

Every day, across the country and around the world, professional art therapists, parents, and community agencies engage children in various art activities that help them express their feelings. These art activities are used as a tool for age-appropriate conversations about a child's feelings, encouraging a dialogue that promotes emotional health and well-being.

WHY DOES MENTAL HEALTH MATTER? Mental health is essential to children's overall health, development, and well-being. Good mental health allows children to think clearly, develop socially, learn new skills, build self-esteem, and develop a positive outlook. It affects how they experience and express feelings, interact with others, build relationships, and handle stress and major challenges. Children who are emotionally healthy are more likely to do well in school, get along with other children, and be physically healthy. Nurturing children's social and emotional well-being can also help build their resilience, meaning their ability to handle



stressors such as an illness or a parent in the military being deployed. Parents and caregivers can generally identify a child's physical needs, but mental and emotional needs are not always obvious. It is important to encourage children to express their feelings and emotional needs, and one way of doing that is through art activities at home, in child care or school, and in hospitals and other settings.

WHAT IS ART THERAPY? Helping children discover, recognize, and express their feelings is an important part of promoting mental health. Art therapy uses the creation of art to help them do this. Making art is a fun and a natural outgrowth of their play and interaction with friends and classmates. It also provides a way for children to communicate nonverbally and to express their feelings in positive ways.

Art therapists and other child development professionals have found that art making for young children is relaxing, gives them energy and hopefulness, and eases sadness and anxiety.

Art therapists are trained professionals that use art media, creative art processes, and responses to created art works as reflections of development, abilities, personality, interests, concerns, and conflicts. They work with people of all ages and help them communicate their feelings, even when there aren't words to do so. The artwork that a child produces should be valued for the creative process. It is essential that parents and other adults express appreciation that the work is being shared and to communicate that the effort, not ability, is what is most important.



WHERE DO YOU FIND ART THERAPISTS? There are thousands of art therapists in the U.S., working alone and in teams with other medical, mental health, and education professionals, and in many different types of settings, including schools, hospitals and clinics, mental health centers, shelters, community programs, art studios, and private practice. The American Art Therapy Association's website provides links to art therapists working in communities around the world (www.americanarttherapyassociation.org).

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the earthquake in Haiti, and following other disasters, art therapists provided emotional support to those affected, helping them create and process their experiences through art. In schools, while working closely with parents and teachers, art therapists are trained to evaluate cognitive and emotional barriers to learning and to provide individualized interventions and services. They also integrate social skills programs utilizing group therapy and art.

Many art therapists work in hospitals and use art to help children address the emotional stress and trauma of illness and treatment. Art therapy engages children and their families in creative work that helps them express their feelings and reflect on treatment experiences. “Give the child control over his or her art production: what to make, what materials to use, whether to keep their art or throw it away, whether to do art at all that day,” advises Tracy Councill, MA, ATR-BC. In her work with seriously ill children, Ms. Councill knows first-hand that “[a] child in the hospital gives up so many everyday freedoms that using art therapeutically creates a valuable arena in which to exercise choice and control.” Providing tools to cope with pain and isolation, process medical experiences, and express a range of feelings, allows young patients to work creatively and mobilize the hope and resilience they need to recover.



WHAT CAN PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS DO? It’s important that parents, teachers, and caregivers encourage children to express their feelings. Children need to know that everyone experiences pain, fear, anger, and anxiety. A piece of artwork is a piece of communication, so when children show you their art, it’s important for parents to interact and “find the right words” to foster and encourage that creativity – to find a *new* language to talk about art with our kids. In her article *Creating with Kids: Talking About Art* Kathryn Horn Coneway suggests that “a good starting point is ‘tell me something about your picture’ or simply say nothing at all, pause a little longer than is comfortable while just looking, and see what your child tells you.” *DO* express appreciation that children are sharing their work with you and ask them if they want to talk about it. In asking a child, parents and other adults are showing they’re interested in understanding the child’s thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. *DON’T* ignore the work or criticize or compare it to other artwork.



Spending time with your children during the art making process is invaluable. “Talking about art takes time . . . shifting back and forth from the visual mode of looking (right brain) to the language mode of speaking (left brain),” says Ms. Horn Coneway. “If children begin to have a routine of art time in their day or week, their interaction with materials will deepen and grow over time. Repeatedly using the same materials is more likely to allow children to gain a sense of mastery over that material and what it can do, leading to the joys of expressing themselves with that material.”



FIND OUT MORE! Art therapists’ unique knowledge and skills can help children maximize their emotional and social well-being and their overall health. If you are interested in finding a credentialed art therapist or beginning an art therapy program in your community, visit www.atcb.org/find_a_credentialed_art_therapist/ or call 703-548-5860. Remember to look for the ATR and ATR-BC credentials when selecting an art therapist.

SOURCES

Creating with Kids: Talking About Art - www.americanarttherapyassociation.org/upload/creatingwithkids.pdf
The Home Studio: Begin with Drawing - www.americanarttherapyassociation.org/upload/homestudio.pdf