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Clay in Art Therapy: A Case Report of a Sexually Abused Child

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Abstract

Contemporary art therapy has focused little on the healing potential of using clay with children that have experienced sexual abuse. In this case report, I provide a brief introduction of a 12-year-old male followed by a discussion of his clay sculptures made in group art therapy sessions over a two-week period during an inpatient psychiatric stay. The tactile and sensorimotor activity of working with clay provided trauma informed benefits such as focusing on the present-moment experience, safely developing somatic awareness, and cultivating self-regulator capacity. Additionally, the client's life-like clay objects permitted him the opportunity to create personalized imagery that symbolized his unconscious processes and life experiences and was a key step toward successful transference and artistic sublimation.

Keywords: Art therapy; childhood sexual abuse; case report; clay; trauma informed

I have practiced art therapy for over three decades, ten of those years with children in inpatient psychiatric settings with co-occurring mental health disorders. Many of these children have lived through traumatic events such as sexual abuse which can have significant and enduring consequences on the overall development of a child. Malchiodi (2012) asserted:

Experiences of sexual abuse and subsequent trauma reactions are different, depending on psychological, developmental, cultural, behavioral, and cognitive factors ... there is a continuum of response to sexual abuse, ranging from relatively few trauma reactions to profound disruption in attachment, behavior, cognition, and interpersonal function. (p. 342)

Acute effects of CSA may present themselves as internalized symptomatology, such as, emotional and behavior

problems, aggression, depression, anxiety, isolation, relationship difficulties, and low self-esteem (Dent, 2020; Laird & Mulvihill, 2022).

The use of art therapy to treat the subsequent trauma reactions of CSA is well established in the literature (Carter et al., 2023; Elbrecht, 2021; Eun & McFerran, 2023; Laird & Mulvihill, 2022; Malchiodi, 2012; Rouse et al., 2022). Indeed, Malchiodi (2012) proposed, “Most present-day art therapists would concur that art therapy may offer an effective means to support the processing and integration of trauma and eventually reparation and recovery in children” (p. 343). Laird and Mulvihill (2022) were of similar thought and asserted art therapy has a significant role in relieving psychological symptoms of sexual abuse. Trauma informed benefits of using art therapy with CSA include, but are not limited to, arousal reduction, safe sensory processing, affect regulation, enhancing insight and self-awareness, reducing dissociation; and improving self-esteem (Elbrecht, 2021; Laird & Mulvihill, 2022; Malchiodi, 2012, 2023).

Clay in Art Therapy

Much has been written on the therapeutic benefits of clay in art therapy (Elbrecht, 2021; Kimport & Hartzell, 2015; Nan et al., 2021; Sholt & Gavron, 2006; Wong & Au, 2019). Yet, I believe contemporary art therapy has focused little on the healing potential of using clay with children that have experienced sexual abuse. Indeed, the use of clay has often been counter indicated for this subgroup due to its propensity to elicit regressive behavior; possibly leading many art therapists to avoid using clay with this population. Yet, my clinical experience has shown me that clay offers distinct qualities that make it therapeutically beneficial for this subgroup.

First and foremost, working with clay involves the experience of touch which, for humans, is one of the first modes of expression, communication, and development of bonds early in life (Elbrecht, 2021). Consequently, the tactile experience of working with clay can potentially provide a non-verbal language through which the mental and emotional realms, as well as the capacity for human connection can be expressed and explored (Sholt & Gavron, 2006). Second, the physical nature of clay has the potential to facilitate the

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liberation of pent-up or repressed emotions. Its tactile and fluid characteristics may bring about regression which, when safely contained, can ultimately facilitate a cathartic release of repressed emotions (Henley, 2002). Third, the sensorimotor activity of working with clay has self-soothing characteristics that may ultimately reduce anxiety and enhance self-regulation by enabling clients to focus on the present-moment experience and safely developing somatic awareness (Kimport & Hartzell, 2015; Nan et al., 2021; Ogden et al., 2006; Ogden & Fisher, 2015; Wong & Au, 2019). Similarly, Elbrecht (2021) asserted the tactile nature of clay can promote the release of energy and tension, provide and channel sensation, and regulate emotion through the creation of form. Lastly, Anderson (1995) proposed working with clay can evoke direct expression from the unconscious, circumventing rigid defense mechanisms and amplify the personal meaning of a symbol.

Setting

The setting was an acute inpatient psychiatric hospital located in the East Coast U.S. Clients were age 12 to 17 with a primary psychiatric diagnosis often with co-occurring disorders such as substance use and trauma. The typical length of stay was just under two weeks. Group art therapy was scheduled for 90 minutes, three days a week. It was required for all clients to attend. Group membership changed as clients were discharged and new individuals were admitted; size varied from 5 to 8 clients. Time was provided at the end of each session for clients who wanted to share and discuss their imagery. Consent was obtained from the client and The Department of Human Services for his imagery to be photographed for presentation and publication.

The art studio was separate from the psychiatric unit, enhancing the feeling of privacy and safety. The space provided ample room for movement and play. It included worktables and fold-up chairs, which allowed for flexible seating arrangements. Overhead lighting delivered ample illumination and a large window at the end of the space offered abundant natural light. The floor was linoleum which could be easily swept and mopped. Perimeter cabinets and shelving offered safe storage of materials and client artwork. The studio was stocked with a multitude of art materials and had a sink. The space lacked a kiln; therefore, self-hardening clay was made available.

Jayden

Jayden (pseudonym) was a 12-year-old White male brought to the psychiatric hospital by his case worker due to increased isolation, anxiety, depression, and angry outbursts. Jayden was extremely guarded and apprehensive of others, especially men. His biological father had been physically, emotionally, and sexually abusive to

him. His mother's forced activities as a sex worker and her substance addiction led to her being absent from the home for long periods, as well as male strangers entering the house at all hours. Because of Jayden's extensive history of abuse, interacting with and trusting adults was significantly ruptured.

Ultimately, Jayden had become a ward of the state resulting in numerous unsuccessful foster placements and multiple temporary respite homes. Trust was a central issue for Jayden; hence, he felt the need to protect himself by avoiding and even sabotaging relationships with others. As a white, middle class, young heterosexual adult male, coming from an intact biological family, I was presented with unique challenges and opportunities when working with Jayden. It was particularly important for me to establish a secure environment so that Jayden would feel safe and could begin trusting others again.

I approached art therapy from a trauma informed psychoanalytic perspective. To accomplish this, I maintained a private and protected space, as well as promoted the development of a safe and supportive relationship where I was experienced as a reliable and trustworthy presence. Clients were provided with a variety of art media and encouraged to use these materials according to their own choices and needs with the anticipation of creating personalized imagery symbolizing the client's unconscious processes and life experiences. Moreover, it allowed the opportunity for transference and artistic sublimation where the client's unacceptable or threatening desires and emotions could be safely transferred into symbolic forms that were socially acceptable.

Jayden participated in six group art therapy sessions over a period of two weeks. When entering the art studio for the first time, he promptly informed me he had no intention of participating in art therapy. "I was told I had to come ... But I'm not gonna [sic] do anything," asserted Jayden. I respected Jayden's conditions and assured him he was welcome to merely observe others and engage the art process at his own pace. I attempted to familiarize him with the space and supplies, but ultimately, he retreated to the sanctuary of a chair whereupon he slumped down in his seat, crossed his arms, and stared down at the floor. For the next 30 minutes he remained silent, periodically peering through the top of his brow to observe others immersed in the art process.

I noted Jayden taking a keen interest in group members working with clay; hence, I placed a 4" X 7" slab of clay on the table and invited him to join me. Fighting back a grin, he pretended to wrench himself from his chair and joined me at the table. I thanked Jayden for indulging me and proceeded to demonstrate the techniques for wedging and working with clay. Jayden's eyes widened and he vigorously nodded his head and leaned forward as I demonstrated the various techniques. I stepped aside and encouraged Jayden to merely play and experiment with the material with no expectations.

Jayden engaged the clay with enthusiasm and smiled with delight as he pounded, punched, and threw the clay down on the table. The medium is not easily destroyed or wasted in its plastic state; thus, Jayden could work the clay without fear of negative outcomes to the material. Intuitively he grabbed a rolling pin resting on the table and began to repeatedly smash the clay. With each thunderous blow, he would raise his head to view the group's reaction. I nodded my head with approval to assure Jayden and the group that it was safe to permit the process to resume. I suspected Jayden's displaced behavior involved transferring negative emotions and would be a necessary step toward successful artistic sublimation. Furthermore, bearing in mind Jayden's history of repeated abandonments, glancing up to see the group's reaction could have been a moment as a group member he would be accepted or rejected, admired or punished – seemingly all instances that he navigated in his daily, traumatic home life.

Session 2: Clay Hand

Upon entering the art studio for the second time, Jayden promptly retrieved a liberal portion of clay and retreated to a space separate from group members. His enhanced readiness to participate in art therapy may have been due to my initial acceptance of his displaced behavior without judgment, rejection, or reproach, thus establishing the initial foundation for trust, as well as relational and internal safety. Podolan and Gelo (2023) asserted safety provides the necessary basis that fuels exploration, promotes healthy development of attachment, and facilitates the treatment progress.

Once again, Jayden worked the clay in his hands for several minutes, taking pleasure in pounding, punching, and flattening the clay. The tactile and sensorimotor activity of working the clay seemed to reduce Jayden's anxiety and permitted him the opportunity to safely develop somatic awareness. Suddenly Jayden announced, "I know what to make!" Group members became curious, and Jayden responded with a foreboding tone, "Wait and see!" Over the next two sessions, Jayden created a life-size hand displaying the middle finger. His hand exhibited particulars such as veins, wrinkles, joints, and fingernails. The addition of a pedestal or base to his sculpture created what appeared to the author as a trophy that expressed his sense of pride and accomplishment, as well as elevate the significance of his work. Jayden finished his sculpture by using a pencil to etch the words "Fuck You" into the base of his clay appendage.

Jayden defiantly exhibit his clay hand on a shelf adjacent to the studio door making it notable and especially visible to visitors when entering the space. He asserted, "This is a warning to anyone who enters this room!" I suspected his sculpture depicted aspects of the transference relationship and was an attempt to distance himself from me and those who would endeavor to

engage him. Furthermore, I understood Jayden's strategic placement of his sculpture as a sublimated trauma response, cautioning and discouraging unwanted or unauthorized visitors who would attempt to gain passage to his space.

Session 4: Clay Prison

When entering the studio for his fourth session, Jayden appeared anxious and agitated. He quickly retrieved a liberal portion of clay and once more retreated to a space separate from group members. He took delight in pounding, flattening, and rolling the clay for several minutes. The sensorimotor activity of working the clay seemed to permit Jayden the opportunity to release pent up energy and tension, creating a sense of calmness and promoting self-regulator capacity. Suddenly he announced to the group that he was going to make a "prison." I wondered if Jayden's subject matter was a counter response to his initial imagery and illustrated a need for containment and control. Additionally, I speculated his subject matter not only represented his feelings of confinement but also functioned as a vehicle to explore personal boundaries and relational and internal safety.

Jayden began his endeavor by constructing an interior space that consisted of a solitary cell. He meticulously smoothed the clay sections by applying water and oscillating his fingers across the material. The tactile experience and repetitious ritual seemed to further diminish Jayden's anxiety and created the opportunity to safely develop somatic awareness. During the construction process, he made several unsuccessful attempts to create the impression of a barred window. I suggested he might try using wood. He smiled with satisfaction as he pressed the wood pieces into the clay, obtaining the desired effect. Jayden's internal structure lacked a door or entrance. He explained, "I can't get out and people can't get in" possibly suggesting an attempt to control social engagement. Jayden painted his solitary cell a peculiar bright red. He associated red with his intense anger and hostility. Pointing to his cell Jayden asserted, "It's (anger) all locked up in here."

Jayden constructed an enclosed space around his solitary cell by erecting a series of prison walls that provided an additional layer of containment, protection, and defense. Once again, he omitted any doors or entrances. I suspected the addition of two guard towers provided added control and restraint, as well as safety. Jayden explained, "From these towers, I can see people trying to sneak in or out." I wondered if Jayden's association alluded to his experience of male strangers discreetly entering and exiting his biological home at all hours due to his mother's forced activities as a sex worker.

Lastly, Jayden voiced his wish to add barbed wire to his prison walls but was unsure how to proceed. I suggested he might try using wood and yarn. Jayden



Figure 1. Frontside of Clay Hand



Figure 2. Backside of Clay Hand



Figure 3. Clay Prison

gathered the materials and invited me to assist in his process. Together we created his anticipated outcome. Should a person pass through or over Jayden's barbed wire, the individual would suffer discomfort and possibly injury. "If anyone tries to get in or out, they'll get cut," observed Jayden. I understood Jayden's barbed wire to symbolize his propensity to harm others when attempting to breach his defensive barriers, as well as his own vulnerability should he attempt to leave the protective confines of his psychological defenses.

Termination

I accompanied Jayden to the art room the day of his discharge to permit him the opportunity to retrieve, discard, or leave behind his artwork. Upon entering the space, he snatched a wooden mallet resting on the table and began to smash the walls and interior cell of his prison. He grinned with delight as each forceful blow shattered his structure, pausing only briefly to observe my reaction. I smiled and nodded my head with approval to assure him it was safe to resume his process. Jayden proclaimed, "I'm breaking out of here!" I deduced destroying his clay prison may have been part of the termination process, signifying the closure of our therapeutic engagement. Additionally, I speculated the demolition of his structure showed a willingness to break down psychological fortifications and become more amenable to the interaction of inside and outside worlds.

Jayden's final act was to retrieve his clay hand, whereupon he presented it to me and stated, "I want you to have this." Jayden's clay object became the central focus of his projected negative feelings. Once transferred to the object, there was the opportunity to perform the act of disposal. My acceptance of Jayden's sculpture was then a symbolic acceptance of previously rejected aspects of Jayden. Moreover, the acceptance of his image was a



Figure 4. Prison Cell



Figure 5. Breaking Out

non-verbal interpretation, an act grounded on an understanding of his sculpture and acceptance of him. I believe it left something unspoken and yet understood. Also, I suspected Jayden offered his clay hand as a gift. However, the gift is more than a mere thing, it is an object through which a child's worth is symbolically affirmed (Dalley et al., 1989). Receipt of his gift provided Jayden needed validation and acceptance. Furthermore, the preceding authors proposed that giving can be insurance against reprisal or future rejection. In view of Jayden's traumatic history of frequent abandonments, my reaction could have been a critical point where he would be accepted or rejected. Lastly, I deduced that Jayden abandoned his clay appendage because he recognized it may not be safe to introduce

his sculpture to the new respite home awaiting him after discharge.

Implications

In this case report, I provided a brief introduction of a 12-year-old male followed by a discussion of his clay sculptures made in group art therapy sessions over a two-week period during an inpatient psychiatric stay. Clay working offered the client distinct therapeutic qualities that were beneficial for treating the subsequent trauma reactions of CSA. For instance, the tactile and sensorimotor activity of working with clay provided trauma informed benefits such as focusing on the present-moment experience, safely developing somatic awareness, and cultivating self-regulator capacity (Nan et al., 2021; Ogden & Fisher, 2015). Furthermore, Jayden's life-like objects permitted him the opportunity to create personalized imagery that symbolized his unconscious processes and life experiences, circumventing rigid defense mechanism (Anderson, 1995; Elbrecht, 2021). His clay sculpture of a hand provided a suitable means of expressing forbidden emotions without injury to others or fear of reprisal and was a key step toward successful transference and artistic sublimation. His clay prison seemed to provide both confinement and protection, illustrating his desire for freedom, yet provided security, safety, and a place of shelter from a world that he perceived to be dangerous and unpredictable.

Conclusions

It is my hope that this case report will encourage other art therapists to employ the healing potential of clay with children that have experienced the trauma of sexual abuse. The physical and tactile benefits of clay coupled with a trauma informed psychoanalytical approach to art therapy offers a powerful, efficient model within which to treat the subsequent trauma reactions of CSA.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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