

## **THE PROCESS OF CHANGE THROUGH ART-THERAPY ACTIVITIES IN CHILDREN WITH BEHAVIOURAL DISORDERS**

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### **Abstract**

The article focuses on the presentation of the aspects of specific art-therapy activities supporting the process of self-reflection and the process of change. Art therapy, as one of the expressive therapeutic concepts in psychotherapy as well as therapeutic education, has the possibilities of complex, systematic influence of individuals in their bio-psycho-socio-spiritual unity. From the beginning of their lives, each person presents a unique and complex human being capable of self-expression, development and change. In difficult situations in a person's life, verbal expression may not be the most suitable means of help. For therapeutic education, the property of the artistic media to promote positive transformation processes is significant. Art and art-based activities become communication means that enable a person to receive information about and to explore their own possibilities and resources to manage the current life situation. Art therapy is based on the use of artistic metaphors, images and visual symbols, as well as artistic materials. Therefore, art therapy acts on multi-sensorial levels, interferes with several sensory paths in both receptive and active expressive form. The authors explored these qualities of art therapy in a qualitative analysis of art therapy techniques, providing examples from their practice in a form of research vignettes and connecting them to the theory of art therapy, art therapy materials with a specific focus on working with multi-sensory qualities in the context of therapeutic education. The paper is a partial outcome of the project VEGA 1/0598/17 Evaluation of The Effective Factors of Multisensory Approaches in Therapeutic Education.

**Keywords:** process of change, art-therapy activities, sensory perception

### **1 CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR OF CHILDREN AND INTERVENTIONAL POSSIBILITIES THROUGH ART THERAPY**

Challenging behaviour in children may have different causes. Problem behaviour can be caused by an organic cause, injury (pre-, peri- or post-natal), psychological and social effects, or a physiological and emotional burden with which the child fails to cope (Tichá, 2015). It is often difficult for the child as well as for the adult to define what can be hidden behind the emotion that will prevail at that moment. The observer sees a reflected emotion that does not match their own understanding of the situation. It is exaggerated,

sometimes incomprehensible, which may turn it to destructive.

A child who is overwhelmed by emotional expression is often misunderstood by society and may suffer from anxiety and frustration. It is common to label these children as "bad" or "naughty." Their behaviour, misunderstood by the social surroundings, may become a label.

From the child with this label, when the environment no longer expects of the child to behave any different, also the child does not expect different reactions of the adults, either and will react negatively again. It affects the child's self-confidence, self-esteem, self-image. Such a child, after experiencing repeated experiences of being persecuted, does not see any sense in changing the behaviour because the child was not listened to or understood; no one was interested in what was behind the expressed behaviour. The chaos that the child is experiencing often cannot be verbally expressed, named, or grasped. That is the reason why natural expression is very appropriate through painting, playing, writing diaries, poems, dancing, music or singing. They need to express the state of their inner being, their soul, their mental "I". Negative experience affects not only the current situation, but also causes problems secondary to it, for example, becoming the triggering moment of human conflicts (Paulik, 2017).

A mature adult can use more control mechanisms than a child for dealing with anger and aggressive tendencies. This includes silent self-management with instructions, distraction from the aggravating phenomena, program focus on dealing with the situation without distraction with "impossible" statements on the other side, and so on. A child can learn these strategies through the natural means of expressive tools (e.g. play, art therapy or music therapy).

For the purposes of this study, we will pay attention to one of these expressive options, which is art therapy. Kučerová (2013) reports art therapy to be one of the possible artistic therapies in the therapy of mental disorders. Her techniques are used in a rehabilitation approach for emotional relaxation, building empathy and cooperation. Support for expressing skills and change in more acceptable behaviours of clients towards themselves and the environment is also a significant meaning of the use of art therapy. Art therapy does not make it a condition to create an aesthetic image or artistic work. Emphasis is placed on the process of creation itself and the desired result is the most authentic artistic expression and the finding of an optimal art form within the possibilities of the child (client) for what they want to express in the image or other artistic expression (Jedlička et al., 2015).

Our psychological past, personal relationships, and working stereotypes make our emotions stronger in one way or another. For example, we may have a tendency to exaggerate self-satisfaction, or, on the contrary, feel very uncertain. To be too confident or overly suspicious, anxious or unnecessarily frightened. Art expression in art therapy is perceived as a means of self-expression and is also the subject of communication.

### **1.1 Application Possibilities of Art Therapy in Problematic Circuits of Behaviour**

Within art therapy there are areas that are also important in the therapy of problem behaviour in children. If we work with these goals, art therapy brings results beyond the specific focus of the problem. If we know what we need to focus on, we pay attention to what is important for a given child (client). Art therapy has its goals, which are divided into two basic categories. These goals constitute the theoretical framework of our understanding of art therapy and the background for the methodology of our study. Among the individual goals we can find:

- Relaxation;
- Self-enjoyment and self-actualisation;
- Visual and verbal organizations (arrangements) of experiences;
- Growth of personal freedom and motivation;
- Freedom to experiment in searching for expressions of emotions, feelings and conflicts;
- Development of fantasy;
- Insight;
- Comprehensive personality development.

Another category are the social aims of art therapy:

- Perception and acceptance of other people;
- Recognition of their value;

- Their valuation;
- Establishing contacts;
- Group engagement and cooperation;
- Communication;
- Joint problem solving;
- The experience that the other have similar experiences to me;
- Reflection of self-functioning within a group;
- Understanding relationships;
- Creating social support.

The basis for the described techniques emerged as part of a project focused on the use of expressivity in therapy in children with behavioural disorders with the beginning of implementation in 2015.

## **1.2 Art Therapy Theme Processing – Research Results**

In 2015, the problem of behavioural disorders in children from the point of view of the diagnostic process and its specificities within the intervention strategies of art therapy, which would make the maximum use of the child's potential and their strengths, began to be examined in the conditions of the Slovak Republic. In this study, materials were developed for a wider population - students in helping professions, experts, and parents of children with behavioural disorders.

The **research sample** was a line of experts providing assessment and intervention in helping professions to promote the child's integrity and the family's own competency resources. The condition for inclusion in the research sample was the application of expressive therapeutic techniques with children with behavioural problems. Participants were specialists in the field of therapeutic education with a profile focused on art therapy. In the first phase, they focused on the assessment of problem behaviour and its subsequent intervention through specific art therapy techniques in the second phase of the research. Based on this study, materials were developed that focused on the different phases of research:

- General knowledge of the problem (information database of behavioural disorders),
- Assessment of behavioural disorders,
- Intervention strategies,
- Knowledge application options.

In this study, we focused on the description of the factors of art therapy methods, in the sense of the process of changing problem behaviour that has been identified as useful in the context of a child with behavioural problems. On the way to recovery, the art has the power to penetrate through the feelings, thoughts, attitudes, character defences of a person to the very core of the personality - to the self, to connect with the deepest resources and to start the healing process. For therapeutic intervention, this feature of the artistic media "to support the positive transformation process" is significant. Art becomes a means of communication that allows people to take information about themselves, discover their possibilities and resources to manage the current life situation.

Drawing such as free drawing, tracing, copying, imagination, automatic drawing, painting, collage, rollage, frottage, engraving, modeling, gluing, sanding, rendering, glass painting, mosaics, grinding, their combination allow emotions to be expressed and transforms in different ways, depending on the specific qualities of the art medium. Every technique requires some material equipment, space, strength, patience. It does not always have to be expensive. Surplus materials can be very useful – old magazines, catalogs, samplers, postcards, various paper, leather, glass, wire, cloth, wood, juice boxes ...

From our exploratory observation from practice, we identified the types of people's rebellion on the material as follows. Every person approaches the material individually. Someone chooses the biggest paper, someone is worried about the big area, someone has respect for the material (in terms of price - it's expensive, I will do it), I do not know how this material responds – surprise and too – It's a shame to me, I do not know how (someone likes to explore the possibilities of the material, someone is careful). The child expresses in their drawing the symbols the helping professional needs to understand to be able to decrypt

the content the child had inserted into them. We talk about the drawing with the child, we ask questions, following what the child says about the picture. To illustrate the image of their life, to complete the story. With the child, we can share our feelings reflecting the image, or the atmosphere emerging from the picture.

In this study, we present an excerpt from the case study of clay work (Research demonstration).

**Research demonstration:** According to her own words, Nika (13 years old) feels anxious, angry, afraid, guilty and unaccepted. Problems in communication with the grandmother, mother and step-father trigger furious outbursts in her that are fuelled by the feeling of helplessness and the need for love. During art therapy sessions, Nika is open, wants to talk and looks forward to the sessions. She tends and likes to stay longer. It is a place where she is the centre of attention and interest, which she normally lacks. Despite the problems that she deals with in the family, Nika is very self-assertive. She has got good vocabulary, she is able to argue and advocate for herself. She fights for her place in the family, even though it has not been successful so far from her point of view. Within the art therapy sessions, we offered the opportunity to work with clay with the aim to improve self-perception and self-esteem, to anchor within herself and in the world, to provide touch that was so important and missing in her life. We also aimed at alleviating anxiety, anger, sadness, feelings of guilt and helplessness, and to present her with experiences of joy, success, acceptance and value. Selected techniques of working with clay included techniques focused on exploring clay as a material (e.g. clay field, clay ball, sounds of clay, variations) and on tactile experience without visual control (e.g. feely bag, relief reconstruction, clay self-portrait, finding your own shape).

Art therapy techniques are the option of removing anxiety, the key to controlling one's own emotional reactions to the environment, whether family or social surroundings.

From the point of view of the course of art therapy, we apply the receptive or productive form based on the results of the assessment in the context of problem behavior.

Receptive art therapy is a perception of a work of art selected by art therapists with a certain intention. In particular, the art therapist considers the person or people with whom the work is conducted and searches to discover meaning. Art therapy uses not only visual perception, but also haptic system and their combination. While, for example, people cannot touch the statues in the gallery, it is allowed or recommended in art therapy sessions. An example of such activity would include instruction to 'rely on your mind to explore some relief from clay, wood, and so on, and just to try to transfer this tactile image to the paper.' The goal is to better understand the person's inner world for themselves, and to learn the feelings of other people. Image perception needs the viewer's cooperation, their "empathy". This means that the viewer will show their own emotions in the artwork. The person can thus discover spirituality, life force, sadness and hope. Feeling changes according to the inner focus of the viewer, but also according to their current emotional disposition. Receptive art therapy includes visits to galleries and exhibitions, screenings of slides or videos associated with interviews about perceived artistic artifacts, and so on.

Productive art therapy is where the use of specific creative activities (drawing, painting, modeling, clay modeling, stone work, wood ...) or intermediary activities (activities linking different media) happens in an individual or group session. Productive art therapy is also called active or expressive art therapy and is therefore the art activity that a person (client, child) performs. Art therapy always has its goal. We often encounter the idea that art therapy is 'just' drawing. It is a very distorted and naive idea that devalues the real work of the art therapist. Leading an art-therapy meeting is a process for both sides. The art therapist must prepare, the entire meeting has a structure, it is not just a specific technique. The professional cannot just lay a sheet of paper on the table without preparation, put colouring pencils in a person's hand and say – So, paint!

The art therapist must prepare the room and the material. With the client, the professional determines what will be the contract (topic) for the given meeting, the goals and the rules of the space, time, working. Before the main part of the session, a warm-up activity is important, for example techniques combining other forms of art (using music, movement), which tune the client to the main part and mirror it. It is aimed to help the client tune in "here and now" and to divert attention from what was happening previously. The main part, the core of the session, which also has several parts itself, follows. It ends with a presentation – reflection of the art work and a dialogue of the client and the art therapist. During the time the client works, the art therapist is not idle, but at this moment has actually does most of the work. The professional tracks what is happening, how a client approaches the task, handles the material, uses the space, and so on. It is said that a good art therapist always hurts in the evening. In their reflection, they can share their observations or feeling with the client, but they will return to the client and the client's needs with their feedback.

Often, people have a problem getting started at all. It is a remnant of the trauma of the arts lessons, when we

were evaluated through the subjective perception of the teacher about what is and is not good, nice, or aesthetic. The charm of art therapy is based on the fact that it is not important how the art product looks, it is not valued in terms of nice, ugly, good and evil ... Sometimes it is a problem that a person is tied to the aesthetic aspect of what they are making. It then lacks the potential of free and true expression. If art therapy is to be helpful for the individual, authenticity is essential, as is the case with every therapy. For children, the pleasure in art making is present up to a certain age. Children themselves do not evaluate negatively unless they have learned it from others. Art is also a natural release for creativity, freedom of expression.

### **1.3 Conclusion**

Art therapy, as one of the therapeutic concepts, has the possibilities of a complex, systematic influence on people in their bio-psycho-socio-spiritual unity. From the moment of conception, each person is a unique and complex human person. A comprehensive approach to a person as a holistic personality – with a wide range of internal resources – leads to positive internal changes and support for adaptation mechanisms. Art therapy provides a wide scope for adequate stimulation, activates the clients, enables them to form and support their ability to overcome obstacles. Art therapy acts both on healing and preventive measures (prevents the risk of confinement, limitation to others and the world that is difficult to overcome during the intervention process). This is the source of the potential of the human being, "because the task of the individual is to transform his primary responses into new expressions which he then sends in a new form to the surrounding world" (Corneau, 2010, p. 26).

Art therapy becomes a process of change that is readily accessible to the client, able to understand the world on their level and thus it contributes to the overall integrity of one's personality. Art therapy, whether it is drawing, clay work, or the receptive form of exploring art, is a process of increasing the quality of life and finding a place in society.

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