

TAFFI Art Therapy Group

(Therapy, Art, Friendship and Flourishing in Illness)

An art therapy support group and novel approach to give voice to children living with chronic illness

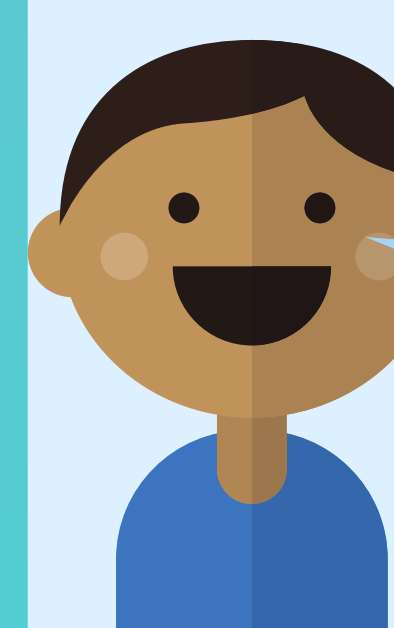
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"I'm more confident and I'm much better with making friends. It's calmed me down, helped me with my chronic illness. It's a very good group and you should go because it helps you to be calm and forget about your chronic illness, and makes you overcome it like, eh, gain power over it and you can just forget about it."



Peter

10-year-old patient with Epilepsy
Peter created an eagle (pictured left) from clay and said it represented freedom. He spoke of his favourite kind of day being one where he was free to run around and play with his friends without any cares or worries. He said there were days where he worried a lot about his illness and having seizures. He felt his friends had more freedom because they didn't have these types of worries, but that he felt he had more control over his illness now.



"I have calmed down a lot more. I usually get angry a lot and now I come home from this and I feel happier. [Making art in the group] is very fun, and like yeah it helped, like in this picture it made me feel happy that I was getting revenge [on diabetes]. I would tell another patient to join [the group], definitely, it's very fun!"

Jacob

10-year-old patient with Type 1 Diabetes
In this image Jacob has depicted diabetes as a character called the Dark Overlord of Diabetes, describing him as a "mean bully". Jacob has drawn himself attacking the Dark Overlord with an insulin syringe to try to save the world from diabetes. He spoke of hoping that they would one day find a cure. Through expressing diabetes as a dark and malevolent character he manages to convey his frustration with his condition as well as projecting his vengeful feelings onto his image.



Background

Many children living with chronic conditions struggle psychologically and report feeling different to their peers.

What we did

An eight-week long art therapy group was held at a local art centre near the children's hospital called the TAFFI Art Therapy Group (Therapy, Art, Friendship and Flourishing in Illness). Art therapy helps children to express difficult feelings about their life experiences within a therapeutic relationship. The art therapy group combined art and creative self-expression with mindfulness exercises to help children explore their feelings and develop coping skills.

Who took part

Thirteen children (7 boys and 6 girls) living with chronic conditions such as diabetes, epilepsy, and cystic fibrosis have participated in the first two TAFFI Art Therapy Groups. We hope that another 40 children will participate over the course of this PhD study.

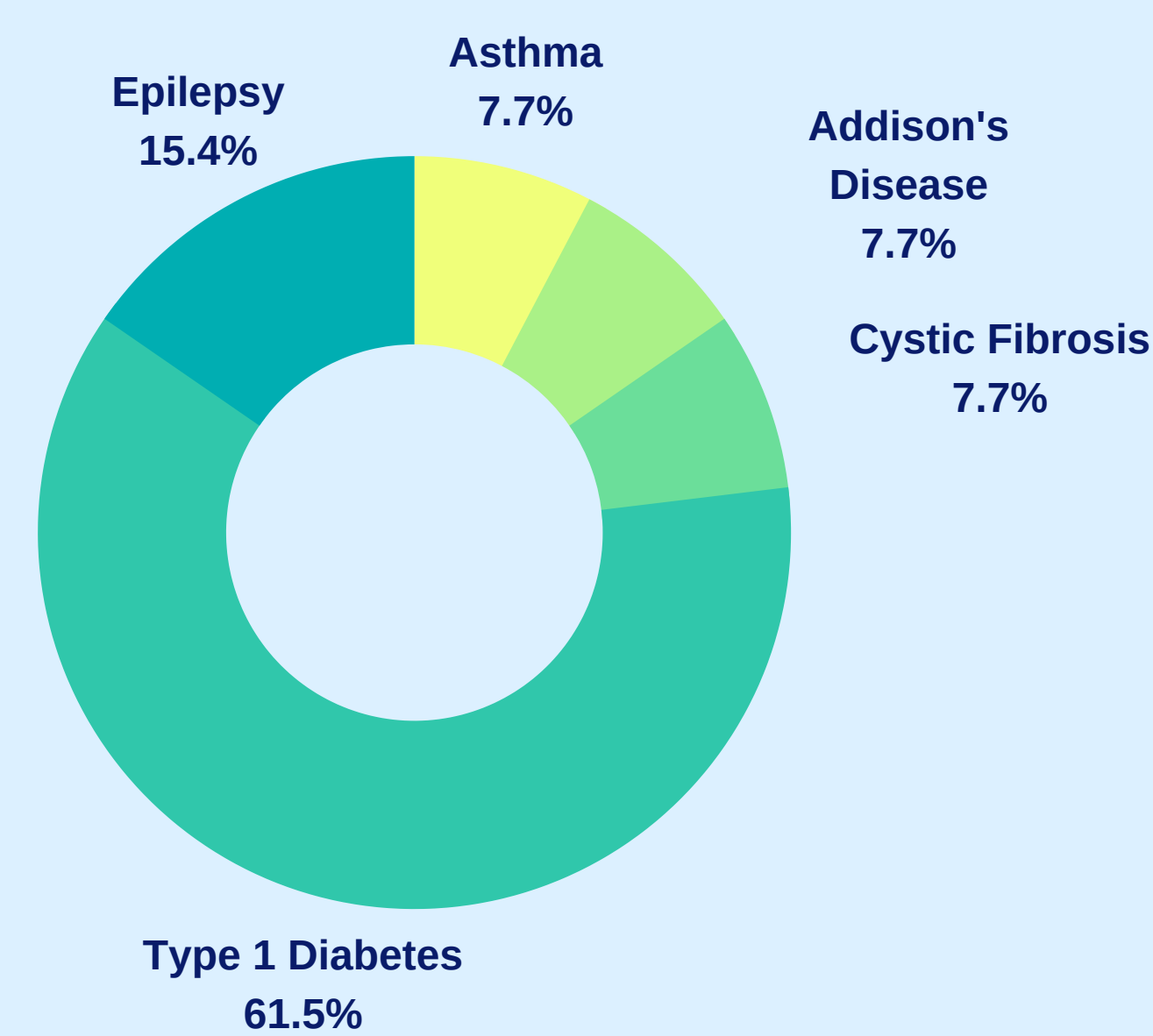
How we collected our data

The children completed questionnaires before and after the group to see if the group helped them cope better or feel differently about having a chronic illness.

Focus groups were held after the art therapy group finished in which parents and children could talk about their experience of the group and say what they found helpful or what they felt could be improved.

We also used Audio Image Recordings (AIRs) to capture what changes the children noticed in themselves and what caused those changes to occur. Each child completed a Reflect Interview (RI) in which they chose two artworks they made during the group to talk about with the art therapist as well as their experience of the group. The recording of this interview is played over a still image of the artworks to create the Audio Image Recording. Through this novel and creative research method each, children's individual experience can be both seen and heard through their art expression and in their own words.

Breakdown of chronic conditions of participants:



Weekly Themes

Week 1	My Inner and Outer World
Week 2	Illness Perception
Week 3	Feelings in the Body
Week 4	Character Strengths
Week 5	Coping Skills
Week 6	Non-Directive
Week 7	A Favourite Kind of Day
Week 8	Group Mandala



"Well it's helped me be happier, and, em, less nervous and calm... It's made me do a lot more art since, em, it's made me like [art] a lot more and helped me express my feelings in different ways"

Jamie

10-year-old patient with Epilepsy and Dyspraxia

Jamie became completely absorbed in making a tiny little puppet called 'Steve' (pictured left). He spent time carefully colouring the head in with a black marker and at one point the lines appeared almost like neural networks in the brain, a reference perhaps to his epilepsy. Jamie acted out a scene, hiding below table and told the group "I'm Steve, I'm from space; from the moon, or from the sun - I get confused!" Being from outer space conveyed his sense of feeling different, however, Jamie's way of coping was through humour, through which he found wonderful acceptance in the group. Jamie was very attached to 'Steve' and he included him like a little mascot in other artworks. This little puppet could be viewed as an extension of Jamie himself, a symbolic representation of him, his experiences and his ways of coping.

Aoife

10-year-old patient with Cystic Fibrosis

This is Aoife's 'Super Strengths Superhero', which she decorated with the following symbols to represent her character strengths that help her cope with her condition:

- Purple represents 'enthusiastic': Aoife told the group she needs energy and enthusiasm to keep up her physiotherapy regime and exercise for her lungs.
- Silver represents 'artistic': She highlighted using art "to forget about stuff" especially during long hospital stays.
- Gold represents 'doing good deeds': She spoke of wanting to help others who have a chronic illness because she knows how it feels

"The group has definitely helped me, because it made me realise that I'm not the only one in the world with like a chronic illness, and, eh, it also taught me that I can say what I want, as in express my feelings. And, like, my mom said that she's noticed that I don't make a fuss when I have to do my nebulizers... It really helped, and if you really like doing art then you will also really like this. It, like, it teaches you how to calm down when your angry. And you meet new people with, maybe, maybe with the same like chronic illness or with something else, and you learn about them as well."



Jessica

10-year-old patient with Type 1 Diabetes

Pictured on the right is Jessica's 'Feelings X-Ray'. The patients did a mindful body scan to become aware of emotions and sensations in their bodies. They then had someone trace around their bodies and filled in their body outlines with colours, shapes and symbols to represent the feelings they noticed inside their bodies



"Before I came here I didn't really know anybody else [with diabetes], not my age, I knew adults, so I felt kind of lonely. Now I know other people my age, and stuff, and now I don't feel lonely or alone. The art helps you to express your feelings. It's really fun and you meet other people that know how you feel and understand you"



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