



CHILDREN'S ART

CHILDREN'S ART AS A RESEARCH TOOL

A child hands you her picture. At first, it is difficult to figure out – she is only eight years old and has little experience with drawing. But as you examine it more closely you see someone with a gun on one side and, look, there is a group of people holding hands on the right hand corner. Is this a happy or sad picture? Is it about war or family life? The answer is probably both.



The drawings and paintings of children living inside conflict can reveal a great deal about their memories and feelings of war. Like any good art, our appreciation for the messages in these drawings and paintings deepens with close inspection. But similar to modern art, the symbols and signs can be difficult to interpret or understand.

Children's experiences of war filter through their minds and feelings in many complicated and unpredictable ways. Their art is no less intense or complex.

Many of the techniques described in this section use art techniques. For this reason we have included guidelines on working with young people's art as a preface to the methods.

For the CAP Project, one of its best experiences have been the local and regional art workshops. We have found this to be a very useful way to encourage young people to examine their lives and to represent them using their wonderful imaginative power to represent their thoughts and ideas. Many of these pictures are included in this manual. The young artists have given their permission to show their artwork. For security and privacy reasons, their names are withheld.

We don't claim to be professional child psychiatrists or art therapists. Instead, our objective is to provide field workers with the tools to increase their capacity to recognize what a child is trying to tell them when she uses certain colours or organizes her drawing in a particular way. This knowledge helps to ensure that programs for war-affected children are responding to their most pressing needs.



ME AND MY WORLD

“A child gets very sad when they have to leave the land. People think that we are young and that we don’t understand what is happening. But we are smarter than that.

Down there in the country you have more liberty, you can come and go at any time. Here in Bogotá it is a lot different. You have to be thinking all the time, of men, of thieves. Everything might be dangerous for you. Children forget about playing and being nice.”

GUIDELINES: ART AS A RESEARCH TOOL



1. UNDERSTAND THE PROCESS

The production of a child's drawing or painting has three inter-related components. The first is the internal conversation they have before and during the production of their pictures. The second is how they choose to represent these ideas to the outside world. The third is the explanation they offer about the meaning of their artwork. All are important factors in the accurate interpretation of a child's art.

Think back to school days. The art teacher asks the class to draw a picture of their summer vacation. Faced with this assignment, students think over the events of their vacation and how to depict those wonderful moments with friends or family.

Every artist goes through a similar process of reflection and selection when beginning a project. What should be included in the picture? What should be given prominence? How should these things be represented? An older or skilled artist considers these and many other points consciously and deliberately. Most of us just choose the topic and plunge in.

An art workshop for war affected children is both similar and completely different than this. The process is the same. However, experiences of war are a long way from summer vacation memories. This has several consequences for the selection process and the results that a child produces.

Try to think of this process from inside the mind of a child who has lived with conflict. A request to "do a picture of your biggest memories" can evoke thoughts and feelings safely stored away. Whether consciously or not, she will be asking herself what she is willing to remember inside these harsh memories. As this internal dialogue takes place, she must also decide just how much she wants to tell others. As long as something is buried inside, there is some control. Displaying her feelings and memories on paper for all to see makes her vulnerable to others' interpretation and reactions.

Signs of this internal dialogue are often evident at the beginning of an art workshop with war-affected young people. Participants will frequently throw out their first paper and start again. Sometimes this is because they are dissatisfied with the results – a frustration we have all experienced. Others will change their mind about the topic. They will want to hide the first picture, complaining that "It isn't right" or "It isn't what I want to do". Other children will disappear for a while and then come back into the workshop ready to participate. Still others will be almost angry at their picture.

This is an important backdrop to understanding a child's artwork. A small sketch or painting represents the merging of two dynamics – her internal discussion about what her memories and feelings against how she decides to represent these ideas to the outside world.

An appreciation for this process underlines the value for individual interviews once the artwork is completed. This allows participants to explain the story and meaning of their pictures. We have found that young people really enjoy this interchange and are disappointed if it is passed over or hurried.

2. AVOID ASSUMPTIONS AND OVER-INTERPRETATION

Try to avoid assumptions about the meaning of children's artwork. This can be difficult, particularly if you know the circumstances of their lives. In working with war affected young people there can be a tendency to interpret everything in terms of misery and unhappiness. However, young people's reactions to situations are often distinct from those of adults. They have a capacity to enjoy life and to seek out ways to be happy, despite the difficulties of their situations.

For example, in a workshop with street children a boy produced a drawing that seemed extremely violent. However, when he was asked for the story of his picture he said, "This was a happy time when we saw clowns acting on the street." And, oh yes, that evening the police did beat them up, but what he liked to remember was the time before that.

What is the solution? Take your cues from the artists and rely on their interpretations. The interview process is vital, as noted above. In this discussion the interviewer should try to avoid leading questions.

3. REDUCE YOUR EXPECTATIONS

Please limit your expectations of the participants' artistic abilities. It is highly unlikely that a potential Bolero or Picasso will be in the group. This is not the point of the exercise. Instead, the participants should see this as an opportunity to enjoy artwork as a way to explore their memories and feelings. What they want to share with others is their decision.

Many children in war situations have few opportunities for education. Even if schools are available, their classes rarely include art lessons. Their capacity to paint or draw is necessarily limited by this lack of training.

There are few things more delightful than watching young people hold a paintbrush for the first time. At the beginning of our painting sessions we often invite participants to "dance" the paintbrush to music. Their obvious pleasure would bring a smile to anyone's face. Just as enjoyable is their excitement at mixing and creating colours.



A girl explains the meaning of the design on her treasure box

All this enthusiasm can translate into powerful and interesting artwork. Again, the interpretation is important – a picture with red all over it might be a depiction of blood from a massacre or it could be because they like seeing that colour on the page.

4. BE GUIDED BY THE PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES

This should be an important reference point in the selection of activities, the structure of the art workshop and the interpretation/debriefing sessions.

While most art workshops are quite flexible, everyone is usually working on the same type of activity. Practically speaking, this is necessary. It is also useful as participants become confused if the workshop has no focus or topic.

This means that the activities must be carefully selected. In CAP workshops we have made mistakes, much to our regret, so want to underline how important this is. Please be guided by the participant's response and quickly change the plan if they seem reluctant or lukewarm at the idea of a particular activity.

One example is the use of what we call story drawings. This activity is frequently used in rehabilitation programs. Typically participants are asked to draw a picture about the most important events in their life. Since most children draw pictures of their biggest memories of the war, these drawings and stories can provide a wealth of information.

Though these story drawings are a useful tool, they should be used cautiously. Even if the request does not include a mention of war, children often respond with pictures of something terrible they have experienced or witnessed. Because they are so eager to please, they may give this picture because they feel that is what the workshop leader wants, not because they want to return to the memory.

Sometimes this activity is just inappropriate. For instance, former boy child soldiers often don't want to make drawings of fighting or ambushes. If asked directly to give these descriptions, they will agree. But if provided the choice, which an art activity should do, their artwork is usually about the day they were abducted or the time they escaped. This resistance to story drawings was also found in workshops in Rwanda. Perhaps in both cases the idea of singling out one particular incident in a wash of horrible moments just makes no sense.

This does not mean that story drawings should never be used but that they, like any activity, must be chosen carefully.



Drawing: When they bombed our village