

Using Art Therapy as a Tool for Relationship Management in Supported Residential Settings for Homeless Young People

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A large proportion of the work in a residential supported accommodation program, is working with young people to get them ready to live independently. The young people have spent varying amounts of time in different stages of homelessness and many have a history of trauma, abuse, neglect, mental health issues (either theirs or their parents'), substance use (theirs or their parents') etc. As we cater for young people of all genders between 15 and 18 years, there are different levels of emotional/mental maturity, communication skills, intellectual abilities etc. Having to meet new people, make friends and integrate into an unfamiliar living environment can be quite a daunting prospect for some young people.

Young people who find themselves in supported accommodation, with a youth worker present 24–7, often feel as though they have little control and have been thrown into a space where they have to live with people with whom they have nothing in common, except their experiences of homelessness.

Young people start on their journey with us, learning the skills for starting and maintaining relationships, meeting people, initiating and continuing conversations and showing a general interest and consideration for others when living in a shared space together. All of these factors can contribute to whether relationships and/or the dynamic in the house, flourish or not. Due to the transient nature of young people accessing our programs, young

people who stay here for longer periods of time, or are repeat service users, may have to meet and learn to get on with a number of varying personalities throughout their stay.

We have been applying art therapy methods at various stages of our young people's stays with us to build and enhance relationships — between the young people living in the house as well as between our young people and our youth workers. Art therapy is the use of art-making as a communication tool in settings mediated by a professional art therapist and it has developed substantially since its early days in the 1940s. Art Therapy has been shown to be an effective tool in the prevention and treatment of mental ill-health with many different applications for enhancing wellbeing and self-esteem.



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There is ever-growing neuroscientific evidence to support claims that art therapy can improve cognitive and social functioning for children, young people and adults alike. There is much research to support early theories that art-making increases cognitive capacity, positive affect and feelings of self-efficacy,¹ lowers feelings of anger² and even promotes self-control. In our residential setting we have observed an ongoing level of interest in generalised art presenting the question... would art therapy be a useful tool in relationship management?

Many of our young people do not have experiences of following rules, or sharing — they are quite independent and forthright and yet many of them do have experience of being protective of others, so can actually be quite supportive of one another when given opportunities to do so. We have found art therapy is very useful in residential care settings as it can be used for everything from teaching and practising relaxation skills, to goal setting, to behaviour and relationships management, and can be applied to working on issues with individuals and/or groups. Once the art-making is complete, having an artefact to talk about often aids people in group settings and in one-to-one situations, to talk more openly about their feelings or matters affecting them by discussing the creative piece and its symbolism — whether it is a drawing, sculpture, photograph or any other type of

creative work — rather than talking directly about themselves.

With all this in mind, we recently offered an art therapy session where residents from three different supported accommodation programs could meet to participate in Coptic Book-Binding. Art therapy activities can provide a non-threatening opportunity for young people to get to know about one another and their youth workers, and to begin to discover commonalities that will move them toward feeling a sense of belonging and connection.

Participation in art can aid communication by reducing the awkwardness of conversations with others through providing a third entity in the conversation for people to focus on. For example, sometimes young people are able to focus on the art materials and process, thus avoiding the intensity of eye contact, for example, while discussing sensitive issues. As the two groups of young people had not met previously, one of the aims of Coptic Book Binding art therapy activity was for the young people to begin building relationships with one another.

All young people required some one-to-one assistance from the art therapist, and this attention heled to build self-esteem. Book-binding is not easy, so most people had to ask for help from one another at some stage of the process — this is also an important skill for our young people

to practice: asking for help and support when you need it. Young people from two of our three residential supported accommodation programs attended this book-binding workshop, with all participants completing the activity taking three hours in total, to complete a finished piece of work.

While art therapy usually privileges the process over the product, in the book-binding workshop, one of the aims was for each of the young people to leave with a journal they had each made for themselves. The book-binding activity was chosen particularly because it would end with a definite product which meant they were able to feel a sense of accomplishment and pride in having made their own book. They will feel this sense of pride each time they write in their book, or show it to another person.

Art therapy is currently being utilised on a one to one basis with residents, as part of our evaluation processes to help capture most significant change stories, and in case reviews and group work. The goal is:

- voluntary participation
- engagement in the processes (with each other and the worker)
- following key instructions/directions
- complete a finishing a piece of art
- reflective on their experience of the process/finished product
- observing the dynamics between resident in a group setting.

The inclusion of art therapy into our residential program assists young people with their emotional regulation and encourages deeper reflective skills. We will continue to trial the use of various modalities of art therapy to support ongoing relationship management and youth participation to inform and enhance our service delivery response.

Endnotes

1. Kaimal G and Ray K 2017, Free art-making in an art therapy open studio: changes in affect and self-efficacy, *Arts and Health An International Journal for Research, Policy and Practice*, vol.9, no.2, pp.154–156. doi: 10.1080/17533015.2016.1217248
2. Walsh D 2012, A sense-able approach to art therapy: promoting engagement for a child with developmental difficulties, *ANZJAT: Australian and New Zealand Journal of Arts Therapy*, vol.7, no.1, pp.26–41.



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