

Overview

WHAT IS A CLAY SCULPTURE EXERCISE?

This is a projective, art-based therapeutic activity that places the feelings of a child onto an external object and allows children to express their feelings through that object.

The sculpture acts as a concrete representation of the child's inner feelings and allows them to utilize the creative arts as a forum for expression while also having a three-dimensional, tangible representation of their therapeutic experience.

Source of Activity: Lowenstein, L. (Ed.). (2010). Favorite Therapeutic Activities for Children, Adolescents, and Families. Toronto: Champion Press.

TIPS & SUGGESTIONS

- Make your own sculpture as the child works so as to both be engaged in activity
- Colors may represent emotions, however do not share this with child until the end

RATIONALE

- Tactile, highly sensory medium
- Somatosensory qualities of touch and physicality
- Perceptual and decision-making responses that involve complex coordination of different cortical regions of the brain
- Self-soothing characteristics of clay enhance self-regulation through smoothing, pounding, building and shaping



Key Points

MODALITY

Individual Therapy

GOALS & PURPOSE

- Establish a positive and open therapeutic environment
- Verbally identify and explain feelings
- Identify themes to be explored together in later sessions
- Increase self-awareness

MATERIALS

- Colored Clay or Play-Doh
- Paper
- Pencil or pen

RELEVANT CLINICAL GROUPS

- The ideal age range for this activity would be children and adolescents aged 3 - 13. Depending on the child's level of interest in art, a clinician may consider using the activity with older teens as well.

EVIDENCE BASED STATS

- Clay Art Therapy sessions were more effective than the nondirective Visual Art sessions in reduction of depression and improvement of daily functioning, general mental health, a sense of well-being, and alexithymia.

Source: Nan, J. K. M, & Ho. R. T.H. (2017). Effects of clay and art therapy on outpatients with major depressive disorder: A randomized controlled trial. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 217, 237-245.

Clay Sculptures as a Therapeutic Technique in Working with Children



A GUIDE FOR MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

BY LEILA PIRNIA

Cultural Considerations

- Clay is a universal medium that can transcend culture, socio-economic levels, race, gender, and other societal boundaries. Therefore, this exercise can be useful across the board with a wide variety of children and adolescents.
- Clay and PlayDoh are cheap and easy to obtain, making them useful in a wide variety of settings.
- This activity could be used in a telehealth setting if the parents of the child are given advance notice to have clay on hand.



When This Technique is Most Useful

- In the early stages of therapy, when children often don't feel comfortable or don't know how to express their emotions
- When children need time to establish therapeutic rapport and trust
- When the therapist believes the child needs a safe way to tell the practitioner some of the key themes that will be present in sessions.

Directions

- Ask the child to build a sculpture that tells something about: who the child is, what they like/dislike, or something they want you to know about them
- Once the sculpture is complete, ask the questions below, and write down responses
- Child does not yet know they are creating a poem so the language they choose should be honored but can be embellished by using poetic license
 - a. What do you want to call this (title)?
 - b. Ask what feeling each color represents and make each answer another line of the poem.
 - c. Regardless of whether it is a person or thing, ask what it would say to grandparents, best friend (or anyone else in its life).
 - i. Reinforce that whatever it has to say is okay because this sculpture can say what it feels without having to worry about other people's reactions
 - d. What is the sculpture's favorite food
 - e. What/who does it like and not like? Why?
 - f. What does it want the world to know about it?
 - g. Other relevant questions based on item
 - h. (Repeat title at the bottom of the poem)
- Write the title at the top and repeat it at the bottom.
- Be creative in how the poem is visually created and only tell the child he/she has written a poem at the end of the exercise.
- Read the poem back to the child and watch for their reactions.
- The child can keep the sculpture that inspired the poem.

Learn More

Elbrecht, C. (2015). The Clay Field and developmental trauma in children. In C. Malchiodi (Ed.), *Creative Interventions with Traumatized Children* (pp. 191-211). New York: Guilford Press.

Meighan, J. (2021). *The therapeutic benefits of clay in play therapy*. London, England. Self-published. dramastartbooks.com

Sherwood, P. (2010). *The Healing Art of Clay Therapy*. Melbourne: Acer Press.

Sholt, M. & Gavron, T. (2006). Therapeutic Qualities of Clay-work in Art Therapy and Psychotherapy: A Review. *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*, 23 (2) pp.66-72. AATA, Inc.

Weitzman, S. (2007). *7 essential skills to teach children*. Belleville, ON: Self-published.