



Arts-Based Mental Health Treatment
for Children and Youth:

Evaluation of Innovative Programs in Ontario



Children's Mental Health Ontario
Santé Mentale pour Enfants Ontario

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ARTS-BASED MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH: EVALUATION OF INNOVATIVE PROGRAMS IN ONTARIO

FINAL PROJECT REPORT, July 25, 2005

PURPOSE

There is a growing body of literature that suggests the arts provide promising directions for improving the effectiveness of medical treatments and maintaining individual and community health. The arts have been shown to be effective in improving self-esteem, social skills, and learning. The arts have the added value of helping professionals to connect with difficult-to-reach children and youth (British Columbia Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services, 2003). The application of arts-based programs in mental health treatment with children and youth is emerging as a positive direction with enormous potential.

In Ontario, 533,000, or 18% of children and youth have a diagnosable mental health disorder. (Ontario Child Health Study, 1998/Statistics Canada, 2003). The children and youth seen in these centres present with a range of social, emotional and behavioural problems including: bullying, violence, defiance, ADHD, eating disorders, depression, self-harm, anxiety, and addictions. Many of these children and youth experience significant impairment in functioning within their families, schools and communities. Many are also involved with child welfare services or the youth justice system.

Children's Mental Health Centres in Ontario have capacity to serve only 140,000 children and youth (one in 3.8). Because resources are limited, centres are continually striving to design and deliver the most effective programs in the most efficient manner possible. For the past several years, children's mental health centres in the province have been developing innovative approaches, and the use of the arts in children's mental health is a developing trend. Clinical observation often verifies the benefits of these approaches, however most centres do not have the resources to formally evaluate their effectiveness.

Children's Mental Health Ontario is an association that promotes, supports and strengthens a sustainable system of mental health services for children, youth and their families. Over eighty per cent of its members have met the rigorous standards required for Accreditation and the balance have committed to do so soon. Children's Mental Health Ontario is committed to promoting high quality services, the development of Best Practice models and the use of Evidence Based Practices in children's mental health.

This project takes a first step in exploring the use of the arts in children's mental health services, and in developing evaluation approaches that will help to establish the effectiveness of these innovative, creative services.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

In early September, 2004 Children's Mental Health Ontario, through its Evidence-Based Practices Committee, distributed a Request for Proposals (RFP) to its member organizations across Ontario. The RFP sought to identify and select 2-3 existing programs that offer services using the arts in the treatment of children's mental health problems, to participate in pilot projects. Each pilot project conducted formal evaluation of the impact of these arts-based services on mental health outcomes of the children participating in them. Since the programs included in this project already exist, the focus of the project was on evaluation and funds were used to implement formal evaluation, not service delivery.

Criteria for selection of the pilot programs included:

- Established, sustainable programs using the arts that have been operating for at least one year
- Programs that are delivered by a children's mental health centre in collaboration with other community partners (e.g. schools, child care, child welfare settings)
- Programs that demonstrate innovation and creativity and use of Best Practice models
- Programs that fit with the Ministry of Culture's priorities
- Programs that will incorporate measurement to demonstrate the effectiveness of the use of the arts in child and youth mental health.

An advisory group was formed, drawn from the ranks of children's mental health professionals in Ontario, and included a paediatric psychiatrist, and a children's mental health professional with a Master's degree in Expressive Arts Therapies. The Advisory Group reported to the Evidence Based Practices Committee of Children's Mental Health Ontario. The recommendations of the Project Advisory Group were reviewed and approved by the Evidence Based Practices Committee and by the Board of Directors of Children's Mental Health Ontario.

Of the proposals that were submitted and reviewed, three pilot projects were selected. Each selected pilot project developed a work plan which was reviewed by the Project Advisory Group. The Evidence Based Practices Committee of Children's Mental Health Ontario oversaw the project as a whole and received regular reports on progress.

Each of the three projects takes a unique approach to utilizing art in the children's mental health context. Each project provided, a description of the project's methodology and results, discussion of the results, and implications for future research. Two of the three projects provided a review of the pertinent literature on the use of the arts in mental health.

The three pilot projects represent a good cross-section of children's mental health services from different parts of the province. Each pilot project looks at different ways of utilizing the arts in children's mental health treatment.

The three pilot projects provide good examples of service evaluation where both qualitative and quantitative research approaches are used. Qualitative style aims to describe social reality or cultural meaning. It typically involves the collection of data from observation, interviews, or verbal interaction, and the meanings and interpretations of the participants may be highlighted. Analysis involves the identification of themes from the data collected. Quantitative methods, in contrast, aim to measure objective facts. Investigations use specially selected or designed tools, i.e., questionnaires or rating instruments, that collect data to measure things such as characteristics, concepts, or behaviours. Analysis of quantitative data uses statistical methods.

Following is a summary of each evaluation project's report and comments on future directions. Full reports prepared by each project are appended to this report.

Project #1

McMaster Children's Hospital, Child and Youth Mental Health Portfolio, Cornerstone Youth Service Day Treatment Program: Arts

Pilot Project Description:

This project evaluated the Arts component in a day treatment setting with 13-18 year olds who have severe emotional or psychiatric problems. The Cornerstone Day Treatment Program is a collaborative program between McMaster Children's Hospital and the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, and makes significant (60%) use of the arts in its programming, in addition to academic classroom activities and psychotherapeutic activities such as relaxation skills, anger management, and specific Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy groups.

This project addressed two questions: How important to the students are the Arts programs within the Cornerstone Day Treatment Program? And what are the characteristics of those students that benefited most from the Arts programs within Cornerstone?

This project used both qualitative and quantitative methods. Data were collected from interviews with current and former clients, teachers, mental health staff, a web-survey, and an analysis of client records. Two standardized measures, the Brief Child and Family Phone Interview (BCFPI) and the Child and Adolescent Functional Assessment Scale (CAFAS) were used to determine if there were differences between those clients who participated more in the Arts programs, and those who participated less or not at all. The sample consisted of 75 clients who attended the day treatment program at some point during the previous two years.

Results:

Three important trends were identified through this project:

First, the Arts provide an important non-threatening activity for extremely vulnerable children. The data support that the atmospheres where the Arts activities take place are relaxed and supportive. Clients have achievable expectations when engaged in the Arts programs, and these settings are seen as safe as well as flexible enough to meet the needs of individual clients.

Secondly, the Arts programs function as activities, as spaces, and as communication and skill-builders. The data suggest that client self-esteem improves through Arts activities. The rooms in which the Arts activities were available were identified as “safe havens” where clients could choose to spend time, to deal better with stress, anxiety, social and academic pressures. The Arts are also linked to improved communication and skills, and there is evidence that clients learn to overcome difficulties, express themselves creatively and develop social skills through participation in Arts activities.

The third trend is that different subgroups of clients showed different therapeutic gains. For example, one subgroup of clients, considered to be the most “emotionally impoverished” benefited through the nurturance of material gains, the tangible products of Arts activities. Gender differences appear to be quite significant in that males use the arts much less frequently than females in the Cornerstone Day Treatment Program.

The degree of relief and safety clearly felt and experienced by clients of Arts programming, as well as the way the Arts helped clients to experience success, appeared to be key contributors to clients’ overall success in day treatment.

Groups of clients were established for the purpose of this evaluation, based on how much to how little time they made use of the Arts while in the program. There were no significant differences between the groups of clients shown by the standardized, quantitative measures. The writers suggest this finding is most likely related to insufficient data rather than an actual absence of difference between the groups.

This project highlighted the arts’ flexibility / adaptability to meet individual needs, the arts’ ability to expand opportunities for empowerment of client-students, and the fact that they are highly valued by staff and clients alike. The opportunities offered to youth by Arts at Cornerstone are exceptional, particularly for programming that is not “officially” designated as therapeutic.

“The role of the Arts at cornerstone to me means a place to relax and discover hidden potential. The Art program lets you try new, exciting and challenging things within the safety of a secure, friendly and safe environment. You do not have to worry about doing something incorrectly because all Art, no matter what, is a masterpiece. I learnt that my work doesn’t need to be perfect” (Past Client of Cornerstone)

Strengths of the Pilot Project & Plans for Future Inquiry:

One of the strengths of this pilot project was the substantial sample size. This evaluation project also made good use of qualitative methodologies (interviews and the web-survey), ensuring that the voices of the clients were central. Further, the project’s other main focus (identifying the characteristics of youth who benefited most from the Arts component of the day treatment program) generated valuable information with regard to improving the relevance and efficacy of the services offered to the vulnerable population served by the program, and clarified a number of areas for ongoing investigation.

This pilot project team is actively looking for more survey participants, which will allow this team to build a statistically viable base for future evaluation and research projects. The survey design made possible through this pilot project is an important piece of the Arts program development at Cornerstone. It will be used as a tool to continue research, feedback, and quality measurement and improvement which will certainly benefit future clients in the Cornerstone program.

Another positive future direction that resulted from this pilot project is that the team is making plans to change practices that will improve data collection through standardized measures, which will help to answer questions such as why males participate in the Arts less than females. Other directions include future study of what client empowerment and locus of control really means to clients, and the implementing of new practices for collecting client feedback using the web-survey during or at the end of clients' involvement in the program.

Project #2

NGODWEAANGIZWIN AASKAAGEWIN (Child and Family Centre, Sudbury): Traditional Anishnaabe Arts and Teachings in the Treatment of Anishnaabe Children with Mental Health Problems

Pilot Project Description:

The Noodjimo Enendamang / Healing Thoughts is a culturally appropriate clinical treatment program that introduces concepts that are meant to increase First Nations children's sense of belonging to family, extended family, community and Nation as Anishnaabe, beginning with an acceptance of self. The Program is a seven week, 14 session group treatment program facilitated by a clinician in the Anishnaabe team. The overall objectives are for the participants to develop and enhance their level of awareness of the First Nations cultural values, to promote their cultural identity and to increase their self-esteem and assertive behaviours. The cultural relevance of the program has been established through consultation and collaboration with the First Nations elders.

The Noodjimo Enendamang / Healing Thoughts program reflects a partnership between children's mental health clinical services and the First Nations community. The program was developed by a clinician in the Anishnaabe team at the Centre in 2002 from the work done in individual therapy using expressive arts as a medium. Participants are taught the fundamentals of Anishnaabe art, and as they complete Native art, they are invited to explore their traditions as a medium to self-awareness. The project's literature review confirmed that there were no evidence-based therapeutic group programs using expressive arts to specifically address the cultural needs of Anishnaabe clients in Canada and the U.S. One male and two female children aged 9 and 10 years participated in this mental health treatment program at Sudbury's Child and Family Centre.

The questions that were addressed through the evaluation are whether at the completion of treatment, improvement would be observed in each participant through at least one of: reduced symptoms, improved general adaptive functioning, increased sense of competence, improved self concept, and increased sense of acceptance and belonging to community. The evaluation made use of several pre- and post- standardized measures: the Beck Depression Inventories for Youth,

Trauma Symptom Checklist, Achenbach, and Child and Adolescent Functional Assessment Scale (CAFAS). In addition, pre- and post- knowledge of traditional teachings was assessed.

Results:

The very small sample size of clients that participated in this project precludes drawing any meaningful conclusions. The intent was to evaluate the progress of eight children in the group treatment program, and as such there was no expectation that the project's findings would have statistical significance. Nonetheless, results showed some changes in behavioral patterns, on general adaptive functioning and perceived self-competence. One of the most important trends, shown through the clients' self portrait drawings, was that all of the clients showed acceptance of self and a strong sense of belonging to family and the community. In this culture, a highly desirable long term goal of traditional teachings and ceremony is to prepare youth so that they reconnect with their Clan, which becomes their extended family. This is a particularly crucial process for youth who have been in care for lengthy periods

Strengths of the Pilot Project and Plans for Future Inquiry:

Despite the small sample size, the evaluation methods and process were very comprehensive. This project is an excellent beginning point for future evaluation of this program. The Noodjimo Enendamung / Healing Thoughts program is clearly a unique, theoretically sound and culturally relevant intervention designed for First Nations children with mental health problems. The authors themselves identify the most important strength of this pilot project as "...the fact that it is a first attempt to measure the effectiveness of a First Nations clinical program".

The Noodjimo Enendamung / Healing Thoughts group treatment program is offered on a regular basis, but until now had never been evaluated. This project facilitated the development of a comprehensive evaluation approach that would otherwise not have been possible with the resources available. Now that an evaluation strategy and methods have been defined and established, the agency plans to continue these evaluation efforts. The authors are encouraged to pursue their study by developing a data bank that will eventually allow reliable statistical analysis. The report notes that using a mainstream evaluation model may not be most appropriate in meeting the objective of evaluating the effectiveness of a First Nations clinical program. However, the Child and Family Centre's participation in this project generated very encouraging preliminary results suggesting future directions that they intend to pursue.

Project #3

Windsor Regional Children’s Centre, Healing Arts Program

Pilot Project Description:

This project evaluated the Healing Arts Program that has been offered at Windsor Regional Children’s Centre (WRCC) since 1995. The Healing Arts Program makes use of music, art (drawing and painting), creative writing, sculpting, and creative movement and dance, and reflects a partnership between mental health services for children and youth and the Windsor area arts community. The project evaluated the effectiveness of children’s mental health interventions that make use specifically of art, dance and music through the Healing Arts Program.

The Healing Arts Program at WRCC regularly hosts a “Spring Into Art” event where local schools and art classes submit their artwork and it is displayed for the community to see at the Centre. In addition, there is an art and holiday sale to raise funds for various programs at the agency. As a result of this initiative, the staff at WRCC became more aware of the power of art within treatment, and cite research that suggests that art-based activities can be an effective tool for people with mental health issues to become aware of and express emotions.

For the pilot study, participants were drawn from WRCC’s ongoing treatment program. Study participants, who ranged in age from 7 to 13 years, attended between 3 and 7 sessions over the 7 week span of the study. There were 19 participants in the art/treatment groups, and 9 participants in a control group (receiving therapy only), totaling 16 males and 12 females. The whole project was overseen by a multidisciplinary task group.

The hypothesis for this project was that art could help children with mental health issues to learn to not only express but control their emotions. More specifically, the study explored whether children participating in art groups would experience significantly greater results in their therapy as compared to children in therapy only. This project had many positive elements, and the advantage of being conducted with respect to a well-established program using the arts in children’s mental health. Unlike the other studies, this project used a control group in the evaluation process, i.e., clients who did not receive the Arts intervention, which is often difficult to implement for both practical and ethical reasons. Another unique feature is that it used music and dance in addition to visual arts.

Data were collected before and after the participant’s involvement in the Healing Arts Program, using an original questionnaire developed specifically for this study. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were performed.

Results:

Although treatment outcomes related to enrollment in specific art groups did not show statistically significant differences, participation in arts-based groups in addition to traditional therapy revealed improvement in adaptive and prosocial behaviours. In addition to the summary of results of the program’s evaluation, the project’s report includes a descriptive case vignette from each of the art groups, illustrating how each group supported the participants’ growth and development of transferable skills:

“I feel more comfortable about myself, and the dance class helped me be more creative and taught me how to express myself.” (Healing Arts Program Client)

Strengths of the Project and Plans for Future Inquiry:

The scarcity of studies on arts instruction (as opposed to art therapy) and its impact on children’s mental health treatment outcomes is noted. This project aimed to create an innovative contribution to the literature as well as providing directions for future evaluation efforts. An interesting issue for future exploration could be comparison of treatment outcomes for children receiving fine arts instruction versus arts therapies provided by clinicians formally trained in the arts therapies.

DISCUSSION

This project supported the implementation of formal evaluation of three existing arts-based mental health treatment programs for children and youth in Ontario. Each of the projects conceptualized and understood the arts to be a vehicle for primary expression / communication, in addition to augmenting verbal expression, significantly expanding forums for progress toward treatment goals and skill-development, and enhancing client-centred approaches. An additional noteworthy element in all of the projects was the high degree of investment and excitement among the project teams and arts program staff – when service providers experience their work as enriching and rewarding, it cannot help but have a positive effect on the people served. The variety across treatment settings and programs participating in this evaluation process, each incorporating the arts in their own ways uniquely adapted to their settings and treatment populations, makes these commonalities even more significant.

Although the evaluation methodologies varied across the three programs, in each case the evaluation approach was professionally designed and managed, utilizing carefully selected pre- and post-outcome measures. All three project reports determined the significant value of qualitative methods for these studies due to the newness of the field of inquiry, the small sample sizes, and/or the specialized nature of the client group or intervention. Quantitative results were not statistically reliable, mostly due to the small sample sizes typical of pilot projects. With larger data bases quantitative methods using specific statistical instruments could prove valuable in the future.

The diversity of these projects offers a rich sample of varied approaches that will add to the state of knowledge about this emerging area of practice in children’s mental health. Insights from these innovative pilot projects can supplement the extremely limited literature available for children’s mental health practitioners and their service partners, and provide direction for future program development, evaluation and research.

This project has supported an essential, early step in an innovative direction with enormous untapped potential. The disciplined evaluation process involved in each of the pilot projects is consistent with the increasing emphasis in children’s mental health on evaluative program research and evidence-based practice. At the same time, the project as a whole provides an important contribution to the development of capacity in the arts – children’s mental health partnership. Project achievements are an important a step towards confirming the arts therapies as a valid and promising practice in the field of children’s mental health.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The application of arts-based programs in mental health treatment with children and youth is emerging as a positive direction with enormous potential. As a new field of inquiry there is a myriad of issues to explore, such as: are there one or more forms of art that work best, for whom, for how long, under what kinds of circumstances, with what kind of goals. Furthermore, how can success be measured most effectively? These kinds of questions require ongoing exploration using formal, thorough evaluation methodologies and reporting in the clinical literature. Given the extremely limited knowledge and practice in this area currently, program development and ongoing evaluation of innovative programs such as Cornerstone's Day Treatment Program, Noodjimo Enendamung / Healing Thought Program, and WRCC's Healing Arts Program are critical.

To facilitate knowledge transfer and to stimulate further interest and capacity-building in this promising direction of service delivery, this Final Report with the full pilot project reports will be disseminated to all member centres of Children's Mental Health Ontario, and will be posted on the association's web site. As another means of sharing their learning with respect to this evaluation project, at least one of the three participating programs is considering submitting an article to a professional journal.

The feasibility of presenting a training forum for the children's mental health sector is being explored to enable the three projects and perhaps others to discuss their arts-based treatment of children and youth, including this new program evaluation research. All three projects would be very interested in participating in such an opportunity.

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- Windsor Regional Children's Centre

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