

The helpfulness of holistic arts-based group work for developing self-esteem in children and youth living in foster care: Connecting research and practice

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Agenda

- brief introductions of research team
- primer activity - group exercise
- overview of research program
- Creative arts-based methods - group exercises
- Discussion of research process - community/university collaboration
- closing exercise - group activity
- group discussion.

- Group is a creative/expressive arts-based program with the goal of improving self-awareness and self-esteem.
- All of the group processes are in harmony with Kabat-Zinn's definition of mindfulness-based practice
 - Activity that encourages awareness to emerge through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience.

The uniqueness of the group stems in part from a grounding in a holistic understanding of health.

- Spirituality can be understood as a search for meaning and life purpose, & connection with self, others, higher power that is self-defined
- A few studies have reported spirituality as a resiliency factor in helping children cope with abuse
- Children's spiritual beliefs are used to further the development of self-awareness.

An example:

Picture here

“Well I’ve liked wolves and I believe that you always stay here on earth to continue until you get really good...you undo all the mistakes you did in your life. And I believe that before I was a wolf. Wolves were strong...you know how wolves are in a pack...well I’m really strong. I went through a lot but I’ve always come out stronger”.

Group - what works

- Group exercises are basic, short, active & sensory focused, & abstract concepts are concretized.
- Listening skills are focused on first.
- We work in 6-week blocks
- To date, we've facilitated 15, 6-week groups
- No attrition
- 6-weeks is not enough time
- Optimal number of children is four.

“trying to talk over each other all the time...there wasn't competing against each other...it was not too crowded and people were more on task.”

Group Structure

- Primer activity,
- Methods aimed at teaching children how to pay attention, use their imaginations, practice mindfulness, explore feelings, thoughts & behaviors, and recognize & develop strengths,
- Break with healthy snacks,
- Methods have to foster success,
- After break, have some choice in activities,
- Develop activities along the way & use teaching moments.

Research Findings

- Fun!
 - child-care workers and foster parents agree
- Shifts in self-awareness and self-esteem evidenced by examples:
 - -feel happier and more confident
 - -improved familial relationships
 - -control over feelings & choices
 - -talking about feelings more
 - -using imagination & relaxation techniques to achieve goals.

A place for creative-expressive arts group work for children-in-care

- Not everyone who is exposed to a traumatic event will develop PTSD or associated symptoms:
- Our group can help engage children who are reluctant about attending counseling in a helping process (or address a lack of services),
- Develop their resilience and self-esteem so that they can cope better with ongoing stress & loss,
- Can be delivered by a wide variety of helping/health practitioners,
- Act as a bridge for further treatment for those children who need it.

Community/University Research Partnerships

- Opportunity to maximize expertise
- Utilize resources
- & access support for children
- “Train the trainer” approach
- Knowledge transfer and mobilization.

Other benefits & rationales

- Workers and caregivers develop knowledge from and about the children
- Resistant to engage with formal counselling programs.

The agency perspective:

- The group process offers a safe, emotionally warm, responsive and autonomy-encouraging place to explore the self.
- The qualitative nature of this study allows the researchers to hear the 'voice' of the children.
- This study will contribute to information in the change process
 - and further explore approaches which have positive implications for practice.

Some useful links:

- Canadian Society for Spirituality and Social Work www.spiritualityandsocialwork.ca
- *Critical Social Work* journal has had two special issues on spirituality and social work:
<http://www.criticalsocialwork.com/>
- *Currents: New Scholarship in the Human Services* journal has also had a couple of special issues on spirituality:
<http://www.uofcpress.com/journals/currents/>