

# Children's Mental Health Day- Art Action Event Tip Sheet

March 17, 2010

Art Action is a child-centered activity designed to take place on Thursday, May 6, 2010, in observance of National Children's Mental Health Awareness Day. Using the theme "My Feelings are a Work of Art," organizations in communities across the country will lead young children in preschool through 3rd grade in art activities, such as painting or drawing, to initiate conversations between adults and young children about having and expressing feelings.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and its collaborating partner for the Awareness Day Art Action, the American Art Therapy Association (AATA), provides this tip sheet and other web based materials to assist parents, teachers and caregivers in helping children to create art about feelings and conduct age-appropriate conversations with young children about the nature, range, and expression of feelings using art as a tool for dialog.

If you are interested in beginning an art therapy program in your community or for your organization or company, contact a credentialed art therapist through the American Art Therapy Association, [www.americanarttherapyassociation.org](http://www.americanarttherapyassociation.org). Look for the ATR and ATR-BC credentials when selecting a qualified art therapist to help with your program. The American Art Therapy Association represents more than 5,000 members in the US and around the world who work to help improve people's lives through art therapy.

The goals are to

1. Integrate mental health into every environment that impacts child development from birth
2. Nurture the social and emotional well-being of children from birth
3. Look for and discuss milestones of a child's social and emotional development from birth

Positive mental health\* is essential to a child's healthy development from birth.

Messages to convey during community Art Action events:

- Mental health is a part of social and emotional well-being and healthy, positive development beginning from birth.
- Mental health is essential to the overall health of children.
- Children can have serious mental health challenges at a very young age; there are methods, practices, and interventions to address these challenges.

**Why become involved?** Young children in prekindergarten programs are expelled at more than three times the rates of students in grades k-12, while preschoolers in child care centers are expelled at over 13 times the rate. This data illustrates the need to address young children's social-emotional health. By encouraging children

ages 3 to 8 to create artwork that expresses their feelings, the Awareness Day Art Action can help to foster discussion about young children's social-emotional health.

Through fun art activities exemplified in the Art Action events across the country, the positive development of young children is promoted, while creating awareness of the many entities working to enrich the total well-being of young children.

On Thursday, May 6, 2010, Awareness Day activities in communities across the country, including the Nation's capital, will be promoting the fact that positive mental health is essential to a child's healthy development. By joining with parents, educators, caregivers, and others across the country to help young people give a voice to their feelings through art and words, Awareness Day Art Action participants help to demonstrate the wide and diverse network of support for children's mental health and provide the young children in their homes, schools, and communities with tools to encourage their social and emotional development.

**Where do I start?** Please visit the American Art Therapy Association Web site at <http://www.arttherapy.org/chmad.asp> to register for the Awareness Day Art Action to ensure that you receive the materials, resources, and support necessary to participate in this activity. Then start planning your Art Action event.

### **Tips to keep in mind when working with young people\*:**

A piece of artwork is a piece of communication, not a piece of clutter. When a child (or anyone, for that matter) shows you her or his art, here are some guidelines for responding in a way that lets the individual know you are listening to her or him.

DO:

- express appreciation that the work is being shared with you ("It's really great that you wanted to share this with me."). *In doing this you communicate that you are interested in your relationship with the child.*
- accept each piece of art as valid in as-is condition ("I see this must be about something important, or you wouldn't have made art about it."). *In doing this you communicate that you accept the child as having validity and worth.*
- ask the child to discuss the work ("Can you tell me a little about this?"). *In doing this you communicate that you are interested in understanding the child's thoughts, feelings, and perceptions.*
- recognize the effort that went into making the art ("You used up the whole sheet of paper—that really must have taken a lot of work!"). *In doing this you communicate that effort, not ability, is necessary for success.*

## DON'T:

- make light of or ignore the work (“Yeah, yeah, yeah, that’s really nice.”). *In doing this you communicate that the child isn’t important to you.*
- criticize or critique the work or compare it to other work (“Why did you make it look like that when you know you’ve done so much better in the past?”). *In doing this you communicate that the child must meet your standards rather than her or his own.*
- analyze or interpret the work (“I can tell by the colors you used that you must be feeling happy.”). *In doing this you communicate a preference to be perceived as an expert on the child rather than as a helpful resource to her or him.*
- praise the appearance of the work or the artist’s ability (“What a beautiful drawing!”). *In doing this you communicate that it is important for the child to please you rather than be honest with you and that ability, not effort, is what it takes to be successful.*

In short, the items on the DON'T list focus on you, while the items on the DO list focus on the child. Remember: appreciating a child’s efforts, not her or his ability, is what paves the road for good communications.\*

## Tips for working with children who are ill or injured:\*\*

When a child becomes seriously ill or is injured, it usually comes as a bolt out of the blue, disrupting the entire family’s sense of security and competence, not to mention their daily routines! Medical art therapy allows patients and families work creatively within the treatment setting, assisting them to mobilize the hope and resilience they need to recover.

- **Art therapists meet people where they are:** no artistic skill or experience is expected or required.
- **Give the child control over his or her art production:** what to make, what materials to use, whether to keep their art or throw it away, whether to do art at all that day. A child in the hospital gives up so many everyday freedoms that using art therapeutically creates a valuable arena in which to exercise choice and control.
- **Create community:** by working alongside others, the child and family employ familiar skills and strengths, experiencing themselves as normal, capable people instead of in the passive patient role.
- **The Art Therapist enters into a creative partnership with the client in the metaphor of art making.** Finding a creative connection with each individual is the doorway to a healing partnership.

- **Art therapists may use traditional visual art forms** such as painting, sculpture and collage, but they may also help clients explore story, puppet-making, photography, film, fiber-arts, printmaking—whatever avenues catch the imagination of the patient population and is safe, clean and appropriate for the setting.
- When **art therapists are integrated members of the psychosocial team**, they can relay information, assessments and questions from patients and families to medical specialists. Art therapists encourage children to ask questions directly of their doctors and nurses whenever possible, and help facilitate clear communication between patients and their families and care providers. \*\*

\*The DOs and DON'Ts of Responding to Children's Artwork  
Megan L. Van Meter, MA, LPC Intern, ATR-BC  
vanmeterm@hayscisd.net

Medical Art Therapy with Children  
By Tracy Councill, MA, ATR-BC  
www.tracyskids.org

*Information of SAMHSA and the American Art Therapy Association, all rights reserved 2010.*