

AUTISTIC CHILDREN AND ART THERAPY: AN ANALYSIS OF INFLUENCING FACTORS FROM CREATION TO PARTICIPATION

Dai Chan

Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Bangkokthonburi University

Email: bigdoorlinda@163.com

Received: December 12, 2024; **Revised:** December 14, 2024; **Accepted:** August 15, 2025

Abstract

This study explores the origin, development and theory of art therapy, with a special focus on the history of children's painting research. Art therapy helps emotional expression and communication through non-verbal means, including two orientations: psychoanalysis and art essentialism. Psychoanalysis focuses on the association and interpretation of artistic creation, while art essentialism emphasizes the role of the creative process in alleviating emotional conflicts. **The study reviews** the history of children's painting research and points out that analyzing painting characteristics can infer children's age, cognitive and emotional development, and help identify psychological abnormalities. Art education theory believes that children's artistic development is the result of the interaction of perception, material processing and creative ability, and appropriate teaching experience can improve children's visual art ability. The experimental part explores the guidance strategies for children's art creation in the graffiti period and the pre-stylization period. **The results show that** providing art materials and visual stimulation in the graffiti period can promote children's hand-eye coordination and physical development; the pre-stylization period emphasizes line drawing and movement coordination, and the value of the creative process is greater than the completion of the work. The study also found that graffiti activities promote the development of hand-eye coordination and visual perception, and the selection and application of art materials are crucial in artistic expression and emotional expression.

Keywords: Autistic children, Art therapy, Artistic creation

Introduction

As an independent treatment method, art therapy can be traced back to cave paintings in prehistoric times. Art therapy in ancient Egyptian and Chinese culture also provided a foundation for its development. From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, the rise of psychological theory, especially the influence of Freud and Jung's theories, prompted the combination of art therapy and psychoanalysis. In the 1930s, Margaret Naumburg proposed the concept of art as the core of treatment, laying the foundation for modern art therapy. From the 1950s to the 1960s, with the deepening of academic research on art therapy, scholars such as Yulman and Kramer further expanded this field, proposed a variety of art therapy theoretical models, and promoted the professional development of art therapy. The establishment of the American Art Therapy Association (AATA) and the promotion of art therapy around the world have gradually made it a recognized psychotherapy profession. In the second half of the 20th century, art therapy theory gradually diversified, integrating existentialism, Gestalt therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy and other treatment methods, and was widely used in the fields of mental illness treatment, child education, family therapy, etc. The American Art Therapy Association defines art therapy as: "Art therapy provides non-verbal expression and communication channels." In the field of art therapy, there are two main orientations: First, it is believed that art creation itself is a therapeutic method, and the creative process can ease emotional conflicts and help self-cognition and personal growth; second, art is applied to psychotherapy, and through the creation of works and the associations it triggers, it has a significant role in promoting individuals to maintain a balanced relationship between the inner and outer worlds. Art therapy is similar to art education, aiming to teach skills and how to use materials. When art is used as a therapeutic method, the guidance provided by the therapist provides individuals with opportunities for self-expression, self-communication and self-growth; art therapy focuses more on the individual's inner experience rather than the final work itself. In the process of art therapy, the methods, content, and associations of treatment are crucial because they reflect the individual's personality development, personality traits, and subconsciousness (Wadeson, 1980). In the mid-20th century, Piaget's cognitive development theory provided a new perspective for understanding children's paintings,

believing that children's painting performance is closely related to their intellectual development stage. Based on this, art therapy should combine development theory with psychodynamic theory. By analyzing the characteristics of children's paintings, such as lines, object modeling, and spatial application, it can infer their age, cognitive and emotional development, and identify possible psychological abnormalities. Artistic creation is the result of the interaction of perception, material processing, and creative ability. It emphasizes that through appropriate teaching and learning experience, children's visual art ability can be cultivated, which promotes the widespread application of art as a therapeutic method.

The Definition and Orientation of Art Therapy

Art therapy, as a therapeutic method that applies the art creation process to mental health and personal growth, covers several key areas.

First, in the initial stage of self-expression, the graffiti period (2 to 4 years old), art therapy recognizes that children's graffiti behavior is not only a coordinated product of muscle movement and visual experience, but also an instinctive way of self-expression. Graffiti enables children to express their comprehensive sensory experience of the outside world through dots, lines, surfaces, colors and space. In addition, children's graffiti is closely connected with their sensory and motor experience. The dots and lines on the picture reflect their body movements and sounds. This form of expression helps to form emotional resonance. From a psychoanalytic and sociological perspective, children's graffiti can be a challenging behavior to attract the mother's attention, or an imitative behavior to gain recognition and praise from family members.

Secondly, graffiti games are important in children's development. Art therapy uses painting activities to promote children's sensory integration and intellectual development, improve hand-eye coordination through hand movements, and stimulate the development of visual perception. At the same time, graffiti and painting activities can reflect and promote children's language growth, as a transition from non-verbal thinking to language reasoning, helping children solve problems more orderly and efficiently.

In the guidance of children's art in the graffiti period, stimulating children's artistic motivation is an important goal. By providing appropriate materials and encouragement, children's curiosity and spirit of exploration are supported, and their ability to express themselves through art is enhanced. In addition, appropriate art media such as crayons, pencils, chalks and colored pens are selected to support the synchronization of children's line sketches and body movements in graffiti activities, promoting self-expression and emotional development.

Next is the initial stage of representation: the pre-stylization period (4 to 7 years old). At this stage, art therapy believes that children's paintings reflect their psychological state and personality development. Children use geometric shapes to show the process of adapting to external norms and expressing things they care about.

In terms of the characteristics of painting expression in the stylization period, children's modeling of objects and characters can be identified as clear symbolic symbols, which reflect children's emotions and cognition of the parts of objects, as well as their development of spatial concepts. Children use base lines and sky lines to express spatial and time concepts, which helps them understand the irreversibility of time and express the order of events in their creations. In addition, unique visual expression techniques such as unfolding, X-ray perspective and bird's-eye view are used in art therapy to show children's interest in the environment and their emphasis on emotions, transcending the visual phenomena of reality and revealing the inner world of children.

In summary, the definition and positioning of art therapy is to use art creation as a therapeutic tool to promote emotional expression, self-cognition, social development and cognitive ability. Through the above aspects, art therapy provides children with a non-verbal way of communication and expression, helping them explore and understand their feelings, while promoting their mental and emotional health.

Analyzing autistic Children's Paintings

The paintings of children with autism show unique themes and expressions, reflecting their unique understanding and feelings of the world. The graffiti works of these children are usually not ideal, not because of their poor painting ability, but because of their unique psychological processing methods and behavioral activities. They may lack the ability to control thinking, memory, attention and movement, which leads to their insufficient understanding of painting symbols, intentions and purposes, thus affecting the completion of painting tasks. In the process of autonomous graffiti, the behavioral changes of children with autism can be divided into three stages: unconscious graffiti, conscious graffiti and creative graffiti, reflecting their development from disordered and uncontrolled movements to the ability to connect movements with imaginary experiences.

In addition, children with autism are quite sensitive to colors, usually prefer bright colors, and can more accurately give specific colors to certain objective things, such as big trees, tree trunks, the sun and the ocean. However, they do not yet have a good concept of space and cannot understand shapes such as cubic houses or cylindrical cups. The level of development of fine muscles is also relatively low, which leads to the need for repeated correction of their pen-holding movements, making it difficult to achieve the requirements of "horizontal and vertical", so the paintings often give people the feeling of light brushstrokes and insufficient overall control.

Children with autism are able to express emotions and vent through painting, using painting to show what is in their inner world that cannot be expressed in words. Art therapy provides them with a safe space to go beyond the limitations of language expression, explore various art materials, textures and colors, and create a visual language that can richly tell their stories and emotions. These characteristics not only reveal the uniqueness and challenges of painting for children with autism, but also show the importance of art creation in emotional expression and communication.

Artistic Creation as a Tool for Emotional Expression

As a tool for emotional expression, art creation has unique significance and value for children, especially preschoolers. During the graffiti period, that is, between the ages of 2 and 4, children's graffiti behavior is not only the product of the coordination of visual experience and body movements, but also an instinctive way of self-expression. This free expression through points, lines, surfaces, colors and space allows children to concretize the experience of sensory integration. At the same time, graffiti is closely related to their emotional resonance and body movements. Every point and line on the screen may symbolize their movements and sounds, reflecting the path of their body movement. In addition, graffiti also marks a key stage in the development of infant movements, from unconscious movements to conscious control, in which children's body and mind grow.

In children's development, the importance of graffiti games cannot be ignored. It not only stimulates children's sensory integration and promotes intellectual development, but also reflects and promotes language growth. At this stage, children gradually practice hand movements through painting activities, improve hand-eye coordination, and learn to use their brains to direct their movements through the development of visual perception. At the same time, graffiti and painting activities also help children transition from non-verbal thinking to language reasoning, promoting the growth of their thinking and language expression abilities.

As children enter the pre-stylization period, that is, from 4 to 7 years old, their paintings begin to reflect their psychological state and personality development. During this period, children's paintings are mainly geometric shapes, especially circles, which can be expressed more casually and quickly, meeting their needs for immediate feedback. In addition, the use of color also plays an important role in children's paintings. It not only enhances the perception of young children, but also helps them start aesthetic training from observing everyday things.

During the stylization period, children's painting performance characteristics are more obvious. They begin to use base lines and sky lines to express the concepts of space and time, which helps them understand the irreversibility of time and express the order of events in their creations. In

addition, children will also use unique visual expression techniques such as unfolding, X-ray perspective and bird's-eye view to show multiple objects in the same space and convey the atmosphere of the entire scene. These techniques not only reflect that child attach importance to emotions beyond the visual phenomena of reality, but also make their paintings more subjective and creative.

In summary, artistic creation, as a tool for emotional expression, allows children to transcend the limitations of language through visual language and intuitively show their feelings and inner world. This creative process not only promotes children's cognitive and language development, but also helps them build a bridge of self-expression and emotional communication. Through artistic creation, children are able to explore and express their emotions, thereby growing and developing psychologically and emotionally.

Influencing Factors from Creation to Participation

The development of children's painting research, especially the theory of Franz Zizek, a Viennese art educator, believes that children are born with the ability to express themselves through visual symbols. Piaget's theory of cognitive development provides a new cognitive framework for understanding children's paintings and reveals the intrinsic connection between children's paintings and cognitive development.

Art therapy infers children's age, cognitive level and emotional development through the analysis of children's painting characteristics, and identifies possible psychological abnormalities based on this. Art education theory emphasizes that the development of children's art is the result of the interaction between perception, material processing and creative ability, and experience and environment play an important role in the development of children's artistic creation ability.

In the graffiti period and pre-stylization period, by providing appropriate art materials and visual stimulation, children are encouraged to create graffiti, thereby promoting the development of their hand and body coordination ability. Graffiti activities not only have a positive impact on the development of children's hand-eye coordination and visual perception, but also the selection

and use of art materials play a vital role in promoting children's artistic expression and emotional expression in the creative process.

The two main orientations of art therapy are psychoanalysis orientation and art essentialism orientation. The psychoanalytically oriented art therapy model believes that art creation itself is a therapeutic method. The creative process can ease emotional conflicts and help self-cognition and personal growth. The art essentialism orientation focuses more on the application of art in psychotherapy. Through the works created and the associations they trigger, it has a significant role in promoting individuals to maintain a balanced relationship between the inner and outer worlds.

One of the pioneers of children's painting research is Franz Zizek, a Viennese art educator. He believes that all children are born with the ability to express themselves through visual symbols. Piaget's cognitive development theory provides a new perspective for understanding children's paintings, believing that children's painting performance is closely related to their intellectual development stage. The views of American art education scholar Eisner provide theoretical support for school art education and art therapy, and promote the widespread application of art as a therapeutic method.

In summary, the origin and development, definition and orientation of art therapy, as well as the historical evolution of children's painting research, have had an important impact on the artistic creation and participation of autistic children. Art therapy provides a way of expression and communication through non-verbal means, including two main orientations: psychoanalytic orientation and art essentialism orientation. The development of children's painting research, especially Franz Žižek's theory and Piaget's cognitive development theory, provides a new perspective for understanding children's painting. Art education theory emphasizes that the development of children's art is the result of the interaction between perception, material processing and creativity, and experience and environment play an important role in the development of children's artistic creation ability. In the graffiti period and pre-stylization period, by providing appropriate art materials and visual stimulation, children are encouraged to create graffiti, thereby promoting the development of their hand-body coordination ability. Graffiti activities have a significant positive effect on children's hand-eye coordination and visual perception, and the

selection of art materials plays an important role in emotional expression in the creative process.

New Knowledges

The study reveals that art therapy not only aids in emotional expression but also enhances children's cognitive development. It emphasizes the need for educators to create an environment that encourages exploration and personal expression through art. Art therapy plays a crucial role in facilitating emotional expression among children, particularly those facing developmental challenges. By fostering creativity and exploration, art education can significantly contribute to a child's emotional and cognitive growth.

Conclusions

This study deeply analyzed the origin, development process, definition and main orientation of art therapy, and reviewed the historical evolution of children's painting research. Regarding the definition and orientation of art therapy, the study pointed out that art therapy mainly promotes emotional expression and communication through non-verbal means, and can be divided into two main orientations: on the one hand, the psychoanalytic orientation emphasizes revealing individual emotions through association and interpretation in the creative process; on the other hand, the art essentialism focuses on alleviating emotional conflicts through the artistic creation process and promoting emotional purification and regulation.

In addition, this study reviewed the research progress in the field of children's painting and believed that the development of children's art is the result of the interaction between perception, material processing and creative ability. In terms of research methods, the study analyzed the characteristics of children's paintings, inferred their cognitive development, emotional state and age characteristics, and focused on the guidance strategies for children's art creation in the graffiti period and pre-stylization period. The results showed that graffiti activities have a significant positive effect on children's hand-eye coordination and visual perception, and the selection of art materials plays an important role in emotional expression in the creative process. Furthermore, the study emphasizes that appropriate art materials and visual stimulation should be provided during the graffiti period to promote children's artistic expression,

transcend the limitations of language, and convey emotions and experiences through visual language. In the pre-stylization period, the meaning of the creative process itself far exceeds the final work. Appropriate selection of art materials that can promote the creative process and help children express their personal feelings and experiences through painting are important guiding strategies for this stage.

The style changes in children's paintings were analyzed, and the study revealed the psychological significance of artistic style changes, explored the psychological mechanisms behind the expressions such as exaggeration and deformation, and further enriched the psychological understanding of children's artistic creation.

References

- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). **Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-5 (5th ed.)**. American Psychiatric Publishing
- Dragan, G. (2023). Composite structure of human mind revealed by HuPoTest. European Psychiatry, EPV 0896.
<https://doi.org/10.1192/j.eurpsy.2023.2197>
- Fonseca Vaz, I., Mouta, S., Jesus, B., & Castro, S. (2022). **Call the Psychiatrist! - Study about Delirium in the context of liaison psychiatry**. European Psychiatry, p. 237.
- Pellicano, E., Dinsmore, A., & Charman, T. (2013). **A future made together: Shaping autism research in the UK**. London: Institute of Education.