have the verbal skills to communicate their feelings. Instead, he says they're far better attuned to expressing themselves through creative outlets, as that's a 'language' they understand well.

Creative arts therapy isn't just good for your child; the benefits can extend to your whole family. When

you engage in therapy with your child, they feel more connected and understood by you, which leads to closer relationships, says Ray. "Often this means less arguing, more honesty and more openness about each others' feelings."

Research from the University of Haifa, performed in 2009, highlights its benefits. The study involved 60 children, aged nine to 14, who all had drug-addicted fathers. The children were divided into two groups. One group was asked to draw their life and describe it to a social worker, while the second described their lives without making pictures. The study found that during the drawing phase, the first group was already opening up about their lives. Their descriptions included more feelings and sensations, the sessions went longer and they expressed optimism for the future. "The use of art seems to help with verbalising trauma," said Professor Rachel Lev-Wiesel, Head of the Graduate School of Creative Arts Therapies.

While the benefits of creative arts therapy are clear, what goes on in a session is harder to explain. This is because, unlike in prescriptive types of treatment, there's no 'one size fits all' approach to creative arts therapy sessions, says Justine. She says every session she runs is different, depending on the age of the child, the child's developmental stage and the aim of therapy.

So far, Emily has had six art therapy sessions, each lasting an hour. Regina's thrilled with the results, saying Emily is starting to regain her sense of self and become more confident, while suffering less emotional mood swings. Most importantly, says Regina, through art therapy, Emily has found an outlet where she can comfortably discuss her issues and gain greater control of her emotions.

INCORPORATE 'ART AS THERAPY' AT HOME

If you think your child would benefit from creative arts therapy, see a trained professional. However, Justine says that for many children, "The task of making art is enough". She says 'art as therapy' will "enhance your child's well-being, improve their confidence levels and provide them with new skills".

Here are some great ways to incorporate more creative arts in your child's life...

ART THERAPY

suggestions by Art Therapist, Justine Wake

- Keep coloured pens, pencils and crayons visible and easily accessible.
- For primary school aged children and younger, try 'messy play,' using materials such as mud, play-dough, finger painting or sand.

- Cooking, mending things, gardening, scrap-booking and doodling all qualify as artistic endeavours, as they all require a creative perspective.
- Sit down and get creative with your children, even if you don't identify as a "creative type".

More information: Australian Creative Arts Therapies Association, acata.org.au

PLAY THERAPY

suggestions by Play Therapist, Ray Medhora

- Play for around 20 minutes at a time, three times a week.
- Allow the interaction to be fully child-led while having an adult present.
- Ensure there are no screens or other distractions around when engaging in playtime.
- Provide an array of toys that promote creative play, such as blocks, Lego etc.

More information: Play Therapy Australia, playtherapyaustralia.com

MUSIC THERAPY

suggestions by Registered Music Therapist, Caitlin Bull

- Make your own instruments – turn pots and pans upside down and use chopsticks, a wooden spoon or your hands to bang them like a drum.
- Engage in 'body percussion' – click fingers, clap hands, stomp feet and so on.
- Download a free music app to your phone or tablet. Choose apps with clear, simple interfaces for young children.
- Your voice is an instrument that's always there, so make use of it and encourage your child to sing to their heart's content. Make up silly songs or sing to the radio and get into the spirit of musical fun.

More information: Australian Music Therapy Association, austmta.org.au

DANCE THERAPY

suggestions by Dance Therapist, Cristina 'Rola' Jiménez

- Put music on that children enjoy, and let them "breathe, feel their feet on the ground, start moving and let go".
- Use props such as scarves, feathers, kites, balls and anything colourful.
- Join in and dance with your child.

More information: Dance Movement Therapy Association of Australasia, dtaa.org.au