

How Creative Art Experiences Can Be Used to Support Young Children and their Outcomes and Well-being

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Literature Review

Some would argue that play not only has one of the largest impacts on children's development, but it is essential for the child to have successful outcomes (Nielsen, 2021). One aspect of play is the use of art and creative art experiences for children. Art is a powerful tool that can be used in a multitude of settings to help with the development of young children and in their wellbeing (Saputri and Yuwono, 2022). Using art as therapy is something that is still relatively new but it incorporates the idea of how impactful play is to children and their development and how art is a way for them express themselves and can be used as a creative outlet when using words might be too hard (Saputri and Yuwono, 2022). This paper will discuss the importance of art as play, what it is, and how it is used in different settings, the benefits of art and art therapy, and some of the challenges to consider.

As stated previously, play is important to the development of children and has a big impact on their outcomes. It supports their cognitive and social development and in their physical health as well (Herrington and Brussoni, 2015). Play can be described as an enjoyable activity that was brought on by the child themselves, is spontaneous and has no end goal (Else, 2014). There are also many types of play where the children might be outside running from creatures they made up in their minds, building tall buildings out of wooden blocks, engaging in a board game, or simply exploring a new environment. Another activity that may seem like a type of play is creative art and would fall in the constructive or sensory play category. Art can be defined as a process of being able to show and develop creativity (Mayar, 2022). Activities in this genre can include drawing, singing, pottery, and making stories (Zaida and Ariyati, 2024). One of the most important aspects of these activities is that the children have the freedom to express themselves and have resources to let their creativity thrive (Mayar, 2022). Art should be seen as another form of play where the child feels motivated to take part in it and not an activity that is forced.

Art is a great way for children and people to express themselves and be creative, it can be a way for people to use their imaginations and explore the environment (Arslan, 2014). However, the past few years, art has been recognized as something more than that. There are many benefits

to art and even art therapy to support the well-being of children. When it is used in early childhood settings, children can learn problem-solving and critical thinking skills (Mayar, 2022). Art can also incorporate other subject areas where children can start to understand mathematical concepts, such as counting and comparing shapes and sizes, or their language development through communication and expressing the meaning behind their art piece (Zaida and Ariyati, 2024). When educators or adults working with children provide these experiences for children, they can introduce them to new cultures and a sense of appreciation for the world. Children can learn to collaborate with others, learn more about themselves, and notice things around them they might not have seen before (Mayar, 2022).

While important in the classroom, it can be used in settings where professionals are helping children who have gone through stressful or difficult experiences. When children have gone through something stressful or have a psychosocial problem, which can be behavioral, emotional, or social, it can impact their ability to perform well in school or in their daily lives. For older children or adolescents, the common form of intervention is meeting with a therapist or using other behavioral therapy strategies. While these methods can also be beneficial for young children, art therapy is another form that can be used (Bosgraaf et al., 2020). The idea of art therapy was brought on by Adrian Hill, an artist from the United Kingdom, in the mid-1900s, who used art as a therapeutic tool in his personal experience of being hospitalized for a long period of time (Martinelli, V. et al. 2025). Over the years, art therapy has been used in healthcare, schools, and in the mental health space to support children and help them cope with their feelings, provide a safe environment for them to express themselves, and relieve stress (Zamelyuk and Mahdysiuk, 2021). A group of researchers conducted studies in the UK and the US on the impact of art on children's development and well-being. They found that children aged 7 who engaged in art experiences and had high creative skills had a low risk of developing depression or another social or behavioral problem in their teenage years. This same study also found that it can be beneficial for children with additional learning needs, who are deaf or have another developmental disability, where art can help reduce the stress or overwhelming emotions they might experience (Fancourt et al., 2023). These art experiences are a way for children to showcase their creativity and might also get the support they need emotionally in a way that is different from what they are used to.

While there are many benefits and evidence supporting the use of art therapy, there are still many challenges or problems that might come with it. One of the challenges is that our society relies so heavily on electronics and the internet that it might make it more difficult for young children who grew up surrounded by screens to want to engage in tangible, hands-on learning activities. In an article describing the challenges of art therapy and using it to support mental health issues, the authors, Yamna Abrar and Asma Majeed express their concern that in their country, mental health and art therapy are not as accepted as they are in other countries and because of this, this field is very small and not accessible to more people (Abrar and Majeed, 2024). This is something that is seen in more places around the world where art therapy is not as common and is something that needs further research so that it can be used effectively in settings such as hospitals and clinics (Martinelli et al., 2025). With any new advancement or new way of thinking, more research needs to be done and greater awareness on the topic so that professionals and the public understand its importance.

Methodological considerations

This section will discuss the methods used for the study. This study will use a mixed methods approach, looking at qualitative data to explore how art can support the development and well-being of young children. The goal of the research is to investigate the outcomes and how children engage in healing through creative art experiences. The study will be looking at children in Wales across two settings, primary schools and healthcare settings. While these two settings are different, they will provide complementary perspectives on how art interventions can be useful in differing environments that support children.

Choosing a sample size for a study is dependent on many factors, such as the purpose of the research, what part of the population can be represented, and the types of data that will be collected. A sample size that is too big might be too overwhelming, and one that is too small may not be representative of the population the researcher hopes to reach (Cohen et al., 2018). The sample for this study is made up of children aged 5-7 years old living in Wales who are experiencing moderate emotional distress, such as anxiety, trauma, grief, or other social-emotional challenges. The sample size will include 30 children, 15 from 5 schools and another 15 from 5 healthcare settings, who fit into the subgroup mentioned earlier. Due to the study's specific focus on young children experiencing emotional or social difficulties, purposive

sampling was employed to select participants who were most relevant to the research question at hand (Nolan et al., 2013). It is also why the researchers decided on this sample size, as this group of children is not representative of all children in Wales (Cohen et al., 2018). This does mean that the sample will not be representative of the whole population of children, but a smaller and more particular group of people, which is why a random sample method was not used.

The researchers will be looking at art-based interventions throughout a 12-week structured art program led by qualified art therapists. The sessions can include a range of possible art techniques such as drawing, painting, collage making, clay or three-dimensional construction, storytelling, or imaginative play. Each session will be about an hour to an hour and forty-five minutes long and take place in the art space within the setting the child is already attending. The researcher will then observe weekly art sessions and document interactions, expressions, and how engaged the children are in the activity. Observations are useful for the researcher to see how the participant behaves in their natural environment (Lambert, 2019). This study will utilize a non-participant observation approach where the researcher is separate from the individuals being served and will not interact or interfere with the preexisting relationships already formed between the therapists, teachers, and children. This is ideal because it will help limit any data that is skewed because of any active involvement by the researcher and any connections they have with the children, and reduce the chance of any biases that can affect the data (Cohen et al., 2018). However, there are drawbacks to this kind of observation. For example, the researcher needs to know what they are going into before the observation. They should be familiar with the context of the group they are going to observe, so they are able to make relevant notes and inferences based on the children in this group. The lack of interactions with the children before the study begins might make this more difficult. Because non-participatory observers typically remain in one spot, it can be difficult to get a full conversation or see an interaction in its entirety. It is also possible that the notes being made have some subjectivity because the observer is seen as an outsider rather than an active participant (Lambert, 2019)

Along with the observations and looking at the art interventions, the researchers will be conducting semi-structured interviews. This style of interviewing can help the researcher make a plan before the interview so they have an idea of what they wish to discuss and prompts to help

guide the conversation (Bell et al., 2024). They will be interviewing the children as well as the parents, guardians, and professionals who work alongside the children. The interviews with the children will look very different compared to the adults. With the children, the researcher can get the data they need verbally, or instead of asking direct questions, they can use age-appropriate techniques such as drawings to express emotion, story mats, or visual prompts to reflect on experiences (Cohen et al., 2018). It is important to consider that when interviewing children, the interviewer is someone they have never interacted with before, which can affect how they respond during the interview. This is an example of the Hawthorne effect. The children might behave differently during the observation or interview when they know they are being observed, especially if it is someone they do not know. This can lead to them being more or less expressive, more willing to answer the questions, or more shy, depending on the child (Lambert, 2019). This can also happen with the adults involved in the study, where the teachers or therapists might change the way they do a lesson, knowing they are a part of a research study. To prevent these things from affecting the data, researchers can be non-intrusive or be discreet when making observations; they should try not to be obnoxious around the children when they are making notes of their actions or behaviors. The use of longitudinal data collection can also be useful in reducing short-term behavioral changes (Cohen et al., 2018). Another challenge might be that the children can be distracted by the items the researcher has brought in to help conduct the interview or by what is going on around them. It can also be difficult for the interviewer to understand what the child means in their response since the interviewer does not have a relationship with them, and getting enough information from the child might be challenging with their short attention spans. With parents and professionals, the interviewer will ask them questions to gain information on the children, observations they have made, changes in mood or behavior, and communication outside of the setting (O'Reilly and Dogra, 2018). When interviewing both the adults and the children, it might be helpful to have shorter interviews so the participant does not get overwhelmed. The Halo effect is something that researchers must also be cautious about. This is when there is a bias based on an individual's appearance, personality, or interests that might benefit the results of the study (Gabrieli et al., 2021). An example of this for this particular study is that those who think art is beneficial for the child's emotional well-being might rate the child's progress more positively than it really is. The person might overestimate a child's behavior, which can affect the responses given throughout the study.

To help mitigate these biases, the researchers can use standardized measures, use objective language when describing children's behaviors or interactions, and gather data from multiple sources (Cohen et al., 2018).

With the advancement of technology, digital and telephone interviews have become increasingly common; however, they also have their benefits and consequences. Smart devices are convenient and easily transportable. It is also more cost-efficient than doing an in-person interview, and it can be done in a setting where both parties are most comfortable. However, there are problems that can come with telephone interviews, such as technological issues with sound or video. It can also be more difficult to pick up on non-verbal cues and body language of the other person through a screen, and there is a risk of potential distractions that can come up on screen during an interview (Cohen et al., 2018). There are also concerns regarding privacy and confidentiality that can come with the use of online modes of interviewing, which should be considered (Ethical Research Involving Children, 2022)

Aside from the data collected during observations, quantitative data can also be collected. The researchers can compare the well-being of the children before and after the art intervention to see any changes in emotional symptoms, peer relationships, and their behaviors at home or in school (Armitage et al., 2023). However, purely quantitative methods are not suitable for this study. Due to the age of the children, it may be more difficult for them to understand complex and standardized measures. The methods used to gather data should be engaging to the children, and asking them to sit and fill out a questionnaire is not only unrealistic but not developmentally appropriate. It is also not possible to see the value of art therapy and how it affects children and their outcomes through a questionnaire, which is why the mixed methods approach is beneficial (Platt, 2016)

This study is an example of how triangulation can be beneficial to ensuring the validity of the data. There are four types of triangulation, which include methodological, data, investigator, and theoretical triangulation (Adams et al., 2015). By utilizing multiple sources as well as a combination of different methods, such as observation, interviews, and questionnaires, this study demonstrates methodological triangulation. There is also a comparison of two settings and an examination of different perspectives from children, parents, and professionals (Roberts-Holmes,

2023). This would be an example of data triangulation where data was collected from multiple sources (Adams et al., 2015).

Ethical Considerations

There are ethical concerns to consider in any type of research, and especially when working with children. The well-being of the participants should be the top priority, and the research should not cause harm or uneasiness. Before the study begins, it is essential for the researchers to gain consent from the participants. This will be in the form of voluntary informed consent in this case. Informed consent involves getting a verbal or written agreement. It can only be given if the people involved are knowledgeable and have an understanding of the research they will be a part of, is voluntary (Ethical Research Involving Children, 2022). Because the research is looking at the outcomes of the children and there are aspects of the study where children are involved, parents, teachers, and the professionals will need to consent if they wish to be a part of the study (British Educational Research Association, 2024). For those below the age of legal consent, they will need to provide assent, which is the agreement of a child (Ethical Research Involving Children, 2025). In this particular study, the researchers are looking at art therapy and working alongside therapists. Informed consent of the participants, in this case, children who are dealing with mental or socioemotional challenges, it can give them a sense of control and can build trust (Flowers and Dawes, 2023). It is important for the researcher to be transparent with all participants about their role in the study. The participants should be informed about how the data will be collected, what data specifically, and where the data from the study will be shared and with whom (British Educational Research Association, 2024). Educating the participants about the study is also a way for the researcher to form a research relationship with them. When the children become familiar with the terms that will be used, this can help build trust in the relationship (Harcourt et al., 2011).

To gain consent, the researcher will provide parents and guardians with details of the study. This can include points such as what art therapy is, how this study will benefit their child, as well as potential risks, and the rights of the participants, including their child. The researcher should also do the same with the children, except using age-appropriate language and explaining to them that they have a choice on whether they want to participate or not. Written consent forms will be collected before the study, and the parents, guardians, and professionals will be provided

with a list of potential risks and also what the children and families might gain from taking part in the study. Along with the written consent form, the researchers will also need to get written or verbal assent from the children. With the nature of the study and how it involves children, this consent and assent will be ongoing, meaning the participants can withdraw at any point (Manti and Licari, 2018).

The top priority is the safety of the children and people involved. Healthcare and social workers are legally required to abide by the duty of care, which promotes the well-being of the individuals in their care. To ensure the safety of the children and people participating in the study, all members of the staff taking part should be made aware of the safeguarding policies, they should know how to recognize signs of abuse, and the appropriate ways to respond (NSPCC Learning, 2023). If an individual has concerns, it is best to contact the university first about the situation, as they have their own policies and guidelines in place for these situations. They require that any research involving children needs to have a Disclosure and Barring Service check that is up to date (The University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2025). Although the researchers will do all they can to ensure the children are safe, there are some risks that still may come up throughout the study. One of those risks is that the children may encounter intentional abuse or maltreatment because of the researcher's lack of practice. This can lead to incompetence and can be due to the researcher not having enough knowledge on the topic. The poor practice might not come from the researchers themselves but from the support staff (Ethical Research Involving Children, 2024). During the sessions, the children might experience emotional distress or feel that they are being pressured to participate, leading to sensitive information being shared. To mitigate these risks, researchers can avoid asking questions that are intrusive or sensitive to the child, pause for breaks when needed, check in with the participant to ensure they are prepared to move on, and having knowledge of child psychology can also be helpful (NSPCC Learning, 2023).

It is also important to consider the potential risks to both the researchers and the university. While conducting the study, the difficult conversations that might arise when speaking to children and their families might be troubling to some (The University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2025). This can be mitigated by providing emotional support or mental health services to ensure the researchers are well enough to go about the study (Department for Education, n.d.).

Researchers can take extra precautions to the potential health and safety risks they might be exposed to while conducting the study. For instance, they can go through a risk assessment process. The researchers should also create a plan for when difficult situations might occur, such as dealing with a participant who acts out from anger or distress. This plan should outline the steps any person on staff should take to protect themselves and others (Department for Education, n.d.). There might be legal risks the researcher might consider that could affect the university as well. Laws such as the GDPR, or the General Data Protection Regulation, and the Data Protection Act 2018 are guidelines the researchers must abide by and should reference those requirements consistently. The GDPR is the framework of data protection in the UK, while the DPA implements the GDPR, and is a more specific set of guidelines regarding data processing and how to handle personal data. Personal data can include race, religion, health history, and political affiliation (Local Government Association, 2018). To help keep this personal information safe and to address any privacy concerns, the University of Wales Trinity Saint David's research ethics and integrity code of practice emphasizes the importance of the GDPR and suggests the use of a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA). This tool can help researchers look at any risks to the privacy of the participants and also provide support in mitigating those risks. This form, once completed, is submitted to the ethics committee for approval (The University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2025). Under the GDPR and DPA 2018, participants have a right to see any information and data the researchers have collected about them. They can also ask that any corrections be made or make note of any inaccuracies. They have the right to remove any personal data about them or object to information being included in the study (Information Commissioner's Office, n.d.). To ensure the research is within the guidelines of the GDPR, the researchers should implement practices to show that they are in compliance and that they are meeting data protection standards such as training the staff on the policies and incorporating impact assessment, ensuring transparency and openness by allowing participants to be apart of the process (MDU, 2024). Other risks to the university include if there were a breach of GDPR or other legislation, risk to the reputation of the university, ethical concerns, and potential harm to participants that might impact future research for the university. These risks can be mitigated through thorough and proper training in safeguarding and child psychology, knowing how to manage difficult situations that might arise, conducting background

checks, gaining appropriate consent, and providing time for reflection and debriefing not only for the child but also for staff (The University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2025).

This study took much care in ensuring that the safety and rights of all participants remained a priority. Gaining consent and assent, highlighting the importance of confidentiality as well as referencing the GDPR, DPA 2018, BERA ethical guidelines, and UWTSD's Ethical Framework, are all components of this study's aim at ensuring that ethical and legal requirements are upheld. Possible risks to participants, the researchers, and the university were mentioned, as well as safeguarding policies. It is essential for all measures of privacy to be taken seriously and with full integrity to minimize the risk of any ethical concerns arising.

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