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**newsletter**

The field of art therapy is a developing entity that is constantly changing and creating unique ways to help people using art as a life enhancing medium.

A relatively new program which utilizes components of art therapy to help children in a school setting is called Art Expression, Incorporated. It is an inclusive after school social skills program that utilizes group therapy techniques and art. It is taught by certified art therapists, school counselors, learning support teachers, teachers, and volunteers at the elementary and middle school levels. The program also provides opportunities for high school students to volunteer as mentors for younger peers.

James and Angela Lowden established a foundation supporting the visual arts in 2001. The foundation was created as a result of Angela Lowden's love of children and her passion for art. The Lowdens then partnered with Mt. Lebanon School District, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to complete their vision of the program. The unique qualities of the Art Expression program are that it was fully funded and created by the Lowdens in collaboration with the Mt. Lebanon School District. Due to the great success of the Art Expression program, the Mt. Lebanon School District has implemented the program in seven elementary schools and two middle schools. In 2007, Mt. Lebanon School District agreed to share the expenses related to the program through the 2009-2011 school years.

As a result of its successes Art Expression became a nonprofit organization in 2007. Its goal is to expand the program to reach more children. Currently, Art Expression is conducted in two school systems and the organization has been contacted by others who have expressed interest in implementing the program in the coming school year.

At the outset of fall and spring term, an introductory letter is sent to the parents of a specific grade level. A meeting occurs between school faculty and parents to review the program as well as complete the proper paperwork, including releases for artwork. The program runs from approximately 3:30 until 5:00 pm one day a week for six weeks. The

average size of the groups varies; however it has been found to be most effective with small groups of 12 to 15 students. Art Expression is an inclusive program; students are enrolled from both regular and special education classrooms. Special education students include those having various needs, most importantly the need for positive social skills in a group setting. Regular education students may also demonstrate a need for positive social skills development.

**Goals**

The five primary goals of the Art Expression program are addressed over each six week session through selected art activities. These goals are enforced, evaluated, and encouraged

**Goal 3** – To utilize problem-solving strategies to reach an appropriate resolution, as it relates to projects and interactions. This is achieved by showing the ability to identify and communicate a problem, create an appropriate plan of response, attempt the plan and/or seek assistance, and evaluate the outcome.

**Goal 4** – To demonstrate an increase in tolerance for frustrations experienced in a group setting. The art therapist and school faculty encourage students to recognize and communicate the onset and cause of the frustration and use problem-solving strategies to help them manage.

**Goal 5** - To encourage the students to establish independence by putting themselves forward in an appropriate manner, which includes self-initiated appropriate leadership within the group.

**Structure**

The Art Expression program has an elementary and middle school format. The elementary format is directive in nature. The art therapist develops directives to address the five program goals. Some effective directives used include murals on a variety of topics, worry beads, hope boxes, and construction of doodle diaries. Keeping in mind the goals of the program, the creation of masks



*Feeling Mask*



*Mt. Lebanon School District Emotive Mask project*

with each student interaction in every session.

**Goal 1** - To demonstrate an increase in self-esteem, as evidenced by positive statements about oneself and one's work along with regular self-assessment of personal accomplishments.

**Goal 2** – To develop and enhance social skills through group participation. The art therapist reinforces students' demonstration of respect by sharing materials, ideas, and personal space.

have been found to be effective with students. In one such project, students were randomly assigned a feeling and then created an emotive mask which expressed this feeling using plastic milk containers, paper-mache, paint, and various materials.

The middle school program is based upon an open studio approach. The students use a self-directive method to meet the goals of the program. The art therapist helps the students

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## ART EXPRESSION INCORPORATED - AN INNOVATIVE SCHOOL BASED APPROACH — CONTINUED

by assisting with technical difficulties, guiding students in brainstorming project ideas, and encouraging interaction between peers. Approaches in both elementary and middle school levels focus on the process of creating art rather than the final product.

### Testimonial: Elliot's Story

Elliot, a fourth grade transfer student from a local school, was quiet, reserved, and appeared to carry the weight of the world on

his shoulders. With his school counselor's encouragement, Elliot joined the Art Expression. During one particular session, the students' project was to create a family crest. This project called for cardboard and drawing materials. Elliot created a pizza for his family crest. When asked why he created a pizza,

### Final Thoughts

Elliot stated, "My father has a brain tumor and my mother has to work two jobs; sometimes I have to cook dinner, I'm not a very good cook but I do make great pizza." The class and staff then knew Elliot's story.

Art Expression is an opportunity for personal expression. A variety of students may benefit from this program ranging from those who simply need opportunities

**A variety of students may benefit from this program ranging from those who simply need opportunities to learn about themselves to those who are disconnected and may resort to violence in the academic environment.**

to learn about themselves to those who are disconnected and may resort to violence in the academic environment. For more information, please visit Art Expression Incorporated's web site at [www.artexpressioninc.org](http://www.artexpressioninc.org) or email Lisa Wright at [lwright580@hotmail.com](mailto:lwright580@hotmail.com). ■

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