

About Art Therapy and Schools*

Research on the use of art therapy in schools is sparse. Advocates suggest it is an innovative way to help children who are manifesting learning or emotional problems. They stress that schools enable art therapy to be provided with equity of access, flexibility, and personalization. They propose integrating art therapy into school counseling, art education, special education services, and after school programs (see Exhibit).

What is Art Therapy?

Wikipedia notes that “Definitions of art therapy vary due to its origins in two fields: art and psychotherapy. It can focus on the art-making process as therapeutic in and of itself (‘art as therapy’) or it can be ‘art in therapy’ (art psychotherapy).”

The American Art Therapy Association (2011) states:

"Art therapy is a mental health profession in which clients, facilitated by the art therapist, use art media, the creative process, and the resulting artwork to explore their feelings, reconcile emotional conflicts, foster self-awareness, manage behavior and addictions, develop social skills, improve reality orientation, reduce anxiety, and increase self-esteem. A goal in art therapy is to improve or restore a client's functioning and his or her sense of personal well-being. Art therapy practice requires knowledge of visual art (drawing, painting, sculpture, and other art forms) and the creative process, as well as of human development, psychological, and counseling theories and techniques."

How Do Art Education and Art Therapy Differ?

In schools, the intent of art *education* is to develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes about art. With specific respect to producing art, the emphasis is on what is produced and not the experience of creating the work. Some have stressed that art education focuses on the art, rather than on the individual producing the art.

In contrast, the intent of art therapy is treatment. Art therapy focuses on the individual and uses the act of creating art as a therapeutic process. The underlying intervention rationale is that, because art is a form of nonverbal communication, it facilitates expression of unconscious and conscious thoughts and feelings. The act of creating art in and of itself is seen as having a therapeutic effect. In addition, the therapist can use the product as a stimulus in efforts to help address personal factors that may be impeding a student's learning, performance, and general functioning.

Art therapy has also been used as part of efforts to assess underlying problems. Professional art therapists can also contribute to the professional development of teachers and student support personnel by clarifying how art can be therapeutic and can promote healthy student development.

*The material in this document was culled from the literature and drafted by Jessica Neighbors as part of her work with the national Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA. Key references used are cited in the reference list at the end of the document.

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Exhibit

Examples of Integrating Art Therapy into Schools

School Counseling. Advocates stress that art therapy is an easier form of communication for children than talking and that counselors can focus on this aspect of art therapy to help some students. To use art, counselors need to learn how to integrate art therapeutically into counseling. In using art, they need to emphasize process over product and clarify the potential benefits to the student. It has been suggested that art therapy fits nicely into the American School Counselor Association's national standards.

Art Education. When it comes to promoting social and emotional development and overcoming social and emotional problems, art classes have long been seen as playing a key role. Advocates see integrating art therapy into such classrooms as enhancing that role. This is viewed as particularly important when schools have sparse resources and few trained personnel for addressing social and emotional concerns. Art classes also are seen as a venue for mainstreaming those special education students designated to receive art therapy as a related service.

In integrating art therapy into the art education curriculum, the focus is on using various class activities to facilitate social and emotional development and to help when barriers to such development are encountered. This includes ensuring a positive classroom climate (e.g., one that stresses empathy, warmth, mutual respect) (a) in the process of teaching, (b) in exploring content, and (c) whenever activity involves student creative self-expression as a focal point for fostering therapeutic impact. In addition, art educators can collaborate with others, such as school counselors, school psychologists, teachers, and administrators, in addressing specific concerns within a school.

Special Education. What evidence there is suggests it is not uncommon for schools to specify art therapy as a related service in a student's Individual Education Plan (IEP). In such cases, an art therapist usually is involved in assessing whether the student is likely to benefit from art therapy, collaborating with IEP teams to set specific objectives, and documenting progress.

After School. After school approaches vary greatly. Some are open to all, others are for special students; some are fee-based, others are free; some are offered every other day, others are once a week. Here examples of a few programs that are described online:

- *Art Expression Incorporated* (Pittsburg, PA): Fully funded and inclusive; uses art therapy in a group setting to accomplish generalized goals for any student who wants to participate (Gain Important Education Outcomes).
- *CREATE Arts Center, SmART Kids* (Montgomery County, MD): Fee-based with scholarships when needed. At-risk students referred by the school (CREATE Arts Center).
- *Children's After School Treatment Services* (Bergen County, NJ): No cost to at-risk referred students. Offers art therapy, play therapy, and recreation. (Children's After-School Treatment Services – C.A.T.S).

What Benefits Might be Accrued from Art Therapy?

Art therapy is described as having the potential to help any child experiencing learning, behavior, and emotional problems. It is emphasized that it opens up a nonverbal form of communication for those who have a hard time communicating their thoughts and feelings (e.g., young children, those who are shy and withdrawn, those with limited vocabulary, those who have been traumatized). It is described as having the potential to help all youngsters to better know their emotions, know themselves, and cope with obstacles during pivotal developmental stages of life.

Some studies report findings suggesting that children asked to draw while they talk about their experiences reveal more information than children who merely talk about their experiences. Such findings are interpreted as showing that drawing reduces children's anxiety, anger, and fear, allows for a stronger connection with the interviewer, helps them organize their communications, and increases memory retrieval.

Art therapy can be integrated with other therapeutic approaches (e.g., cognitive behavioral therapy, training in social skills and for problem solving, systematic desensitization) to facilitate cognitive, social, and emotional outcomes (e.g., better problem solving, reduced stress and acting out, increased coping mechanisms, reconstructed maladjusted thinking patterns, increased prosocial behavior, increased self-control),

Concluding Comments

At a time when there is a renewed interest in the role of art in enhancing school climate, facilitating social emotional development, addressing barriers to learning and teaching, and re-engaging disconnected student, it is relevant to think about how art therapy fits. At the same time, it is essential to remember that few schools can afford to add an art *therapist* as yet one more professional specialist. As with all mental health interventions, art therapy should be viewed as embedded into a unified and comprehensive system of student and learning supports.

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More Art Therapy Resources

- >Art Therapy. <http://www.internationalarttherapy.org/> .
- >Art Therapy at DMOZ. http://www.dmoz.org/Health/Professions/Art_Therapy/
- >Art Therapy in Schools Program Exhibition Showcases: The Work of NY City's At-Risk Children. <http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/site/ataglance/2013/11/art-therapy-in-schools-program-exhibition-showcases-the-work-of-new-york-citys-at-risk-children.html>
- >National Alliance of Specialized Instructional Support Personnel (NASISP). Art Therapy Services & Resources. <http://nasisp.org/Descriptions.html> .