ART in YOUR LIFE programme @ Shanti Ashram

Art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life.
Pablo Picasso

The 'Art In Your Life' programme at Shanti Ashram & ICPH provides children with an opportunity to gain a theoretical understanding of art therapy and the positive impact it can have on their life, as well as a practical opportunity to create art.

It was conceptualized & launched in May 2020 at the peak of the COVID 19 Pandemic when children were affected by unprecedented school closures.

Art has been an effective tool to engage children actively at the Ashram. The 'Art In Your Life' programme was informed by psychological theory and participation from the children themselves.
Early in the pandemic, we encouraged young children to give their thoughts and feelings a voice through emotional mapping exercises.

Art therapy, as we understand it at Shanti Ashram & ICPH is an integrative mental health and human service intervention that enriches the lives of
individuals, families, and communities through active art-making, creative processes, applied psychological theory, and human experience within a psychotherapeutic relationship

The Mental Health Spectrum Affecting Children
The mental health of children in the context of a crisis is an understudied area, and this points to an urgent need to better understand how to help our children maintain and improve their mental wellbeing. This can be in unprecedented situations like the COVID 19 pandemic and in post pandemic contexts, where children are quickly phased back to pre-pandemic work schedules.
The spectrum of mental health problems that affects children ranges from boredom, lack of cognitive stimulation, irritability, restlessness, stress, anxiety and in the most extreme cases, to even death by suicide. Being forced to stay indoors also increases the risk of children experiencing or witnessing different faces violence and abuse in their homes and in society.

India has struggled with a mental health crisis even before the advent of the pandemic. The National
Crime Records Bureau reported that in 2019, 381 people died by suicide every day in India. This was a
3.4% increase in deaths by suicide from 2018. A study published in 2017 by the India State-Level Disease Burden Initiative stated that over 197 million people in India had a diagnosed mental disorder out of a population of 1.3 billion. These numbers were only exacerbated by the pandemic and mental health challenges in children is showing an active climb in the graphs that we research presents to us today.

Our COVID-19 Response and Research Desk also conducted a field study entitled 'Children on the Periphery' that aimed to understand the impact of the
pandemic on vulnerable children by listening directly to what they had to say. From the responses of 130 children from 13 of our service villages, we observed feelings of loneliness, frustration about not being able to go to school or see their friends, fear about contracting the virus, fear about financial instability as
a result of their parent's unemployment and insecurity about the future.

We identified an urgent need to address the mental health burden the pandemic was placing on the shoulders of these young children, and our Art Therapy sessions were one of the interventions used to provide them relief, respite and a chance to once again lose themselves in the joy of learning and doing. The moving quote of Pablo Picasso, "Art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life." resonated with us.

To operationalize the programme, a brainstorming session led by the field staff of Shanti Ashram & ICPH followed by the listing of 11 child-friendly interventions as part of the 'Art in your life' programme.
They include:

1. **Public speaking:** The "You can be a public speaker!" workshop series which helps improve their communication skills, boost their confidence and most importantly, provides them with a platform to voice their own ideas & thoughts.

2. **Storytelling:** The "Every child a storyteller" initiative helps children to weave stories around their unique cultures and backgrounds.
3. **Poetry writing:** "Let's Write Poetry" teaches children about the history of poetry writing and brings children
closer to the Tamil language as they experience how language could be a vehicle for their imagination.
4. **Flower stringing:** The workshops teach children the traditional South Indian methods of stringing flowers together using thread or fibre from a banana plant to make garlands or hair accessories for girls & women.
5. **Needlework workshop:** This workshop carries forward an everyday activity for many families in Tamil Nadu – the craft of needlework where children learn how to sew buttons or hooks onto clot. They also learn to make handkerchiefs and other things for day-to-day use. This creative activity also helps them develop coordination and fine motor skills.
6. **Origami workshop:** Children joyfully learn how to mould and craft paper into different
shapes in this immersive and collaborative exercise.
7. **Emotional mapping:** This activity gives children the opportunity to express their emotions through
visual drawing and colours. It helps adults and the children themselves to introspect, express and identify their emotional status. In the process it helps identify their emotional needs also. For an adult professional, whether in health care or education, this helps customise the mental
health support and care that the children needed to receive.
8. **Jewellery making**: Children learn to hand-make jewellery for themselves and their loved ones in this workshop. This engages them creatively and helps develop their fine motor skills.
9. **Basket and Mat making:** Children attend this very popular session to learn the traditional art of 'Kuda
Pinrathu', a source of livelihood for many across rural Tamil Nadu. These sessions promote a
hyperlocal form of craft and allow children to understand the value of working together.
10. **Arts and Crafts:** These child-centric workshops engaged children and teach them how to
sketch, paint and make crafts.
11. **Dancing:** The 'Let's Dance Together' sessions bring children to dance together and encourages
both creativity and physical activity. Through dance, both these critical components : creativity & physical activity stand enhanced.

Adding a 12th intervention in 2024

12. **Mandala drawing**: **In 2024,** we reviewed this list again and have added the 12th intervention of Mandala drawing in partnership with Ms.Ishitha Bhansali, the President of Rotary Club of Coimbatore Dynamix.

A mandala is a complex abstract design that is usually circular in form. 'Mandala' in Sanskrit means circle. Mandalas generally have one identifiable centre point, from which emanates an array of symbols, shapes and forms. Mandalas can contain both geometric and organic forms.

As a primed art activity, it helps children to draw and unleash their creativity. It further enriches socio-emotional learning. Mandala drawing gives children a space to put their thoughts and feelings down on paper. It allows a child to express their unconscious feelings and experiences in a safe space. Colouring and focusing on a mandala are calming to the child's being. Creating mandalas helps move beyond negative thoughts also.

ART in YOUR LIFE programme @ Shanti Ashram *"Sangamam – Building Together a More United and Peaceful World"*- February 2026

Goals of the Workshop

- Provides children with an opportunity to gain a theoretical understanding of art as therapy and the positive impact it can have on their life,
- Create a practical opportunity to create art.
- To explore with them opportunities they can create in everyday life to create and enjoy art.

Resource Person: Ms. Lioba Knepple artist born and educated in Germany and closely associated with the Focolare Movement.

At Shanti Ashram:

EVERY CHILD MATTERS!

Expected Outcome

As a team, we visualize our children will learn to express themselves, their emotional status better and connect to their core emotions after completing the 'ART in your life' programme.

At Shanti Ashram, we place the child at the center of all our work, and this includes engaging them as co-creators of programmes for their own

development. Intentional child participation involves: ensuring
children's voices are heard, they are given a platform to express themselves, and they have a champion who protects their rights and advances their development.

In the past, several of our 'Art in your Life' sessions were designed and led by a faculty team that is comprised of young volunteers and mentors that are alumni of the Bala Shanti Programme, scholarship awardees and youth volunteers of the Ashram. This will be followed in the 2024 edition too.