

Art and Music Therapy

By Liana Cafolla

Self-expression through art or music is nothing new. But increasingly, both art and music are being used internationally and in Hong Kong as a form of therapy to help children, as well as adults, express repressed emotions.

Just as art and music provide artists and musicians with a way to express their creativity, art and music themselves can provide a means of expression for those who need an alternative way of communicating.

Children with special needs, in particular, may lack the oral skills or vocabulary to talk about their feelings, or the ability to reflect on them. But acknowledging and understanding feelings is often considered vital to learning how to deal with difficult emotions. Under the supervision of a trained professional, art and music can provide a means of communication where words are secondary or even superfluous.

Cathy Malchiodi is a US-based arts therapist and has been practising for more than 25 years. She believes that art therapy can be effective in a wide variety of cases.

"I believe art therapy has shown particular effectiveness with individuals who have experienced trauma – such as children who have been abused, adults who have experienced traumatic loss, witnessed a traumatic event, or have had a traumatic medical condition such as cancer, and even returning military who may experience trauma reactions or posttraumatic stress as a result of

their experiences. A number of therapists use art therapy with particular success with children and adults with autism or related disorders or attention deficit disorder, older adults with dementia or Alzheimer's disease, and individuals with a variety of mood disorders."

But how exactly can art be used as therapy? Malchiodi says it works by combining visual arts and the creative process with psychotherapy and counselling.



"It is based on the belief that the creative process involved in artistic self-expression helps people to resolve emotional problems, develop interpersonal skills, manage behaviour, reduce stress, increase self-esteem and self-awareness, and achieve insight. The overall goal of art therapy is to enable people to achieve emotional, interpersonal, and/or cognitive growth through specific art making experiences," she says.

She says art therapy differs from other forms of psychotherapies in several ways: "1) It helps individuals to externalise feelings and thoughts in a unique and tangible way; 2) it helps individuals to convey feelings or thoughts that may be otherwise difficult to verbalize; and 3) it is usually perceived as non-threatening, neutral, or even as 'play', reducing resistance to treatment."

The same is true of music therapy. Raymond Ng Wai Man is a registered music therapist and the chairperson of Hong Kong Music Therapy Association. He says that music therapy can be used to restore, maintain and improve mental and physical health by using the systematic and professionally directed application of music to bring about desirable changes in behaviour. "Such changes enable the individual undergoing therapy to experience a greater understanding of himself and the world about him, thereby achieving a more appropriate adjustment to society," he explains.

"Music therapy addresses four major areas of development in children, namely speech, cognitive skills, social-emotional as well as motor skills," says Paul Pang, who runs a music therapy centre offering classes to children with special needs including autism, pervasive developmental disorder, attention deficit disorder and speech problems.

Ng, who also teaches training courses at HKU SPACE for musicians who want to become music therapists, says that music therapy has begun to be included in schools here as a way to help students with emotional, social and behavioural problems, and that schools are seeing positive results.

Music therapy can be especially effective in treating special needs children because the unlimited range of musical creation that is possible eliminates a central problem with other therapies: boredom.

Raymond Ng explains. "Children with special needs feel bored because the general training of physiotherapists and occupational therapists requires them to do the same movement a hundred times. However, music therapists can conceal the movement in the musical activities. Therefore, the clients can easily finish [the action] a hundred times with fun music."

As with art therapy, the focus of music therapy is expression

based on non-verbal communication, and this often takes the form of musical improvisation to express internal feelings. "For cerebral palsy, music therapists may help the clients to relax, coordinate physical movement, and increase their self-esteem. For mental retardation, music therapists try to enhance their social skills, cognition, emotional expression, and motor function, especially for severely mentally retarded clients," says Ng. "Mostly, for autism, music therapists will focus on improving their social skills, speech and language and emotional expression." One of his cases gave quite dramatic results – a young client named Johnny who was diagnosed with mild autism at the age of three. Ng began to treat him at the age of eight.

"Although his speech and language had been improving, his parents and teachers thought that he was too passive in different groups," recalls Ng. "Therefore, his parents brought him to participate in the individual music therapy session. I spent a lot of time improvising with him. I hoped that he could express his own feelings and needs, and helped him to solve the problems."

"In the first session, he chose the big drum and cymbal. He played extremely loudly. He seemed to show me his ability. I played the piano with him in order to bring out all his potential. In the second and third sessions, he arranged the xylophone, metallophone, ocean drum, woodblock, and wind chime around him. He played these instruments with a pair of beaters strongly and continually. He seemed to confirm his ability and confidence. I still played the piano to support him. At the end of the sessions, he was sweating profusely."

"After these three sessions, I talked with his mother. She was surprised that Johnny was playing so strongly. I asked her if there was any improvement in Johnny. She told me that he had begun to raise up his hand to answer teacher's questions. The teacher and parents were also very surprised by Johnny's improvement because it was his first time to actively reply to the teacher's questions. Actually, Johnny had very strong unexplored potential, which was limited by his parents' excessive worrying, for example, his parents never allowed him to climb to get anything).

However, he succeeded in expressing his potential, which was confirmed in the music therapy sessions. He successfully brought what he had gained from the sessions to his daily life. Music helped him to gain confidence. He can now confront different challenges." ■



If you have any questions relating to music therapy, please feel free to email Raymond Ng at: hkmusictherapist@yahoo.com.hk

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Visit www.musictherapy.com.hk for more information about Paul Pang's music therapy centre.

Ask Tina

Our children are changing every day and each stage of their development needs care and understanding. Tina Stephenson specialises in child development and she regularly speaks to parents on child and youth related issues. She is Programme Director of Early Years Network (www.Early-Years-Network.com) and My Grrlz (www.MyGrrlz.com). If you have a question concerning any stage of your child's development, please email editor@parentsjournal.com.hk and Tina will be happy to answer your questions.



My 14-year-old son seems quite effeminate and I have a strong feeling he might be gay - not that this matters to me or my husband. I just worry about how his peers may treat him. I want to broach the subject with him but don't know how to. I want to know whether he is or not so I can help him. How do I do this?

The most important message any parent can give their children is that they will be loved and accepted no matter what choices they make. As a parent, you feel compelled to help him and protect him – after all, protecting him has been your job for the last 14 years. It is difficult to watch our children make choices that are not our own, but this is part of life. We all faced challenging situations on our own as we defined and built our own character and confidence. My advice to parents (and I frequently get questions about gay teenagers) is to avoid asking him directly, he will tell you when he is ready. "Are you gay?" is among the most difficult and disaster ridden questions ever asked by parents, especially to teens. Instead, phrases like "I will love and accept you no matter what" are terrific. As long as he feels comfortable and accepted by you, he will tell you. In the meantime, you can put your energy into creating an environment for open communication. Whether or not your son is gay, your unconditional love and support will be the most important gift you can possibly give him. If he does 'come out' and tell you that he is gay, there are many supportive and sensitive organisations for families and friends of lesbian and gay teens – try www.pflag.org. Whatever his preferences, lifestyle, or choices, he will appreciate your loving patience while he navigates the complex world of identity formation.

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