

Expressive Therapies

Empowering individuals—those living with social, cognitive, emotional, physical, and/or spiritual needs—through music, art, and mental health therapies to improve health and well-being.



Creative Therapies and Adoption

Children who are adopted often present with social, emotional, and behavioral needs. Music therapists and art therapists can provide a variety of creative experiences that support these children and their families in practicing and developing skills that help them to be successful as they learn and grow. This newsletter explores three main areas and how music therapists and art therapists can address those needs.

1

ATTACHMENT

How attachment styles and relationships may be affected

2

FAMILY

How parents, siblings, and their relationships may be affected

3

IDENTITY

How self-identity and self-expression may be affected



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Attachment

A history of trauma and insecurity prior to adoption can have implications on a child's attachment style.

As infants and children, we all form a unique relationship to a primary caregiver, from whom we seek physical and emotional security in response to distress. The impact this has on our development is highly time-sensitive, as even just the first week is crucial to healthy growth. Attachment theory explores the nature of these relationships and attachment style formation based on different factors—such as trauma, stability, and emotional presence—and how these affect our skills and interpersonal relationships as adults.

A secure attachment style generally forms in the context of positive caregiver relationships. The attachment figure is sensitive to the child's needs and supports the child's feelings of worthiness, understanding of others, and their belief that their needs will be met. An insecure attachment style generally refers to a child's perception of how and if their needs will be met and can be either anxious/avoidant, ambivalent/resistant, or disorganized/disoriented.

Adoption itself can be very stressful and complex for any child. This may have a wide array of implications on a child's attachment style, interpersonal and social skills, and regulation skills. Children who have formed insecure attachment may struggle with increased stress and anxiety, low self-esteem, poor regulation skills, and aggressive or withdrawn behaviors. This can also lead to difficulties with executive functioning, cognition, attention, learning, and social relationships.



How can music therapy and art therapy help?

Music therapy and art therapy can serve as effective means for uncovering the complexities of each child's adoption experience and address the needs which may arise with insecure attachment and/or trauma history. Music and art therapies can provide a safe setting with a sense of control for developing trust and practicing social reciprocity skills crucial to the development of healthy relationships and attachments. Creating and experiencing music and art with others naturally encourages reciprocal interaction through: listening, waiting, sharing, taking turns, and accepting/making compliments.

Aggressive and destructive behaviors, often as a result of strong emotions, as well as anxiety and stress reactions are often seen in those with insecure attachment and/or trauma history. Music and art can be used to explore what different emotions feel like, potential causes, and how they can be expressed in a healthy way. Music and art can also be framed and developed as self-regulation and coping strategies for addressing these behaviors, so alternative tools are learned for expressing needs and emotions productively rather than destructively.

Hurwitz, Allison. "Nina and the Bad Animals Who Bite: The Use of Art Therapy with Children in Foster Care." *Creative Arts Therapies Approaches in Adoption and Foster Care: Contemporary Strategies for Working with Individuals and Families*, by Donna J. Betts, Charles C Thomas, 2003, pp. 168-190.

LeMare, Dr. Lucy. "The Importance of Attachment in Adoption." *When Emotional Development Is Delayed | Adoptive Families Association of BC*, www.bcadoption.com/resources/articles/importance-attachment-adoption.

"Trauma's Impact on Attachment." *TeachTrauma*, www.teachtrauma.com/information-about-trauma/traumas-impact-on-attachment/.

MAJOR GOAL AREAS:

- 1) Improving regulation skills, both emotional and physical
- 2) Practicing assertive communication skills
- 3) Improving social skills through neurologic music therapy techniques
- 4) Improving self-esteem and self-expression
- 5) Processing of trauma experiences

Family

The child who is adopted isn't the only one affected by their history.

Prior to adoption and permanent placement with their new family, a child's family can be extremely limited or nonexistent. A lack of feelings of safety/security, insecure attachment to caregiver figures, and a trauma history can all have implications for the child's new family

A child who has learned distorted expectations, perceptions, and responses to the behavior of others may have immense difficulty interpreting and reacting to the behaviors of their new family. They may interpret normal disciplinary behavior as abuse, over- or under-react to emotional stimuli, and misconstrue boundaries and social cues as neglect and insecurity.

This can all amount to strained relations and interactions with new family members. A child may lash out verbally or physically, or push boundaries, in an attempt to establish that their position is secure. Though hurting their family is not the child's intent, family members may

struggle to recognize the child's true need in the face of personal hurt and reactions to such strong, negative outbursts.

How can music therapy and art therapy help?

Music therapy and art therapy provide a safe setting for the adoptive child and their family to engage in the creative process together as a means for developing assertive communication skills and healthy relationships. Experiences focused on creative problem solving help the child and family learn how to overcome obstacles and challenges, and to work together towards a common goal. Communication skills can be learned through art and music, so both the child and family members are able to assertively share their feelings and needs.

Experiences may include: songwriting addressing choices and boundaries, using art and music as healthy coping strategies, collaborative music and art experiences to practice interpersonal interactions and connections, emotional expression, and more!

FEATURE: "CELESTIAL"

Featured in this month's newsletter is a poem written by one of our music therapists, Jennifer LeVasseur. When she's not in the office, Jennifer enjoys putting on some instrumental background music and playing with language. We hope you enjoy "Celestial!"

Check out future newsletters and stay tuned for more featured art, music, and writing from some of our staff and clients!

Celestial

Sometimes I wonder if the stars can breathe—
stuttering gasps of air and light—or if
their words are whispered softly underneath
the quiet stance of lampposts on my street,
the quiet loyal lampposts of my street.

What sickness leaves the light coughing and pale?
As bruises form in gray and cobble the pavement,
the air pulsates with cold, the breath of frail
life. Hazy hours with fewer stars worth saving.
Frail life with fewer stars. Worth saving.

Identity

Experiences prior to adoption can present ongoing challenges for the adoptive child's identity formation.

Our self-identity is our sense of self, our recognition and understanding of who we are and who we want to be. We begin developing our identity very early in life, and it continues to be influenced as we grow. For adoptive children, understanding one's self-identity can be a very confusing and anxiety-filled process.

An adoptive child who has developed an insecure attachment style will expect negativity from others, and by extension may have a very negative sense of self—others do not find me worthy, so why should I believe myself to be so? Similarly, trauma history can drastically impact one's self-identity, creating a fractured and conflicted sense of self in response to past experiences. The challenge after adoption is not only to address the needs that arise from the child's history, but also the child's ability to establish a sense of self-worth and engage in healthy self-expression.

How can music therapy and art therapy help?

Music therapy and art therapy can provide a unique and meaningful medium for exploring self-expression and self-identity.

Both provide a safe space for expressing both a child's past

and present sense of self, and growth into a healthy self-identity. In art therapy, this can include exploration of self-portraits, collages, strengths, symbols, and emotional identification and expression. In music therapy, exploration and growth can be experienced through lyric analysis, songwriting, imagery, improvisation, and emotional identification and expression. The images we use or the lyrics we identify most with can say a lot about our sense of self, even without us realizing.



THANK YOU FOR READING OUR NEWSLETTER!

We appreciate connecting with the community by sharing the specifics of music therapy and art therapy. If you have further inquiries, we highly recommend you visit our website at www.expressivetherapies.net, our Facebook page (Expressive Therapies), the American Music Therapy Association at www.musictherapy.org and the American Art Therapy Association at <https://arttherapy.org/>, or email us at info@expressivetherapies.net.

Take care and be well!

