

Sculpey - Art Therapy by Deborah Hage



Applying the same guidelines to clay will also yield valuable insight. An added benefit is that most children have not become jaded to the projective art process when clay is involved and thus are more apt to self reveal. The benefits of clay are numerous. It is extremely colorful and appeals strongly to the child's imagination. Most children are immediately intrigued with the clay and its creative possibilities. Parents also have found there is an "ah ha" quality to watching and interpreting their

child work with the clay. Pieces of the child's personality that have been obscured jump out at them and they tend to have an insight into their child's view of the world that they did not have before.

The best clay identified so far is Sculpey, a trademarked plastic clay found in arts and crafts supply stores. It is about \$3 a block. It comes in over 20 colors, however, it is best to stick to the primary and secondary colors of black, white, blue, purple, green, yellow, red, orange, and brown. These eight colors provide the child with a wide range of choices with which to make expressive objects. Once the object is completed by the child it can be baked to a hard consistency in a regular oven. Until it is baked it is moldable and mixable into shapes and colors of infinite variety.

The process is similar to the process used with drawings. The child and family come into the therapy room and the child is set to one side with instructions on what to do with the clay. While the child works with the clay the therapist talks to the parents, obtaining a history of the child and descriptions of the negative behavioral issues. When the child is done and has sat quietly, waiting to be addressed by the therapist, then the therapist takes the piece in hand and asks the child questions regarding it. The questions depend on what task the child was given.

The basic task that has yielded the most insight is to create an animal that the child would be if the child were an animal. The therapist briefly discusses the different types of creatures – those in a zoo, those found in Africa, those found in homes, those found on farms, those that fly, those that swim and those that are simply made up like Dr. Seuss animals. The child is instructed to make any animal he wishes, either one that he has seen or one that he makes up, as long as it is one the child would be if he were an animal. He can use any and all of the colors. The animal, however, must be able to stand up. This last instruction is to avoid the child making a flat animal profile, rather than a three-dimensional object which has more diagnostic possibilities.

When done the child is asked open ended questions. For example:

Tell me about your animal.

What is the name of your animal?

Where does your animal live?

Are there other animals like this one?

Does the animal have parents? Where are they?

What does the animal eat?

Where is the animal going?

The child is then invited to leave the room and the results can be discussed with the parents. The process the child took to create the animal is part of the discussion as are many of the same elements used to interpret drawings. The goals are to find elements of the clay art that confirm or deny existing diagnostic possibilities and to help those who wish to help the child to a healthier mode of functioning gain insight in to what the current functioning is.

Examples of clay art and interpretation possibilities follow.

Black and White Dog



Marlon S, age 11, described by parents as being basically a good kid but sassy. The animal is a friendly, tail wagging dog with a large head. The eyes are disproportionate and indicative of hypervigilance and watchfulness. Marlon said, “They light up at night.” The ears are attuned to the environment. Mom confirmed that he was egotistical and watched her constantly in order to catch her in mistakes that he could point out to her with his oversized, prominent tongue. The choice of colors indicates he tends to see the world as black and white. Mom is either right or wrong. In his world there are no grey areas.

When he corrects his mother it is with the attitude that she is wrong and he is right. The body of the dog tipped over slightly to the right indicative of a small, yet discernible instability. The tongue was disproportionately large, as wide as the body and dragging to the floor, a clear reference to his parents concerns that he is mouthy and verbally belligerent. His need to have the last word and to back talk his parents is a primary concern.

“El Horse”



Chelsea B, age 12, is described by her parents as oppositional and defiant, requiring supervision 24 hours a day to curtail stealing and destructiveness. Prior to her adoption she had a history of multiple moves. As described by Chelsea, her clay piece was an “El Horse” or an elephant horse. “El Horse” is quite crudely made for a 12 year old suggesting an immaturity. It has the head of an elephant and the back end of a horse. There is a rider on the back. The multiple figures indicate a sense of

role diffusion, she does not really know who she is. Her choice of multiple colors for the body, legs and rider is indicative of some level of mania, possibly bipolar. There are no ears on either figure, indicating how unavailable Chelsea is to verbal instruction. The eyes are huge and protruding, on the top of the head, more like the multi-directional eyes of a fly than an elephant,

indicating an extreme watchfulness and hypervigilance. The legs are solidly planted, suggesting immovability and the appearance of being stuck. The reins connect to the body but are not being held in the hands of the rider, suggesting an inability to take control. “El Horse” and rider “are crossing the desert and are used to traveling”. Numerous other details point to a high level of disturbed thinking and separation from a solid reality base, consistent with a diagnosis of attachment disorder, and thought and mood disorders.

Bee



John J, age 8, had a great many attention seeking behaviors such as non-stop chatter, high activity level and playing dumb. He made a bee-like insect. It had eyes but no mouth (dumb) and no ears (unavailable to verbal instruction). When asked what the bee did he picked it up and flew it around the room saying, “It goes round and round and up and down, buzzing and buzzing until it is ready to STING.” He jabbed the bee into the therapist as he screamed the last word. His mother confirmed that was what it was like living with him.

White and Black Cat



Albert J, age 10, had numerous negative behaviors and his parents were concerned that they would not be able to let him live at home much longer. Albert was creating his creature while they discussed how difficult it was to parent him. His creature has very wobbly, unsteady legs and it tips off to one side, barely balanced enough to stand, indicating how off balance he is and how skewed his view of the world is. He made a white creature with orange stripes initially. As his parents talked he took the orange stripes off and replaced them with black ones. When asked why he changed colors he said, “I think it is time this tiger changed its stripes.”

Orange and White Giraffe



Andrew, 5, had recently exhibited unusually angry behaviors, had become uncooperative at home and at school. His creature is very solidly planted, indicating a firm foundation. However, the neck and head are obviously phallic in design. His mother insisted that he had never been in a situation where he could possibly have been molested, nonetheless, she allowed the therapist to explore the possibility with Andrew. After several sessions Andrew revealed when, where and by whom he had been molested.

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Use of Clay in Projective Art

Applying the same guidelines to clay will also yield valuable insight. An added benefit is that



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Black and White Creatures



Jade H, age 7 ½, was brought in with her younger brother, Jack. They were in a foster-adopt situation and Jade was doing fairly well. Jack was not adapting well at all. The parents were questioning whether they should try to keep both children, disrupt both children or just keep Jade, as she was doing so well, and disrupt with Jack. Jade's creatures are black and white exemplifying good and



evil. The larger, angelic creature, is larger and dominant over the smaller, devil type creature.....very illustrative of her inner struggle of good over evil. The angel, though predominantly white, has black elements. The devil, while predominantly black, has white elements. Jade's message about herself was that even the best child has some bad and even the worst child has some good. Nobody is all one or the other.

Purple and Orange Pie



Jack H, age 6, was brought in with his older sister Jade. He made several items, one of which was a snake poised to strike. His second item was an orange pie. Inside the pie he made numerous small red berries. He then covered the berries with the crust. When asked about it he said that he did it that way "because the goodness is hidden."

Snakes



Snakes are a fairly common theme. They can be examined to see if they are benign, lying flat; or dangerous, poised to strike. The presence or absence of communication features such as ears, eyes and mouth indicate ability to interact with others. Snakes do not have arms, with which to reach out to the world.



Yellow and Black Backed Creature

Andrea, 7, was described by her mother as withdrawn. Her creature is solidly planted, with four firm legs. However, there is little torso, only a flat plane with no substance (backbone). The neck is not strong enough to hold up the head. While the

face has eyes, ears and a mouth, they are pointed downward, avoidant of communication and of interactions with the environment.

Purple Winged Creature



Ruben R, 11, was referred for uncontrollable anger and aggression. As described by Ruben, his clay piece was called a “Hornflyer”, a purple creature with “horns like a bull, body of a snail, tail like a snake, and wings like a bird”. “It is both a boy and a girl.” “There are no others like him”. “He lives in different places. When he feels mean he lives in a corral to keep him from hurting his house.

He puts his head down to charge others with his horns when he is excited or wild. When he feels angry he lives in a snake’s den. When he is in trouble he goes to his secret nest. He goes into his shell when he is lonely. He has pictures of his family in there. He flies whenever he wants to wherever he wants.” Notably the face is featureless, associated with evasiveness and hostility. There are no ears with which to hear, no eyes with which to see and no mouth with which to communicate. It has no legs to move about, associated with helplessness and emotional immovability, and no arms to reach out. The use of the color purple has been associated in projective art with an internalization of affect, anxiety and tension. “Hornflyer” appears to have no sense of who he/she is, no sense of being in relationship to others and no ability to get in relationship with others.

Green Horned Creature



Jeremy, 9, was referred for oppositionality and defiance. His creature is bull-headed, thick necked with legs so wide and squashed together there is a sense of immovability, of stolid stubbornness. The eyes are bright red slashes, indicative of the flash point rage his mother describes. The tail is long and tipped with yellow (poison? stinger?). It looks malevolent. The horns are wide set, pointed and give the creature the ability to charge at a moment’s notice. There is no mouth or

ears, thus no way to give or receive verbal communication.

Multicolored Insect



Rick, 42, is the father of an adolescent who refused to participate in the projective art. Rick said that the clay looked like fun so as the therapist talked, he worked with the clay instead of his son. The wide choice of colors is indicative of a manic personality, which he and his wife concurred with. The tail has the appearance of having a stinger on it. He and his wife admitted that sometimes he “zinged” the family with his volatility.

The overall appearance, however, is of a very heavily burdened creature, whose load is so huge a

support is required under the front of the body to keep it from collapsing. The tiny legs appear to struggle to pull the burdensome body behind it. Rick described his role as the father of an oppositional and defiant adolescent as being sometimes more than he can bear.

Various Mixed Figures

