Art Therapy for Children

"Art is standing with one hand extended into the universe and one hand extended into the world, and letting ourselves be a conduit for passing energy."

Albert Einstein

The Impact of COVID-19 on Children

When the COVID-19 virus began to spread across the world and was declared a pandemic in March of 2020, the wellbeing of people who were physiologically most vulnerable to the effects of the virus - senior citizens and those with comorbidities – were prioritised. Children, who have lower chances of contracting the virus and very rarely exhibit severe COVID-19 symptoms, were not considered a priority group and thus treated like the rest of the adult population – pulled out of their regular environments almost overnight, made to stay at home and expected to migrate their entire lives online.

It has now been 468 days since the declaration of the pandemic, and for many children, this has resulted in more than a year of isolation, neglect and developmental deterioration. Children's fundamental rights to education, play and protection from harm and abuse have been jeopardised by the unintended consequences of lockdown measures. UNESCO data showed that between March 11th 2020 and February 2nd 2021, schools were closed for an average of 146 days in South Asia[i]. In India, however, schools remain closed to this day and the second wave of the pandemic has pushed this number still higher in recent

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months. What started as a public health crisis has set off multiple crises – a learning crisis, an economic crisis, a nutritional crisis and a mental health crisis. And the impact of these crises are distributed unequally – the most vulnerable children are bearing the brunt of this pandemic as it compounds existing socioeconomic inequities.

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 during the current pandemic. The spectrum of mental health problems that affects children ranges from boredom, a 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 violence and abuse in their homes[ii].

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[iii]. 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[iv]. These numbers will only be exacerbated by the pandemic and children, still learning to express themselves and without the agency to seek professional help, will suffer immense challenges and be in need of targeted interventions. A holistic effort to alleviate the impact of COVID-19 on children must therefore prioritise interventions that focus on their mental health needs.

Shanti Ashram's Holistic COVID-19 Response – Art Therapy

Shanti Ashram's COVID-19 Response for Children during the pandemic prioritises vulnerable children and focuses on their education, nutrition and mental health. One of our programs that actively engages children, inspires their creativity and aims to improve their mental health is 'Art Therapy'.

Art therapy is an integrative mental health and human services 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[v]. Art is an effective tool to engage children and at the Ashram, we started an initiative called 'Art In Your Life' where the conceptualization of the program 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. By giving the children the opportunity to solidify their emotions through visuals and colours, this activity helped us identify their emotional needs and thus customise the mental health support and care they needed to receive. 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.

> "Art washes away from the soul the dust of every day life."
> Pablo Picasso

Interventions

The 'Art In Your Life' program 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.

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The sessions began in May 2020 and so far, 2405 children from 29 different villages have been part of 32 sessions of this bi-weekly course. The intervention covers 11 different programs:

1. Public speaking: The "You can be a public speaker!" workshop series reached 262 children to improve their communication skills, boost their confidence and most importantly, provide them with a platform to voice their thoughts.

2. Storytelling: The "Every child is a storyteller" initiative reached 258 children to help them weave stories around their unique cultures and backgrounds.

3. Poetry writing: "Let's Write Poetry" taught 63 children about the history of poetry and brought them closer to the Tamil language as they experienced how language could be a vehicle for their imagination.

4. Flower stringing: 105 children participated in workshops that taught them the traditional South Indian method of tying flowers together using thread or fibre from a banana plant to make garlands and jewellery.

5. Needlework workshop: 85 young children were part of this workshop that carried forward a daily activity for many families in Tamil Nadu – the craft of needleworking. 85 children learnt how to button and how to hook stitch onto cloth to make handkerchiefs. This creative activity also helped them develop coordination and fine motor skills.

6. Origami workshop: 103 children joyfully learnt how to mould and craft paper into various different shapes in this immersive and collaborative exercise.

7. Emotional mapping: This activity gave 56 children the opportunity to solidify their emotions through visuals and colours, which helped us identify their emotional needs and thus customise the mental health support and care they needed to receive.

8. Jewellery making: 54 children made jewellery for themselves and their loved ones in this workshop that engaged them creatively and developed their fine motor skills.

9. Basket and Mat making: 194 children attended sessions to learn the traditional art of 'Kuda Pinrathu', a source of livelihood for many across Tamil Nadu. These sessions promoted a hyperlocal form of craft and allowed children to understand the value of working together, and showed them a way that they can contribute to communities around them by distributing the products they had made.

10. Arts and Crafts: These child-centric workshops engaged 541 children and taught them how to sketch, paint and make crafts.

11. Dancing: The "Let's Dance Together" sessions have brought together 684 children to help them add both creativity and physical activity to their lives through dance.

At Shanti Ashram, we place the child at the center of all our work, and this includes engaging them as co-creators of programs for their own development. Intentional child participation involves ensuring that 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. Several of our Art Therapy sessions are designed and led by a faculty team that is comprised of young volunteers and mentors that are alumni of the Bala Shanti Program, scholarship awardees and youth volunteers of the Ashram. These sessions explore how the children see art in the context of their own lives and serve as a platform for the expression of their voices. Our young volunteers, guided and supported by our staff, have played a vital role in making the programs child friendly and have been an asset to expanding the scope of our work for children during the pandemic.

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The Impact

Lockdown measures have forced children to stay indoors, change their daily routines and exponentially increase their screen usage. Vulnerable children who live in poverty are disproportionately impacted by these changes – many live in single room houses with no space to play and do not attend schools that engage with them creatively. The impact of our Art Therapy sessions, which aim to address these inequities, is thus two-fold. They allow children to once again participate in cognitively and physically engaging forms of recreation that they were deprived of, and in the process, restores their fundamental Child Rights, mainly 'the right to rest, relax, play and to take part in cultural and creative activities.'

Advancing Community Cohesion & Peace Building in the midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic

"Children are not the face of this pandemic. But they risk being among its biggest victims, as children's lives are nonetheless being changed in profound ways. All children, of all ages, and in all countries, are being affected, in particular by the socio-economic impacts and, in some cases, by mitigation measures that may inadvertently do more harm than good."

UNICEF

The scale of this ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is overwhelming at times
Over 200 countries affected
178,597,032 people have tested positive to the Corona virus so far
Nearly 450 days of school closures in India
Over 1.5 billion children affected by the multiple crises that the COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed

Given this massive disruption in the lives of our children and entire communities, one is often at a loss for where to begin. Institutions have a complex landscape to navigate just to keep child services going on a daily basis. The divides are clear, whether it is in the digital world or the world we co-habit. Disease, Deprivation and Disruption all come with a very heavy cost, particularly on vulnerable children. Besides people already living in poverty, it is estimated that over 150 million additional people will drop into poverty as a consequence of the pandemic. It seems almost impossible to find the time and space to think of the big picture, when today's needs seem to be urgent every day! This pandemic is threatening the reversal of hard-earned battles in child mortality, school enrollment, child immunization, food security and protection of child rights.

Let us not forget the responsibility we owe the growing child in our midst. Let us remind ourselves everyday of our ethical obligations to children. Their everyday desire to be heard, to be seen, to be listened to. They must see in us adults a positive and powerful effort in having their voice heard and their needs met. This is where we can go beyond what overwhelms us to find our own particular ways in serving children and their best interests. We must find ways both local and global to bridge the many divides that confront children.

These wonderful Art Therapy sessions for children initiated as part of COVID-19 Response is one such simple way that resilience and hope can be built in local communities. The eleven different activities implemented are an example of how simple interventions can be co-created, be built on the agency of children themselves and where creativity and creative thinking makes breakthroughs in re-imagining the learning space.

It reaffirms the impact of Positive Peace and its potential in the restoration of relationships both with the self and with others. Positive Peace to be sustained must also be driven by the commitment to build more fair systems and societies. In the midst of this challenging COVID-19 pandemic, efforts such as this help children to rediscover a sense of community, the joy of belonging to each other, a palpable human inter-connectedness and stimulation that impacts cognition and worldviews, that positions peace, community cohesion and equity as key measurements of development and progress.

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That every child matters is our shared understanding at Shanti Ashram. That is why we have worked with children and ensured their wellbeing: physical, mental, social and spiritual in the midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic. That is why we have brought children from different villages, from different lived experiences and religions, from varied socio-economic backgrounds and family circumstance to be a community. These Art Therapy sessions have helped them to enjoy art, to practice it, to understand it and together, heal better and find simple ways to build resilience and hope.

It also reaffirms the thought of our founder, Dr. M. Aram:
'A creative person is a positive force, a force for PEACE'

[i] COVID-19 and School Closures: One Year of Education Disruption, UNICEF Report

[ii] WHO <https://www.who.int/news/item/14-05-2020-substantial-investment-needed-to-avert-mental-health-crisis>

[iii] National Crime Records Bureau < https://ncrb.gov.in/en/accidental-deaths-suicides-in-india>

[iv] India State-Level Disease Burden Initiative Mental Disorders Collaborators, 2017. "The burden of mental disorders across the states of India: the Global Burden of Disease Study 1990-2017". Lancet Psychiatry. < https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31879245/>

[v] American Art Therapy Association <https://arttherapy.org/>

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