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## The use of art therapy in counseling children

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## The use of art therapy in counseling children

### Abstract

Art is being used more and more by counselors working with children, particularly within the school setting because it allows for children to communicate nonverbally in a timely manner. "Art therapy in a school setting can offer children the opportunity to work through obstacles that are impeding their educational progress. It can facilitate appropriate social behaviors and promote healthy affective development" (Bush, 1997, p. 16).

The purpose of this paper is to explore how art is used in counseling children and examine specific techniques. Also, the author will focus on the stages of artistic development of children, the use of art as an assessment tool, the symbolism within the artwork, the use of art in multicultural counseling, and ethical issues related to art therapy.

# THE USE OF ART THERAPY IN COUNSELING CHILDREN

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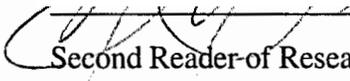
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## Using Art As A Way To Help Children In Counseling

Art is being used more and more by counselors working with children, particularly within the school setting because it allows for children to communicate nonverbally in a timely manner. Bush (1997) indicated that society is changing and school personnel are under scrutiny for not being able to keep up with the difficulties students face in today's world. She suggested that one way to reach and help students in the schools is through art therapy. "Art therapy in a school setting can offer children the opportunity to work through obstacles that are impeding their educational progress. It can facilitate appropriate social behaviors and promote healthy affective development" (Bush, 1997, p. 16).

Communication through art is helpful when working with children because it is a natural and safe way for them to express themselves (Allan, 1987). Also, art is a means of communication that can occur with all children across culture and gender. The primary goal of counselors who use art and art products with children is to generate physical, emotional, and learning skills that are necessary to help children make connections between their inner and outer worlds (Bush, 1997).

According to Cochran (1996), "Art therapy is any therapy that uses self-expressive art as the primary therapy activity. Art therapy includes the child symbolically working through confusions, anxieties, and conflicts" (p. 288). Art can be a non-threatening and fun method to help children express themselves while working through the difficulties in their lives.

Art is used by many counselors in the mental health and school counseling fields as assessment methods and intervention techniques. The purpose of this paper is to explore how art is used in counseling children and examine specific techniques. Also, the author will focus on the stages of artistic development of children, the use of art as an assessment tool, the symbolism within the artwork, the use of art in multicultural counseling, and ethical issues related to art therapy.

### Stages of Artistic Development of Children

There are different stages of artistic development for children. These stages typically correspond with a child's age depending upon his or her exposure to art activities. It is necessary for a counselor to have some understanding of these artistic stages of development in order to identify what a child's artistic expression may be in relation to his or her life difficulties. For instance, a kindergarten age child may draw a house off centered on a piece of paper. This would not necessarily represent anything about his or her life because it is typical of the child's developmental age. However, if an older child did that, the counselor might need to probe further into the representation of the picture. In addition, it is normal for children to fluctuate back and forth from one stage to another from time to time (Malchiodi, 1997).

Malchiodi (1997) named her stages scribble, basic form, human form and beginning schema, development of visual schema, realism, and adolescence. Stage one is scribbling. This stage typically corresponds with children ages 18 months - 3 years. Scribbling is a form of a child's earliest artistic expression that typically is

kinesthetically based (Malchiodi, 1998). These scribbles are usually formed unintentionally and are random in form. Malchiodi (1997) explained that children at this age will not necessarily be able to express emotions and thoughts through their art nor will they be able to talk about it. However, it is still important for children to have the opportunity to work with art activities because it is enjoyable for them.

Stage two is basic forms. Children who are in this stage range in age from 3 - 4 years. It is around this time that children express early development of symbols. This means that the scribbles in the child's drawing represent something to him or her. They still are drawing scribbles, but are creating stories about their drawings (Malchiodi, 1998). Beginning in this stage, a counselor can discuss the artwork with the child. Most likely children will want to talk about their pictures; however, some children need to be encouraged by the counselor to talk about their work (Malchiodi, 1998).

Stage three is human forms and beginning schemata. This stage usually includes children ages 4 - 7 years. During this time, children are increasing their symbolic representation in their artwork. One of the significant developmental tasks at this stage is the early drawings of human figures (Malchiodi, 1998).

Stage four is development of visual schemata. This stage occurs from ages 6 - 9 years. It is at this time that children have a more complex development of symbols, using object composition, color, and use of baseline. Also, children are creating x-ray drawings where someone or something can show through from behind (Malchiodi, 1998).

Stage five is realism. This involves children ages 9 - 12 creating pictures that represent real-world things. A child is creating complex pictures with line, shape, detail, perspective, color, and human figure drawings are depicted with great detail, and are differentiated by gender (Malchiodi, 1998). Many people do not go beyond this stage in their artistic development due to various reasons such as no longer participating in art activities or having feelings of discouragement over lack of competence (Malchiodi, 1998).

Stage six is adolescence. This stage begins around age 13. Children at this level are more sophisticated in their artwork. The artwork contains an accurate use of perspective, greater detail, a critical perception of the environment, color, design, and abstract image. At this level, a child makes choices about how he or she represents an object, a person, or a scene (Malchiodi, 1998). Understanding the six stages of artistic development helps in assessing and addressing a child's artwork in relation to his or her age and capabilities.

#### Assessment with Art

Art is used in various formal and informal assessment tools as well as intervention techniques. Formal assessments are tests that have a particular score for a particular response. Therefore, people who respond in similar ways will have similar scores. These tests are formatted the same for all people (Dunn-Snow, 1994). An example of a formal assessment is the Silver Draw-A-Story Assessment. The Silver Draw-A-Story Assessment was created by Rawley Silver to assess people for depression (Dunn-Snow,

1994). In this assessment tool, 14 cards with pictures are presented to the person. These cards include pictures of four people dressed differently, five different animals, one tree, one air balloon, one castle, one volcano, and a knife. After the cards are presented, the person is asked to choose two of the image cards which he or she is to draw the picture either freehanded with his or her own ideas or by tracing it. The person is then to write a three sentence story and a title. The drawing, the story, and the title are assessed on a 5-point scale that extends from severe depression to no depression (Dunn-Snow, 1994). Dunn-Snow has adapted this test to use as an intervention for emotionally disturbed students at the elementary and secondary level. She used the cards from the test with students who are resistant to art activities. In addition, Dunn-Snow found that this instrument can provide students with structure and support in the beginning stages of the counseling process when using art.

Some informal art assessments include the Kinetic Family Drawing and the Human Figure Drawing. The Kinetic Family Drawing was developed by R. C. Burns (Burns, 1982, cited in Cobia & Brazelton, 1994). This involves the counselor giving the child a sheet of paper and a pencil. Then, the counselor says, "Draw a picture of everyone in your family including yourself, doing something. Try to draw whole people, not cartoons, or stick people. Remember, make everyone doing something-some kind of action" (Burns, 1982, cited in Cobia & Brazelton, 1994, p. 133). These drawings lead to insights as to what is happening within a child's family as well as thoughts and feelings that accompany the child's family situation.

In human figure drawings, a child is directed to draw a person (Malchiodi, 1998). These drawings can be connected with a particular topic, lesson, or story. For example, Sadowski and Loesch (1993) described a lesson on child abuse that ended with human figure drawings. Many of these drawing had indicators that abuse may have been occurring to particular children. For example, an enlarged genital area in a drawing may be an indicator. It is important to realize that the human figure drawing is one assessment that should have follow-up work because just one drawing may or may not provide enough accurate information. By using a second and third assessment, the counselor is able to collect a variety of data and can interpret the child's problems accurately. There are many types of assessments that can be used with children, and art is one way to assess. In order to use art assessments, a counselor needs to be familiar with the symbolism children use in their artwork.

### Symbolism in Art

Art is a mode of communication for children; therefore, artwork typically represents what is happening in the life of the child (Malchiodi, 1997). However, it is important to discuss the meanings with the client in order to be accurate in the interpretation. The following examples are possible interpretations with selected meanings.

Some examples of symbolism in art may involve family drawings, house drawings and figure drawings. In family drawings, the child is asked to draw his or her family (Malchiodi, 1997). The symbolism within the family drawings may indicate such things as anxiety, significance of a family member, values, and relationships within the family.

For example, a child may draw family members separated from one another. This may reflect avoidance of family members, a need for safety, or a need for independence.

Also, a child may refuse to draw a family picture. This refusal may indicate that a child is embarrassed about his or her family and their circumstances, or the child may not know whom he or she should include in the family. Moreover, the size and the placement of the child in the drawing may show a child's perception of self-importance (Sadowski & Loesch, 1993).

The house drawing is a picture of a child's house. House drawings are thought to give insight into a child's personality (Malchiodi, 1997). For instance, some would interpret the child drawing a chimney on a house as signifying interpersonal warmth within the family, while others would give it a phallic significance (Malchiodi, 1997). In addition, chimney smoke may be an indicator of anger or tension either within the child or between family members. Drawings of floating houses, particularly with older children, may reveal a child is from a violent home or a child has a transitory lifestyle. Floating houses may represent a child's difficult life situation that is in confusion and turbulence. However, it is important to know that younger children frequently draw floating houses, due to their stage of artistic development, and this may not be associated with their life circumstances (Malchiodi, 1997).

Symbolism in figure drawings of children can be interpreted. For example, the exclusion of hands may signify that the child is feeling a lack of control (Sadowski & Loesch, 1993). Also, large hands may suggest that a child is feeling guilty about sexual

behaviors. The omission of the lower body could mean that the child is feeling a lack of support. This connection is made because the lower body supports the upper body, leading to feelings involving a lack of support and helplessness (Sadowski & Loesch, 1993). Another interpretation is that a child is denying the genital area in order to cope with an abusive situation (Sadowski & Loesch, 1993). Huge circular mouths may suggest the child has been involved in behaviors associated with oral sex (LaRoche, 1994). Drawings of hearts may indicate an absence of something in a child's life, such as love (LaRoche, 1994). Excessive attention to the middle of the body can indicate that the child is interested in or is preoccupied with sex. For example, the child's drawing may have zippers, belts, or attention to the waistline with large separations between the upper and lower body (Sadowski & Loesch, 1993). The examples described in this section are suggested meanings for a child's artwork, but they can not generalize to all children. Therefore, it is always necessary to follow up with a child using art in many different ways and talking with a child about his or her art creation.

### Interventions with Art

There are numerous types of art interventions that are used with children and adults alike. Some of these interventions involve the use of paint, clay, batik, masks, collages, boxes and more. Art is utilized as a counseling intervention in infinite ways. For the purpose of this paper, only a few art inventions will be described. The interventions presented are the use of clay art, computer art, and joint mural art.

The use of clay in art counseling is common. Clay is an appropriate medium of art to use with children because one can constantly demolish the creation and start over (Kahn, 1996). This shows that things can change and be recreated as many times as possible until it is as the children want them to be.

The goals of the clay therapy process are: to improve self-image, to increase task orientation, and to improve decision-making and problem-solving skills (Kahn, 1996). These goals are accomplished because clay is malleable and can be changed, leading to symbolically changing and improving one's self. Also, creations made from clay involve thinking ahead to the next step of the process, incorporating planning ahead, which increases task orientation. Additionally, planning ahead in creations made from clay consists of making choices as to what to make, how to make it, and the use of colors, which reinforces the practices of problem-solving and decision-making (Kahn, 1996). Since the process of working with clay is somewhat slow, children do not see instant results. This helps children learn about delayed gratification and increases their patience. Finally, working with clay can lead to success or failure in any given session. Clay is an art medium with the potential to create something great, while at the same time the clay can fold, leading to a failed creation. Working with clay teaches children how to appropriately accept success and failure (Kahn, 1996).

The use of computer art helps a child express his or her inner feelings through computer drawings. Computer art is similar to any other type of art. It allows for the child to draw with lines, shapes, colors, and symbols on a computer screen. The use of

the computer is really “cool” for a child in today’s world (Johnson, 1987). Throughout the computer art sessions, a child is asked to draw a picture, and when he or she is finished, the counselor facilitates a discussion about the picture. Johnson (1987) described computer art as “a way of enhancing communication between the child and the counselor and offers a protective assessment tool. Additionally, it can be used as a medium for looking at ways of perceiving oneself and exploring more adequate coping behaviors” (pp. 263-263).

Another art intervention is a joint mural. According to Rubin (1984), a joint mural can be used with family groups as well as any other type of groups. These joint murals can be conducted in a couple of ways. One way is for the group members to collaboratively decide what to create before they begin, and the mural is created accordingly. Another way to create a mural is for the members of the group to stand around a table with paper and chalk, and each member creates an individual section. After that, a discussion can be facilitated by the counselor about emerging themes that connect the participants' drawings. Finally, the mural can be created according to those themes that are similar across group members' drawings. This method of art helps group members connect with one another in a non-threatening manner.

Art interventions can help a child learn to communicate more effectively in a normal way. Art interventions are plentiful and fun for both the counselor and the client. Children respond successfully to art activities.

## Art in Multicultural Counseling

The United States has a large population of culturally diverse people, and this diversity is rapidly increasing. According to Cochran (1996), the majority population in California by the year 2000 will not be white, and the rest of the United States will not have a majority white population by the year 2060. This is a societal change that people in the counseling field need to consider. This means professionals must be well trained in multicultural counseling in order to help students from all cultural backgrounds. Cochran (1996) emphasized the importance of art therapy when counseling students who are of different races other than the counselors. "Art therapies are less limited by cultural differences between the counselors and the clients than are other forms of interventions" (Cochran, 1996, p. 287). It appears that the use of art with multicultural students helps them to overcome the barriers they face in achieving success in school. It gives them an opportunity to communicate in a non-threatening way until they become comfortable and confident in a world that is presently dominated by the English language in the United States (Coseo, 1997).

The primary educational barriers for culturally diverse students are communication difficulties, difficulties learning cognitive materials and developing cognitive skills, difficulties fitting in socially, and experiences of stress due to assimilation (Cochran, 1996). Communication difficulties can arise between students who speak English as a second language and teachers who are from the majority culture. It can be arduous for culturally diverse students to communicate effectively with school personnel, especially

when they are experiencing emotional turmoil. Therefore, a student who is having difficulties communicating may benefit from working with art media. Children who have difficulty with language tend to have an easier time expressing their feelings through their artwork (Coseo, 1997). The counselor's role is to help the child identify his or her feelings so that the child can gain insight into those feelings. "Art therapy can provide alternative avenues for children to express emotions and situational difficulties that are inhibiting their classroom learning" (Cochran, 1996, p. 291).

Expression of feelings through art will eventually lead to a child gaining confidence in order to verbally express his or her feelings. This, in turn, may reduce children's anxieties about their school difficulties (Allan, 1987). It is evident that art is one effective way to help children adjust to their environment when they have a language barrier.

A second barrier for multicultural children can be in learning cognitive materials and developing cognitive skills (Cochran, 1996). This problem exists because of language differences as well as differences in cultural values and backgrounds. Art therapy is essential to solving this problem because it involves experimentation with problem-solving and decision-making in a non-threatening environment. For example, decision-making in art may involve choosing what colors to use. The counselor's role is to observe the student and to reflect back to the student his or her choices as well as the process he or she used in making the choices. Again, the counselor is learning about the

student and his or her thought processes. Through this process, the counselor may gain insight as how to help the child in his or her classroom (Cochran, 1996).

A third barrier is the difficulty culturally diverse students have in fitting in socially. Due to the differences in the majority and minority cultures, students have learned different ways to behave socially (Coseo, 1997). This process may lead to problems such as making and keeping friends. However, through art therapy groups with children of the majority and minority cultures, the children can teach one another about their cultures' social behaviors (Cochran, 1996). The goal is for children to begin to accept and respect one another and the unique qualities that they bring to the group and to their class. In addition, this method will teach children how to relate with each other using the technique of art. Art is a familiar and neutral medium for all cultures to explore.

The last barrier addressed is the stress multicultural students experience due to factors related to assimilation. Assimilation is when a person is able to function well in the majority culture while preserving and respecting his or her own culture. Also, Cochran (1996) explained, "a conflict between cultures creates a natural tension between the majority and the minority groups that is highly stressful for children" (p. 293). Art therapy can be successful in helping children explore this stress and reduce the tension they may be experiencing.

Art therapy has been used and found effective among children from culturally diverse backgrounds. The effectiveness of art in counseling is illustrated in the following case study of Native American youth in a group setting (Appleton & Dykeman, 1996).

This study was conducted with 10 Native American boys and girls from a public school on an Indian reservation and comprised of about 40% Native American students and 60% European American students. The students ranged in age from 7 to 17. These students were involved in a group that met once a week for 50 minutes and lasted for 7 weeks. Each session was conducted according to a particular theme using art to explore the session theme. The themes included group building, home and family, self-knowledge, affective expression, cognitive themes using symbolic projection, a return to the affective expression, and group closure. These sessions helped the Native American students explore their relation to their family, their tribe, and the non-Native American society.

Throughout the group process, the Native American students found a safe place within their European American public school where they could address their difficulties through art. They began the process of healing and growth that was required so that they could begin to enter into cross-cultural dialogues. The group appeared to begin this process because the students created dynamic art pieces that truly reflected their struggles. In addition, the group evaluations were all positive, indicating that the students felt the group was beneficial. Many students wanted to continue on with the group or another similar group. This suggests that the art method reached and helped these Native American students.

It is essential for the counselor to have a strong understanding of his or her own cultural identity as well as his or her biases and prejudices so that he or she can

effectively work with clients of another culture without causing further difficulties (Coseo, 1997). Coseo (1997) indicated that a counselor can use art therapy as a way to confront his or her own cultural prejudices and values that interfere with the effective treatment of multicultural clients. Children of all cultural backgrounds can benefit from art therapy.

### Ethics in Art Counseling

Art is used as a counseling tool when verbal communication is difficult. Therefore, it is important for counselors to consider how artwork and its implications should be treated with children and adults. Ethical considerations are especially important when using art as an intervention when counseling children.

### The Relationship Between Art Work and Verbal Communication

Many times it is hard for a child to express himself or herself in a counseling session. "When verbal expression is difficult, the art materials can provide a vehicle for self-expression" (Hammond & Gantt, 1998, p. 272). However, when a child is using art as symbolic communication he or she has the right to his or her privacy. The counselor is expected to keep a child's artwork confidential (Hammond & Gantt, 1998).

Because artwork done in the therapeutic setting often depicts childhood memories, dreams, and expressions of sexual and aggressive content, the counselor has a particular responsibility to decide which of the pieces are seen by others, even those who are part of a treatment team. (Hammond & Gantt, 1998, p. 273)

When counselors use art methods for assessments and interventions, they should view the child's artwork as a form of speech that represents a child's communication through symbols (Hammond & Gantt, 1998).

In addition, Hammond and Gantt (1998) suggested that counselors who use art as a method to help children with their life difficulties need to be prepared for unexpected emotional responses that sometimes occur during art therapy sessions. Art can trigger emotional responses more often than other types of interventions (Hammond & Gantt, 1998). Overall, when considering the ethical implications of artwork, a counselor should view the art product just as he or she views verbal communication. A person's art creations and the information the counselor gathered from the interpretation of the art should be kept confidential.

### Ownership of Art Work

Ownership of artwork may be dictated by the counselor's institution of employment. Some require the artwork to be kept by the agency, while others want a visual record of it by way of a photograph, and still others want notation of it in the same way that verbal notation is recorded (Hammond & Gantt, 1998).

If the counselor needs to defend himself or herself from charges of malpractice, a record is vital, even if some pieces have been destroyed.

Therefore, it could be argued that a prudent course for those conducting intensive psychotherapy would be to keep a photographic record of all the art and treat it like any other documentation. In agencies where the therapeutic emphasis is not

on psychotherapy per se, one may follow more relaxed procedures. Each agency or program should make a thorough review of its own policies and procedures with its legal counsel to help employees and contractors make rational decisions on these matters. (Hammond & Gantt, 1998, p. 274)

It is necessary to help a child understand these issues that surround ownership of his or her artwork in order to eliminate confusion.

### Research and Publication of Art Work

The issue of artwork used in research and publication is another aspect to think about when considering the confidentiality of a client. Hammond and Gantt (1998) indicated that a counselor needs to consider the purpose of using the artwork and the ability to preserve the privacy of the client. For instance, if the artwork is used for contributing to the body of knowledge related to the field of counseling in order to help other counselors and clients, then using it may be ethically sound. In such cases where a therapist may be considering using a client's art for further benefiting the field of counseling, a counselor should regard the client as a collaborator in the decision-making process (Spaniol, 1994). Each decision can be a therapeutic benefit to the client at different times. For instance, showing the counseling team the client's work may help in reviewing and making sure the client is making progress (Spaniol, 1994).

### Use of Art by Therapist Who Do Not Specialize in Art Therapy

Some therapists believe that anyone trained in counseling can use art methods to help a person, while others believe that it is necessary to be trained in art therapy in

order to use it in counseling sessions. Hammond and Gantt (1998) stated that any trained counselor should be able to help a child communicate in a nonverbal manner when he or she is unable to verbalize his or her thoughts and feelings. However, the difficulty for the counselor may arise when a child has a strong emotional reaction brought up by the art that he or she may be doubtful of how to use the artistic process in bringing such a reaction under control (Hammond & Gantt, 1998). Another concern is when a counselor who is not qualified makes an interpretation about a client's artwork. If a counselor is unclear about interpreting a child's artwork, then he or she may need to consult with another therapist who is an expert in art therapy before drawing conclusions from the artwork. However, this is another time when the counselor needs to be cautious about keeping a client's confidentiality (Hammond & Gantt, 1998).

Finally, Rubin (1984) believed that an essential role of the counselor in art therapy is facilitating the process effectively.

Since the creative process itself is so often central to the art therapeutic encounter, the clinician's ability to facilitate that process is as important a component of successful art therapy as is his or her equally refined understanding of the symbolic meanings of the child's visual communications.

(Rubin, 1984, p. 292)

However, Cochran (1996) indicated, "it does not take a great deal of training beyond that of a master's degree in school counseling to begin to use techniques from art therapy" (p. 296). Further, Cochran (1996) stated that it is beneficial for a counselor to

take more training in art therapy techniques, but it is not a requirement. It appears that experts have differing opinions about who is capable of using art as a therapeutic method.

In general, a counselor needs to be aware of his or her limitations when doing any type of counseling, including art therapy. Also, it is important to reflect upon the ethical standards of counseling and the use of art. The goal of therapists is to help clients better their lives.

### Conclusion

It appears that the use of art therapy can be beneficial for children because many children lack the ability to verbally communicate their thoughts and feelings (Johnston, 1997). However, a counselor needs to have a basic understanding of the stages of artistic development so that he or she realizes what is appropriate art for a particular age group of children. Also, a counselor can use art as an assessment tool or an intervention, but he or she should be careful in drawing conclusions about a child's art work without having the child discuss the art as well as having several other assessments and interventions from the child. Additionally, it is essential that counselors who are working with art have an understanding of the symbolism in art. There are some generalized meanings of certain symbols within the artwork. However, each individual is unique and flexibility of the interpretation is necessary so that the counselor does not misinterpret a person's art expression.

Art techniques in multicultural counseling can be effective because the art is a way to bring out commonalities and celebrate differences while breaking down the cultural barriers. Children of different cultures have difficulty in school because of the break down in communication between the students and teachers as well as between their peers of the majority culture. It can be stressful for a student from another culture to find common grounds with the majority culture in order to successfully function in their new setting. Art therapy is one way that helps minority students communicate in a non-threatening way, while not having to worry about the spoken language. Art therapy can help multicultural students be successful in their new environment.

All professionals involved in the counseling profession must be guided by ethical codes, and counselors using art need to consider ethics regarding their client's artwork. Spaniol (1994) made the suggestion that the counselor involve the client in making joint decisions about his or her artwork. This collaboration may help in making good ethical decisions about a client and his or her artwork.

It is evident that a counselor using art assessments and interventions in therapy has a lot to consider before implementing such techniques. However, this effort can be worthwhile because art therapy is one type of communication that cuts across all areas and barriers of a person's life including culture, income, and life circumstances (Appleton & Dykeman, 1996). As one art therapist explained students during art:

Feelings and talents were constantly on display in the art therapy room.

Vibrant strokes of color revealed the passion, gentle flaws of pastels

whispered periods of peace, clashing tones and shapes cried confusion, pain and fear. However, the opportunity for expression was its greatest value to each when their finished products were displayed together in the gallery for the reception, the colors, forms and lines were profound statements of their inner selves that were almost deafening to the hearts of the viewers. (Cernero, 1991, p. 20)

Children experience many thoughts and emotions during art therapy that they may not know how to express in any other way. It is a natural and pleasant way for them to communicate with the counselor.

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