

Art work

At one nursery in London, an art therapist is helping young children with a range of difficulties – in a purpose-built garden ‘shed’. *Caroline Vollans* finds out about the benefits



Ashed in the garden of Kate Greenaway Nursery School and Children's Centre, close to the bustle of King's Cross station in London, is home to a specialised form of intervention for young children who are experiencing a range of difficulties. Dean Reddick, an art therapist, works here with children who have been referred by the children's centre or the nursery school.

Art is commonly regarded as a therapeutic activity in itself, like gardening, baking or physical activity. It can utilise the body, the emotions and the senses in a way that is considered cathartic, healing and generally good for well-being. Art therapy, though sharing these beneficial qualities, is something quite specialised.

Art therapy is a form of psychotherapeutic intervention that uses art, and the processes of making art, to enable expression and communication. Through his work, Mr Reddick aims to address emotional,

developmental and psychological issues that children may find troubling, confusing and distressing, in order to facilitate a positive change. Change is achieved through an engagement with the art materials, the art processes and the therapist in a safe and reliable environment.

Art is a medium through which emotions can be both released and contained. By the same token, making art can evoke overwhelming feelings and bring about unbearable emotional states in children. It is for this reason that art therapy should be practised by a highly trained specialist in a very particular environment.

Art therapists are trained to pick up on non-verbal symbols and metaphors expressed through art and creative processes and are, too, able to work through their relationship with the child. The presence and interactions of a professional therapist is what distinguishes an art therapy session in the shed from a nursery session where a child might use art to express their feelings.

Art therapist Dean Reddick works with children in a structure with lots of natural light and a huge range of materials

TAPPING INTO EMOTIONS

Art therapy can help children, including very young children, both release and contain a range of emotions that are otherwise left unexpressed or, similarly, manifested in an oblique way: this might be through withdrawal, hyperactivity, anger and overly aggressive play. Though it is commonly understood that art therapy is principally about the sublimation of emotions into images, this is only part of it when working with young children.

Mr Reddick says, 'Whereas older children and adults can use images as a way in to talking and as a catalyst to change, very young children cannot. An art therapy session is about the child expressing their thoughts and feelings through making art, or exploring the materials.'

Expression and change occur by a number of means other than

talking: through the process of the child's physical involvement with the materials, or through making a significant object or picture. Aspects of the child's artwork and the processes they undertake become their way of communicating with Mr Reddick.

The very physicality of doing art is a particular reason for the suitability and success of Mr Reddick's work with such young children. He explains, 'Whereas speaking might be difficult or, indeed, not possible, most children can find a way in to some form of artistic expression.'

It would seem that this is especially the case when an inviting array of materials and spaces are on offer, as in this particular London art space.

OFF TO THE SHED

The shed is a standalone, purpose-built structure set in the garden. There is an abundance of natural light from both the roof and the glass doors (blinds are in place during sessions).

The floor is tiled so plenty of mess can be made. All materials are at a height at which children can help themselves.

There is a table with chairs and floor space. There is a variety of mark-making materials; a spectrum of colour; a sand tray; textiles, an easel; a drying rack; a doll's house; people and animal figures; clay and water play. In all, it entices any child who goes in to start exploring what is there.

Children come and work in this space with Mr Reddick for 45 minutes a week. If the child is under three, a parent will be present. 'This provides an opportunity for working with the parent-child relationship,' he explains. 'It means we can work on issues such as containment, separation and separation anxiety, parental trauma, relating, communication, limits and boundaries.'

He collects the children from wherever they are in the setting. Transitions are important, as anyone who is involved with young children knows, but especially so for children in difficulty. 'The collecting of the children

and the walk to the shed are a significant part of the work,' he says.

It is with this aspect of the therapy that the staff on the nursery floor are especially involved. Being able to support the child in both leaving and returning is imperative. There is no single approach to this, as each child is unique and will have a particular relation to the therapy, so it is something that Mr Reddick and the staff at Kate Greenaway work on continually with each individual child.

DURING A SESSION

What does a session look like? Mr Reddick welcomes the child in and explains the boundaries – there is considerable freedom, but there are, necessarily, some limits. For example, he will explain that hitting and throwing the materials are not allowed.

The children are told that they come to the session to make art and to think about their feelings; this is their remit and provides a framework for the session. They are also told that they can do or make whatever they like.

Mr Reddick is there to use what they do and how they do it as a means of giving them feedback about their feelings and experiences. This will, over time, help them to process and make sense of what is going on for them. Mr Reddick clarifies that this 'can be a long-term endeavour – both the nature of and the length of the therapy is unique to the individual child'.

He is in the fortunate position of being able to work with each child for as long as it takes. He goes with them to primary school if the work is still in process and continues it there. This in itself helps the more troubled children (and their parents) with the transition from nursery to Reception. The work is reviewed regularly, and Mr Reddick meets with parents equally regularly.

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Many of Mr Reddick's referred cases are for children involved in domestic violence. Artistic expression can help children with such crises. The therapy provides a way to safely express and contain difficult and terrorising feelings, cope with traumatic memories and their triggers and, over time, develop and support emotional stabilisation.

'Working with the child with their carers in this situation is particularly delicate work where issues of blame, guilt and parental responsibility have to be carefully and sensitively approached,' he explains.



MORE INFORMATION

- *Art Therapy in the Early Years: art-making as a therapeutic intervention with infants, toddlers and their families* by J Meyerowitz-Katz and D Reddick (eds) (2016 – in press), Routledge
- 'Assessing a young autistic boy in art therapy in private practice' by A Etherington (2012) in *Assessment in Art Therapy* by A Gilroy, R Tipple and C Brown (eds), Routledge

Another specific group of children that are referred to art therapy are those on the autistic spectrum. For children who have difficulty with verbal and social communication and interaction, both the art and the relationship with the therapist can provide a powerful means to channel their inner worlds and experiences.

Art therapy can be beneficial to children with autism by fostering an improvement with their ability to imagine, play and think symbolically. It can help them to manage sensory issues such as stickiness, and can assist them with their fine motor skills.

Finally, this art work in a shed in King's Cross is an incredibly valuable form of intervention for many children and their families. But Mr Reddick says that the success and feasibility of the work depends hugely on the support of the school: 'Without the trust and respect of the head teacher and the permeation of this through the staff team, the work would not be sustainable'. A space that is free from interruption can, in itself, be difficult to guarantee in a busy setting.

Mr Reddick might be the therapist in the shed, but he is not working in isolation. As with all good interventions, he and his work are very much connected to the rest of the setting, families and partner agencies; this allows the children to find their voice and use it not only in the shed, but in their world beyond it. ■

Caroline Vollans is a teacher and psychoanalyst who provides supervision in early years settings, cvollans@hotmail.co.uk

