

Art Therapy with Families

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Abstract

Alfred Adler (1930/1978) understood and paid attention to the importance of a family's influence on the development of personality: that children and parents seek significance in the family social system; that all behavior is purposive; and that all family members will create their own meaning for life based on how they perceive what is going on around them. Gender, birth order, and sibling interaction can also play a role in lifestyle development depending on how each person perceives her or his role. Using art with families can help to reflect social and familial relationships, with the possibility of moving the focus of therapy from problem behaviors to healthy interactions based on encouragement and social interest.

Keywords: art therapy, encouragement, families, social interest

Handling life's conflicts in close relationships reflects the family's heritage, systemic process, and patterned responses. Certain styles of coping predominate in different cultures. Family members find it hard to talk about these differences because they are not really aware of them. Patterns of problem behaviors are repeated rather than changed, and part of the solution can be in understanding the history that set up those patterns. Other differences can include the way one behaves toward learned gender roles, age differences, birth order, disability or illness, a death in the family, suicide, the economic situation, and the community environment. All of these differences can influence the family atmosphere, which might include parents' being overprotective, overindulgent, rejecting, authoritarian, permissive, or depressing (Dinkmeyer, McKay, & McKay, 1987; Grunwald & McAbee, 1999). These handy labels for particular styles of relating with one another can help in the process of recognizing the sometimes discouraging attitudes that could be bringing the family into therapy.

Identifying the Family's Lifestyle Pattern

Usually when a family comes to therapy, they want the problems solved more than they want to understand why they happen. Sometimes family therapy has been mandated, and the discouragement is deep. Understanding the problems families are having is the key to understanding their strengths.

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Indeed, many times it is just the good qualities, exaggerated, of family members that get them into trouble (e.g., being too helpful, overly protective, or overly concerned about details). When they can understand how each family member experiences life, the family can begin to deal with its own sense of reality, what the truth is for each of them and how each might wind up in conflict with others.

When working with a family for the first time, the therapist provides a large piece of paper and enough different markers for each family member to have his or her own color. A simple art therapy directive is given: "Please choose a marker and then draw with that marker on the paper in whatever way works for you." The process almost always starts with a general and mostly ambiguous directive before specifics are identified and assessed.

When the family members are finished drawing, they may wonder, "What does it all mean?" The art therapist wants the family to answer that question first: "Well, what would you say to the family who created this drawing?" There are multiple values to phrasing the question this way. The question itself invites externalization, the experience of standing back and observing their work from a distance, which is true for all art therapy experiences. The question is also relational in nature and invites the family to comment on the whole process as well as, perhaps, individual contributions to the art.

After a few minutes of considering the question, one child, a little braver than the others, says, "It's a mess." "It looks scary," says another. And possibly, "It looks cheerful with all the colors"; "Looks like you had fun doing it"; or "I don't see a plan." Sometimes the only answer is, "I don't know," perhaps out of loyalty to the family or perhaps because of safeguarding or even the fear of making a mistake. Sometimes there is no answer at all.

From the first general question, the art therapist seeks to move the conversation to personal experience and, if possible, self-assessment within the process: "What happened for you when you were working on the paper?"

The range of answers is almost limitless, but whatever they are, they cannot help but reflect common family interaction sequences, private logic, and mistaken goals, and sometimes, lifestyle convictions, patterns, and goals. The following statements are examples that illustrate clues to individual and familial processes:

- Mom tried to help me and I didn't like it.
- Dad hardly did anything at all.
- There was no room left for me, but I didn't want to do it anyway.
- (shyly) I wanted Mom to do mine (pause) . . . she is a better artist.
- I liked working together even though it's a mess.
- I wish Grandma were here. She would like doing this project.
- Mark was telling me what to do.

- Ann took all the space.
- Sean scribbled on my drawing.

By following the different colors, the family members and the art therapist can begin to see how the lines reflect sibling positions, individual personality styles, and the roles each person takes; the art therapist and the family also get to see who feels left out, who liked the process, and who did not.

The next question follows naturally from considering what has just happened in the session: How do the creative process and product reflect what is actually going on in their lives individually and as a family at the moment? The family art session reproduces or highlights to a degree the family's everyday pattern of communication/interaction (Kwiatkowska, 1978).

Sometimes, a family attempts to blame or scapegoat the "problem child" for their difficulties. The scapegoat usually does not want to participate or wants to spoil it for the others. Art therapists see such interactions as a "cry for help." Any member of the family can be the scapegoat, but usually it is the one who creates the most trouble and is probably the reason for the family coming to therapy. Of course, not every family has a scapegoat. Families often realize there is something not quite right when one of the members begins to experience and act out symptoms of depression, fear, or anger. In these cases, families just want to learn why there is conflict or distress and what needs to happen to bring peace and/or wellness to the family and its members.

It takes courage to look at one's attitudes and behavior. Not everyone is willing to take responsibility for their part in family distress or struggles; change often comes slowly or, sometimes, not at all.

The Therapeutic Challenge

An art therapist starts by observing the family at work on a drawing, seeking to understand the world the family members have created for themselves. First observations might focus on exaggerated or patterned movement: Does the family member move toward, away from, or against others? It is important to focus on the system and, at the same time, to pay attention to symptoms and the purpose(s) that the symptoms may serve. The family, too, can begin to recognize certain patterns in their behaviors just by the way they interact with one another in the process of drawing. They find out for themselves that some behaviors lead to good feelings while others are discouraging. One parent might be overly involved; another might use praise; one might want to tell others what to do; another might be sarcastic; or still another might express appreciation. All family members will

eventually find their place, or they will struggle in vain on the same piece of big paper.

The reality of cultural differences is hidden among the many models for a family today including, as Carlson, Sperry, and Lewis (1997) mention, "nuclear families, singlehood, non-marital heterosexual and homosexual cohabitation, single parent families, remarried and step families, foster and adoptive families, childless families, multi-adult households" (p. 5), and dual-career families. Behaviors emerge from the way parents and children experience their place in life with parents having the responsibility to be leaders of the system and ultimately to create a nurturing atmosphere (Satir, 1988).

One parent might openly express emotions and want to talk endlessly about a problem; the other might be afraid to reveal feelings and hide under a cloud of silence. One parent might pressure a child to achieve; the other might be more concerned that the children are well behaved and act in a respectful way to people. Some parents like to be strong and stoic; others like to complain. Some use alcohol to cope with stressful situations; others might use work or verbal abuse or even humor when things are not going their way. Sometimes, there is a network of family relatives banding together for support; other families are isolated and cut off from possible support.

Ethnic and cultural values are contextual positions and vantage points similar to birth order in that they are not deterministic but have the ability to affect tremendously how people behave in a family. The strongly held values of those who immigrate to a new host country may be somewhat diminished by the third or fourth generation, especially given an integration of children into a new educational system and the massive amount of choices people have these days (Miranda, Estrada, & Firpo-Jimenez, 2000). The process of multigenerational acculturation can still lead to deep conflict, resentment, and misunderstanding in family relationships along with all the other problems (e.g., prejudice, oppression, or marginalization) the family system may experience from the outside. Some of these models and behaviors will be a challenge to the therapeutic alliance because they will include totally different life experiences from those known to the therapist.

The Adlerian systems theory (holistic, purposive, cognitive, and social) is one that focuses on change as well as different styles of interacting and coping (Bitter, 2009b; Sherman & Dinkmeyer, 1987; Sherman, Oresky, & Rountree, 1991). This takes time. There is a purpose for the patterned behavior of the family, and at first, it may be difficult to understand. Roles are played without awareness, and changing the way one behaves can upset the equilibrium, bringing new problems. "Family defenses are strong and so revealing the conflicts through the art process can be less threatening. The art process, by itself, does not necessarily bring about change" (Kerr, Hoshino, Sutherland, Parashak, & McCarley, 2008, p. 168)—even if the

family recognizes certain unsuccessful behavior patterns. Family members have to be willing to respect each other and to try out new ways of interacting with each other if change is to occur.

The value of the art task is threefold: The process as a diagnostic, interactional, and rehearsal tool; the contents as a means of portraying unconscious and conscious communication; and the product as a lasting evidence of the group's dynamics [so that the family may see for themselves with] the invading device being the art directive. (Landgarten, 1987, p. 5)

The therapist watches carefully for hidden or open "messages" the family members give each other while they are working. The family involved in a drawing task seems to "forget" that the therapist is observing, and, as a result, they reveal behavioral and communication patterns that they might not want the therapist (as an outsider) to see or hear (DeOrnellas, Kottman, & Millican, 1997).

The process of making art together invites participation and encourages a feeling of belonging. The meaning evolves out of the words the family uses to explain both their process and their artwork. These words will come much closer to the truth than anything the therapist might have to offer. Sometimes, the hardest task for the therapist is just waiting in silence so meaning comes from the family. However, the therapist does need to focus on building a relationship with the family by actively listening, validating feelings, and showing an understanding that, given the family belief systems and situations, what the family members are doing in their lives makes sense. These are all facets of encouragement within the therapeutic relationship.

The therapeutic arrangement must be set up so that it is clear that the therapist is not the rescuer but someone who is still invested in the process. The therapist's job is one of joining with the family by paying attention to the individual while still reflecting on the system the family has created. Assigning good intentions to each member (redefining and reframing) and providing affirmation models respect. Humor can sometimes help to reframe a minus situation to a plus. Trusting the family to find solutions to their own problems of interacting with one another helps them learn to take responsibility for their own behavior and facilitates the development of social interest (Kerr et al., 2008).

Assessing the Family System

The family system is organized for the purpose of maintaining itself and to accomplish cognitive/emotional goals that may be conscious or unconscious. These goals for behavior can be thought of on a continuum from highly useful to highly useless, and the family can be conceptualized as a

homeostatic system in which change in one part affects every other part. The therapist looks for both useful and dysfunctional behavior by listening to and observing both the verbal and nonverbal interactions as well as the metaphors in the artwork created by the family. Each member of the family is a participant-observer, and often how family members see each other depends on how they see themselves. Pathological patterns can develop around issues of dependence-independence, pleasing-controlling, comfort-superiority, or domination-submission, sometimes resulting in conflicts where one person feels threatened with a loss of belonging in the family (Bitter, 1993; Sherman & Dinkmeyer, 1987). The therapist will observe the seating and working arrangements, too: The overly dependent child, for example, may not be talking and may be sitting close to an overly protective parent. The therapist will also want to observe and assess the roles the family members assume with each other and the alliances formed (e.g., one parent and child against the rest of the family; one or more of the children against the parents; or a whole family against a child [scapegoat]; Kerr et al., 2008).

Metaphors also offer avenues for understanding the family and its members, and they occur in both verbal and visual form. Attitudes and emotions are evoked through the process of art therapy and can be more easily understood and accepted by family members. Within the therapy session, power is often experienced and recognized as part of the presenting symptom (e.g., depression, defiance, or disobedience). Individual dynamics can include the myths and beliefs that are part of the individual's lifestyle and that also organize or define the system. Mosak's (1977) descriptions of people who need to be "first," "best," "the baby," "the excitement seeker," "the getter," "the martyr," or "the victim" often emerge in the process of art therapy with families. To understand the family lifestyle pattern, the therapist needs to recognize who is being kept busy with what behavior and for what purpose. The art process makes the lifestyle pattern of the family visible and puts the focus on the family rather than the therapist.

Having each family member draw an animal to represent himself or herself and also ones for the different family members in relation to the presenting problem can also be very self-revealing as well as helpful to the others (Oster & Gould, 1987). Animal drawing in relation to presenting problems or complaints, such as a lack of cooperation with what needs to be done around the house, fighting, lying, poor grades, substance abuse, or even a sexually active teenager, tends to lower the intensity of the discussion and to introduce a lighter element into the discussion. As Mozdzierz suggests elsewhere in this journal issue, it often has a *calming* effect. As the family continues to look at the art they have created, they begin to trust the process as one that has personal meaning for them.

Another art experience used to make family dynamics more comprehensible is to have family members create sculptures using clay. Clay forms

are made to represent each of the family members in relation to the presenting problem (Keyes, 1983). Each shape has a voice and can talk to the other shapes. The figures can be moved around and can be thought of as a play produced by the family. The talk can include saying something positive about the other person or can be used to let others know how the person feels in relation to the problem.

Sometimes, the personal form can recognize similar beliefs or behavior patterns with other family forms. It is not uncommon when multiple figures experience the same behavioral patterns for a family secret to be revealed (e.g., substance abuse, physical abuse, or sexual abuse). Hearing and understanding the messages from other family members can encourage new family and member decisions and expand awareness of both past and present family relationships.

The Concept of Resistance

Therapy is designed to overcome resistance, yet cooperation with and within the family is sometimes elusive. It can be that the whole family fights against change. Adlerians view resistance as being both positive and negative. On the positive side, resistance can demonstrate integrity and setting up healthy contact boundaries. But to resist can also mean that one feels powerless or inadequate, and that feeling might lead to giving up and becoming a victim or even rebelling in ways that are unproductive (Sherman & Dinkmeyer, 1987).

It is not necessarily the misalignment of goals but a deeply discouraged family that rigidly resists any insight or change. It may be due to a family's ignoring the pain of an individual family member, which often happens in families troubled with alcoholism or incest. Family members play rigid roles, whether they want to or not, to maintain homeostasis, but this does nothing to support the wellbeing of the family (Linesch, 1993). A safe place must be created so that the extremely high levels of emotion and loss accompanying these behaviors can be addressed through the art therapy process.

In families where there is violence and abuse, the art can help to alter perceptions, modify dysfunctional worldviews, and effect change without requiring insight into the behavior (Riley, 1990). With severe trauma, family members may have no inherent coping skills for surviving the unspeakable loss and grief they are experiencing; they are in a state of psychological imbalance. Especially in crisis intervention, the individual's subjective experience of the event needs to be explored and understood. The use of art is an ideal method to deal with grief and to encourage the family member's inner strength (Linesch, 1993).

Sample Case

The names and circumstances in the following sample case have been altered to protect confidentiality. A family of five comes to the counseling center to deal with a troublesome problem of almost 2 years, increasing in intensity over time, and for which they have found no solution. By this time, the unending disruptive pattern has become part of a circular process in which all parts of the family system interact with and affect each other negatively (Riley, 1990). The key to bringing some relief lies in interrupting and altering the sequence of interactions, but how to do it is the challenge for both the family and the art therapist.

The father, David, is quiet and unassuming; the mother, Ann, is somewhat anxious, seems very discouraged, but wants to get some practical answers; a son, Mark, age 8, seems distressed, on edge, but ready to cooperate; another son, Andrew, age 6, is serious and quiet like the father; and a daughter, Jody, age 4, is mostly playful and wanting to please. Mother initiated coming to therapy because she finds she is constantly taking responsibility for Mark's hurtful behavior toward Andrew, and it has become increasingly difficult for her to maintain order so that the household runs smoothly. In a few brief moments, she tells the art therapist that Mark is constantly finding fault with Andrew's behavior and this goes on in the bedroom that the two boys share; at the breakfast table when Mark complains about the way Andrew is eating his cereal; in the car on the way to school when Mark criticizes the clothes Andrew is wearing or the way he is sitting or even the way he breathes; and in the TV room when there can be no agreement about which program to watch. Andrew responds by not paying attention to Mark; Jody tries to get Mark to stop his constant complaining about Andrew; Mother tries to get the two boys to have fun together and to involve Father; and Father feels it is not his place to interfere but expects peace and quiet when he comes home from work. All agree that it has become an intolerable family problem, but Father would prefer not to be a part of it.

The therapist asks the family, "What thoughts do you have about what is going on and when did this problem start?" Mother replied that Mark's critical attitude and disrespectful behavior toward Andrew started when he was in first grade and that, as time goes on, he gets more obsessed with trying to "fix" Andrew. Mother has tried to restore peace by punishing Mark, by ignoring his remarks, or by "nagging" or isolating him, but finds herself losing patience and becoming discouraged, especially because nothing she does seems to help and the problem is getting worse. She is beginning to doubt her self-worth as a mother. Father thinks Mark wants to control or be the boss of Andrew; Mark says he doesn't know but denies wanting to be Andrew's boss. Andrew shrugs his shoulders, and Jody just smiles. All

three children seem very bright for their ages, but when asked about school, Mark seems overly concerned about doing well and measures himself very closely against his classmates. He is not the least bit interested in sports and thinks that is what most boys want to do.

The art therapist decides to ask the family if they are willing to "draw a picture of everyone in your family, including you, doing something" [at home] (Burns & Kaufman, 1972, p. 43) and then to talk about their work. Jody just wants to color, and the rest agree to follow the drawing directive. The simple line drawings reveal father reading his paper or working on the computer; mother cooking in the kitchen or working in the garden; Mark working on his computer or watching TV; Andrew drawing cartoons or playing with his toys; Jody playing in the sand box or helping mother in the kitchen. Andrew drew himself playing with Mark, with each of them taking turns making up stories to go with the cartoons they were drawing. Andrew drew and talked about himself as the leader of the storytelling game.

At the next therapy session, nothing had changed in the family interactions. Father was absent. The rest of the family was asked to draw what it was like not to have Father at the session. Jody was sad; Mark and Andrew didn't care; and Mother's picture tapped into her unacknowledged anger as she noted the "hole" where her husband was supposed to be and his lack of support/involvement in helping to discipline Mark.

With the agreement of the children, the therapist decided to meet with Ann separately at the next session. At this time, Ann volunteered the information that she was the peacemaker in her family of origin even though she found her efforts to be mostly futile. The therapist wondered what Ann would look like if she continued with this behavior and could she draw herself "as if" she had become that person. Ann didn't like that picture of herself burdened down by a heavy rock, too heavy for her to manage and knowing that she needed help but didn't want to ask for it. At the same time, she recognized how she helped to create distance in her relationship with David by administering to what she perceived as the demands of the children, ignoring both her own needs and time to spend with him. She also knew that she couldn't force David to change his ways. So, what would it take to bring David back into the picture, to make the family "whole" again, and to put an end to Mark's hurtful and disruptive behavior?

At the next session the two boys were asked to draw their favorite room in the house and put themselves into it. Mark drew the bedroom with only himself in it and Andrew's bed by the door; Andrew drew the basement family room where he played with his toys. When talking about their pictures both boys said they wanted a room of their own, and that they didn't like sharing a room, especially sleeping in the same room together. Mark said that Andrew liked to get up early and "mess around," and Andrew said that Mark kept him awake at night by leaving his light on to read.

Was it possible for each boy to have his own room? Mother said that the fourth bedroom was a small guest room and that the room for the boys was made extra large so both boys could have the company of each other. Mother had missed this companionship in her own family of origin and wanted it for her boys. What to do? Andrew asked if he could sleep in the guest room but still play in the big room. Mark did not want to share the big room and wanted to be able to shut the door and keep others out. Eventually, Mother arranged it so that both boys had their own bedrooms. Mark's attitude toward Andrew became less abusive, and verbal attacks on him came less frequently. Andrew still sought out Mark's company, although it had to be done by "appointment." The two boys would then spend time continuing their games of cartooning and making up stories to go with them. They seemed to sincerely enjoy each other's company and creativity and were willing to share some of their work with the therapist. Their stories almost all had to do with banding together against the forces of the outside world. A little while later, Mark got a dog-walking job and wanted Andrew to come along to pick up the waste. Andrew was delighted to be asked but refused to help with "the job" after a couple of days. Mark was still concerned about school but found out that he was one of the top students in his class and that he was well liked by his teacher and peers, thereby diminishing his anxiety and his investment in being "first" in his class and, at the same time, securing his place of belonging.

Now that Mother's perceived "job" of keeping peace just got easier, she had time to take a class that she helped put together on parenting and learned that by being the well-intentioned "Good Parent," she ended up being trapped by Mark's negative feelings and unacceptable behavior (Bitter, 2009a; Dinkmeyer et al., 1987). She was then able to recognize the pattern of her past "making peace" behavior and its consistency. Whenever she found herself wanting to repeat that behavior, she deliberately stopped herself and changed her approach to one of actively listening to the beliefs and feelings of her children and her husband. Weekly family meetings were held, and once Father realized that he was being left out of the decision making, including plans for having fun and setting order, he made it his job to attend. We decided to have one last meeting for the whole family to see how everyone is doing and to encourage family cohesion.

A large paper circle is cut into five equal pie-shaped pieces. Each family member is asked to draw or paint on her or his puzzle piece whatever it is she or he likes best about being a member of this family and/or what happened to make things better in this family. When the pieces are put back together, a metaphor for the relational whole is created. Each member is part of the circle, and together they are a family with multiple perspectives and multiple options for solving problems and living together. Talk revolves around how they have each learned new ways to make their lives less

stressful and more harmonious. Mother likes her "new space" in life and is learning to ask for help; Father likes the peace he has when he comes home and doing things as a family; Mark likes the privacy of his room (and is enjoying school); Andrew likes his new room and special times to play with Mark. Jody puts all the colors together to make a "rainbow" picture.

The therapist reframed (from a minus to a plus) Mark's disruptive and disrespectful behavior: "Could it be that you didn't want to hurt your mother's feelings by wanting your own room?" Even though he had never been aware of the purpose of his behavior, Mark liked the thought that he wanted to be considerate of his mother's wishes, even if it meant putting himself as the target for punishment and upsetting the family.

A year later the therapist received a photo Christmas card with everyone smiling. What was the best thing about art therapy? They all agreed that it was learning to ask themselves and each other the questions: "Who owns the problem?" and "What can we do about it?"

Reorientation and Termination

As family members begin to rehearse and to try on new roles in daily life and within the art therapy process, they begin to change what they are doing with one another and find new ways of relating that feel more satisfying. Another art therapy project that can be useful echoes the first "free" art experience, only this time when a large paper is provided there are different instructions. The art therapist does not want any of the family members to paint anything on the large piece of paper until they have come to an agreement. Tee Dreikurs (1986) gave these instructions for the mural painting:

This time do not paint anything unless you know what you're going to do, how you're going to go about it, and what your goals are. Do not paint at all if you cannot reach agreement. (p. 95)

Reaching an agreement is what takes time. The family members can learn this in their family meetings and in our sessions together as they move from roles of rigidity to ones that are more flexible and adaptable. Once again, their process is transparent. The goals are to come together as a group and to share the responsibility to create something without sacrificing individual uniqueness or integrity. Once this task is completed and everyone feels satisfied, the family is left with visible evidence that they can, in fact, function successfully as a team. The messages they give themselves about this project reflect mastery, cohesion, cooperation, social interest, and hope for the future (Dreikurs, 1986).

Children of all ages find it easy to follow this art directive and like it when they have a voice in the agreement. In fact, the whole family feels this

process brings more unity and beauty than the drawing they made without a plan. Parents and children can learn that they have equal value, that modeling is the best way to teach manners, and that gentle reminders offer hope when there is discouragement. Parents and children can move away from fear, power struggles, and revenge and move toward accepting differences and the ability to get along and have fun with each other. These are the ideals sought when using art therapy with families: The process encourages self-awareness and promotes the feeling of belonging that leads to trust and the development of social interest.

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