

# Not Just Child's Play

## Art Therapy's Amazing Impact



Photo courtesy of Laurie Hesler

By Laurie Mowry-Hesler, MA, ATR-BC, MFT

As a parent, have you ever asked your child to draw a picture to send to a sick friend or relative? Many times our intention is to bring comfort and joy to the person receiving the drawing. Some of us may be attempting to give the child a way of participating in a difficult life event. Art is a natural and age-appropriate means of communication for a child. The making of art, however, is more than child's play; it is a powerful form of therapy, especially for children.

### What Is Art Therapy?

Art therapy, as defined by the American Art Therapy Association, is "an established mental health profession that uses the creative process of art making to improve and

enhance the physical, mental and emotional well-being of individuals of all ages." The creative process involved in artistic self-expression has been shown to help people "resolve conflicts and problems, develop interpersonal skills, manage behavior, reduce stress, increase self-esteem and self-awareness, and achieve insight." Art therapy integrates the field of human development, visual art and the creative process with counseling and psychotherapy models.

Art therapists have master's level degrees in art therapy or a related field and practicum experience in clinical, community and/or other settings. Art therapists are skilled in the application of a wide variety of art modalities, such as drawing, painting or sculpture, for assessment and treatment.

Art therapy can have profound psychological and educational implications. Take the case of 11-year-old Sam,

a child with special needs. Sam initially demonstrated his artistic abilities through meticulous and repetitive drawings of Spiderman comic strips. One day during gym class, Sam accidentally hit another child. He became paralyzed by his emotions and was unable to find words for an explanation or an apology. However, when asked to draw the incident in comic strip form, Sam was able to produce a powerful visual description of the accident. Without a single written word, his comic strip gave the adults a place to help supply the words that Sam was unable to produce on his own. As Sam's skills and talent have grown, he has applied his phenomenal ability to copy what he sees into beautiful African animal drawings and sculptures. For Sam, art also gives him a vehicle for engaging the world around him.

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## Art Therapy in Special Education

Sam's case illustrates how, for children with moderate to severe speech and language disabilities, art therapy can be the key to unlocking and communicating thoughts that might otherwise go unspoken. In fact, the most recent growth in the utilization of art therapy has been in the area of special education, as children with special needs struggle with their learning disabilities or emotional challenges and with their sense of self-worth. The arts often afford these children not only a place where they can shine, but also where they are often gifted.

For parents who are dealing with seriously ill children, art therapy often

provides the patient, as well as the family members, a much needed respite. At Children's Hospital and in specialized children's units around the nation, art therapy or child-life specialty teams offer group and individual sessions. A child may participate in art therapy while receiving medical treatments such as chemotherapy or dialysis. Parents and hospital staff speak of how vital the art has been in allowing an alternative vehicle for communication and also in preserving moments of normalcy for the sick child and the family.

Jennifer Coon-Wallman, an art therapist and psychologist at the Children's Room in Arlington, Mass., uses art-making for children dealing with

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grief and loss. According to Coon-Wallman, "Art-making can be especially healing during the grieving process, as words often are insufficient, answers usually scarce and emotions tend to come in waves that can overwhelm us, subside, then overwhelm us again."

## Therapeutic Intervention

Art has also been shown to improve children and adolescent's academic performance, social behavior and SAT scores, as well as lower high school drop-out rates. In Jersey City public schools, a Creative Arts Therapy Program was established in 1993 to more fully meet the needs of students. Art therapists Nancy Healy and Cindy Lou Nelson explain that, "Creative arts therapy is a psycho-educational therapeutic intervention, which provides students with the opportunity to participate in verbal and non-verbal expressions through the use of the creative arts. During the creative art therapy process, students learn problem-solving strategies, patience and perseverance. Students improve their ability to concentrate for a sustained length of time and gain social skills such as sensitivity, cooperation, conflict resolution and anger management through small-group interaction." Many schools across the country are also looking for ways to integrate the arts into classroom curriculum. For students who do not respond to traditional learning styles, art offers other avenues of learning as well as promoting social and emotional well-being.

## Across the Ages

The many uses of art as therapy have been steadily growing since the 1940s. In its earliest beginnings, art therapy was first recognized and developed in adult psychiatric facilities. Art therapy has since gained attention in health care facilities throughout the United States in the fields of psychiatry, medicine, psychology, counseling, education and the arts. Art therapists have served the aged population in retirement and rehabilitation facilities for approximately forty years. As seen in work with children, art appears to have a profound ability to connect aging individuals with their world – present or past. When patients are "engaged in the experience, they feel respected as people. They have dignity. They get their personhood back," says John Zeisel, a founder of Artists for Alzheimer's.

Art therapy has also been used to help veterans

**For more information about art therapy or for referral services in your area, contact the American Art Therapy Association, Inc., in Alexandria, at 1-888-290-0878 or online at [www.arttherapy.org](http://www.arttherapy.org).**

connect with their world after returning from war, and it has been applied after cataclysmic disasters, as demonstrated in the artwork of 9/11 victims' family members. These powerful images of grief and loss speak not just to individuals and families but to a whole nation. When words cannot describe the unthinkable, artistic expression can somehow serve as a bridge to the deep groaning of our soul.

Much has changed for art therapy since its beginnings. It has evolved into an effective method of treatment and assessment for children, adults, families and groups in different settings. It offers an important nonverbal means of communication – an alternative form of self-expression that is uniquely reflective of the creator of the artwork. The resources for expressive therapy for all are now much more accessible in, and around, our communities. As parents, you can know that the next time your child draws a picture or creates another form of art, for you or someone else, to pull up a chair and join in. It's good for you, too.

Laurie Mowry-Hesler is a master's level, board-certified art therapist and marriage and family therapist based in Rockville. She is a consultant for TLC's Katherine Thomas School and the Expressive Therapy Center.