

## IN FOCUS

# PRODUCING MESSY MIXTURES IN ART THERAPY: A Case Study of a Sexually Abused Child

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This article presents a brief introduction of a 6-year-old child followed by a discussion of her artwork—a series of what she described as messy packages produced in art therapy sessions over a 6-week period during an inpatient psychiatric stay. The child repeatedly used art materials to produce a messy mixture that she then spread over a sheet of paper, folded, and ultimately placed in a sealed box for safekeeping. Rather than intervening in or diverting her from this process, the art therapist allowed the child's sense of chaos and provided her an opportunity to address her feelings and to create a "holding form" where confusing and unsettled emotions could be handled and examined.

### Introduction

Abused children are more inclined to communicate their experiences and internal states through the process of making a mess. Those who have been sexually abused will often create messy solutions to symbolically express feelings of being filled up with mess, of being messed up, and of trying to find some way to control and handle the mess (Sagar, 1990). Frequently, these children will create messy solutions to express feelings of being dirty, stained, or polluted.

The production of messy solutions can also be an abused child's attempt to handle and examine chaotic or unsettled emotions where good and bad have become obscured (Sagar, 1990). Aulich (1994) states that the production of messy solutions can be interpreted as a mixture of opposing forces, such as love and hate, noting that often the abused child experiences some good

feelings of being loved as well as bad feelings; as a result, the production of messy solutions may represent the child's confusion and undefined feelings.

### The Setting

The setting was an acute inpatient psychiatric hospital where all children were required to participate in group art therapy. Group membership changed as patients were discharged and new individuals were admitted. The group met bi-weekly; size varied from 3 to 5 patients. The average length of stay for patients ranged from several days to several weeks.

All clients participating for the first time were shown around the art studio and introduced to the various materials, storage spaces, and so on. The studio was stocked with a multitude of materials and had a sink, places to sit, and table space. I employed a non-directive approach, providing participants with a variety of art materials and encouraging them to use the materials according to their own choices and needs.

### The Case of Felicia

Felicia was a 6-year-old female brought to the hospital by her caseworker with complaints of aggressive behavior, uncontrollable tantrums, and behavioral problems which included sexually inappropriate behavior. The child was living with her biological mother and 9-month-old half-brother. Felicia's biological father had abandoned the

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family when she was about 2 years old. Despite her young age, Felicia was often left to care for herself and assumed many maternal responsibilities because of her mother's inadequate skills as a caregiver. The mother's boyfriend had been living in the home until authorities requested that he be removed amidst indications that he sexually abused Felicia.

Felicia regularly attended the art therapy sessions with enthusiasm and excitement. When entering the art studio for the first time, she did not wait to be shown around the room or introduced to the materials, but ran to a nearby shelf and began indiscriminately gathering art materials, thus demonstrating her emotional neediness, as well as her tendency for sudden action. My subsequent efforts to familiarize Felicia with the room and materials were largely thwarted because of her fleeting attention span.

Felicia's eyes widened when she discovered a row of half-gallon jugs filled with various colored paints. She expressed her satisfaction at finding this seemingly inexhaustible amount of supplies, boasting to the group, "This is all mine!" Felicia proceeded to give each jug of paint an affectionate hug and kiss, then she hastily took up a palette and began haphazardly filling it with an assortment of colored paints. I had strong feelings of apprehension about her hit-or-miss technique and the paint spilling over the edges of her tray, but when I tried to ease my trepidation by assisting Felicia with the jugs of paint, she was quick to assert her need to be autonomous. "I can do it myself . . . I don't need any help!"

After her palette was filled with paint, Felicia seized a brush and a sheet of white paper (12" X 18"), inadvertently mixing the various colors as she scooped up the paint with her brush. She became inspired by the result of this accidental effect, and then began to deliberately mix the paints on her palette, gradually blurring the distinct pigments into a brown mixture. When working with paint, it is not uncommon for young children to indiscriminately mix colors into a muddy-looking solution. Often, young children derive kinesthetic pleasure from mixing the colors, as well as satisfaction in their ability to manipulate and change the distinct pigments. Young children may accidentally mix the paints into a brown mixture because they lack the coordination and fine motor control required to manipulate a brush.

But in addition to these maturation factors, Felicia's need to blur the distinct colors into a brown mixture may have reflected her chaotic and unsettled emotions, as well as her inability to uphold clear boundaries because of past transgressions of her own physical boundaries. Her messy mixture may have been an attempt to communicate her opposing feelings of love and hate, or good and bad. Felicia would often make conflicting statements about her mother's boyfriend. One moment she would express her fondness and affection towards him, only to state minutes later that she "hated" him because "he did bad things."

Felicia also expressed confusion about what constituted good behavior and bad behavior. She was reportedly called a "good girl" by her abuser after he secured her promise not to reveal what had happened. Once the secret was exposed, Felicia began to struggle with feelings of shame and guilt, perceiving herself as a "bad girl."

Upon stirring her paints into a muddy solution, Felicia scooped the sludge from her palette and applied it to her paper. She began painting with controlled and deliberate brush strokes, but as time elapsed, she began painting in a progressively less controlled manner. As group members watched Felicia work with her mess, they responded with disgust and apprehension. One said, "Yuck . . . keep that mess away from me . . . I don't want it on me!" Group members moved to the opposite end of the room in an effort to avoid contact with Felicia's mess.

Felicia ultimately dumped the brown mixture from her tray onto her paper, at which point she began manipulating the material with her hands. During this finger-painting process, she stated, "I have to cover up all the white." Felicia was emphatic about blanketing the paper with her mess and would not stop until this was accomplished (Figure 1). Sagar (1990) witnessed similar behavior in sexually-abused children and stated that they are more likely to express internal realities by creating a messy mixture with art materials, which they then smear over a surface.

Once the paper was completely covered with the sludge, Felicia folded it in half and patted it down. As she pressed the paper together, the brown mixture began to ooze from the edges of her paper. This prompted Felicia to double the paper over a second time. During this process she stated, "Don't let it get out . . . see it?" Ultimately, she folded the paper into a small square; yet,

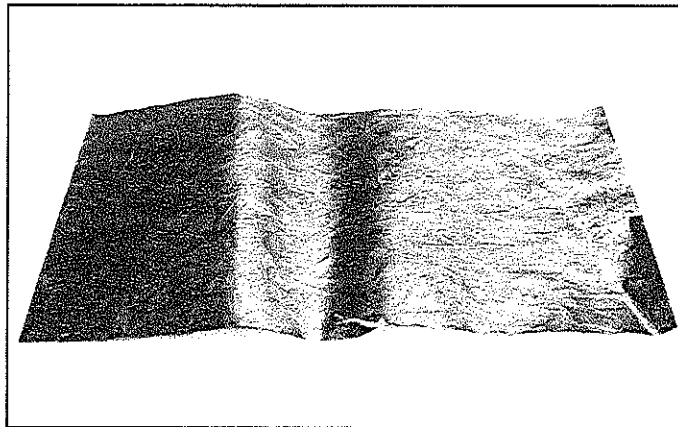


Figure 1

despite her efforts, the brown mixture still managed to seep out from the edges of her paper (Figure 2). I viewed Felicia's folding as an attempt to contain the brown mixture. She may have feared that her "mess" would contaminate her self and her surroundings if it was allowed to escape the boundaries of her paper. Sagar (1990) has witnessed similar behavior in sexually-abused children and asserts that this ritual is the child's attempt to give the messy mixture a "holding form."

Felicia seized a cardboard box from the counter and placed the messy object inside (Figure 3). She then sealed the box shut with masking tape (Figure 4), observing, "Now it can't get out!" Her process and spontaneous associations suggested an urgent need to contain her sense of chaos and mess. The container provided a "holding form" for Felicia's mess and provided a safe place to store it.

Throughout her art therapy sessions, Felicia would make a messy mixture and then spread it over a sheet of paper, fold the paper, and ultimately place it in a sealed box. She would then give these cardboard containers to me for safekeeping. I would acknowledge the importance of the objects and assure Felicia that I would watch over the packages and their messy content. Felicia may have sought my assistance because of her ambivalence towards disposing of her mess. Occasionally Felicia would ask, "Do you still have my boxes?" I would retrieve them for her and she would examine them closely to see if they had been safely stored.

Sagar (1990) has also observed sexually abused children making messy packages which are then given to the therapist for storage or disposal. She maintains that the messy package may represent the "secret" which the child has withheld and is now bestowing onto the

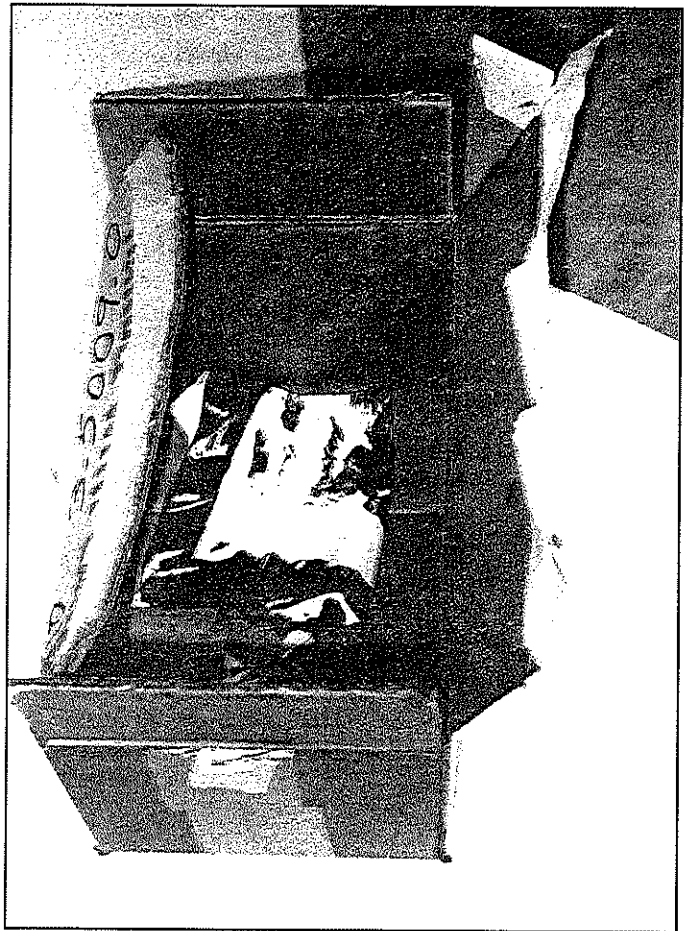


Figure 3

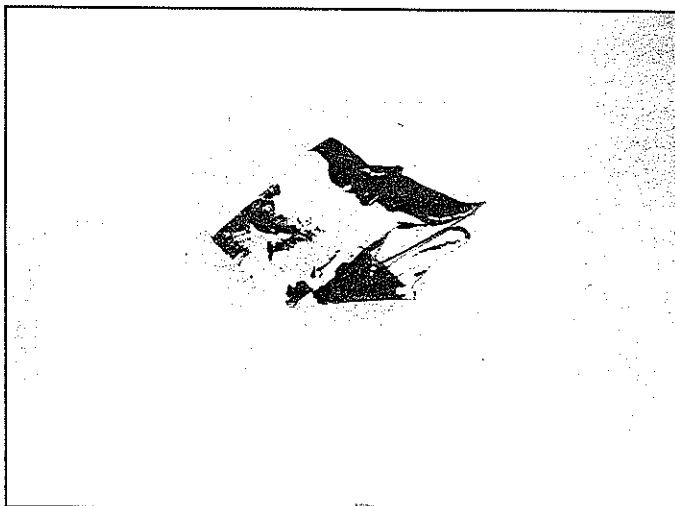


Figure 2

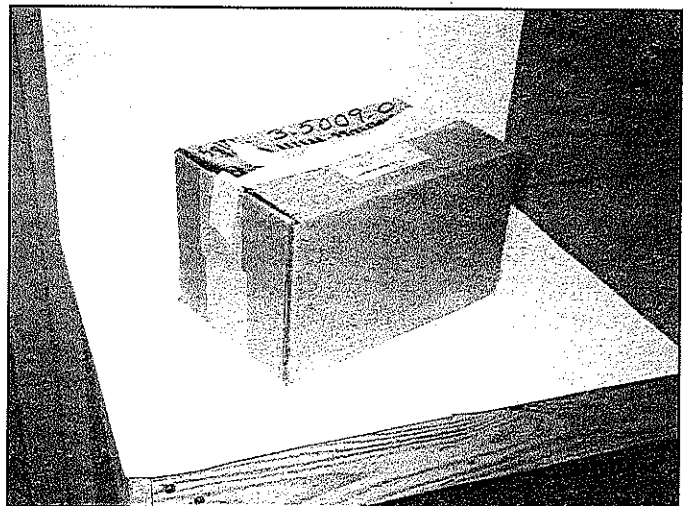


Figure 4

therapist for safekeeping. The child may ask for the package at some later time, whereupon he or she may or may not choose to dispose of it.

Felicia would always close her art therapy sessions by cleaning her skin of the sludge which had coated it during her artmaking. Standing on a stool at the sink, she would vigorously wash her arms and hands with soap, asserting her need to be autonomous and self-reliant by stating, "I can do it myself."

Felicia indiscriminately showered her limbs with water and would become elated as the brown sludge rinsed from her skin and trickled down the drain. She would often announce to the group and me, "Look! It's coming off!" She seemed both relieved and excited to discover that the brown sludge could be removed from her body. Felicia's bathing ritual was obviously used to physically cleanse herself of the brown mixture, yet I believe it also can be interpreted as an attempt to cleanse herself of her chaotic feelings, as well as her sense of feeling dirty.

### Discussion

In this case study, Felicia consistently used artmaking to create messy mixtures that she then spread over a sheet of paper, folded, and ultimately placed in a container for safekeeping. Rather than intervening or diverting this process, I stayed with Felicia's sense of chaos and offered her an opportunity to address her feelings related to mess. During her 6-week hospitalization, Felicia was never able to separate her colors; however, artmaking did provide her the opportunity to handle and examine chaotic or unsettled feelings, as well as to begin communicating her feelings of being messed up or filled with mess inside. She was able to disclose her personal experiences and internal states through the process of making a mess.

Felicia's practice of folding the messy paintings and then depositing them in a sealed box illustrated her need to create a "holding form" where her mess could be

contained and safely stored. However, she was unable to dispose of the old packages of mess, even as she produced new packages, which implies indecisiveness in respect to her mess. She may have experienced some good feelings of being loved during her abuse, as well as bad feelings; consequently, her relationship with her messy packages was ambivalent because of these conflicting feelings. Felicia's bathing ritual was possibly an attempt to act on her desire to cleanse and purify herself of her mess. Felicia's ablution may have provided her a means of washing away her past and returning to a sense of purity and innocence (Cooper, 1978).

Felicia was discharged from the hospital before developing an understanding about her ambivalent feelings and internal chaos. Before leaving the hospital, she abandoned her packages of mess stating, "I don't want 'em . . . you take 'em!" Felicia's need to ultimately discard her packages of mess may have been a part of the termination process. By relinquishing her packages of mess, she may have been trying to cast away or leave behind her chaos, confusion, and unsettled emotions. Her packages of mess may have represented painful emotions and life experiences which she felt were best forgotten.

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