

## Arts in health: Promoting the health and wellbeing of young care leavers

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### Introduction

Research demonstrates that young people who have been in care have a greater likelihood of becoming parents themselves at a young age, and that their children are more likely to be taken into care (Chambers et al., 2002). In addition to this, becoming parents themselves is likely to re-awaken the abuses and deprivations of their own childhood. This group of vulnerable young people may be helped by art therapy. The British Association of Art Therapists (BAAT) defines art therapy as *a form of psychotherapy that uses art media primary mode of communication* (BAAT, 2009). Young people who take part in art therapy need not have any skill in art. The creative arts process helps the young person to effect change and growth on a personal level through the use of art materials in a safe and facilitating environment. Art therapists are also aware of how body language and the manner of relating to the therapist and other group members express the state of mind. For example, anxiety can be expressed through finding it difficult to take off a jacket or turn off a mobile phone.

The use of interventions such as art therapy is further enhanced when one looks at the research into the field of neurobiology. Neurobiology looks at how the brain develops, and also at how early trauma can be repaired. Schore (2003) believes that the orbital frontal cortex of the brain is the key area involved in both infant attachment and emotional regulation. An early relationship with an emotionally attuned primary care-giver able to regulate the baby's physical and emotional state provides a growth-promoting environment for the developing front orbital cortex. The converse is also true, insofar as an unresponsive or abusive early care-giver can inhibit the brain's maturational process. Attachment bond formation in the first three years of life is hugely important for later personality development, social adjustment and personal happiness. As Schore states

The cumulative effects of these early interactions set up an internal sense of security and resilience that comes from the intuitive knowledge that one can regulate the flows and shifts of one's emotional states either by one's own coping capacities or within a relationship with others (Schorer, 2003, p.19).

The emerging understanding of how the brain develops suggests that some of the more creative therapies may help the young person to tap into resources that are otherwise unavailable to them, and to use their new-found knowledge and understanding to repair some of the damage done in their early childhood.

Being aware of these areas of research demonstrates how essential it is to support care leavers during pregnancy and in the early stages of motherhood if they are to find the resources required to parent their babies successfully. The need to nurture the nurturers is all important. This became apparent to one of the authors during her experiences as an art tutor in H.M.P. Barlinnie for eight years. It became evident to her that the most violent young men had almost all been put into care at an early age, and quite often had been the only one excluded from their family, with other siblings being cared for by extended family. Twenty years later they still nursed angry feelings, particularly against their mother. This anger became projected onto female partners and their own children. It made the therapist realise that if appropriate therapeutic intervention work had begun at the time of the trauma or perhaps at some point during their care experience, these men may have been spared a lifetime of unresolved rage and destructive ways of relating to self and others. This paper will look at one project in which art therapy was used with young care leavers.

### **Arts in the City**

*Arts in the City* began in 2002 and was originally a one-year project. The project was created as the result of a working partnership created between The Big Step, a thematic Social Inclusion Partnership, Glasgow City Council Social Work Services and Glasgow City Council Culture and Leisure Services (now Culture and Sport Glasgow). The aim of the project was to address the fact that care leavers had been denied access to the arts and its therapeutic advantages through having had disrupted schooling and lack of parental support and consistency of home address. *Arts in the City* hoped to offer a second chance for young care leavers to address issues that may prevent the development of healthy bonding and attachment to their children. Another objective of the project was to help care leavers develop their social networks through increased participation in the arts in Glasgow. In addition to removing barriers to accessing and participating in the Arts, the project sought to achieve outcomes for young people in relation to their mental health by increasing confidence and self-esteem as they developed skills in art activities.

The programme was designed and developed with the particular needs of looked-after children and care leavers in mind. During the first year, a programme ran which offered drama, video production and photography and a series of visits to galleries and theatres. Programmed in six-week blocks of activity, it needed to be flexible enough to allow young people to dip in and out of activities. Each block was designed to end with a public exhibition, to celebrate their work and encourage future participation. Removing barriers to access was at the heart of the programme and though many young people did engage with the project, it also highlighted reasons why others did not take part. In particular, care leavers who were young parents identified the lack of a crèche as being one reason for being unable to participate in the arts activities on offer.

### **Working with care leavers who are young parents**

We originally sought funding to provide crèche facilities to enable care leavers who were also young parents to access *Arts in the City*. The funding provider (Camelot) suggested that we should include parenting skills as part of the funding bid. This would enable a group who had expressed interest but who were traditionally hard to engage, to take part. This reflected the original approach of *Arts in the City*, with the young people's voices being heard in the changing focus of the programme.

With funding secured for three years, *Arts in the City* started to develop its Arts and Parenting Programme. After several false starts, the service called *Cre8* was born.

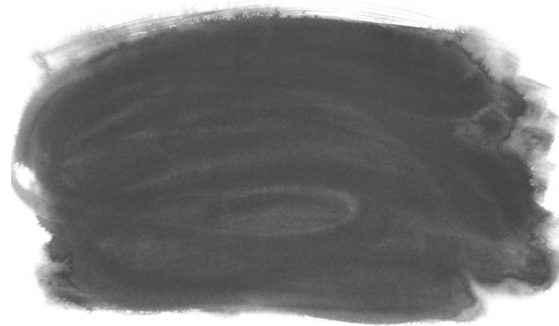
Clients were referred by Leaving Care Services in Glasgow and it soon became apparent that they all displayed classic symptoms of post-natal depression. These symptoms include:

- Excessive exhaustion;
- Loss of self esteem;
- Lack of confidence in abilities as a mother;
- Disturbed sleep;
- Helplessness;
- Lack of joy in motherhood;
- Fear of harming herself or her baby.

It became apparent how some or all of these symptoms would inhibit the mother's responsiveness to her baby. The effort required for the interaction

necessary for healthy brain development in the first two years of a baby's life (holding, rocking, lifting, cuddling, singing, mirroring his or her facial expressions and vocalisation) take a huge amount of energy on top of the feeding and physical care of the baby. For a mother with depression this could feel impossible. Her failure to find joy and pleasure in her mothering role may increase the downward spiral of a sense of failure and despair with its negative impact on her baby's development. To halt the downward spiral at this stage, *Cre8* used three main strategies. It developed an integrated approach to work with vulnerable mothers using, art therapy, baby massage and relaxation techniques.

### 1. Art therapy



During painting workshops conducted by an arts worker the above image was produced. A *Cre8* worker present recognised that something important was being communicated, but without awareness of the processes inherent in art therapy did not know how to respond. At this point contact was made with Creative Therapies, a Glasgow-based company of drama, dance movement, music and art therapists, established in 1994 who believe in using the arts to relieve distress and exclusion. This group helped to train the *Cre8* staff, who were then better able to intervene based on an understanding of the therapeutic impact of art.

### 2. Baby massage

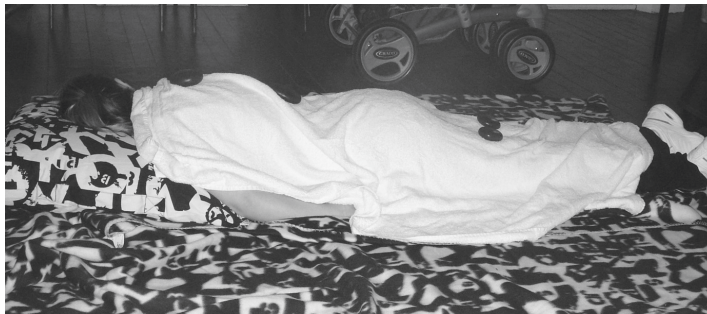


In baby massage, touch and gentle stroking were used to help mothers bond with their babies. Mothers were taught to watch out for cues from their babies

which come from the direct gaze, the maternal gaze connecting her to her baby in what Perry and Szalovitz call ‘the positive feedback loop’ and ‘the mother – infant dance’(Perry and Szalovitz, 2007). The baby is in control, signalling for interaction through play and touch to begin by looking directly at the mother and for it to end by breaking the gaze. For this to happen, the mother has to be sensitive to and focused on her baby. This performs essential functions in the development of the baby’s brain. Visual stimuli emanating from the mother become the most potent stimulus in an infant’s social environment; the child’s intense interest in her face, especially her eyes, leads him or her to track the face and to engage in long periods of intense mutual gaze. Baby massage can

- Aid bonding;
- Improve communication between parent and baby;
- Help to calm babies' emotions and relieve stress;
- Soothe babies and help them to sleep better;
- Help babies in the development of their bodies;
- Enhance parents' ability to understand their needs;
- Aid digestion and help relieve colic, wind and constipation;
- Strengthen immune system;
- Regulate breathing and relieve nasal congestion.

### 3. Relaxation techniques



When the young parents who were care leavers first arrived at the group, it was apparent that their stress levels were high and they displayed moods, swinging from emotional and weepy to irritable and verging on aggressive. In addition to the pressures faced by many new parents, the young mothers from a care background had often never learned self-regulation from a primary carer as their early experience was of disorganised attachment. If this is then added to complicated relationships with partners and family and friends; money worries;

health worries; housing problems and a lack of the usual support networks to contain and diffuse anxieties, there was a real need to reduce stress levels before mothers can engage in any meaningful way. To facilitate relaxation, a Positive Touch Therapist offered a wide variety of alternative therapies including Acupuncture, Hot Stones, Individual Therapeutic Massage and Reiki. As a truly holistic approach to wellbeing, all of the above combined to work through all the senses, touch, smell, sound and vision.

### **The importance of groupwork**

Groupwork was a key part of the *Cre8* process. Joining a new group can create anxiety in all of us but particularly for young people who have been in care and find it difficult to establish trusting relationships. Unlike an activity-based group where the focus would be on the product, in art therapy groups it is emotional wellbeing which is of most concern. To encourage participation in art activities, equal focus would be placed on reducing anxiety.

The group addressed the social isolation felt by many young care leavers who spent long periods alone with their babies. By sharing their experiences, they realise that they were not alone with their anxieties. It helped to encourage a feeling of hope and provided a safe space for trying out new ways of behaving. It also provides a new opportunity to learn how to trust. The group also the possibility of corrective experience, as many of the group members difficult relationships with their families. The day was structured in such a way that young care leavers and staff also spent time together informally, coffee breaks, or a shared lunch round one large table. It was often in these informal spaces that genuine sharing occurs, and the foundations of trusting relationships began to form. It offered the chance to laugh together.

### **Conclusion**

Margaret Naumburg is considered to be one of the founders of art therapy in the USA and her theories have been a major influence on British art therapists. She stated that

The process of art therapy is based on the recognition that man's most fundamental thoughts and feelings, derived from the unconscious, reach expression in images rather than words (Naumburg, 1950, p. 511).

Through its encouragement of non-verbal communication and non-directive way of working, art therapy can seem less threatening than verbal interactions. A side-by-side method of working can develop with interest focused on the

image, allowing trust to develop. Through learning to communicate through images, a sense of being understood emerges, diffusing anxiety and allowing thinking to begin. Any gains made in this process can then be transferred to groups, families and communities. When such techniques are combined with other therapeutic approaches such as massage and relaxation, a truly holistic approach to the overall wellbeing of young care leavers who are parents can be achieved. Although retention rates were high and outcomes were positive, funding for *Cre8* came to an end which resulted in the project coming to a halt. *Cre8* is currently seeking alternate sources of funding to allow the work to resume.

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