

A sense-able approach to art therapy: Promoting engagement for a child with developmental difficulties

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Abstract

This article discusses the impacts of an art therapy intervention provided for a child with developmental difficulties. Qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection were utilised in the case study, including pre- and post-testing, interviews and therapist observations. The participant attended eight art therapy sessions, in which a specific balance of sensory input, provided through the therapist's management of art materials and utilisation of physical environment, supported the child's engagement in art therapy. This in turn led to positive therapeutic outcomes regarding the child's engagement at home and school, including improvements in attention and concentration, prosocial behaviour, emotional regulation and less defiant behaviour.

Keywords

Art therapy, developmental difficulties, children, engagement, sensory

Introduction

The ability to engage with the world around us is an important component in living a meaningful and connected life (Reid, 2008). For children with developmental difficulties, an inability to accurately receive, respond to and act on information from the surrounding environment can lead to poor engagement across various areas of their lives, which can have both immediate and pervasive long-term effects on their abilities, opportunities and well-being (Chiarello, Palisano, Bartlett & Westcott McCoy, 2011; Cummings, Kaminski & Merrell, 2008; McCartney & Phillips, 2005).

Art therapy has been effective in promoting behaviour and responses that assist effective engagement (Isis, Bush, Siegel & Ventura, 2010; Reid, 2008). However, for this client group, the integration of an expressive and a physical component to treatment may result in better therapeutic outcomes (Kearns, 2004). Given the supporting evidence for using sensory interventions with children with developmental difficulties, approaching art therapy with a

sensory focus may be a holistic way to address the experiences and support the engagement of these children (Kinnealey, 1998; Miller-Kuhaneck, Henry, Glennon, & Mu, 2007).

The primary research question for this study was: Will tailoring the sensory input provided in an individual art therapy intervention promote engagement for a child with developmental difficulties? This research aimed to assess whether providing specific sensory input within an art therapy intervention would improve the engagement of a child with developmental difficulties, both in the art therapy intervention itself and within the wider context of her life.

Literature review

Art therapy

Art therapy is the use of art-making within a professional therapeutic relationship (Edwards, 2004). The power of art therapy is in its capacity to utilise the nonverbal processes of art-making to help people express and integrate their life experiences (Malchiodi, 1998).