

Book review

Art therapy in the early years: Therapeutic interventions with infants, toddlers and their families

Edited by Julia Meyerowitz-Katz and Dean Reddick

Routledge, London and New York, 2017

(ISBN 978-1-38-81477-6 (pbk))

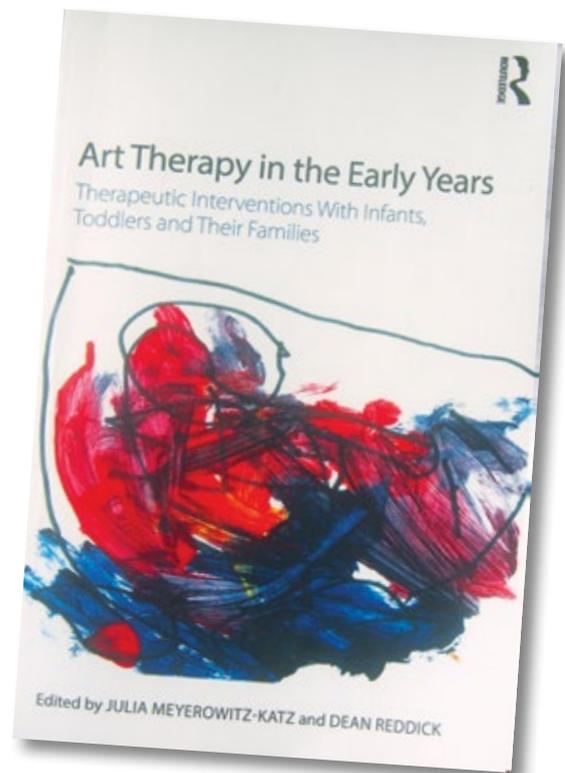
Reviewed by Jo Kelly

Art therapy in the early years is a significant book, not just for art therapists, but for all therapists who work with infants, toddlers and their families. This thoughtful text is psychoanalytically informed, sensitively written, and, with its careful analysis, provides a valuable exploration of the mental health needs of the very young. Although it specifically addresses the subject of art therapy, professionals such as nursery nurses, early-years teachers, health visitors and family case workers, as well as counsellors and psychologists, will find this book relevant to their work.

Infant mental health is a developing area of interest and research. As Caroline Case (a leading psychoanalytically trained art therapist) notes in the Foreword, recent research in the area of neuroscience shows the long-term effects of adverse circumstances for infants and young children, which makes this text of particular significance.

The book deals with a range of settings, including children in care, mental health clinics, hospitals, preschools and early-intervention contexts. With contributions from Australia, the UK, Spain and Mexico, it illustrates similarities and differences across diverse cultural contexts. The writing is powerful, and movingly explores the intricacies of therapeutic work, giving voice to the therapist's anguish of helplessness and reiterating the importance of supervision. The authors write honestly about countertransference, which makes this text valuable for trainees and students.

In their Introduction, editors Meyerowitz-Katz and Reddick explain the emergence and rationale of the book and its division into three sections: individual art therapy, parent-child dyad and



family art therapy, and group art therapy. This triadic structure means that the book can be read according to a context or the practitioner's interest, and each section reiterates the adaptive possibilities inherent in art psychotherapy, emotional integration and development.

The four chapters of Part 1 describe individual art therapy with infants and toddlers. Reddick's case study of working with a 3-year-old twin, traumatised by medical procedures as a result of his premature birth, gives an example of the complexity of developmental issues and the importance of long-term involvement in therapy. The trauma of the child's early experiences, expressed in play, is sensitively and tenderly conveyed. The black-and-white imagery, with the zigs and zags of beginning writing, is symbolically expressive of his oral aggression. Reddick concludes the chapter with a poignant postscript, in which he articulates the importance

of his role as a container, able to receive the child's communications.

The chapters of Part 2 discuss family and dyad art therapy with infants, toddlers and their parents. Hosea's chapter, 'Amazing mess', describes a painting group set up in partnership with Sure Start and a child and adolescent mental health service to strengthen mother-infant relationships. The background information that Hosea provides illustrates the importance of early intervention in the long-term nature of the concept, design, theoretical underpinnings and implementation of evidence-based programmes. One aim of the painting group is to bring parents' reflective capacities into play when interacting with their infants. Hosea argues that engaging the art-making process plays a large part in this. The chapter shows the central importance of trust, and how building it takes time, commitment and sensitivity. With attachment theories (Bion, 1962) at the heart of the theoretical underpinning, the group space and activities act as a 'container' for messy feelings. The boundaries of time, place and ritual support parents as they relax and explore their own inner resources. The use of technology to record the session and play it back to the group adds an interesting and valuable extra dimension of reflection and learning. The vignettes described in the chapter highlight the delicate and complex nature of the mother-infant dyadic relationship, and Hosea's commentary is most helpful and educative for the reader.

Part 3 of the book discusses group art therapy with infants and toddlers. Rayment's chapter, 'Side-by-side: An early years' art therapy group with a parallel therapeutic parent support group', describes clinical material from group processes and how outcomes are measured. The context here is broad, with an assortment of Anglo and European backgrounds, a range of Jewish religious observance, and a diverse socioeconomic demographic. In addition, various parental challenges are described, such as family breakdown, depression, illness and bereavement, illustrating the complexity of group work. The art therapy group is already well established, and the chapter illustrates the benefits of a multi-disciplinary approach, with referrals originating from other professionals concerned about emotional well-being of young children aged around 2 to 3½ years. Rayment documents

the initial assessment and criteria for inclusion of the participants. She comments on the art therapy space and the importance of containment rituals around separation and collection of the children from their caregivers. Rayment does not skirt around the challenges of overlapping roles when working with the children and providing the therapeutic support needed by the parents; she also discloses her own feelings of being overwhelmed by the behaviour of one of the children. These acknowledged challenges reflect the complicated and layered nature of therapeutic work, as well as the privilege of working in this developing area of practice.

Art therapy in the early years is readable for most audiences, with tenderly written chapters and descriptive narratives among its many strengths. Its cross-cultural contexts point to the universality of creative work, yet it also reveals the uniqueness of art therapy, emphasising the significance of the role of the materials and the created imagery, and the importance of the relationships and processes involved. As Case argues, this book will put art psychotherapy "on the map" with other therapists who traditionally work with this population.

Reference

Bion, W. (1962). *Learning from experience*. London: Heinemann Medical.

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AUSTRALIAN AND NEW ZEALAND JOURNAL OF ARTS THERAPY

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Published by Australian and New Zealand Arts Therapy Association

ABN 63 072 954 388

PO Box 303, Glebe, NSW 2037, Australia

www.anzata.org

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ISSN: 1833-9948

Design and production Vic Šegedin

Printing Tender Print, Geelong, VIC, Australia