



Children Draw War

Therapy and Recovery Processes

“Yigal, paint me a face of war
With wrinkles – barbed wire and moles of wilderness;

Yigal, paint me a face of war
As it really is – awful and horrible;

So that we know, if it again suddenly comes,
To defend ourselves with shields of peace”.

(Dalia Weinstein)



"When we draw a picture we provide a vessel for the soul" (Siano, 1998)

Life between routine and war and life's ongoing struggle in the shadow of the threat to one's existence constitute an integral part of reality for children in the North, for children in the South and for Israeli children everywhere.

Over the last two years, Ashalim – JDC Israel and the Education Ministry's Psychological Counseling Service have been recruited, with the support of the Jewish Communities of America, to respond with therapy to the anxieties and hardships of children in the North following the Second Lebanon War, and of children in Sderot and the settlements bordering the Gaza Strip in the wake of continued firing of Qasam rockets. As part of this effort, hundreds of children and youth have received art therapy.

The present exhibition offers a glimpse into the world of these children, as demonstrated during such therapy. This collection of pictures is evidence of life in the shadow of existential threat, of the traumas of the children as well as those of adults. The subjects expressed directly in the figurative pictures leave the observer no room for doubt: the period of the war in the North and the continued firing of Qasam rockets in the South have left a mark of pain, suffering and terrible fear.

Art Therapy

Art therapy begins where words end. The idea of broadening the range of therapeutic options offered to children through art therapy-- in addition to psychological therapy -- grew from a recognition of the need for different forms of expression, those based on the language of art.

From the dawn of civilization, art has been used as a means of expression, of relief and of coping with anxiety and fear. Evidence of this can be found in cave drawings, in the ceremonies and rituals practiced in times of war and in the rituals used to exorcize demons.



Art therapy is based on the assumption that man's thoughts and feelings, which stem from the unconscious, are better expressed through images than through words. Before a child knows how to speak, read or write –he or she draws. Children's art is a language and an integral part of expression everywhere on earth.

Children are drawn to creative activity, the chief aim of which, for the child, is the process of creation itself and not the finished product. The figurative picture serves as a mirror for the events in the child's inner world. The choice of objects, the form of their organization on the page, the size and scale, the misrepresentations and deviations from accepted norms, all constitute an unconscious projection of their problems and difficulties.

Art Therapy in the Wake of War

Children's drawings during and after a war reflect their experiences and fears and their continued attempts to cope with the reality of an ongoing threat to their lives. Art therapy allows traumatic emotions and experiences to be processed and expressed non-verbally. The accessibility of the language of drawing and the unmediated connection between children and creative expression (not necessarily verbal) make an exciting and fascinating therapeutic process possible.

On the one hand, visual creation is distanced; on the other, it provides relief from trauma, offering the creator (the child) control and integrity. It allows a transition from a state of passivity to one of activity in which the child has control over the material, in contrast to his or her helplessness in the face of life's events. The experience of control, absent during wartime, is made possible to a certain extent by acts of creativity.

The use of the different materials -- gouache paints, oil pastels, watercolors, clay and play dough -- is undertaken with the understanding and knowledge of the different therapeutic qualities of the materials. The child's needs and the decision to begin therapeutic intervention provide the impetus for their use.

About the Exhibition

The exhibition has been divided into three parts in order to provide the spectator with a perspective of the process that took place during therapy. To the credit of the children, their creations and the therapists, we were given an exceptional opportunity to be partners in emotional processes and the manner in which they are expressed in artistic work.

Part 1:

Expressions of distress in children's pictures

The imprint of each child's personality can be found in all the stages of creation and in the final creation itself. In this series of pictures, we meet the subjects that threaten to deluge and overwhelm the children: Nasralla, the Katyushas, feelings of anxiety, etc. By means of the pictures, one may see that the feelings of anxiety and dread receive legitimacy and provide a protected place for relief. A mental expanse is produced that gives the children freedom to make changes and reduce anxiety. The result indeed resembles objective reality; however, here, in the child's creation, it is controlled.

Part 2: Processing the trauma, healing and recovery

In this series of drawings, we witness the work done during treatment, whereby, in general, one may see the therapeutic processes through a number of lenses:

A: The use of the space on the page.

At the beginning of the therapeutic process, one may notice that not all of the paper is used; there is more reliance on and adherence to the frame of the page, and sometimes the picture floats in the air, disconnected. Towards the end of the therapeutic process, however, one may see that the page is used in its entirety.

B: The contents that arise in the pictures.

At the beginning of therapy, the content was mainly related to war, such as Katyushas, airplanes and destruction. During the process and at its end, we see more contents

reflecting a return to routine: sky, flowers and birds, items that reflect an emotional experience of adjustment and are better suited to the children's developmental level.

C: The use of color.

At the beginning of therapy, dark colors predominated -- mainly black and red, symbolizing an anxious state. During treatment, brighter, softer and more varied colors appear, reflecting a return to the use of the emotional range in a broader and more varied manner.

Part 3: Strength in spite of it all.

This series of pictures reflects creative expression by means of various materials and techniques. Each work stands on its own and presents different strategies for coping with traumatic events and experiences. The empowerment of the emotional experiences that take place in group art therapy, as well as the impressive product itself, constitute another, different aspect -- an expression of strength.

In the work, one may see the expression of a re-enactment of events, memories, a search for amulets and protective images and also the construction of a safe place.

All of these are evidence of adjustment and of the re-establishment of emotional strength. Meeting these strengths, abilities and emotions, finding creative solutions, flexibility and adjustment -- these are essential components in the building of emotional and spiritual strength.

The children's works were produced as a part of their therapy. Both the children and their parents consented to the presentation of these works in an exhibition. The items that allow for identification were changed to protect the children's privacy.

Recognition of the great importance of exposing the public to the struggles endured by the children and their families during the Second Lebanon War in the North, as well as in Sderot and the settlements bordering the Gaza Strip in the South, the understanding that there are additional tools for coping with recurring traumas and the struggle for strength in spite of it all -- gave birth to the idea of this special collection.

Documentation of the therapeutic processes was done by the art therapists during the period of therapy. We tried to maintain phenomenological observation -- the objective description of the creation and of the therapeutic processes -- and, out of caution, we have been sparing in our interpretive commentary.

We thank the art therapists who agreed to share the process of their fascinating and exciting therapeutic work with us, the children's parents who cooperated, and finally, the children themselves, who opened a window, both exciting and touching, to their emotional world and to the difficult experiences they endured.