

Spotlight: Art Therapy

Jennifer Bassin at The Hospital for Sick Children



Art Therapy

At The Hospital for Sick Children (SickKids) in Toronto, art therapy has been a part of the treatment regimen for psychiatric patients for some time, and has recently been expanded to include medical patients. This new art therapy program is funded entirely by donors.

Jennifer Bassin is an art therapist at SickKids. Her background includes a Master's degree in counseling and a background in psychology. She doesn't consider herself an artist; rather, she considers art and the making of art as a tool that allows children to address difficult challenges in a controlled way.

Therapeutic 3Doodling

Jennifer's young patients frequently grapple with illnesses that the adults around them scarcely understand. Dealing with the complex range of feeling and emotion that these illnesses entail is no easy task. Jennifer's ultimate goal is to get her patients to talk about their illness and, in that way, begin the process of facing their fears.

Jennifer relies upon an extensive range of traditional artistic tools to engage her patients, including paints, crayons, and various types of paper. When she meets with her clients, she spreads the entire array before them and encourages them to play with whatever looks most inspiring.

But some of Jennifer's patients "don't like art" or don't consider themselves to be artistic. For these patients, traditional art supplies can be a barrier to self-expression. The 3Doodler is viewed as more of a high-tech gadget than an art tool, and so is a welcome sight in the eyes of these patients. They say it's more modern, more advanced, "cooler". Rather than guiding her patients using stencils or a photo, Jennifer gives her patients free rein to explore what the 3Doodler can do. While the initial result is usually a simple blob of extruded plastic, Jennifer reports that her patients' facility with the 3Doodler increases rapidly.

All of this free-range play has a purpose. As the patient becomes more comfortable bringing her ideas to life using the 3Doodler, Jennifer will broach the subject of the illness, usually by asking: "can you create what you think the illness in your body looks like?" In the case of a disease like cancer that has a physical manifestation that is three-dimensional, patients will often revert to something that looks a lot like their first creation — a blob. While simple, there's a lot more to this than initially meets the eye.

A simple blob such as that will form the basis of a conversation where Jennifer and her patient will explore what her 3Doodled creation means to her, why it's shaped and colored the way it is, how

*Jennifer Bassin:
"Art therapy is taking the language children already speak and meeting them at that level. You don't have to be good at art to participate in art therapy. It doesn't have to be about the painting or about the drawing. It's more about finding something they enjoy that we can use as a tool to explore how they're feeling."*

she felt while she was making it. Putting a 3Doodler into their hands allows these brave young patients to wield control over their own representation of their illness, and thus gain a greater level of control over their efforts to deal with it.

As Jennifer has noted: "When you create something outside of you, you can really treat it like it's at a distance, and it makes it safer for us to explore a little bit."

Additional Resources

- **Donations for SickKids Foundation:** <http://www.sickkidsfoundation.com/donate>
- Canadian Art Therapy Association: <http://canadianarttherapy.org/>
- American Art Therapy Association: <http://www.arttherapy.org/>
- SickKids Creative Arts Therapy: <http://www.sickkids.ca/ProgramsandServices/Creative-Arts-Therapy/Creative-Arts-Therapy.html>
- SickKids Foundation: <http://www.sickkidsfoundation.com/>
- "Sick Kids Hospital art therapy program helps children express themselves"
http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2014/09/01/sick_kids_hospital_art_therapy_program_helps_children_express_themselves.html