Art Therapy - What it is and how does it help people with autism?

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Introduction

Art Therapy is a service which can be provided to pupils within a school. The service provides a safe space whereby the young people can express their thoughts and feelings with the aim of promoting emotional wellbeing and supporting pupils with their education.

What is Art Therapy?

Art Therapy is a form of psychotherapy that uses art media as its primary mode of expression and communication. Within this context, art is not used as a diagnostic tool but as a medium to address emotional issues which may be confusing and distressing.

Art Therapists work with children, young people, adults and the elderly. Pupils may have a wide range of difficulties, disabilities or diagnoses. These include emotional, behavioural or mental health problems, learning or physical disabilities, life-limiting conditions, neurological conditions and physical illnesses.

Art Therapy is provided in groups or individually, depending on the individuals' needs. It is not a recreational activity or an art lesson, although the sessions can be enjoyable. No previous experience or expertise in art is required.

Influenced by psychoanalysis, art therapists have been inspired by theories such as attachment-based psychotherapy and have developed a broad range of client-centred approaches such as psycho-educational, mindfulness and metallization-based treatments, compassion-focussed and cognitive analytic therapies and socially engaged practice. Exploring the links between neuro-science and art therapy has also been at the forefront of some of the British Association of Art Therapist (BAAT) conferences. Importantly, art therapy practice has evolved to reflect the cultural and social diversity of the people who engage in it.

Creative Method of Expression

Art Therapy is a creative method of expression used as a therapeutic technique. Art therapy originated in the fields of art and psychotherapy and may vary in definition.

Art Therapy may focus on the creative art-making process itself, as therapy, or on the analysis of expression gained through an exchange of interaction with the therapist. The psychoanalytic approach was one of the earliest forms of art psychotherapy. This approach employs the transference process between the therapist and the individual. The therapist interprets the symbolic self-expression as communicated in the art and elicits interpretations. Analysis of transference is no longer always a component.

Current art therapy includes a vast number of other approaches such as: person-centred, cognitive, behaviour, narrative, family (systems) and more. The principles of art therapy involve humanism, creativity, reconciling emotional conflicts, fostering self-awareness and personal growth.

How can Art Therapy help with autism and complex needs?

Art therapy can address Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD)

Art therapy is ideally suited for addressing sensory processing disorder (SPD), a pervasive problem in autism which contributes to a great deal of difficult emotions and behaviours, yet is too often overlooked. Sensations such as the texture of carpet, fluorescent lighting, crunchy foods, the hum of a refrigerator, may be irritating, or even excruciating, to people with autism ("like nails on a chalkboard," as a client once put it). When thus overstimulated, people with autism may become agitated, avoidant or simply "shut down" and become impassive in order to escape the unpleasant stimulus.

One of the most common goals in art therapy is to increase tolerance for unpleasant stimuli, while channeling self-stimulating behavior into more creative activity. Because art is naturally enjoyable for almost all children, with autism or not, they are more likely to tolerate textures and smells they might otherwise avoid when they are part of a fun art process. A child might find that he or she can actually cope with handling slimy, paste-covered strips of newspaper, for instance, when it's part of a fun papier mache craft project. Repeatedly confronting the stimuli they prefer to avoid helps to desensitise them, making it more bearable when they encounter these sensations in daily life. A child who learned to deal with paper mache, for instance, might then find that handling slimy hand soap was no longer so unpleasant.

Sensory fixations are another common feature of autism. Some people may stare at their fingers as they flick them back and forth or endlessly twist tiny strips of paper. Repetitively engaging in such self-stimulating behaviors (or "stimming") can make people with autism stand out, prevent them from interacting with others and can distract them from other activities, such as school work or play. On the other hand, these sensations may provide some calming, soothing feelings when the person is agitated. In art therapy, the goal is to channel non-functional or inappropriate stimming into socially acceptable, creative outlets.

Case Study: Compulsive shredding of paper turned into beautiful collages

One child with autism was disciplined at a previous school for his compulsive habit of shredding paper. When taught to use his love of shredding to make a collage, the child embraced this new outlet. Today, Grant Manier wins awards for his striking, realistic collages, made with thousands of torn strips of paper and other shredded media.

Another successful artist, obsessed with twisting bits of paper, now makes art using twist ties. This type of art making can help turn a behaviour that once caused social problems into a form of self-expression and enjoyment.

Stephen Wiltshire is one of the most famous artists with autism. His work is largely architectural or of cityscapes, monuments and buildings.

Other artists with autism who create representational art include Richard Wawro, Jessica Hillary Park and Ping Lian Yeak.

How can pupils access Art Therapy?

Pupils are able to self-refer as well as staff, parents/carers and external agencies. Once a referral is made the pupil is given an initial assessment so that the therapist and pupil can decide if it is right for them.

Parent/Carer involvement

There are regular reviews as part of therapy which offer opportunities to review progress, answer questions and to share information with parents on how best to support the young person. There may be art therapy sessions where parents/carers participate if this is felt appropriate by all involved.

What do we mean by confidentiality?

Art Therapy takes place within a confidential framework in which information, including art work, is not to be shared with others without consent unless there are concerns about the young person's safety. This confidentiality is maintained within the framework of the multidisciplinary team.

Art Therapy at Options Autism

Art Therapy works as part of the integrated therapeutic team. Each referred child has timetabled art therapy sessions. Options Autism enables the child to express and process past traumatic experiences. At the same time staff training sessions are run to support staff in their practice. For example, in understanding the special communication needs of some children and how to work with these in practice, or the attachment difficulties experienced by some children, the history which brings this about and how to make sense of this while managing the child's behaviour and supporting them to regulate their behaviours.

Example of art work created at Options Kinsale

Aims of Art Therapy using the Attachment Framework at Options Autism:

- To encourage a relationship with the art work which can in turn support relationships with others.
- A space to be reflective starting with a creative act.
- Support autonomy via the confidence of having created an image - this new creation instils hope as each achievement is a new start.
- Building on this new start from repetition of creation.
- Development of a stronger ego as the therapist reflects back on what is made.
- Language development through exploration and validation.

The Art Therapist at Options Kinsale is Nadine Wilkinson. She is skilled in the areas of non-verbal communication, symbolic and visual imagery. She adapts her work according to the pupil and practice and is informed by psychodynamic theory as well as her own experience as an artist. She is State Registered and regulated by the Health Care Professionals Council (HCPC).

Useful Resources

- Art Therapy, Trauma, And Neuroscience by Juliet L. King, Routledge 2016.
- Creative Arts and Play Therapy for Attachment Problems by Malchodi Crenshaw, Guildford 2014.
- Art as therapy by Tessa Dalley, Routledge 1984.
- Working With Children In Art Therapy by Caroline Case and Tessa Dalley, Brunner Routledge 1990.
- Art Therapy with Children on the Autistic Spectrum, Beyond words, by Kathy Evans and Janek Dubowski, Jessica Kingsley Publishers 2001.

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The complete series of help sheets can be found on our website www.optionsautism.co.uk/resources

For further information about our schools and homes throughout England and Wales for children and adults with autism, complex needs and learning disabilities call: 08442 487187 | **email:** info@optionsautism.co.uk | **website**: www.optionsautism.co.uk

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