

Create Together: Is art therapy intervention associated with objective change in at risk attachment relationships?

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ATTACHMENT AND ART THERAPY

- The quality of the loving bond between caregivers and infants in the first three years of life lays the foundations good mental health.
- Insecure attachment is associated with disruption in childhood cognitive and behavioural development (Belsky, 2001), and strongly predictive of a wide variety of mental illnesses including personality disorders, depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, PTSD and suicidal ideation and self-harm in adulthood (e.g. see Weich et al, 2009).
- Crucially, the quality of early relationships are open to change (Van IJzendoorn et al, 1995). For example, art therapy interventions can be used to help parents to become emotionally available and to support them in developing attuned responses to their infants (e.g. Hosea, 2006). These interventions can be timed to tackle 'at risk' attachment in its forming stages, so to prevent future negative consequences of insecure attachment.
- Art making is ideal for enabling and encouraging infant-centred interactions because the experience of trying new materials naturally offers opportunities for regulation, positive touch and to speculate about the infant's aims and feelings (Armstrong, 2013).
- Art therapy interventions have been found to improve mothers' perception of their relationship with their child (Armstrong, 2013; Armstrong and Howatson, 2015), and maternal mental health (Arroyo and Fowler, 2013; Ponteri, 2001). However, all previous art therapy attachment intervention studies have focused only on perceived change in the parent-infant relationship.

'CREATE TOGETHER' AIMS

- The aim of the current research is to balance a case study perspective with objective observations of the mother-infant relationship as it changes over the course of art therapy intervention.
- To achieve this we supplement maternal report measures with a qualitative coding system designed to measure changes in behavioural dimensions of parent-infant interaction associated with secure attachment.
- In addition to improvements in maternal mental health and mother's perception of the relationship, we expected to observe an increase in positive attachment behaviours across the course of the art therapy. This would indicate an objective change in the relationship associated with art therapy intervention, encompassing the child's experience.

'CREATE TOGETHER' INTERVENTION

- 10 mothers identified as having 'at risk' attachment with their infants (age range 1 month – 20 months) participated in an art therapy intervention, attending a 1.5 hour art therapy session weekly for 12 consecutive weeks.



- During the sessions mothers were supported by an art therapist and a facilitator to make artwork with their infants, clean up afterwards, and socialise with other group members. All of the sessions were recorded by digital video camera.

'CREATE TOGETHER' MEASUREMENT

- Mothers completed questionnaires pre and post intervention to measure their perception of the quality of the relationship with their infant (MORS - Mothers' Object Relations Scale) and their own mental wellbeing (WEMWBS - The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale).



- 10 minute video clips from the beginning, middle and last session of the intervention were also coded using Behavioural Observation Research Interactive Software (BORIS; Friard & Gamba, 2016) to record the duration of 8 markers of positive attachment shown in Figure 2.

'CREATE TOGETHER' RESULTS

- As shown in Figure 1, maternal mental wellbeing and perceived relationship quality increased following intervention.

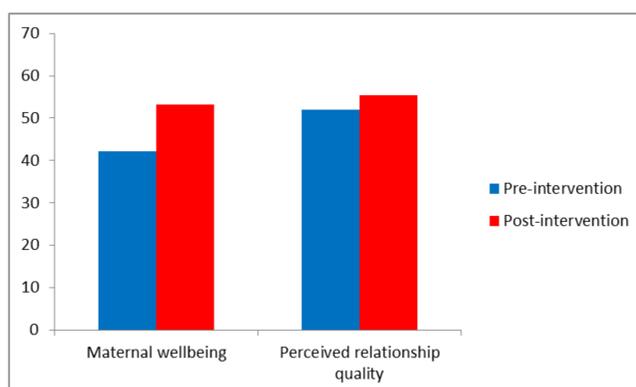


Figure 1: Change in maternal wellbeing and perceived relationship quality during intervention

- The improvement in maternal mental wellbeing was large and significant ($F(1,9)=40.06$, $p<.001$, partial $\eta^2 =.82$), whereas the improvement in maternal perception of the relationship was medium, and fell short of significance ($F(1,9)=4.40$, $p=.065$, partial $\eta^2 =.33$).
- As shown in Figure 2, the total duration of positive attachment behaviours showed a substantial increase over the course of the therapy ($F(2, 18) = 6.52$, $p = .007$, partial $\eta^2 =.42$). Post hoc comparisons indicated that there was a significant improvement between the beginning and end of the intervention ($p = .035$).
- However, the only individual attachment behaviour to show a significant change was the duration of joint goals ($F(2,18)=4.89$, $p=.020$, partial $\eta^2 =.49$). Post hoc comparisons indicated that joint goals increased significantly from T1 to T3 ($p = .033$) and T2 to T3 ($p = .022$).

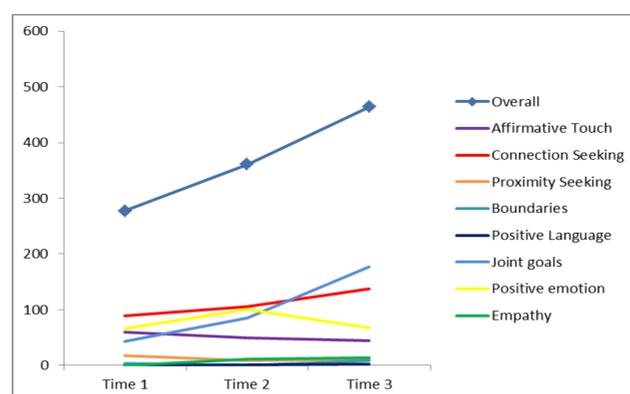


Figure 2: Change in positive attachment behaviours during intervention

'CREATE TOGETHER' CASE STUDY

- Sarah# had a history of social work involvement, and had lost a previous child to the care system. Referred with suspected PND, she was initially quite flat emotionally and very passive with her baby and in her interactions with other group members.



- Engaging in art making resulted in Sarah initiating physical engagement with her baby. The therapist was then able to draw Sarah's attention to her baby's positive reactions to her, and cues for connection seeking. Such acknowledgment helped Sarah to realise and be reinforced by her child's affection and need for her.

- Interaction with other mothers was also beneficial for Sarah, enabling her to build friendships with peers, and helping her to realise that motherhood is challenging for everyone.

- By the end of the intervention, Sarah appeared happier and more enthusiastic, at ease around other mothers, and more talkative and interactive with her baby. She seemed to feel safe within the group, sharing more of herself and her life, even arranging to continue to socialise with the other mothers.

#Name changed to protect anonymity

'CREATE TOGETHER' CONCLUSIONS

- As in previous studies, art therapy intervention was associated with positive changes in maternal mental health and maternal perceptions of the mother-infant relationship.
- Crucially, we also found a significant increase in the number of positive attachment behaviours witnessed across the course of the therapy.
- At the beginning of the intervention mother and infants spent less than 50% of the time period sampled engaged in positive attachment behaviours; this rose to 77% of the time by the end of the intervention. Engagement in joint goals increased four fold in the same timeframe.
- Although compromised by low power, these results provide the first evidence to suggest that art therapy intervention brings about an objective improvement in the quality of mother-infant interactions, such that a constellation of behaviours associated with secure attachment increase.
- In addition to replicating this result with a larger sample size and control group, future research should aim to identify the mechanism by which art therapy supports attachment relevant behaviours. It will also be important to determine if changes in behaviour observed within the sessions extend to mother-infant interactions beyond the group.

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