

# Program Snapshots – Creative therapies via telehealth

Summary of discussion with Berry Street, 10/12/2021

## About

Berry Street's The Wattle Project offers therapeutic and case management support to young people and their families, where an adolescent has used violence in the home. Alongside Family Therapy and EMDR, The Wattle Project offers art therapy as a means of engaging and supporting therapeutic outcomes. Art-making processes may support the expression and contemplation of experiences that are difficult for the young person to put into words. When experiences are externalised by the young person through art making, these experiences can be looked at and spoken about when it feels safe to do so.

## Elements of art therapy

Art therapy supports the expression and contemplation of experiences that can be difficult to put into words. It could be through the process of art making itself or the final product which helps young people externalise their emotions in a safe way. In this program, a therapist may work one on one with the young person, with carers and young people together or with a whole family, to support them to express their experiences of trauma by engaging with the body through sensory means such as drawing, painting, or other mediums. This process of can support discussions about lived experiences, as well as joyful reparative and connecting experiences for families.

Within art therapy the process of making art towards therapeutic outcomes can offer in a number of ways. It may be the process itself that is therapeutic. The product of the art therapy session is a tangible piece of art which the young person has accomplished and able to feel proud of. In this way, the process of art making can boost self-esteem for young people, as making something shifts them into a mindset of being able to do things, and as a result they feel happier and prouder of themselves. At other times art making can be a way to explore certain themes and look at life experiences from a different perspective. For example, if a young person describes a feeling or experience of anger, the therapist might then invite them to draw a picture of 'anger', whether it be imagined as a creature, or depicted in a more abstract form. In this way, art therapy can be a less threatening way to explore emotion and trauma.

## Challenges during COVID-19

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic saw many therapeutic responses forcibly adapt to a telehealth model of delivery. Initially this was a challenge for art therapy as it is primarily a sensory, materials-based relational model of therapy. Working with a young person through a screen can reduce the sensitivity to non-verbal communication (body language, the way the young person uses the art materials, etc.) A particular challenge is that neither the art making process, nor the final artwork, can be seen in person by the art therapist. Usually, viewing the process and the end product is a way that art therapists can explore meaning and promote meaningful reflection. Through the telehealth model, the therapist needs to be more deliberate in demonstrating curiosity and intentionally questioning the process and the work itself. Engaging with art making whilst through the screen also means the young person can take control over how much or how little they share about their artwork, which may be helpful and empowering. Although telehealth has been a challenge for both practitioners and young people engaging with art therapy, new ways of exploring and promoting understanding through art making were developed in order to make creative therapies as accessible to young people as possible.