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Artistic Expression as a Pathway to Mental Wellness

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Abstract

Children in low-income communities do not have ways to express their feelings and emotions. Nueva Vista is a non-profit organization in the community of Santa Cruz that provides a variety of services including homework club that serve the communities around Santa Cruz County. The project is a series of workshops in partnership with Artistic Expression as a Pathway to Mental Wellness to give children who are in middle school and high school that come to homework club a way to use art to better their mental health and let their feelings out through their artwork. The workshops focus on the different types of contributing factors like childhood trauma, and lack of support. Artistic Expression as a Pathway to Mental Wellness will help decrease the consequences like getting involved in violence, developing more mental health problems, and death from arising.

Keywords: Mental Health, Expression, Communities, Children, Resources

Agency & Communities Served

Nueva Vista is a non-profit organization located in Santa Cruz, California. There are many different offices throughout the county that focus on different things. Their mission is “to deliver essential services, provide equitable access to resources, and advocate for health and dignity across every stage of life” (Community Bridges, n.d., para. 1). The programs give community members access to transportation, healthy food, health care, and senior adult day health care. They offer crisis support, case management services, early education, grade school tutoring, as well as classes in breastfeeding, nutrition, parenting, and literacy. They serve many local children, families, and seniors each year around the Santa Cruz county communities with many of them being low-income families. Many of those people that Nueva Vista helps live in the beach flats area, around the beach flats center twenty-seven percent are families living there. Over the Santa Cruz community the median household income in 2019 was \$90,855 for all of Santa Cruz, just in the beach flats area alone the median household income was \$26,642 which means around \$2,220 monthly income (City Data, n.d.).

At the beach flats center we work with children that are in elementary to high school. There are many services that the center offers to those students who come to homework club. Some of those services that they provide are, homework tutoring with a one on one homework volunteer, ocean scholars which is done during spring break, summer fun which is like summer camp during the day for the children, friday movie nights and other events/ services. Many of the children that come to the beach flats center come from low income families or families that do not have much. They do not have the right resources to help with their mental health which leads to them holding onto their feelings and emotions.

Problem Model Background and Literature Review

Problem Statement

Living in low income households and poverty there is a high chance for poor health and mental health problems. There are many children living in low income communities who do not have the right resources to better their mental health to feel comfortable expressing their emotions (Hodgkinson et al., 2017). In these low income communities they do not have access to get mental health help but they experience violence, unemployment, and poor living conditions. Dealing with those types of stressors at a young age in life can lead to anxiety and depression (Compare et al., 2014). If there was a chance to improve the quality of life in low income communities and provide more access to mental health resources and programs there would be fewer children who do not feel comfortable asking for help or explaining their emotions. Please see the problem model below in Figure 1 to view contributing factors to children who are in low income communities not having ways to express their feelings or emotions and the consequences.

Figure 1: Problem Model

Contributing Factors	Problem	Consequences
Childhood trauma	Children in low income communities not having the right resources to express their feelings and emotions	Get involved in drugs
Lack of parental guidance and support		Mental health problems/ Death

Contributing Factors

Childhood Trauma

Trauma is an event that no child should go through. The way that trauma affects a developing brain through its cognitive and emotional development can lead to many problems in the future (Downey & Crummy, 2021). There are so many different ways that trauma can occur; through child abuse by parent or caregiver, sexual abuse, malnourishment, or even emotional abuse. When a child is being abused by a parent or guardian it causes a mistrust in their belief in protection, which can prompt hesitation in being emotional leading to mental health problems like anxiety and depression (Downey & Crummy, 2021).

Children who have experienced complex trauma may find it challenging to recognize, communicate and regulate their emotions (Peterson, 2018). When a child is dealing with a trauma that is so big and does not have the right ways to communicate or even recognize their emotions it can lead to depression, anxiety, and even anger. They might internalize or externalize these reactions and display unpredictable or explosive emotional responses, such as trembling, sadness, anger, or avoidance. A child's environment might be filled with the traumatic experiences that a child is facing which will make it difficult for them to calm down if they are having an episode. Even interactions with other people can trigger them because they have in their mind not to trust anyone and the world around them is a dangerous place (Peterson, 2018).

Lack of Parental Knowledge and Support

There is no doubt that most parents want their child/ children to succeed in life, but there are many parents who do realize the impact that they play in a child's life. Having the role of the parents in a child's life is very crucial especially during the younger developmental stages. Parents impact children's personality and psychosocial well-being (Fatima et al., 2021). Most do not know how much children pay attention to situations that are going on in their lives. Children

are like sponges, they absorb most of what is around them, including their parents' emotions. When a child's parent is having poor mental health it can relate in many different ways their child is having poor mental health as well (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). A majority of the time if a parent is struggling with their own mental health and not seeking the care they need for themselves, it is most likely they are not finding help and resources for their children who are struggling with mental health problems as well. Parents, at times, do not know what signs to look for or recognize when they have a child who is struggling with mental health. Most of the time their child does not express mental health struggles to their parents either which leaves the parent not knowing. When parents do not have the correct resources or know what to do in their situations, they tend to do nothing especially in Hispanic/ low income households.

In today's world there are about 57 million of latinos/hispanics living in the United States with many of them struggling with language barriers that can affect seeking help for mental health (Umpierre et al., 2014). Not being able to seek mental health help means that parents have to find another way to deal with those issues which leads most of them not talking about it simply because of the culture. There have always been a large number of children who are raised in a Hispanic household around the Hispanic culture who struggle with showing their emotions merely because their parents do not recognize or express emotions. The children in the household learn things from their parents. In most Hispanic cultures, the adults in the family do not show their emotions. They were taught from their parents and other elders around them that as adults they do not show what they are feeling (Ramos, 2022) which can lead to many consequences later on in life, like using substances to cope and developing more mental health problems.

Consequences

Get Involved in Drugs

Mental health disorders go hand in hand with substance abuse. Many times using drugs and getting involved in drugs is the only way that a person who is struggling with certain mental health issues can cope. Studies that have been performed by the national institute of mental health have shown people who are struggling with mental health disorders, like depression, anxiety and PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) are more inclined to use drugs and alcohol to cope (National Institute of Mental Health, 2023). Having difficulties with emotional regulation can contribute to the initiation of drug use as a way to cope with the negative emotions that a person is feeling (Kober, 2014). Many drugs are very addictive meaning that using a substance once to cope, can lead to using over and over and experimenting with other substances because they enjoy the way that the drug makes them feel (*The Connection between Emotional Dysregulation and Drug Addiction | Mental Health Blog, 2020*). Becoming addicted to substances as a way to cope can lead to many horrible things developing like more mental health problems in life and even death.

Mental Health Problems/ Death

Children who suppress their emotions tend to develop more mental health problems like depression and physical disorders (Compare et al., 2014). There are so many children who suppress their emotions because they do not feel like they have anyone to talk to or simply do not know how to communicate what they are feeling. When a child holds onto those emotions, it leads to stress which can progress into depression and different mental health problems in the future (Cleveland Clinic, 2015).

In many cases the worst outcome of children who are dealing with emotional suppression and other mental health disorders is death. When a child is dealing with such bad mental health and they do not feel like they have anyone to talk to or help them, they can fall into deep depression to the point where they want to take their own life. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for people ages ten to thirty-four (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). When a person commits suicide there are many steps that the police take to determine the cause of death. They perform a psychological autopsy to determine the mental health state of the deceased. In most cases when a psychological autopsy is performed, it is identified that mental health disorders like depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, alcohol and substance use disorders are the main factors for committing suicide. The article says, "Every year, about 800 000 people commit suicide, 86% of whom are in low-income and middle-income countries, and more than half of whom are aged between 15 and 44 years" (Prince et al, 2007).

Project Description and Implementation Process

Project Proposal

Once a week at the center during teen group and after tutoring for the younger children we will have an hour long art therapy session where I will facilitate a therapeutic art project that I have learned from a professional mental health worker to help the children learn how to use art as a way of expression. Each project will be at a different level and hit different topics that the children might be dealing with like death, self confidence, family issues, trust and so many more. I will be there walking each of the students through the art project as well as partaking in the project myself. Every week I will hand out a questionnaire at the beginning of the session and at the end of the session to measure if there was any impact on the children's mental health. During

the session I will take notes on things that I find, as well as after reviewing the questionnaire over to gather my results.

Project Justification & Benefits

The primary goal for this proposed project is to give the opportunity for the children that come to the center to use art therapy as a creative and therapeutic experience to express themselves through the art projects they create. When having a parent/s who does not have the right resources or guidance to support their child when they are dealing with mental health issues it can lead to the children not feeling like it is okay for them to express the way they are feeling and talk about their emotions with their parents or adults. Many of the children that come to the center are at the age where they are figuring themselves out and have expressed that they do not feel like they have someone to talk to about the things that are going on in their lives. This project will also give the children resources like ways to better communicate with their parents about their emotions, being able to create an art piece to explain how they are feeling and many other resources. Some of the benefits that this project will provide is giving the opportunity to the children at the center to finally have a therapeutic way to express their emotions to better their mental health. It will also help build the community by offering this program to help the children around the community better their mental health and even teach parents how to help their children who are struggling with mental health through this project. For each of the workshops I asked a specialist in children's mental health for recommended art projects that would target different troubles that they were having. They could then take what they learned in the workshops home with them and use those resources/ tactics when they are struggling with their mental health.

Expected Outcomes

The expected outcome is to help children in low income communities that come to the beach flats center to learn how to express their emotions and feelings through a different way than talking. The expected number of participants is the teen group that I work with on Thursday which is five students who come for tutoring. The way that I will be measuring if these workshops have helped in any way for children's mental health is through a questionnaire that will be passed out at the beginning and the end of the workshops.

Assessment Plan

Prior to the mental health art therapy workshop the children would be given a questionnaire with a number of questions related to mental health to be filled out. The surveys would be used for keeping record of who was there and used to measure their process throughout the workshops. After each session with the participants they would be asked a number of questions related to the workshop that we did that day to see how the workshop had an impact on their beginning answers to the survey they were given at the beginning of the workshop. At the end of the second month on the last day of the workshop, the children were given the same questionnaire that they received at the first workshop to be filled out after their session. I then looked at both of those questionnaires to see how the workshop had helped the children in expressing their feelings and emotions.

Implementation Process

At Nueva Vista after tutoring on Thursdays we will have Ana from Walnut Avenue Women's and Family Center come in and do different activities with the children at the center. This project will be based on some of the needs of the children that I can pinpoint from how they answer the questionnaire that was given to them. I talked to my mentor and the other advocate at the center about the project. They agreed that it would be a good project to implement at the

center. It started off being a once a month project we did during September through December. I noticed that not as many teens were showing up to the activity when we were doing it once a month with the younger children. However, when we had Ana from Walnut Avenue come into the teen group after tutoring they would stay. So, I decided to make the project more of a weekly activity with the teens during the months of February through the end of March because they seem to need the help and resources more. Once tutoring is over at five o'clock, we begin the art therapy workshop. It lasts for about an hour from five to six. Once I put all the findings together, I will talk to my mentor and the other advocate at the center about how the workshop went and if it was an effective workshop. Please see appendix A for more details on the implementation plan.

Project Results

By implementing Artistic Expression as a Pathway to Mental Wellness at Nueva Vista it has helped the children at the center learn that art is a good way to let their expressions free and how to use art as communication when they are going through hard times. With the success of the workshops, more children around the Santa Cruz community can start to learn more about how art can be used for bettering mental health.

Before we could start the workshops, we needed to know more about the mental health of the children that come to the center. To do so there was a questionnaire passed out a week before the first workshop to understand some of the problems they were facing and felt they could not talk to their parents or teachers about. After that first questionnaire was filled out around the three workshops, another questionnaire with similar but different questions was passed out to see the progress of the workshop and if it was helping or not. Some of those questions included; How are we feeling today? What things do you do that make you feel better when you're having a bad day? When you are having a tough time with something, who do you talk to about

it?questions that are based on mental health so that I can see where they needed help the most. Majority of the students answered at first that they did not need help with their mental health but that was because they didn't know what was classified as mental health, the end result from the majority of answers to the questionnaire was that they did need help. On the last workshop after the children completed their art project for that day another questionnaire was passed out that had the same questions as the first questionnaire with a couple added to get results regarding whether or not these workshops should continue.

After taking a look at all of the questionnaires that were given to the students, I was able to see if the Artistic Expression as a Pathway to Mental Wellness workshops was a success or a failure. At the beginning of the first workshop there were two out of the five students who did not fully understand some of the questions that were being asked and so they asked for clarification. Once they were told what the questions meant they were able to answer them. In response to the questions, one of the five said that they needed a lot of resources for mental health and were willing to get the help that they needed by participating in the workshops. Two out of the five did not seem to need much help in finding resources for mental health but were still willing to participate. After comparing all three of the questionnaires at the end, the results were not what I expected in a good way. The children who did not seem to need the workshops seemed to benefit from the workshops more than I anticipated. They really got in tune with their mental health and let their feelings come out. One of the questions that was asked was if they would like the workshops to continue. All of the children answered yes and said that they would like it to continue and enjoyed it.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The Artistic Expression as a Pathway to Mental Wellness program will provide a great resource for parents and children to access mental health help. I have observed that many parents do not realize that their child is struggling with their mental health because they either do not know what the signs are or merely just do not know the resources that are around the county that can help. The questionnaire that each student filled out indicated that the Artistic Expression as a Pathway to Mental Wellness workshops gave five out of five students the chance to learn a new system to help them. The students said that they would love to take this workshop if it continued.

When looking back at Artistic Expression as a Pathway to Mental Wellness workshops, there could be some improvements. One of those improvements is making it more known about the workshops happening to get more students involved who need it. A way that Nueva Vista could do this is by creating a social media page on instagram or tik tok that talks about the different resources that they provide and more information about the mental health workshops that have happened. When the workshops happened they usually took place after tutoring/ homework club so only the students that came to that would participate. With the feedback from the students that did the workshops many of them said they would like to see the workshops continue because they felt like it helped them. If the workshops were to continue it would really benefit many of the children around the Santa Cruz county communities.

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Appendix A

Project Implementation Plan

Tasks	Timeline	Parties Involved	Materials/ Services needed	Deliverables/ Completed Project
Talked to mentor about capstone ideas	December 2022	Meridith Cook (mentor)	A list of needs for the beach flats center	Meeting
Got approval for capstone idea	January 2023	Meridith Cook and Barbara Sliverthorne (instructor)	N/A	Approval
Talked with the advocate at the center about dates for the project to happen	January 2023	Ivonne Silva (Advocate)]	Calendar	Meeting with idea of dates
Researched art therapy activities and talked to art therapists about some activities	January and February 2023	Me	Internet and Connections with people around town	Emails
Put together a list of activities that I will use at the center	First week of February	Me	Internet	Summary of research found
Created the survey to measure what needs are needed	February 9, 2023	Me	Online document, print out	Questionnaire
Started to implement the project by handing out the survey and starting the activities	February 16, 2023	Me and Students at the center	Questionnaire handout, paper, art supplies	N/A

Collected the data from the surveys and notes from after the sessions	April 6, 2023	Me and students at the center	Questionnaire and online document	Questionnaire
Look over the questionnaire to review the data collected	April 6, 2023	Me	Google document and beach flats center	
Present all the work and paper to my fellow mentors/advocates at the center	May 2023	Me, Barbara Silverthorne, Meredith Cook and CSUMB students	Paper, handouts, graphs, powerpoint	Presentation and paper