

# MIND & BODY

A copy of the drawing made by a seven-year-old who underwent art therapy at the Institute of Mental Health includes the sentence "you are stupid" written in a speech bubble. The child was struggling to cope with a new stepmother and was doing poorly in school at the time. PHOTO: INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH



**MAKING PROGRESS**

In her last session, she painted a bright and colourful house with all her family members in it. This was seen as a significant positive shift regarding how she now sees her reconstituted family.



**MS HO SOO FUNG**, a principal occupational therapist at the IMH, about the seven-year-old who drew the painting on the right. The child underwent 12 art therapy sessions over six months, which provided a safe space for her to express her feelings of loss and uncertainty. Her biological mother had died, she had lost touch with her first stepmother and she did not get along with her second stepmother. Her father eventually married again.

## Colour a kid's world – and help him heal through art

Art therapy is gaining popularity here as a form of help for kids undergoing life-changing or difficult experiences



**Joyce Teo**

The seven-year-old girl drew stalks of flowers, insects and clouds, and coloured them in with cheerful hues of red, yellow, blue and green. She wrote "happy" in large lettering at the bottom.

But on closer look, something else stands out: a speech bubble from the ladybird on top left hand corner with a small scribble that reads, "you are stupid".

Ms Ho Soo Fung, a principal occupational therapist at the Institute of Mental Health (IMH), asked the girl if she wanted to talk about it. She didn't want to and it was left at that.

After all, art therapy is meant to be a safe outlet for a child, allowing him to freely express difficult feel-

ings without being forced to discuss them, said Ms Ho.

Art therapy is a mental health profession that is becoming more popular here, particularly with children, who tend to take to it naturally.

In this instance, the girl was fearful and did not do well in school and probably felt she was stupid, said Ms Ho, who was aware of the girl's background before the session.

Subsequent sessions with the Primary 1 pupil threw up drawings of empty houses as well as Angry Birds cartoons.

At one session, she used plasticine and ice-cream sticks to create two houses, which she attached to a board with excessive amounts of gum. She then painted and used glitter to decorate them.

The girl, who was referred to art therapy to help her deal with her misbehaviour at home and in school, was then learning to relate to a third maternal figure.

Her biological mother had died and she had lost touch with her first stepmother. Her father remarried,

but she did not get along with her second stepmother. Her father eventually married again.

The child underwent 12 art therapy sessions over six months, which provided a safe space for her to express her feelings of loss and uncertainty, said Ms Ho.

"It allowed her to work through emotional conflicts she felt at home and to explore building a healthy relationship with her new stepmother," she explained.

Her new stepmother, who was struggling to build a relationship with the child, was involved in the therapy. With the child's agreement, she would view the creations at the end of each session and the pair would have brief conversations about them.

"The mother gradually became more confident of herself and of her place in her stepdaughter's life," said Ms Ho.

Over time, as the girl developed more trust with Ms Ho, she used more materials and added more details to her drawings.

"In her last session, she painted a bright and colourful house with all her family members in it," said Ms Ho. "This was seen as a significant positive shift regarding how she now sees her reconstituted family."

**Helping kids during hard times**

More art therapists in private practice have emerged in the past two to three years, particularly as more graduate from Lasalle College of the Arts' Master of Arts in art therapy.

The Art Therapists' Association of Singapore, which started in 2008, now has 45 members compared with 30 in 2013.

IMH started art therapy for its patients in 2010 while the Singapore General Hospital (SGH) began offering it in 2011 under its eating disorders intensive treatment programme. The KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH) also offers it.

Art therapy benefits children who could be experiencing life-changing or challenging situations, such as long-term hospitalisation, chronic or terminal illnesses, mental health conditions and trauma.

They may also be experiencing significant emotional setbacks and concerns with regard to self-image, self-esteem and confidence.

During the therapy, art is made in the presence of a therapist. The focus is on the process and the relationship between the child and therapist, rather than on the art itself.

Ms Pearlyn Lee, an art therapist at the Child Life, Art and Music Therapy Programmes at KKH, said: "Each person's work of art is a representation of the things that matter to him at that moment in his life."

"The art piece is like a container in which these important matters can be contained and viewed with an emotional distance by the child and the art therapist."

When art therapist Annelaure Vuillermoz worked with a girls' home here, she conducted weekly sessions for about two months before the girls started to trust her.

"These girls have witnessed domestic violence or have experienced trauma. They would create a huge mess in the art therapy room," said Ms Vuillermoz, who founded her art therapy practice Colourfully two years ago.

"If they lived in an aggressive environment, making art is a way to release the emotions that are trapped inside and it is very cathartic."

They did not speak much and just needed someone to be with them and see what they have created.

The final piece of art may not contain warning symbols, such as alarming words. Rather, it could be the way the art is created that gives you a clue of the depth of their emotions, said Ms Vuillermoz.

Art therapist Dian Handayani, who is with SGH's psychiatry department, said there is a growing body of research that suggests improvements in mood when clients are encouraged to work on art that contains positive emotional expressions, compared with merely creating art for venting and distraction purposes.

Discharging negative emotions such as anger and rage through art can, at times, be a catharsis and constructive.

But given the new evidence, she has begun to encourage her patients to also create art that depicts positive emotions, such as calmness and being in control.

Making art that depicts contrasting emotions often provides patients with richer experiences and insights into their issues, she said.

At her sessions, patients often request to do something that will motivate them to recover from their illness. And, one of the things Ms Dian has asked them to do is to create pieces on the things in their life worth fighting for. They would draw happy families having a meal together or their future, such as themselves in a graduation gown.

"They can verbalise that they want this or that but when the work of art is created – these dreams are as if they have almost come to life," said Ms Dian.

"There is a richness to it that words sometimes cannot describe in details, and it can be powerful."

joyceteo@sph.com.sg

SEE MIND&BODY B9

## 2 misconceptions about art therapy

**1 Art therapists can decode a person's mind just by looking at a finished piece of art.**

The truth is that art therapists do not analyse pieces of art.

"In our practice, we cannot interpret or make meaning of an art piece in silo – we see the patient holistically, taking into account input from other professionals working with the patient, personal history and current life situation," said Ms Pearlyn Lee, an art therapist with the Child Life, Art and Music Therapy Programmes at KK Women's and Children's Hospital.

Therapists also observe the patient as he creates an art piece, including the way he interacts with the therapist and his own interpretation of the work or art, she added.

Ms Dian Handayani, an art therapist with the psychiatry department of the Singapore General Hospital said: "While the media like to portray the 'fortune teller power' of art therapists to read people's art pieces and, indeed, it makes exciting TV shows, the real power lies in the patient's own unique individual self and his expressions."

"For example, a patient may use black to symbolise feeling depressed or scared, but another may use the same colour to express strengths, elegance and beauty."

**2 Art therapy is only for people who can draw or paint.**

You don't need to know how to draw to benefit from art therapy as the focus is not on artistic skills. It is about expressing yourself through art. Art therapists are not there to judge your art piece but to help you process your thoughts and feelings.

"There are no real prerequisites – art therapists see the young and old, with varying levels of abilities and disabilities, and from various walks of life," said Ms Lee.

Art therapist Annelaure Vuillermoz said she has had clients who felt they could not really do art.

"Clients come and tell me they are not good enough in art. If we explore this belief, we often find out they believe they are not good enough in many areas in their lives," she said.

Joyce Teo

# Find out more about your child through his drawing

## The work as well as process of making the drawing or painting can offer clues to a kid's emotional struggles

Joyce Teo

Hidden within a child's drawings may be symbolic representations of their struggles in dealing with their emotional difficulties.

The process of making the art also offers clues to the child's emotional struggles, said Ms Ho Soo

### MEDIUM TO SHARE HIS FEARS

The movie inspired the artwork. When he was watching the movie, he felt a lot of fear and the next day, it was an opportunity for him to feel the fear and to tell me what he was fearful about. The psychologists in the 1950s might say that this boy is very violent but this is not true. The art piece was a medium for him to share his fears.



MS ANNELAURE VUILLERMOZ, an art therapist, about a boy who painted a man stabbing the eyes of another man.

Fung, a principal occupational therapist at the Institute of Mental Health.

Indeed, art therapy is about the creative process of art making and not simply about analysing symbols, said art therapist Annelaure Vuillermoz.

A worrisome symbol for a child may not mean anything to another child, she said.

A boy who made a gruesome painting of one man stabbing the eyes of another man, for instance, may not be something that sets off alarm bells.

In fact, when Ms Vuillermoz asked him about it, the boy said that he had recently watched a movie about zombies and it frightened him badly.

"The movie inspired the work of art. When he was watching the movie, he felt a lot of fear and the next day, it was an opportunity for him to feel the fear and to tell me what he was fearful about," said Ms Vuillermoz.

"The psychologists in the 1950s might say that this boy is very violent but this is not true. The art

piece was a medium for him to share his fears."

Ms Ho offers these tips for parents keen to find out more about their children through their art pieces:

**1 Note the child's level of engagement in creative activity.**  
See how absorbed the child is in the art making.

Ask yourself: "Is the child overly absorbed or is he or she engaged for long periods of time but coming up with nothing much?"

**2 Note the colours and the medium being used.**  
Parents know their child best.

So, if your child who usually enjoys using a variety of colours switches to using a single colour, it is good to have a chat with him to find out the reasons for this change.

It is also good to check for corroborative evidence, such as if there are any changes in the child's sleep patterns, mood or interest in play.

**3 Share your thoughts with people they trust, be they relatives, teachers or school counsellors.**

This is especially so if you intuitively sense alarm from:  
• Watching the child engage in art making, for example, if the child is overly aggressive while creating the work of art;

• Looking at the images of the child's completed drawings - if the drawing includes elements which you feel are concerning.

**4 Note the child's behaviour after the work of art is completed.**

Is the art piece hidden away or purposely destroyed?  
For instance, if it has been stowed away, it shows that the child wants to keep it a secret.

This could signal a fear of being judged or being unloved.

If you manage to find the hidden piece art, you should not tell the child you know his secret but you can ask: "What happened to the art-piece that you did?"

If the child does not like what he drew, it could be that he feels he cannot meet the expectations of his parents.

joyceteo@sph.com.sg

## A teen's artwork and what it means

In art therapy, the therapist will help the patient understand and better manage his emotions. These are three original art pieces by a teenager who underwent art therapy with Ms Pearlyn Lee of child life under one of the Child Life, Art and Music Therapy Programmes at the KK Women's and Children's Hospital. Ms Lee shares some of her insights.



### PLUSH BALL

The hand-sewn plush ball is short and fat - like the way she looked, said the patient. But she liked the ball as it is cuddly and nice to hold. The ball appears neat and pretty on the outside but as the artist, the teen was aware of how frayed and messy it is on the inside. I asked if this represented how she felt about how she copes with the stressors in life, where she presents a brave front to loved ones but is, in reality, struggling inside.

The patient was never seen without her ball at subsequent sessions. It has become a representation of herself.

### 'YOU CAN'T SEE ME'

The same teen made this from magazine cuttings and said it was how she appeared to most people - what is hidden from others is that she was not always happy and found it difficult to be around people. This led us to reflect on how social situations can sometimes cause her stress. She came to understand that it was all right to excuse herself from an uncomfortable social situation, and instead find a safe space to calm down before returning to engage with people.



### A IS FOR 'ALIVE'

When she created this work of art based on the initial of her name, the patient had fewer crying spells and no longer had extreme negative thoughts. She was able to engage better with people and manage feelings of stress or depression. She explained that the circle surrounding the A represents her need to find her own space, while the flower represents close family members and friends whom she would allow inside this space to comfort her.

It consolidates the patient's awareness of her own needs, recognition of her own strengths, and of her finding connections with trusted individuals.



Source: KK WOMEN'S AND CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS