

## Non-directive imagery and art work

Artwork may enable children or young people who are distressed or traumatised to express their inner thoughts and feelings in ways other than words. Just providing a safe space, art materials, time, and encouragement may support them in processing and making sense of these experiences. It can also enable you to make a broader assessment of their needs, concerns and difficulties

***a) Chose a safe space with uninterrupted time wherever possible.***

Ensure the space is appropriate, safe and contained. If you are to work with a young person over some time for a more therapeutic process, then this should ideally be in the same place at the same time every week. Let the child know in advance if there are to be any changes to this wherever possible.

***b) Clarify the boundaries and purpose of the work***

Be clear with the child or young person from the start about what the work is for, i.e. assessment, life story work, therapeutic space etc. Ensure the child understands the confidentiality boundaries of this particular piece of work. Assessment work will offer far less confidentiality than therapeutic work where the privacy of what the young person talks about is very important to them. Ensure that the child understands that any information they say which indicates risk of harm to themselves or others cannot be kept confidential.

***c) Provide a selection of materials e.g. pens, paints, paper, magazines, glue, sparkly bits, etc.***

Find out what materials the child feels most attracted to and attempt to supply as much of these as possible, e.g. lots of black paint, so that the child's self-expression is not constrained by lack of resources.

***d) Give the child time and space to draw, paint, colour, stick etc.***

Make sure the child is clear about time boundaries, how long you have in each session and how long altogether you will be meeting. This provides containment to the therapeutic or assessment relationship formed.

***e) Allow the child to make a mess***

As a worker you may be restricted by your environment but it will be counter-productive if you are worrying about damage to carpets etc if paint is spilled. Provide each of you with protective clothing (e.g. oversized second-hand shirts) and put some tarpaulin over the floor. Make ground rules about the mess being contained within this space. Ensure there is enough clean-up time at the end and involve the child in this.

***f) Be permissive and encouraging in what the child creates***

Many of the children who use social work and care services have been emotionally abused or neglected and have received little encouragement to express themselves or validation for who they are. Ensure your words and body language are encouraging and support them in feeling positive about their creations. Honour their artwork, keeping it safe between sessions. Negotiate with them about who should keep their work at the end (ideally you) and how long for.

***g) Support them in their work rather than interpreting it.***

Interpretation should be avoided as images usually have symbolic value rather than being direct visual representations of experiences. Try these kinds of comments and open questions to help children verbalise their inner experiences and encourage them to continue:

- I see you've scribbled that all in black
- Can you tell me about the little boy there?
- What does the dog think of that?

***h) Attend to the meaning of the ending***

Forming a relationship with you can mean you become very significant to the child during this work. Ensure they have an opportunity to reflect with you on the meaning of the ending to them and that the ending is not rushed.

**Key points to consider**

It is important that you do not step outside the boundaries of your skill and experience. Seek appropriate support and supervision and undertake additional reading or training where it is needed.

Unless you have undertaken additional training you should be wary of using these skills and techniques with very traumatised or distressed children as a primary therapeutic method. Such intensive work should be referred to an art or play therapist (Wickham and West 2002). If you are unsure, consult with a specialist worker such as a therapist, first to find out whether the work you are considering is appropriate and should be carried out by you.

Do not avoid direct communication where it is necessary within your role and to achieve particular tasks. Instead, you should see the play or art forms as "bridges to open up communication with children who are finding it hard to express themselves and engage with others at a direct or verbal level" (Lefevre, 2008, p.130). Always consider whether children might benefit more or additionally from some direct verbal contact about issues of concern to them.