

Engaging Children with Therapeutic Art Resources:

5 Powerful Practice Activities

Nicole Batiste

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 (Art Therapy Journal Organization). Art therapy is beneficial because it can assist children with several issues including trauma, grief, anxiety, coping skills and other presenting problems. Children are inherently creative, and it is typically easier and less threatening for them to create art as opposed to answering questions directly. Creating artwork allows children to process challenging issues in an engaging manner. Talking to children about their art activities can provide practitioners with the necessary information to treat their clients and gives children the opportunity to be actively involved in the therapy process.

While an art therapist is needed to practice art therapy, any clinically licensed therapist can use therapeutic art in therapy and achieve insight and feedback from child clients. Creative expression is relational, therefore, it is important that clients have an established therapeutic rapport with their client. Key techniques in therapeutic art include the use of open-ended drawings and therapist-directed art activities. Below are five therapeutic art activities for use with children.

Gratitude Tree

This activity helps children focus on strengths. The completed gratitude tree looks like a traditional tree trunk with branches. Then the client writes things they are grateful for on the leaves of their tree. The child then finishes their tree by adding color.

Key Techniques:

- Print out tree and leaf templates. This allows the client to feel confident about crafting their tree and leaves (optional).
- Scaffold this project by listing things the child is grateful for before the child begins to draw/create their tree. This allows uninterrupted creating of tree leaves.
- If child appears to enjoy cutting and gluing, the child can make leaves separately and paste them on the tree.

Dual Self Portrait

This therapeutic art activity is a creative way to develop self-awareness and self-esteem with children. Children complete a face template divided vertically down the middle. On one side of the face the child completes outward characteristics and on the other side the child completes inner emotions, hidden experiences and personal hopes. This activity is helpful for children as it requires them to explore and name struggles, strengths and goals as well as outward behaviors.

Key Techniques

- Print out face templates or assist client with making one (optional).
- Provide traceable eyes, nose and mouth (optional).
- Brainstorm and lookup symbols or words to put inside both parts of face.
- Scaffold the activity by listing "inner-self" characteristics as well as "outer-self" characteristics.

Storm Cloud

Clients utilize various art materials to create a storm cloud. Process questions might include: What negative thoughts/messages are in your storm cloud? What sad/scary things are hanging over your life? What stressors or worries are in your storm cloud? Clients use color to represent the answers to these questions and color in their clouds. Next, clients use five raindrops to specifically reflect what is inside their storm cloud. For example, the raindrops may say divorce, death of a loved one, or friendship problems.

Note that this intervention can trigger strong emotions, and therefore, it should only be introduced once a strong therapeutic alliance has been established.

Key Techniques

- Have a list of colors or crayons and help child decide which colors to use to represent their emotions and experiences.
- Client may prefer to cut holes in raindrops and cloud and attach raindrops and cloud by a piece of yarn. Or raindrops can be glued under cloud.
- Make a list of stressors beforehand.

Coping Skills Sun

The client creates a sun filled with positive emotions, and adds stars to represent strengths, coping skills, or supports. Children choose a color or colors to fill in their sun, and fill in the stars with names of support people and specific coping skills. Process

questions include: When do you feel best? What makes you feel safe/calm? Who loves and supports you? What do you do to make yourself feel better?

Key Techniques

- Provide sun and star templates if client feels too intimidated to create their own sun and stars (optional)
- Have a list of coping skills ready
- Model and practice coping skills chosen
- Use yarn to connect stars to sun

Good Friend vs. Bad Friend

This activity is geared to children working on social skills and peer relationships. It facilitates the exploration of good friendships versus toxic ones. In a large heart, clients use words and symbols to represent what makes a good friend. In a large sad face, children use symbols or words to list characteristics of unhealthy relationships.

Key Techniques

- Use one page for the heart and one for the sad face.
- Provide a list of unhealthy and healthy relationship traits (use language appropriate to the child's age).
- Have older children assess the relationships in their life.
- Have younger children assess what is most important in their friendships.

Conclusion

The above therapeutic art activities facilitate a positive therapeutic experience and enrich the treatment process. Treating children requires creativity, and art is a medium of therapy that children typically respond well to and enjoy.

References

Walker, D. (2006). Art Therapy for Children: How it Leads to Change. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry* Vol 11, Issue 2, pp. 271 – 282

About the Author

Nicole Batiste is a former educator turned School Social Work-Counselor. Nicole has spent 8 years working with children, with 4 of them being direct social work, counseling,

and advocacy services for students and families. She has worked in multiple settings including schools, private practice, and universities. She provides training on creative interventions for children for the Houston Independent School District. She has been selected as a School Counselor Employee Resource Group Leader for her district to train other counselors on effective social emotional learning groups and counseling services. She has worked with the University of Houston to create Social Emotional Learning Programs for at-risk students. She also owns hubforhelpers.com an online platform for helping professionals to access engaging therapy materials based on the CASEL model and other major adopted frameworks and theories.