



The Children's Assessment Center

The Magic Power of an Image By Claudia Mustafa, LMSW, RPT

I find it both fascinating and thrilling to look at art, especially that art made by tiny hands. Art is, in my opinion, a private feeling or thought made into public form so that others can admire it. Very often, the children who come to The Children's Assessment Center for therapy have suffered severe trauma in the hands of people they love and trust. Art therapy becomes a way of coping with trauma too difficult to assimilate; however, art therapy should be used with caution, for children who have not acquired an appropriate level of emotional stability through therapy, retelling their story through art therapy can be retraumatizing.

Through art, children encounter a new sense of freedom. A blank piece of paper turns into a canvas of endless possibilities where children can explore their creativity and express their emotions. Art therapy allows children who have lived painful experiences to embark themselves in a journey to an inner place where words are neither necessary nor spoken. Art becomes a way by which children can express their feelings symbolically.

Through Art, children can do the impossible. Children can regain mastery of their world. They can fulfill both positive and negative impulses, without fear of the consequences. And most important for children who have experienced severe trauma, they can relive past traumas and change the outcome of their story in their pictures. Children are, understandably, often resistant to have to relive their painful experiences. Art then, becomes a way that helps children tell their stories.

Through art, children can express their feelings related to their past, their present and hopes for the future. A 6-year-old girl, who is in foster care, consistently draws a picture of a house and a tree; her mom is standing by the door while she flies a kite.

I recently used art therapy with an 8-year-old girl who was abducted and severely sexually abused. Four months into therapy, she had been unable to share her story; it was too painful for her to relive her experience. I asked her then if she could draw a picture of what had happened to her. She drew three pictures in which she gave full detail of her abuse; she drew every detail in the room where the abuse had occurred and remembered the things she had done before and after the abuse. After she finished her drawings, she was able to tell me the story of her picture, creating a distance between herself and her experience. This empowered her to continue to talk about the abuse in a way that made her feel safe.

On a different occasion, I asked a group of teenage girls to finger-paint a picture that told something about their own abuse, it could be anything they wanted to. Even when at the beginning the teens complained about their participation in “such a childish activity,” they became absorbed in the process once the finger paints and paper were made available. The atmosphere in the room changed as soon as the teens started to work on their project.

One girl started out by painting a small human-like figure in the center of a large sheet of paper. Artwork can be modified; it lends itself into changing and transforming, allowing the client to go deeper into their thoughts and feelings. By the time she was finished with her picture, all we could see was a thick coat of black paint mixed with blue, purple, and red. She had been suppressing her feelings related to the sexual abuse, by her stepfather, for a long period of time.

Art therapy helps victims externalize their feelings, experiences, hopes, dreams, and conflicts. The girls’ artwork looked similar: it told a story about their pain and sadness. The result of the artwork is not as important as the process. Clearly, this activity gave this handful of teens ‘permission’ they needed to express their emotions and to explore the conflict, turmoil and chaos they experienced as a result of the abuse.

Art therapy helps children recognize problems, feelings, and needs that they may not want to acknowledge openly or that are buried in their unconscious. In this way, children are often able to release their feelings, recognize their needs, work through their conflicts and resolve them safely.