

Aim: This mixed methods study will examine the impact of the Vasarhelyi method of Child Art Psychotherapy (CAP) on internalising and externalising behaviours in a sample of children involved with Tusla.

Abstract: Children in child welfare services may present with complex experiences of trauma. The Vasarhelyi method of Child Art Psychotherapy (CAP, McGovern et al., 2016) is a non-verbal psychotherapy which facilitates children to explore trauma through art with a trained Art Psychotherapist. This study will examine the effect of CAP on children in child welfare services with internalising and externalising behaviours. Two groups of children (from Dublin North City Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and from Tusla) will contribute to one sample. Data will be collected pre-, during and post-intervention. Quantitative measures completed by guardians include:

- Achenbach Child Behaviour Checklist
- Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation - Outcome Measure
- Assessment Checklist for Children, and the Parent Daily Report Card.

Outcome measures (t-scores) of children with internalising behaviours (indicated by raised CBCL scores) versus externalising behaviours will be compared across the sample to investigate the impact of CAP on internalising and externalising presentations. Post-intervention, a focus group will examine the impact of CAP with a focus on the transferable psychosocial skills obtained through attendance, analysed using Thematic Analysis.

Context: Children in child welfare services may present with complex experiences of trauma, including disruptions to primary caregiver attachments which may be compounded by experiences associated with the care system (Milburn et al., 2008). The mental health presentations of children in care may be more complex, and may include attachment relationship difficulties, self-injurious behaviours, trauma-related anxiety, and conduct difficulties (Tarren-Sweeney et al., 2008).

The Vasarhelyi method of Child Art Psychotherapy (McGovern et al., 2016) is a non-verbal, client-led psychotherapy which facilitates children to explore trauma through art, which is then reviewed with a trained art psychotherapist. The model does not rely on literacy or verbal skills, thus is suitable for children with literacy and learning difficulties (such as inattention and hyperactivity often seen in children in care; Tarren-Sweeney, 2008). The Vasarhelyi method features images as a non-verbal communication; images as a non-linear representation of a temporal event; the provision of 3 semi-structured assessment sessions prior to commencing therapy; and the provision of an emotional 'Empty Space' whereby the Art Therapist may leave the room while the child creates art (Vasarhelyi, 1990). The present study is an effectiveness study to examine the impact of CAP on the emotional and behavioural difficulties of children involved with TUSLA.

McGovern and colleagues (2016) found 75% of art psychotherapy supervisors believed CAP was more effective for internalising than externalising behaviours (n=9). The quantitative study will investigate if child art psychotherapy (CAP) is more effective for children with internalising behaviours than those with externalising behaviours (indicated by raised CBCL scores of somatic problems, social problems, aggressive behaviour, withdrawn/depressed).

Methodology:

Sample: Two groups of children from Dublin North City Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and from Tusla who have been referred to Child Art Psychotherapy (CAP), will contribute to one sample. Children referred to child art psychotherapy who are in the clinical range for any disorder using the screening CBCL completed by their parents or foster parents will be admitted to the research study.

Design: Children referred to CAP can attend 3 introductory sessions in Child Art Psychotherapy. They will be asked to create an image of their earliest memory, an image of their family and of themselves, which may demonstrate the child's core pain and presenting difficulties. After 3 sessions, children are invited to commit to attending further weekly sessions of CAP or to cease attending. The child engages in CAP, until therapist and child agree that therapy is complete, for an average of 14 sessions (Saba et al., 2016).

Quantitative measures will be completed pre-therapy, during therapy, at end of therapy and 6 months post-therapy. The guardians of the participating child will be telephoned by the art psychotherapy students or social workers to collect the data (Parent Daily Report Card). Routine data collected by the service will also be analysed.

Analysis: Data will be assessed using SPSS. Outcome measures (t-scores) of children with internalising behaviours (indicated by raised CBCL scores) versus externalising behaviours will be compared across the sample to investigate the impact of CAP on internalising and externalising presentations. Qualitative study: Post-intervention, a focus group held in Tusla will examine the impact of child art psychotherapy on children's lives outside of the therapy room, with a focus on the transferable psychosocial skills obtained through attendance at CAP. Qualitative data will be analysed using Thematic Analysis.

Implications:

The Vasarhelyi method of CAP has been commonly used in Ireland for 14 years. It is in Tusla as part of the Child Art Psychotherapy Evaluation (CAPE) project since 2016. The current project seeks to investigate its effectiveness. The effectiveness of art therapy, specifically CAP, is a relatively under-studied (McGovern et al., 2016; Saba et al., 2016). This is apparently the first known study known on the use of CAP with children involved with child protection services.

Tusla reported there were 6,189 children in care in Ireland (2017). Of these, 92% were cared for in foster placements. There is little Irish research regarding the mental health needs of children in care and CAMHS services (Lucey, 2013) therefore this study may contribute to the body of knowledge for this population.

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