

Evaluating a creative arts program designed for children who have been sexually abused

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KEY WORDS

Child Sexual Abuse; Creative Arts Therapy; Qualitative Research.

ABSTRACT

This research study was designed to evaluate the use of creative arts classes as an adjunct to therapy, to enhance recovery for children for whom there had been an allegation of child sexual assault. Children who were attending therapy in a rural Australian town were invited to free after-school classes in clay modelling, African dance and drumming, mosaics, and Aikido. Twenty-two interviews were conducted with non-offending parents and teachers. The teachers and the therapist observed the children's behaviour during every class. Data was analysed using a thematic approach. The program proved very popular with children, parents, and teachers alike. There were many benefits for the children, who grew in self-confidence, demonstrated improved social skills, formed trusting relationships, and experienced a reduced sense of isolation. The possibility of increased disclosures and the impact of external events on recovery are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Belief in the healing power of the creative arts dates back thousands of years (Karkou & Sanderson, 2006). The Ancient Greeks believed in a mind-body connection and linked art and medicine. Lost during the Dark Ages, this belief re-emerged when Jung advocated the use of the imagination and creativity as a healing force (Karkou & Sanderson, 2006) and recognized the importance of the creative arts as a medium for expressing the unconscious in therapy (Schaverien, 2001).

A distinction needs to be drawn between the use of creative arts in therapy with children (in this project) and creative arts therapy (Levine, 1999). Using the creative arts in a therapeutic setting is a form of behavioural therapy, that can also be educative and help children and young people to gain insight into their current

behaviour and feelings (Karkou & Sanderson, 2006). However, this is different from creative arts therapy with traumatised children which uses art in an intentional way 'within a relationship that makes sense of transitional experiences' (Levine, 1999:272), and is designed to help children recreate themselves through play.

Over many decades, clinicians have been publishing case studies demonstrating the effectiveness of using the creative arts in therapy with traumatised children (Axline, 1964; Carey, 2006; Miller, 1991; O'Brien, 2003). The consensus among clinicians that the use of creative arts can be healing for the child, either as an adjunct to therapy or through the use of creative arts therapy (Rogers, 2000). However, there is a need for more quantitative and qualitative research evidence to support