

## Training on Child Psychology

COOPÉ' Sud

### 4. Using art-therapy with children

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### IMPORTANT NOTICE

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## 1. Definition of art-therapy

Art-therapy concept is based on the idea that any human being's life experiences (good or bad) are "stocked" in the psyche in various forms, **including images** - at a conscious or unconscious level. (Remembrances are kept in our psyche in all its sensory aspects: hearing, smell, touch, taste, and vision). These remembrances are associated to corresponding specific emotions (positive or negative). These images can be expressed through creative expression ; the easiest way to observe it is to use mediums such as artistic expressive activities. One's experiences and remembrances (conscious or unconscious) are then expressed in an **indirect, symbolic** way.

Art-therapists believe that a person's creativity is influenced in priority by the experiences which had the most important impact in the individual's life (the stronger a remembrance is, the more important its trace is in the person's psyche). Then, a person's creativity is influenced by the most significant emotions and events which happened in the individual's life. Art-therapists think that, if human beings are given the opportunity to express themselves, the most emotionally loaded remembrances will be expressed in priority.

Then, in the case of children (or adults) who have gone through difficult experiences and traumas, their creation is highly orientated on these events' remembrances and associated feelings, its impact on the child's life, self-image, personality and the coping reactions he/ she has developed in order to deal with these experiences.

**Art-therapy consist in helping individuals to express these images and emotions in a symbolic form.** It is a non-directive technique, usually no direct questions or investigation about reality are done. **Only symbols are discussed and analysed with the therapist, and the person is free to**

**establish links between the symbolic creation and real life and difficulties, when he/she feels ready for that.**

Because of the connection between art symbols and inner emotions and images (more globally, what we called the person's inner world), creative activities provoke feelings of appeasement, emotional release and general feeling of well-being. The distance with concrete reality that creative activities suppose generally helps individuals to feel free to express. If the adult counsellor or therapist shows a **non judgmental attitude towards the child, with unconditional acceptance**, paying attention and showing interest to the child's creation, he / she is going to feel that what he / she has inside is basically good. That helps in terms of increasing self-esteem and self-confidence, developing hope and a positive attitude towards one's capacity to express and deal with inner problems.

Using art-therapy technique is particularly appropriate for intervention with children, since symbolic expression is their favourite way to express themselves. Activities such as drawing, painting, sculpture, collage, role playing, drama, story telling.... correspond to children's way of expressing their emotions and inner world.

In normal human development, there are different steps in self expression:

- first, babies and young children use their body in order to express their needs (for example, a baby cries to express his need for food or basic cares).
- Secondly, children use symbolic play so as to express themselves and to grow: observing children playing show the kind of developmental step and the problems they are going through, their wishes, feelings ... (eg. children imagining they are a family, playing as if they were adults, parents, babies, teachers...).
- Thirdly, starting at pre adolescence time, verbal expression becomes the most favourite and objective way to communicate with others and to express oneself.

## **2. Example of children's drawing: general statements.**

When children are drawing or creating something, they express the images they have integrated from their past experiences; these show the characteristics of their inner world, their own representation of the world around them. Then, the different elements of their personality under construction appear, in its conscious and unconscious aspects: intelligence, emotional and affective aspects (wishes, fears, impulses, drives, relationships, coping mechanisms...).

In order to get the as much information as possible about their inner world, **it is important to let children draw as freely as possible**, and to give them the least instructions as possible (and the least precise ones) : for example "Draw a person, any person you want, just like how you can imagine it".

The following statements have to be understood as general indicators and its application has to be done very carefully; exceptions might appear, depending on each child's personality, psychic organisation and previous experiences. Of course, each child 's creation has to be understood and analysed depending on his / her social and cultural environment.

a) Intelligence.

It is possible to find some indications in the children's drawing about their intellectual level by comparing their creation to the kind of drawing which is expected at the children's age; then it is possible to have an idea about the child's mental level. Many theories, testing and scales have been created in order to measure it.

b) Affective aspects.

Through the way they are drawing and talking about their drawings, children express their self image, the representations they have of the others, images of their past experiences, feelings, emotions, their fears, desires, inner concerns... All the aspects of a child's emotional state can be observed and analysed.

**The adult should never forget that these two factors (intellectual and affective aspects) are influencing each other.** For example, most inhibited children make very simple drawings which can be interpreted as a sign of intellectual deficiency, but in fact, this is due to a depressive component or other affective difficulties.

Then it is essential to compare the drawing analysis to the observation of the child's behaviour or psychological tests results. It is also important to remember that the children's state of mind when they are drawing has to be considered as a factor which is able to influence the interpretation (that is why it does not make sense to give any psychological test to somebody who is going through a depression, for example). The child's behavioural manifestations while he/her is drawing (or creating any art work) is as important as the drawing analysis itself.

So, the adult has to be very careful with giving an interpretation: observing children and trying to analyse their creations and play provide adults with some information about children 's inner tendencies. **No conclusions can be evoked without having several sessions with children, including discussions with them and counselling.** (Standardised testing, in addition to each child's behaviour observation and expressive activities provide the counsellor or educator with more complete and comprehensive information. Then, conclusions can be evoked).

c) Graphic characteristics.

The observation of the way a child is drawing lines (its thickness, strength, the mark of the stroke of lines) reveals some information about the child's tendencies:

- If the line is strong, it shows some strong impulses, daring or violence; excessively strong lines are in keeping with a lack of control of impulses and drives, or brutality.
- If the line is weak, it shows inhibition tendencies or shyness; excessively weak lines are in keeping with a lack of self-confidence, lack of trust, fear to fail or to express oneself (this is generally related to the impact of a traumatic experience: the child prefers to avoid expressing himself because he wishes to avoid remembering the painful emotions). One must carefully observe the child so as to evaluate the impact of the children's possible natural shyness when they are drawing (which might be transitory and disappear after a while).

d) Page area.

Most children use the whole page space to produce their drawing, but some of them prefer to draw in a special page area, which always has a symbolic meaning. Commonly, this is what page areas are associated to:

- Lower part of the page:** it represents the area of basic affective needs, which is associated to the mother image. (The very lower area is often associated with depression).
- Upper part of the page:** it represents the area of imaginary, dreamy, spiritual component, or the "ideal" side. It is usually associated to the father image's area.

•**The left side** usually represents the past.

•**The right side** usually represents the future. (For left-handed patients, the left side represents the future and the right side the past).

Then, if children are drawing from the left side to the right, there is a movement in the direction of the future, which is normal and positive. But, if they are drawing from the right side to the left, the movement is in the direction of the past, which can be a sign of fears to face the future or to accept their present age and life situation. It might show an inner wish to go back to a past condition when they felt more protected, safer and happy.

Art-therapists use to say that **the page space represents the child 's inner space**. If this space looks like a desert, it may mean that the child feels inner emptiness or is suffering from feelings of loss (this is usually in keeping with depressive tendencies).

The drawing's main characteristics also represent the child's inner world specificity; for example, most of the time, **confused drawings** express inner confusion. Coping reactions also appear : for example, **very organised drawings** (made with ruler, like if the child wanted to make a "perfect" drawing...) usually express a defence mechanism consisting in controlling emotions and impulses (which ought be strong and difficult to handle). Also, usually, if after several sessions the child is still making **school type drawings**, it shows the child's tendency to avoid expressing his / her emotions and inner world (that kind of stereotyped drawings help the child to stay at a superficial level of expression, where only "socially accepted" things are expressed). This may show lack of self-confidence to express oneself, or efforts to "hide" and repress some more painful emotions or strong impulses and drives.

e) Children's two main types of personality tendencies.

There are two main types of children's personality tendencies:

- **The rational type:** in this case, these children's spontaneity, their expression of emotions and impulses tend to be controlled. Since drawing situation is in keeping with emotional and global self-expression, these children tend to take many precautions, to draw carefully (it is a way to "control" what they are expressing in their creation), with mostly angles and straight lines. These children also often ask for eraser and rulers. They globally "think" more than they "feel" (they use their logical and intellectual abilities in order to deal with life events).

- **The sensory type:** these children are mostly spontaneous, sensitive towards the atmosphere and human relationships, and globally tend to freely express their emotions. In addition to the observable behaviour of the child, these aspects are often expressed in the drawing through curved lines. They globally "feel" more than they "think": they use their feelings, emotional and sensory abilities

A mixed type can also be often observed, but generally a sensory or rational tendency is found, which gives us some information about the child's personality tendency.

Based on this observation; it is generally appropriate to propose to "rational children" some expressive activities, in order to help them develop their potential to express themselves more freely, with less control. For "sensory children", their tendency to express themselves with no control might lead to possible mistakes, or lack of structure and behavioural control; activities aiming at giving more structure to behaviours might be proposed to the child.

f) The colours.

The way children use colours in their drawings is important, since colours are directly related to children's emotional level. For example, if children do not use colours or only **black or dark colours**, it often shows a possible depressive component with some difficulties to enjoy their present life.

\* The use of white colour:

- **If there is a lot of white (or blank space)** in the child's drawing, it very often shows depressive tendencies, feelings of inner emptiness or it might express that something important is missing in the child's life.

- **If children are using white colour on a white paper** (then, the observer cannot really see what they are drawing since there is no observable mark left on the paper): this attitude is often related to a traumatic experience children are trying to "hide", repress or deny (such an attitude is often related to the idea of secret: something is there, but the child cannot express it). Such a behaviour shows the children's inner conflict and the compromise they are using: on the one hand, they need to express their trauma (in order to overcome it), but on another hand, it is so difficult and painful for them that they tend to repress it. The use of white colour is then a kind of "compromise" for expressing that the child has "something" to hide (guilt feelings are often associated to that kind of details). Stories of secrets and hidden things are often associated to that kind of drawings.

Colours always have symbolic meanings (it is influenced by the cultural environment and children's past experiences). **Red**, for example, is in keeping with strong emotions and impulses (it is the colour which is commonly associated to aggressiveness, anger, death or sometimes love - red hearts). **Blue** is generally associated to peace and life (colour of the sky and the sea). **Yellow**, the sun colour, is generally a positive colour and evokes warmth and happiness.

Even if some symbols seem to be universal (because of their association to nature elements), discussion with the child about his / her own feelings is always needed: for example, if a child witnessed his parents' death in a car accident, if the car was blue, blue colour might not be associated to peace and life!

g) Animals.

Children are often using animals images as representatives of themselves or significant persons in their life: this is a mechanism which consists in keeping a certain distance with the inner representations they evoke. It helps them to express their feelings towards these persons or themselves more freely. Animals often symbolise children's own feelings or different aspects of their personality: for example, a dangerous or nasty animal might represent their own aggressive tendencies. Depending on children's cultural environment, animals have special symbolic meaning. In the **Hindu religion**, for example, animals used as vehicles by some particular gods may have a special symbolic meaning.

However, beside the cultural aspect, some animals' symbolic references seem to be international: for example, **cows are often associated to the maternal image** (because of its reference to milk). **Turtles or shell animals** often evoke the idea of protection or withdrawal (these animals are able to hide themselves in their own body shell).

b) Feminine and masculine symbols.

The understanding and the conceptions of the sexual difference between men and women can be observed in a child's drawing through the characters' physical aspect (hair, body shape, clothes...) and through the presence and the importance of certain details having symbolic meanings (this is a non-

exhaustive list!):

- Feminine symbols: food, milk, water (sea, marine animals,...), any kind of containers (vase, jug, pot...), flowers.
- Masculine symbols: pointed, sharp objects, pipe, cane, sun, symbols of strength or power (weapons, snake, wild animals...).

Globally, the mother (feminine) symbol is associated with basic affection, close relationship, basic protection, basic cares, food... and the father (masculine) symbol refers to strength, power and law.

#### i) House

Houses and its different characteristics in the drawing commonly symbolise children's self. Again, its interpretation highly depends on each child's cultural, social and economic environment (if a child who grew up in extreme poverty and never had a house is asked to draw a house, interpretation has to be adjusted!). However, some global characteristics are observed.

Generally, houses' appearance of stability and solidity represents children's own inner stability. **Positive details** such as flowers or any decoration usually show children's self-image positive or narcissistic" aspects (atmosphere of "life" in the house is always a positive indicator), if it is not too much stereotyped. **Windows** evoke their openness to others, **curtains** refer to the possibility to withdraw and hide what is happening within themselves (that can be a sign of capacity to keep inner private space too). Presence of **doors** symbolise children's capacity to keep their own private space without withdrawing, with the possibility to open themselves to others (possibility to open it or close it). **Chimney with smoke** refers to the presence of strong inner impulses and drives (this image supposes that there is fire inside the house, which always symbolises strong impulses). **Roof** is there to protect the whole house: its characteristics show the child's capacity for self-protection.

Knowing that drawing houses supposes many stereotyped images; several counselling sessions might be needed in order for children to freely express their own inner house representation (certainly different from school type drawings) and their creativity.

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