

An artful tale

Narelle Smith takes us on a (sometimes humorous) tour of her expressive arts groupwork at the local primary school

In 2005, I studied a certificate in art therapy. The course was created and run by Annette Coulter, who is one of the pioneers of art therapy in Australia. Annette was trained in the British tradition of art therapy. At the time, I was doing therapeutic casework with children living in out-of-home care, and I was able to use some art therapy techniques with them.

When I moved from out-of-home care to community work, I wondered how I could use my art therapy skills in the new context. I work as a family worker, and my work is located in a primary school that operates as a community hub. I thought about offering the school an expressive arts group, and one day, the principal of the school asked me if I was interested in doing art as an after-school activity. Synchronicity!

I carefully explained to the principal that expressive arts is a creative process that provides children with the opportunity to play and experiment with art materials. The emphasis is on the process of creating rather than on the finished product, and it helps children to tune into their thoughts and feelings. I explained that the expressive arts group would be based on art therapy principles and that the functioning of the group would be in response to the children's needs and would appear to have fewer rules than a classroom. I offered an example – what would I do if the children wanted to make balls out of clay and throw them at each other? The principal immediately said that the students would be told that they couldn't do that and if they continued, they would be disciplined. I replied that I would allow the students to go outside and throw the clay balls at a paper target. The principal smiled awkwardly, thanked me for my time, and ushered me out of his office.

However, the community liaison officer (CLO) at the school came up to me soon after, and said she was going to be the support person for the expressive arts group, and could I start next week? So the group started in April 2009. Prior to this, I had to give the CLO a quick lesson on art therapy. The CLO is an extremely hardworking advocate for the school and the students, and a brilliant event coordinator, but psychotherapeutic techniques were completely novel for her. This is what I communicated to her about responding to the children's artwork:

You only ask two questions:

- *What would you like to tell me about your artwork?*

- *How did it make you feel?*

Don't praise the child's artwork.

You can comment that they spent a lot of time on it, or that they used a lot of colour, or filled the page, or left lots of blank space.

But never, never praise.

You can also say:

'When I look at your artwork, the (size, colour, shape, texture of a particular thing on the artwork) reminds me of...'

or

'When I look at your artwork, I feel...'

Be reflective with children.

Use the words that they have used, and with the same affect, to confirm that you have heard what they have said.

Don't expect the child to answer or comment on what you have said. Silence is absolutely OK. Children will only start revealing parts of themselves when they feel that you can be trusted 100 per cent (that you won't reject, ridicule, reveal their secrets or judge).

When in doubt about what to say, say, 'Mmmm.'

Do not speak to parents about the children's artwork. 'Mmmm' is a handy phrase to use with both children and adults.

Do not let parents go through the children's artwork.

The other slightly challenging aspect of facilitating an expressive arts group was that my service specifications (state government funded) stated that my target population was parents. To sweeten the





20 children for the group, and 27 children enrolled. Approximately 120 children attended the school at the time. I was aware that not many groupworkers would take in so many children, especially children from Kindergarten to Year 6 with varied and complex needs. Also, I hadn't ever facilitated an expressive arts group before. However, I was inspired by the Raw Art Works (RAW)¹ movement in the USA.

Success is in the detail

The principal refers children to the group who are experiencing behavioural, social or emotional difficulties. He doesn't give me information about the children's past history or presenting difficulties. We have had: children with eating disorders; traumatised children; children who have experienced physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse; children with the usual diagnostic labels – ADD, ADHD, ODD, PDD, PDD-NOS, conduct disorder, Asperger's syndrome; children suffering grief and loss; and children living in out-of-home care. This is no job for the faint-hearted, but the principles I learnt in the art therapy course have never failed.

Ever mindful of child protection, I have a rule that the children are not allowed to take any of their artwork home. This allows for a physically and emotionally safe space where children can express anything they wish through their art, without fear of risk, interpretation or criticism. One child drew himself as a bear eating his mother. He would not have been able to express himself that way if the artwork was going home to his mum to be put up on the refrigerator.

I am ruthless with this rule, and nothing leaves the room. It's the one thing that the children take me to task on regularly. One young lad recently asked me how long I keep the artwork for and if he could have his artwork after that. I replied, '25 years.' He exclaimed, 'Miss, you could be dead by then.' I'd never thought of it before, but he could be right. I don't have time to archive the artworks – they are all kept in sealable plastic boxes in a locked storage shed. As funding is very tight, I take photos of all the sculptures and recycle the clay. Parents can make an appointment with me to view their child's artwork. However, before that appointment, I would sit with the child and ask them which artworks they would not like the parent to see.

These details are important. Based on the success of the group I facilitate, the organisation I work for attempted to do something similar in the next suburb. They contracted a local counselling service to run an art-based programme for selected children. They had eight children and four workers in this programme and it failed. The workers were not trained in art therapy and the requisite amount of emotional safety was not assured. They invited parents to participate in the programme. The children took their artworks home. The workers did not respond appropriately to the children's art. The

deal, I had to sell the expressive arts group as having the function of exploring topics such as self-esteem, friendship, resilience, and conflict with the children. Being the sort of person who likes to creatively explore boundaries, my team leader gave me her blessing.

I had no idea how well an expressive arts group would be received by the school community. The flyer carefully explained the purpose of the group, emphasising that the children would not be learning how to create aesthetic artworks. We set a limit of



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children's behaviours were such that there was no benefit to continuing the programme; it ended before the scheduled date and was not repeated.

The group itself

Although the group is open, the children know each other because they attend the same small school and live in the same small suburb. They've grown up together, they play on the streets together, they are in and out of each other's homes. They are bonded through adversity. Although there are many conflicts amongst the children during the school day and on the streets, I think this community feel has influenced the tone of the group and the interactions within. These children, in many ways, are like a large sibling group.

Approximately 100 individuals have attended since it started. Some have been in the programme the whole time, some leave and come back more than once, and some stay for one term. We are

there for any child who wishes to attend; no one is turned away. The feedback from parents is that the expressive arts group is helping their children, they don't know how or why, they just know that it is. Some parents have said that, since attending the group, their child has become more creative with arts and crafts.

As the group operates as an after-school activity, we give the children tea when they arrive, and we go as a group to the toilets afterwards. This section of the afternoon operates under school rules. Initially, with such a large group, behaviour management became necessary, especially as there were a lot of older children attending. I used the 1-2-3 Magic system² for behaviour management. Although this system is at odds with psychotherapeutic practice, it is much gentler and kinder than what the children have usually experienced. The principal was impressed with how 1-2-3 Magic worked with the children and implemented it school-wide in the classrooms.

The group is held in what is called the 'community room'. I also use this room for the supported playgroup, African drumming group and parent workshops that I facilitate. The room is used by the Parents and Citizens group for their meetings, and other events organised by the CLO. As such, the space cannot be dedicated to looking like an art room. And due to lack of storage, much of the playgroup equipment is around the room.

When the group started, some children wanted to play with the playgroup equipment and I would say that this group was only for art. However, after observing how much some of the children regressed with finger painting and playdough, I decided to include play in the programme. I offered home corner, doll house and sand tray. Although at the time I had not been trained in play therapy (I have, subsequently), I had read *Dibs in Search of Self* by Virginia Axline, and responded to the children in a similar manner. Some of the children enjoyed the opportunity to play families in home corner, or act out scenes at the doll house or sand tray. Sometimes the art materials are rarely touched in favour of play.

The difficulty with having the group in the community room (and that's the only place we can use) is that parents feel they can walk in when they like. It can be difficult to maintain a therapeutic boundary. The CLO, who has a great rapport with the parents, will lure parents out onto the verandah for a chat before they can sit next to children and comment on or interpret what the children are doing. The CLO also watches for parents arriving to pick up their children and gives the children a warning to pack up what they are doing because their parent is coming.

At first, I set one art task per week for the children, based on the above-mentioned themes, and for the rest of the time the children could explore anything that was placed out for them. How the children interpreted the art task was up to them

The case of Jed

Jed came brusquely into the community room. He arrived before any of the other children. 'I'm Jed, who are you?'

I replied calmly, 'I'm Narelle.'

'I thought the CLO would be here. Where is she?' he asked rudely.

'She'll be here soon,' I replied.

He leant across me quickly and attempted to snatch at the food I was preparing for afternoon tea. I told Jed that we would all eat afternoon tea together when the other children arrived.

Jed was in Year 5 and a new student at the school. A good-looking boy with a confident presence. The other children were clearly impressed. For the rest of the afternoon, he tested me – he said disrespectful things to me, he made sexually provocative sculptures with clay, he bossed the other children around, he came very close to me on occasions, and looked to my face for my reaction to the things he said and did. I absorbed and reflected. Jed missed a week but returned the following week. He was polite and courteous, but shadowed me for the whole session. He appeared to want my approval and attention. I absorbed and reflected. The following week, he shadowed the CLO. In subsequent sessions, he was occupied with making guns with air-dry clay.

Many times, he came 'wired for speed', his anxiety rolling off him in waves.

'What do you need to do, Jed, that will help you feel better?'

'Run.'

'Then go run around the oval as many times as you need, but I want you to come back to me when you've finished.'

I stood on the verandah of the community room, trying to watch the children inside, but keeping an eye on Jed. It was a risk – he wasn't directly under my supervision. If he decided to run off, I wouldn't be able to track him down. Sometimes he was able to tolerate having some other kids run around the oval with him. He always came back saying he was ready for art. I heard that Jed had been self-harming.

He grew to feel very safe in the expressive arts group. He became like a loving big brother to the other children in the group, rather than the exciting rebel he was initially. Frequently, he would happily put aside what he was doing to help a younger child who asked for his assistance. He smiled a lot.

and it was not mandatory. The art can be incredibly complex and layered, or a dot on the page, but it all has meaning. Sometimes the child doesn't want to talk about his art or has not yet uncovered the meaning for himself. It took a bit of retraining for the children not to expect praise from me. I always redirect the children with 'more importantly, how do you feel about your art?' and 'what is your mind telling you, and what is your heart telling you?'

Late in 2010, the group evolved to being non-directed. I started running out of ideas for directed activities, and I also started to see benefit in the children being free to do what they felt they needed. Initially, the group was so big it needed to have some direction, but as the students became familiar with the process, it became no longer necessary.

About six months ago, I did attempt one directed art activity. It was a mask activity – one mask for a strong feeling they'd experienced recently, one mask for calming down feelings. Half the children rebelled – they drew one line and asked if they could move on to other activities. For a few, the activity lasted the whole session. For me, it was a reminder of how far the group had come, despite it not being a closed group. The children, like water, find their own level.

There is frequently a tension between allowing the children to express themselves as fully as they want or need to, and containment for practical reasons. Certain ideas within a large group can take on a lot of momentum. Recently, the children started painting their faces with the liquid paints. It started as small marks but got to the point where one child completely covered his face in dripping black paint. Other children followed. The difficulty was protecting the children's school uniforms. We supply paint shirts, but somehow the children manage to get paint under the shirt and onto their school uniform. This creates more cleaning for parents, and the children could get into trouble at home for something they enjoyed in the group. I purchased face paints for the next session.

Thirty months on

I have been facilitating the group for two-and-a-half years now. It has become a safe space and students look forward to the sessions. Some children have only just started to test how safe the group is. One who has only drawn happy themes for two years, recently drew a picture that had themes of violence and death. The student was nervous about the picture, didn't want to talk about it or show me. Interestingly, this student has constantly protested about my golden rule – no taking any artwork home.

It is also interesting that behaviour management is very rare now. My colleague said to me recently: 'Do you know, we haven't sent a child to time-out for ages now?' She was right. And at that time, we had up to 32 children attending the group. Some children who are frequently in trouble in the classroom find their halo in the expressive arts group.

Within the soft, warm embrace of the group, the children feel free to explore different roles and other ways of being.

I get a buzz from seeing the children get so much from their art and play, respecting the process and respecting other children's expression. The children who have been coming to the group for a while are heard saying to the newer children: 'We don't comment on other people's art,' or, 'There's no such thing as a mistake in art.'

Although I know how effective art and play is, I am still surprised at the small miracles that occur within the group. A child will do an artwork that I am perplexed about, but I will go with the process. Later, I will receive some information about what the child is experiencing in his family life, and the particular artwork that he did six months ago makes total sense. Every so often, a child will present something that is staggeringly beautiful, detailed, or the essence of everything the child is struggling with at that time, and I just want to say 'wow', but I breathe and I look at the child and ask, 'How do you feel about your artwork?' And after the children have left, my colleague and I will debrief and be amazed at how wonderful this art therapy process is.

We have to let go of all our adult curiosity, the uncertainty of 'not knowing', and trust the process. Garry Landreth⁴ advises that we can only support the child in her growth, and uses the analogy of a bean plant. When the bean starts to break the surface of the soil, we can only provide the right conditions for its growth. If we try to straighten the crook of the bean before it is ready, it will snap.

There have been so many precious moments and just a few challenges in the life of this expressive arts group. When art and play therapy principles are applied diligently, emotional and physical safety can be maintained, and children can experience a sense of control that they rarely experience in any other setting. Within a large group, they learn about companionship, tolerance, boundaries and understanding. There is much to be gained and I am grateful for the opportunity to be able to offer meaningful experiences in art and play to the children in the community I work in. ■

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