

# **Play and Art for Children from Multi-Stressed Families**

*by*

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## **Abstract**

Many children from multi-stressed families underachieve at school due to the many issues they face at home. Not being able to achieve academic success has a great impact on children's self-esteem. Thus early interventions are required to assist the children in their development. Play and art have been increasingly employed as communication tools with children because of their limited linguistic ability. This paper highlights the benefits of using play and art therapy interventions to engage a group of 25 children whose parents had been receiving assistance from The Ang Mo Kio Family Service Centres (Ang Mo Kio Branch). The use of play and art therapy interventions to assist these children develop their self-esteem is discussed and its effectiveness highlighted in this paper.

## **Introduction**

The Ang Mo Kio Family Service Centres (Ang Mo Kio Branch) serves a large portion of the low-income families living in the neighbourhoods of Kebun Bahru and Yio Chu Kang, Singapore. Many of these families face multiple challenges, including financial hardship, child behavioural issues, marital issues and caregiving issues. Parents of low-income families are often so preoccupied with meeting the daily needs of their families that many of them overlook the importance of being involved in their children's development and general wellbeing.

The agency also serves families where one or both parents are incarcerated. The frequent entrances and exits of these parents in the children's lives create uncertainty. From

the agency's casework and counselling work with these families, it has been observed that these children's academic performance often fall below age-appropriate literacy levels. Many of these children display a lack of confidence and difficulties in expressing themselves when faced with challenging situations. School failure coupled with social rejection may result in the development of antisocial behaviours in their adolescence as they search for a sense of belonging among their peers. Such behaviours may progress to criminal activities in adolescence and adulthood, e.g., drug-related crime and gang involvement (Patterson, Barbara & Ramsey, 1989). Hence, early intervention plays an important role in assisting these children to develop a positive self-esteem and resiliency at a young age.

As their brains are still in the early stages of development, most children do not have the verbal abilities of adults in articulating their emotions, perceptions and beliefs. They are usually more comfortable conveying their ideas and feelings in ways other than talking, such as drawing, painting, engaging in drama and music, etc. Thus the Nurture Programme was designed by the social workers from The Ang Mo Kio Family Service Centres (Ang Mo Kio branch) to engage children through various art and play therapy interventions to provide them a platform to develop a positive sense of self.

### **Self-Concept and Self-Esteem**

An individual's self-concept is a combination of who we think we are, what our capabilities are, what we think others think of us and what we would like to be (Plummer, 2007). Self-esteem is our personal evaluation of our self-concept (Plummer, 2007). Self-concept and self-esteem are closely influenced by an individual's experience from childhood and the significant people in one's life (Plummer, 2007). These experiences also affect our

formation of the 'ideal self,' that is, the person who we want to be or who we think we should be (Plummer, 2007). One's level of self-esteem is indicated by the difference between the perceived self and the ideal self (Plummer, 2007). Thus it is important that we help children achieve positive experiences in their early years so that they are able to develop a positive self-evaluation and be less dependent on the approval of others. This can be done through helping children gain knowledge about themselves, and helping them to accept, as well as express, themselves (Plummer, 2007).

From my work with many low-income families as a social worker, I found that parents from these families often struggle with many issues at home. These issues are often presented as financial crises in meeting the basic needs of the families in initial sessions with the social worker. However, coupled with deeper issues such as marital issues, child/teenage behavioural issues and caregiving issues, many of these parents hardly have the time and energy to look into the emotional and social needs of their children.

Children from these families often lack the resources to have a head start in life and tend to be low achievers at school. My observations of children from these families suggest a strong correlation between low self-esteem and academic achievement. Children tend to evaluate themselves through their environment and interactions with significant others in their lives. Experiencing little success in academia could lead to the development of negative self-concepts expressed in self-evaluations worded as "I am not good enough" and "I will never make it pass the Primary School Leaving Examinations." With low academic success and parents being preoccupied with their own issues, praises and approval come rare to these children. In the long run, children with low self-esteem may look for ways to confirm their negative views of themselves. In addition, they may continuously misinterpret the opinions

and actions of others in order to 'fit' them into their negative self-concept (Plummer, 2007). If children continue to depend on these sources to maintain their self-esteem, they will have difficulties coping with stressful life events as they are not confident of their abilities. They may turn to dysfunctional ways of coping, such as substance abuse, gang-related activities and violent crimes, in the later part of their life as the people they meet in these activities may offer them the sense of belonging and confidence often found lacking in their families and schools. Given that children in multi-stressed families are vulnerable to these challenges and stressors in their lives, this group of clients are of concern to the social workers of the agency. Our main aim is to be able to assist these children to have positive experiences through therapeutic art and play activities as preventive measures.

### **Introduction to Art and Play therapy**

Art is often used as tool for personal expression to communicate one's feelings and experiences (Essame, 2010). The process of creation and exploration is more important than the final art product. Art therapy may be described as a process of creating art work in the context of a therapeutic, non-judgemental relationship with the therapist who nurtures the creation (Essame, 2010). Art-making is important to children as a form of expression and communication, especially when they are limited in their linguistic ability to describe how they feel and what they are experiencing. I have observed that most children who attend counselling sessions at the agency often talk little. Hence, social workers have to find alternative ways to engage children. In most situations, social workers are seen to bring along papers, crayons, colour pencils, glue, etc., to engage the children.

Besides being a tool for individual work with children, art also plays an important role in group work. It provides a platform for experiences, feelings and ideas to be expressed and shared in visual forms (Essame, 2010). Art therapy aims to bring about change, healing and

restoration for the individuals who journey through the creation processes (Essame, 2010). Thus I have chosen art and craft works as an essential mode of intervention with children from low-income families who are underachieving at school.

Similar to art-making, play is essential for the healthy development of children. It is so important that play has been recognized by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights as a right of every child (Siu, 2010). Children have an innate capacity to play. Play not only provides fun and joy to children, it also enables children to learn life skills that cannot be acquired in formal educational settings (Wan, 1998). Children can take on different roles, and plan and experience success and failure during play (Essame, 2010). For example, a child who feels belittled during play with other children can pretend to be his super hero and feels empowered during the process. Play and art-making share the same emphasis on process. Both require the child to be an active participant in activities (Wan, 1998).

### **Benefits of Art and Play therapy Interventions**

Therapeutic art-making and play processes can help children express themselves and make sense of the world around them. This is supported by what Donald Winnicott termed as using transitional objects in creative play, i.e., the use of objects symbolically in play (Essame, 2010). Children tend to develop a close relationship with a special toy to help them make the transition from emotional dependency on a caregiver to a more internalized emotional independence (Essame, 2010). Children usually identify a toy as a source of comfort, which they are able to hold and have control over what they need most or desire (Essame, 2010). This form of behaviour is not uncommon in adults too (Essame, 2010). When we experience stress or uncertainty, we seek ways to make us feel safe and comforted. How many of us keep a small box of chocolates or candy in our office and at home? The object that offers comfort could also be an imagery or a role, such as when children assume the role of their super hero using materials they find to gain a sense of strength during times

when they feel threatened. Thus healthy play and art-making experiences can satisfy children's developmental needs, such as inner satisfaction and social acceptance from others, at various developmental stages (Wan, 1998). This therapeutic process enables them to develop a positive self-concept and the ability to overcome developmental tasks.

During art-making and play processes, it is important that children are not directed on what and how to draw and play. Instead, children should be encouraged to explore using toys of various materials, texture, colour, etc. and be allowed to make a mess as part of the therapeutic learning process (Essame, 2010). Children are generally creative, and they have resources to assist them in problem-solving. If children are not provided with the appropriate environment to overcome some of the developmental crisis effectively, they are likely to display aggressive and helpless behaviours (Wan, 1998), which are commonly seen in some of the children who are brought to the agency for assistance. Some of the common aggressive and helpless behaviours include attention-seeking, bullying, and verbalized or actual self-harm (Essame, 2010). Thus it is important to provide children with opportunities to explore and play creatively to develop their ego strength. Children should also be given the right forms of challenges in art-making and play processes so as to help them transform some of their destructive communication methods to positive and effective communication methods. This, in turn, can enhance their problem-solving ability, which has positive impacts on children's self-esteem.

Recently, there have also been developments in science that support the benefits of art-making in children. Much of the emphasis in mainstream education is placed on learning to read, write, and solve arithmetic tasks (Essame, 2010), which are very much linked to left-brain activities (Essame, 2010). On the other hand, art is tied to right-brain activities, which help to make meaning of words, make sense of the environment, and intuition (Essame,

2010). Research which included MRI scans has shown that during acute traumatic stress syndrome, blood supply, which is influenced by cortisol levels, move to the right side of the brain, resulting in a temporary shutdown of the left side of the brain. Hence trauma affects a person's ability to process or understand verbally what is happening to them (Essame, 2010).

As education has shaped us to utilize more of our left brain, it is important for us to help children in multi-stressed families enhance the use of their right brain to allow them to make sense of what is happening around them. This can be done through the use of creative art-making and play processes.

Besides being useful to the development of children, art and play therapy are deemed to be useful in helping children release tension and strains caused by traumatic experiences in life. These traumatic experiences include emotional, sexual and physical abuse, death of a significant person, inadequate parenting, exceptional losses and exposure to drugs and alcohol (West, 1996). Children who have undergone traumatic experiences tend to have insecure attachment styles (such as disorganized attachment patterns) and may face difficulties in managing stress throughout their life (O'Brien, 2010). Art-making and play create a safe environment for children to express how they feel and help them make sense of what they are experiencing. Being able to express and communicate how they feel liberates them from the stress they are facing.

Having looked at how art-making and play processes can assist children in building a positive self-esteem, I will now provide a brief outline of how the Nurture Programme ran.

### **The Nurture Programme**

The Nurture Programme was scheduled to run once a week for an hour. It ran on a weekday evening so that parents were available to bring their children to the programme. The objectives of the programme were:

- 1) To build the children's self esteem and confidence.

- 2) To build and increase resiliency among the children.
- 3) To involve parents in their children's development.
- 4) To enhance the quality of life of the children and their families.

The first session usually began by involving children in setting ground rules for the sessions with the help of social workers and volunteers. The rules helped to set a boundary that was safe for children to explore and express themselves. The added advantage of letting children participate in setting some ground rules was that it allowed the children to have ownership and a sense of control over the sessions.

Subsequently, the sessions involved components of both art and play therapy, such as drawing, clay works and using of recycled materials to recreate objects. The workers involved in the planning had to make changes to the materials found in books in order to cater to the children's low literacy levels (refer to Appendix 1). Parents were involved in the activities in some of the sessions so as to provide opportunities for parent-child bonding. This also presented an opportunity to train parents as therapeutic agents in their children's life by teaching them skills to engage children at home (Siu, 2010). These sessions were carried out to assist children in learning about the world, offer opportunities for them to test reality, and explore and express emotions. In the long run, it was hoped that the children in the Nurture Programme would be able to communicate their thoughts and emotions to their parents, and that their participation would enhance their self-respect and self-worth through new coping skills to manage stressful situations (Siu, 2010).

Apart from the weekly centre-based sessions, the children were also attending weekly sessions at a local speech and drama studio, Graces Speech and Drama Studio, on weekends. These sessions offered a structured learning environment where children could acquire phonics and other new skills through storytelling and drama. The sessions were conducted by



trained and qualified teachers-volunteers. The activities, which were experiential in nature, took the experience of learning out of the home and school environment. It aimed to develop the children's potential so as to build their self-esteem and confidence.

The importance of parental involvement should not be underestimated. Parents have to understand and be convinced about how art and play are useful to their children so that they would be committed to bringing their children to the Nurture Programme and to follow-up with some of the activities at home. The respective social workers managing the cases also helped parents to understand the importance and the positive aspects of engaging their children in therapeutic activities and creative methods of learning. This was done by inviting parents to discuss their thoughts about their children and join their children in art and play. Photo blogs were given to parents on a regular basis to highlight the contents of each session. Such facilitation was done throughout the programme to enhance parents' involvement in their children's development and progress.

Evaluation had to be ongoing to steer the programme in the right direction. Recordings in the form of videos and documentation of the sessions were gathered. Social workers evaluated the effectiveness of the sessions through reviews of the recordings and introduced changes whenever necessary. In addition to this, parents' feedback was gathered on a regular basis to assist social workers and volunteers to track the progress of the children. Parents' feedback on their children's behaviour and emotional well-being were solicited to assist social workers in planning the various components of the programme.

### **Author's Experience with the Use of Art and Play Interventions**

Although the art-making and play elements had been gradually added to the Nurture Programme in late 2010, the effectiveness of the art-making and play processes could be observed in the children as well as parents. Most of the parents noted that their children began to communicate better and to be generally more confident at home and in school since they joined the Nurture Programme. Below are some examples of how art-making and play processes benefitted the children and their parents, and how they helped children and their parents to bond.

### **Nicholas**

Nicholas\*(name has been changed), a seven-year-old boy, had just started primary school education when he was brought to the agency for help by his mother. His mother was having difficulties managing his temper tantrums at times, as Nicholas had been observed by the teachers in school to be easily distracted and disruptive during lessons. These complaints had not arisen when Nicholas was attending nursery and kindergarten. During the sessions the social worker conducted with Nicholas and his mother, Nicholas expressed that he wanted to be friends with other children but he felt lonely most of the time. Individual sessions were conducted with Nicholas using play with plasticine, and drawing. Nicholas was observed to enjoy the activities and made progress in sessions. Nicholas was invited to join the Nurture Programme as part of the intervention and assessment to understand his difficulties in making meaningful relationships with his peers. He was observed to have very little confidence of his abilities in engaging others. He spoke positively about others but was unable to maintain eye contact when he talked about himself. A few children complained that he was too 'sticky' and they did not want him to be in their groups. The children were taught about the value of difference and the importance of creating a safe environment for each other. The children's groupings were also rearranged regularly to accommodate differences in strengths for

different activities. Nicholas was allowed to express himself through play and art-making processes, which helped him to ease into the group eventually. At the time of writing, Nicholas was still attending the Nurture Programme and attending ongoing sessions with case worker. His mother recently provided feedback to the case worker that Nicholas had been more cheerful and less disruptive in school.

## **Yati**

Yati\* (name has been changed), a six-year-old girl, and her brother, Sufian\* (name has been changed), aged 4, had not been attending preschool due to financial difficulties in the household. When they were first referred to the Nurture Programme, both children were quiet and spoke little English. The social workers and I at AMKFSC had difficulties communicating with them because we were not well versed in the children's mother tongue, Malay. However, changes and progress were observed when they started attending the Nurture Programme regularly. They became more confident in making attempts to communicate with both the workers and other children in the programme. The art and play activities conducted in the Nurture Programme had served as useful communication tools. The structure of the programme had helped to create a non-threatening environment for the children. Each session started with warm-up games, which helped Yati and Sufian to ease into the session, followed by a short introduction to the theme for the week. At the time of writing, Both Yati and Sufian had been observed by their parents to be more expressive and the parents had also been working hard to make some basic materials such as colour pencils available at home so that the children could carry out their favourite activities at home.

During one of the parents' group sessions that took place in early September 2011, parents were required to make finger puppets representing themselves, after which they were invited to share their creations with their children who were doing the same activity in a

separate room. The activity was carried out in separate areas to provide opportunities to highlight the creativity and strength of their children, and to prevent parents from ‘rescuing’ their children by making the puppets for them. Most parents enjoyed this activity, for they said they had not been ‘playing’ for a long time. Many of them said that they had learnt from the activity that play need not be expensive and could involve simple activities that need not be time-consuming. During the children’s group sessions, some children said that they had learnt to use unwanted materials such as bottle caps and rubber bands as part of their play at home. The families enjoyed the play process, and the children were excited about their parents’ creations. At the conclusion of the session, parents and children were encouraged to share their experiences. It was a heart-warming moment as some children and parents realized that the puppets they had created shared many common characteristics. These sessions served as a platform for parents to bond with their child/children. In addition, they encouraged parents to spend quality time with their children and helped them understand the benefits of play for children. Hence, in the long run, parents felt confident about engaging their children through play and fun, thus allowing art and play to be part of the activities they share regularly with their children at home.

### **Conclusion**

Art and play therapy interventions have many positive impacts on one’s self-concept and general well-being. The effects of these interventions can empower underachieving children from low-income families when they face various stressors in childhood and also later in life. The examples above demonstrate some of the positive impacts that art and play processes have on children in a short time frame. In the long run, these interventions act as preventive measures through which children acquire effective communication methods that

enhance their problem-solving abilities, and learn how to deal with developmental crises effectively. It is social workers' duty to make art and play accessible to the children we work with to allow them to build a positive self-concept at an early age. In addition, the activities of the Nurture Programme helped parents bond with their children and provided them with ideas to spend quality time with their children in the midst of their busy schedules. The children who experienced the positive impacts of the programme would likely engage in art and play with their next generation.

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Appendix 1

\_\_\_\_\_ 's Angry Story

Once upon a time, there was a very angry \_\_\_\_\_. I knew it was angry because it was stomping its \_\_\_\_\_. I could tell that it was angry because its \_\_\_\_\_ was turning into the colour of \_\_\_\_\_.

Draw a picture showing why the \_\_\_\_\_ was so angry!

