

Promoting Children’s Emotional and Mental Health in Communities Traumatized by War: The ArtReach Foundation Model

**Bernhard Kempler, Ph.D., Clinical and Developmental Psychologist
Director of Programs, The ArtReach Foundation**

The traumatic effects of war are often visited upon children with particular severity and destructiveness. A child may personally be the victim of physical violence and injury, or she may witness violence being perpetrated on others. Parents, siblings, and other important people may be killed, injured, or may disappear from his life without explanation. Chronic fear, insecurity, and chaos may result in emotional trauma, loss of faith in the future, and loss of trust in those who previously were his caretakers. Even after the shooting stops the child will be dealing with the grief, trauma, and demoralization of the grown ups around him. At precisely the time when these children may need special care and assistance adults and social institutions may be least able to come to their help.

The ArtReach Mission

The mission of The ArtReach Foundation is to help children in worn torn communities to heal, to regain faith and hope, and to get back on the path of normal growth and development. The Foundation goes to where the children are in worn torn countries, which in most cases is the schools. We introduce into the classrooms activities and processes derived from group therapy, and art and drama therapy. Our professional staff conducts workshops using art and drama therapeutic methods directly with children. We then proceed to the training of teachers in these concepts and methods. Our final step is to train selected and talented teachers to become trainers for other teachers. We continue to supervise and support these trainers until they are able to continue the work on their own.

The ArtReach Model

The work of the ArtReach Foundation has from the beginning been based on the assumption that creative artistic, imaginative, and self-expressive activities are emotionally healing and promote positive growth and development. This assumption is well founded in concepts and observations of psychologists, educators, and specialists in human development. Drawing, painting, and dramatic play are intrinsically healing. We believe these experiences are particularly helpful to individuals who have experienced extraordinary difficulties and challenges, and whose sense of the stability and rightness of their world and their social structures has been severely damaged. Playful, engaging, and imaginative processes within the context of safe and supportive relationships with peers and adults offer children an effective opportunity of retuning to a path of normal and healthy development.

During the five years that the Foundation has been working in Bosnia/Herzegovina we have refined and further developed our understanding of how best to achieve our mission. We have realized that we have not only been working with individual children who have been hurt but with traumatized and severely disrupted whole communities. We have seen that our workshops have been extremely meaningful and healing for teachers. After personally participating in our workshops teachers have said that these were "life changing" experiences. As a result they are better able to sensitively apply our methods to children in their classrooms. A direct outgrowth of the realization that we are working with damaged communities is a greater emphasis in our work on the emotional and interpersonal environment in the classroom. We now stress and teach methods of creating a safe and supportive classroom community, one that encourages and enables mutual respect, good listening, sharing, and meaningful self expression.

The ArtReach model is an integration of group dynamics, art therapy and drama therapy. The art and drama components are seen as functions of the imagination. Each of these components makes its particular contribution to the overall efficacy of the model.

The Imagination

The gift of the imagination is an essential part of our human mental makeup. Our minds automatically generate images and fantasies as, for example, in our dreams. Far from being a useless activity the imagination is a way of grasping and understanding both external reality and our internal subjective world. Very often we are not able to grasp or resolve difficulties with our most advanced mental functions, such as rational, conceptual thought and problem solving. Instead, the first attempts emerge as images that capture feelings and the earliest glimmers of understanding. When we take our imagination seriously and give it concrete expression we encourage and set into motion a process of understanding and of integrating even the most difficult and problematic experiences.

Art Therapy

The basic methods of art therapy can be applied to a wide range of psychological and emotional needs. When a child sits quietly looking at a blank sheet of paper and a set of colored pencils or paints he or she is pulled into an internal world of feelings, concerns, wishes, and fears. Every choice he makes--color, placement, pressure on the paper, controlled vs. free flowing line, etc.-- expresses personally significant issues and challenges. As the child draws he is externalizing and giving form to these concerns. The very act of creating a drawing or painting gives direction to inner tensions. But it may also lead to greater awareness of deep inner concerns. If the child is working with an experienced art therapist his initial markings may be extended to a more full fledged process of healing, growth, and problem resolution.

Drama Therapy

While art activities orient a child towards his internal and private world dramatic activities encourage the energizing and spontaneous interaction with others. Dramatic enactment is similar to dramatic play of children. It involves role playing, the creation of plots and their resolution, expression of feeling, and spontaneous dialogue. By engaging not as oneself but as an imagined or assigned other the child can safely experience a wide range of feelings, attitudes, and actions that he may not have access to within the scope of his own identity. Since everyone knows that the action has no serious consequences there is room for experimentation and risk taking. In the drama a child can produce alternative and more desirable, even healing outcomes, for prior experiences which may have remained unresolved or been traumatic. With the guidance of an experienced drama therapist the actor may experience cathartic expression of emotions, discover solutions to certain dilemmas, and feel generally released and empowered.

Group Process

The free play of the imagination, the giving form to deep feelings and concerns through art, and the freedom and broad range of experiences engendered in drama are all enhanced and made more meaningful when they occur within the context of a safe, supportive and sensitive community. To create this atmosphere the ArtReach model makes use of principles from group therapy. These include the respect for every individual, the importance of everyone being heard and acknowledged, the welcoming of diversity of feelings, opinions, and attitudes, and protecting the group from destructive interactions. The group leader encourages mutual empathy and direct interpersonal communication. The ArtReach staff members make use of these principles in leading art and drama groups, and they model and teach these principles when they train new ArtReach trainers.

An ArtReach Five Day Workshop

This workshop is, with some modification, conducted with either children or adults.

Each day starts with the leader encouraging participants to share how they feel as they begin the day. What do they expect from the workshop? Do they have any fears or concerns? Is there anything on their minds that draws their attention away? These personal expressions are acknowledged and accepted with empathy and without judgment or criticism.

Each workshop day is divided into a morning session and an afternoon session. The morning is devoted to art therapy exercises and the afternoon is devoted to drama therapy exercises. The afternoon drama exercises pick up on the themes and concerns that have emerged in the morning session. Throughout the day the leader may take time to invite comments, reflections, sharing of feelings and ideas that emerge from the activities.

Each of the five days has a guiding theme. These themes have a definite sequence that reflects a natural process of growth through the meeting and dealing with challenges. These are the themes:

Day 1. Creating a safe and supportive environment that promotes creative exploration and expression.

Day 2. Gathering my/our resources. What supports me, strengthens me, encourages me? What and who adds positively to my life?

Day 3. What troubles me and frightens me? What creates a negative and disturbing element in my life? What experiences can I not overcome, are too much for me?

Day 4. What do I hope for, what is possible for me? What obstacles stand in my way? Who can help me, show me the way?

Day 5. The open moment: What have I discovered and gained? How can I give to and assist others?

The Impact of ArtReach Workshops

The consistent feedback we have received from participants in these workshops is that they have had a positive effect on their personal lives and influenced their approach to working with children in the classroom. Teachers are more aware of children's emotional needs and feel more confident about introducing art and drama activities in their classrooms. Some teachers have created art and drama exercises that touch directly upon the problems of violence, loss of parents, siblings, and friends, being displaced, exploring feelings of fear and grief.