The Therapeutic Aspects of Art Therapy for Children

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Introduction

- According to the American Art Therapy Association, “Art Therapy is an integrative mental health and human services profession that enriches the lives of individuals, families, and communities through active art-making, creative process, applied psychological theory, and human experience within a psychotherapeutic relationship.”

- Art Therapy in clinical settings dates back to the 1940s in the United States.

- The top 10 Children’s Hospitals in the US utilize creative therapies such as art therapy.

Objectives of Art Therapy

- Encourage self-expression of thoughts and feelings related with illness and hospitalization.
- Help children process and work through possible traumatic experiences associated with hospitalization.
- Promote a sense of independence and feeling of control.
- Facilitate positive self-esteem and positive body image
- Encourage the development of healthy strategies for coping.
- Learn effective techniques to self-manage stress and anxiety related to illness or condition.
- Promote problem-solving skills.
- Facilitate hand-eye coordination and gross motor skills.
- Encourage non-verbal communication skills.
- Organize thoughts to make independent decisions.

Applications

- Before Diagnosis and Treatment Plan
- Before Surgery
- After Surgery
- During Coping of Diagnoses
- During Rehabilitation of physical/metal impairments
- After Treatments/Hospital Stay
- At home with supportive community and family partners
- During Hospice or Palliative Care

Observations from Art Therapists in the Field

“Children sometimes lack the words to express what is happening to them symbolically, there is a disconnect between how they feel and what they are able to actually say” (Michelle Dean, 2017).

“Art therapies can be a normalizing experience for children, one which children in all cultures recognize” (Cathy Malchiodi, 2015).

“The overall aim of art therapy is to enable change and growth on a personal level. Art therapy is often wrongly assumed to be a form of distraction or diversion from personal difficulties. This is not the case. [Rather it] provides an alternative to spoken language as a means of representation and communication.” (Michele Wood, 2015)

“When the ill child engages in art making, he or she is in charge of the work—the materials to be used; the scope, intent, and imagery; when the piece is finished; and whether it will be retained or discarded. All these factors are under the child artist’s control. Participating in creative work within the medical setting can help rebuild the young patient’s sense of hope, self-esteem, autonomy, and competence while offering opportunities for safe and contained expression of feelings” (Tracy Councill, 2007).

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Conclusions

- Art Therapy is a powerful human experience transforming a person’s hospital stay, frame of mind around an illness, and expression of his/her vulnerability and strength in the midst of pain and suffering.
- Art therapy offers the advantages of a universal, non-verbal language, with immediate, strong emotional effects.
- Information gathered through artworks can be invaluable to a medical team seeking to treat the whole person, not just the diagnosis.

Art Work

“My mission is to weave the Tapestry of Hope & Strength with each artwork as a thread to support the whole hospital.” - Art Therapist at Comer, Yasuko Yoshihara ATR-BC, LCPC (March 23, 2018)

References


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October 6, 2017 interviews by the American Art Therapy Association of Michelle Dean, MA, ATR-BC, LPC, CGP, Co-Founder of the Center for Psyche and the Arts, LLC in Philadelphia.