

# Art Therapy For Adolescents In India

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## Abstract

The COVID pandemic has ravaged nations and increased the disease burden on countries due to the numerous deaths reported daily, strict restrictive measures taken by the government to regulate the spread of the infection, and the increasing strain on the healthcare system. Among the populations most affected is children. While the death toll in children has been moderate compared to other populations, COVID has had a significant negative psychosocial effect on the young demographic. The main challenges for children arise from having family and friends who are infected and quarantined/ isolated, have died due to the infection, or being subjected to mandatory isolation in the form of school and public spaces closures that have affected their lives. India, which has about 41 percent of its population as minors (below the age of 18), is one of the nations most affected by the pandemic resulting in deaths, government-enforced isolation/ quarantine, and closure of schools at a significantly higher rate than most countries. Consequently, the psychosocial challenges of the pandemic to children are likely to be major for the young Indian population. To address the problem, art therapy, which can be offered in person or online, is proposed as an intervention to meet the need of Indian children during the pandemic period.

## Art Therapy for Children - A Need of the Hour during COVID in India

### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has ravished nations, homes, and governments resulting in a global health burden that has affected all demographics. While the pandemic has affected certain demographics such as the elderly at a higher rate, it has also impacted adolescents and minors globally. In terms of the physiological consequences of the pandemic, researchers such as Mantovani et al. (2021), who conducted a meta-analytic investigation involving 19 studies and 2855 minors, have found that the majority of children generally present with milder symptoms including cough, fever, nasal congestion, dyspnea, and abdominal pain. However, other researchers including Kumar et al. (2020) that children might suffer the most critical psychosocial consequences of the pandemic. Chiefly, children are affected by the pandemic in three ways. Firstly, they are affected as patients who are likely to contract serious variants resulting in the need for quarantine or admission into critical care units in hospitals. Secondly, children are also subjected to the psychosocial burden of having parents, friends,

and families who are infected or have died due to the condition. Lastly, children are also victims of the containment measures adopted such as closure of schools and playgrounds, which affect multiple facets of their lives. In India, where more than 41 percent of the population is minors, the occurrence of more deadly variants followed by the routine closure of schools and public spaces alongside mandatory isolation and quarantine procedures have had a significant negative impact on the psychosocial wellbeing of children. Accordingly, art therapy is proposed as one of the readily adoptable intervention applicable to care for the psychosocial needs of children in India during the COVID-19 pandemic period.

## **Literature Review**

### **Children and COVID**

One of the most affected demographics by the COVID virus has been children. Accordingly, researchers have sought to understand some of the psychosocial challenges and problems affecting children due to the direct effects of the virus and the actions taken by governments to contain its spread. For example, in their study, Singh et al. (2020) examine the impact that the lockdown occasioned by the COVID virus on children. They found that to young preschool children aged 3-6 years old, the pandemic resulted in significant clinginess, irritability, and attention-seeking behaviors. They also noted that children generally felt fearful, uncertain, and isolated leading to poor sleep and appetite, agitation, and separation anxiety. Similar findings were also reported for children school-going children, who found the home confinement to be distressful and disruptive of their education, emotional, and social routines. In another related research, Jiao et al. (2020) reviewed the psychological and behavioral impacts of COVID on children of different ages. From their review, which evaluated 320 children aged 3-18 years, Jiao et al. (2020) report that irritability easy distraction, clinginess, and fear of asking questions about the infection and its consequences were the most common psychological effects of the pandemic. Jiao et al. (2020) also reported that depression and anxiety disorders were also reported as affecting children. In addition, Jiao et al. (2020) noted that children also suffered behavioral and somatic symptoms. For instance, behavioral issues such as loss of appetite, physical discomfort, nightmares, and poor sleep were also evident in the majority of the children enrolled in the study. The symptoms were largely thought to occur due to the impairment in social interaction, reduced physical activity, and the general lethargy, anxiety, and depression that adults at home manifested due to the stress of COVID.

In addition, researchers have also explored the mental health effects that children suffer due to being quarantined for having contracted the virus. For instance, Liu et al. (2020) studying how contracting COVID and being quarantined discovered that the affected children were likely to develop separation anxiety, acute stress disorder, grief, and adjustment disorder. Other long-term consequences such as the increased risk of developing psychosis and mood disorders have been reported in children who are quarantined and separated from their parents for a significant period (Liu et al., 2020). Lastly, other researchers have also conducted studies evaluating how pandemics affect children with existing mental health challenges. For instance, Lee (2020) conducted a study evaluating how children with mental

health issues were affected by the COVID pandemic. The author claim that the main issue caused by the pandemic was the disruption of the school calendar, which meant that the majority of children who typically receive their mental health care in school were unable to access the necessary services. Such children were also unable to access adequate face-to-face support services, which were likely cancelled due to the government closure of most public institution and enforcement of quarantine and social-distancing regulations. Lee (2020) also observed that most children with conditions such an autism spectrum disorders and mood/ personality issues were also likely to deteriorate given the disruption of school and institutional closure on their much needed routines.

### **Art Therapy**

Notably, one of the interventions that have been proposed for managing and caring for children suffering from psychosocial trauma and challenges is art therapy. Bosgraaf et al. (2020) contend that art therapy is particularly optimal in the case of children and adolescents with psychosocial issues since it uses family-focused child-friendly strategies (art). The therapeutic approach is also non-threatening and readily accessible making it useful when caring for psychosocially traumatized children. Typically, art therapy is employed in managing and improving self-awareness, self-esteem, social skills, emotional resilience, and distress. Theoretically, art therapy is not limited to one treatment model but can integrate principles of approaches such as psycho education, systemic, psychodynamic, humanistic, and eclectic. Consequently, when applying art therapy, the role of the counselor is to create an environment where children can get in touch with their emotions, learn to express themselves more openly, and adopt various practice/ play skills to demonstrate a sense of self-efficacy and control necessary for self-discovery(Bosgraaf et al., 2020).

Noteworthy, due to the restrictions imposed by governments to minimize the spread of the COVID pandemic, one of the areas of interest has been the application of art therapy online. For instance, Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al. (2021) studied the application of art therapy online to elementary school children during the pandemic period and the effect on their mental health and wellbeing. In the context of COVID, Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al. (2021) assert that even the online version of art therapy has notable benefits for children. For example, the researchers maintain that COVID for children is associated with a loss of control over self, family, educational activities, play, and others. However, with art therapy, children have an opportunity to interact with each other, adults, and their environment through play, which gives them back control over their lives, at least in part.

### **Children, COVID, and India**

In India, the COVID pandemic has had one of the most devastating effects, especially due to the various deadly variants that have been reported in the region. Whereas the virus has affected all demographics, Kumar et al. (2020) point out that children and minors in India are particularly affected. for India, more than 41 percent of the nation's population is made of individuals who are below the age of 18 years (Kumar et al., 2020). Kumar et al. (2020) report that while the number of infection cases reported among minors has not been relatively high, the lockdown and other negative consequences of the pandemic are the main concern.

According to Kumar et al. (2020), the psychosocial impact of COVID in Indian children can be categorized into three groups. The first is made of children who have been infected by the virus and are likely either isolated in quarantine or admitted for intensive oxy gentherapy. The second group is made of minors who have parents or immediate family members suffering from the virus or who have died due to the pandemic. The last category is made of children who are in quarantine or isolated due to the general government-enforced lockdown that has affected the activities of the minors including schooling and socialization.

### **Methodology**

A qualitative case study method will be utilized to assess the application and use of art therapy in the care of children in India following the increased infection by COVID. Due to the meeting restriction measures, the art therapy sessions will be applied online. First, three families from India with children between 5 and 12 years will be selected. The families will be required to have a laptop or internet-supported desktop/ tablet. They will then be instructed to install the Zoom Video call app and will be provided with a password to allow them to access and participate in the art therapy sessions securely. Each family will then be asked to provide a child with a drawing pen/ marker and paper. Then, the diagnostic drawing series (DDS) will be administered. Mainly, the test will be administered in three sessions, with the first focusing on asking the young participants to draw different pictures that they find interesting during the COVID period. In the second session, the young participants will be asked to specific pictures, such as a tree or animal. In the third session, the participants will be asked to draw a picture of how they feel due to the COVID pandemic. In addition to participating in the three drawing tests, another aspect of the therapy will be to engage the children in allowing them the freedom to be expressive through various forms of arts. For instance, for the first test, the children can draw as many pictures as they wish during different sessions. Similarly, for the third test, the assessor can ask the children to express their emotions pictorially by focusing on specific aspects of the pandemic, such as expressing how the child feels for having friends and family who have been infected or died due to the pandemic.

### **Discussion**

The three images that the three Indian children will be used to interpret their psychosocial wellbeing in the context of COVID. Notably, the DDS test administered as part of art therapy is modified to suit the context of the pandemic by asking children to make drawings that are relevant to them following the spread of the virus. Once the tests are completed, each will be analyzed for interpretation. For example, the aim of the first tree picture test is important in showing and eliciting responses such as spontaneity, enthusiasm, hostility, resentment, interest, or disinterest as part of the child as a consequence of the direct or indirect effects of the pandemic. Further, the drawing, shading, choice of picture, and color use might be helpful in subjectively judging the coping mechanisms that the child has adopted to manage the stress and pressure of the pandemic(Cohen et al., 2013). In the second DDS test, the children are asked to draw a specific thing: a tree, which is representative of who they are. The drawing mostly represents the psychological state of the individual from the past. Consequently, the

children are likely to draw and color a tree to perfection as they did when they were younger and before the psychosocial stress of the pandemic. The importance of the test is to show how the child has changed due to the prevailing circumstances (COVID). The third picture allows the child to be expressive. The associated emotional release is one of the therapeutic benefits of the process. For children, using drawing, colors, and lines to share their feelings about COVID and its impact on self, friends, schoolmates, and family can help in restoring psychosocial and emotional wellbeing. Besides showing the willingness to be open and affectively expressive, the third picture could also demonstrate a change in the mood and energy level of the child. Lastly, the third drawing test can also provide the children with opportunities for closure. In particular, the experience can allow the children to share not only what they feel but also how they perceive the pandemic and its effect on their lives in general.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, art therapy is one of the child-friendly interventions that can be adopted by counselors working together with parents to help explore and find solutions to the psychosocial challenges facing children due to the COVID pandemic. In the case of India, where more than 41 percent of the population is made of minors, the nation's continued suffering from the pandemic is likely to have significant devastating effects on children. Accordingly, applying art therapy sessions online can be useful as an intervention that is applicable despite the containment restrictions imposed by the government. Art therapy can also be adapted to help children express the emotions and thoughts associated with their experiences of being in lockdown, living with infected families, having lost a loved one, and being kept away from school and other public social activities essential for their normal cognitive, social, and emotional development. From the proposed study, art therapy in the form of the DDS can be used to engage children while exploring their psychological, emotional, and social challenges associated with the pandemic. From a scholarly review, art therapy encourages children to engage in emotionally expressive social and psychological activities that not only reveal their struggles during stressful times such as the pandemic era but also provide an avenue for closure and healing for the young population.

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