

Service, Support and Success

The Direct Support Workers Newsletter

Conversation Pieces: Using Artwork and Art-Making to Enhance Communication for People with Intellectual Disabilities

By: Amanda Gee

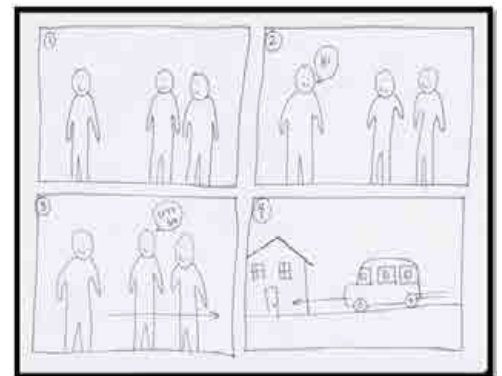
We think of art as something to look at, something to hang on your wall or visit in a gallery but art is also a way of communicating. Since people began making marks on surfaces, people have been using art to communicate. From cave paintings, to murals, frescos to sculptures, comics to collages, people use art to say something, to tell a story, to tell their story.

As an art therapist having people use art to communicate, to express something, to tell a story, and to get feelings out is part of my everyday job. However, using art to communicate is not just for famous artists, and it is not just for art therapy clients. Everyone can use art to communicate, to express something, and art can be used to enhance the communication of individuals who do not communicate verbally, or who struggle to express feelings, to get the words out and to be understood.

We are not talking about art therapy here as that which should be left to the professionals; we are talking about using art activities as tools to enhance communication in people's everyday lives. Families, direct support staff, teachers and professionals can all use these. Some of these activities are designed to open up regular and ongoing communication, and some are for use in specific situations to enhance understanding and expression. The activities that follow are suggestions to try and get you thinking about how you can use art making and images, as a visual communication tool.

Draw out the story:

Have you ever been having a conversation with someone and all of a sudden you are stuck feeling like you do not fully understand the story? What happened first? Who was there? How did that happen? If you do not understand the story that you are being told, get some paper and draw the story out for you, the listener, and for the storyteller to see. You do not need to have amazing art talents to do this – stick figures and basic representations will do. This can help to clarify the story. It can be done in a sort of comic book format by laying the story out frame by frame.



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Tell the storyteller what you are going to do, and then get them to retell the story again from the beginning while you draw it. Don't be afraid to stop the teller for clarification as you go.

Another way to do this is to have the storyteller take some paper and draw it out for you. Again, they don't have to be the best artist— if they can draw stick people and basic representations that will work. Since it is their story, they may be able to lay it out frame by frame better than you can. You can sit with them as they do this so that they can tell you the story as they go.

They may have difficulty drawing the story chronologically. It's perfectly fine for them to start with drawing the main picture that shows what happened, and then they can draw the before and after. The main picture 'anchors' the story in time, making the other events easier to draw in the right place.

This technique of drawing it out can also help when trying to explain something to someone. Drawing the story, explaining through drawings and pictures can be very helpful. It can assist the individual to understand what you are explaining. Afterwards the individual can take the drawings with them, if appropriate, as a reference for later on.

Put that feeling onto paper:

If an individual is struggling with a particular emotion, having a bad day, or is reacting to a specific incident, they could be encouraged to 'put that feeling onto paper.' This activity can work well for anyone – regardless of verbal communication skills. Feelings need to be expressed. Happy feelings can be easier to express and are often more appropriate to express publicly but, when we are upset or angry, it is harder to express those feelings in an appropriate way. You can yell and scream and bang your fists, but that can be quite disruptive. Try encouraging that these feelings be expressed on paper. Provide larger paper if possible, and markers, crayons or pastels. Encourage the person to 'get those feelings out' and onto the paper. They can scribble, draw what happened, or represent the feeling in shapes or colours.

Of course we can also do this with positive feelings, but it can be particularly effective with negative feelings. Try it yourself – it is a wonderful, cathartic way to express and communicate how you are feeling without having to stomp and swear.

Feelings chart:

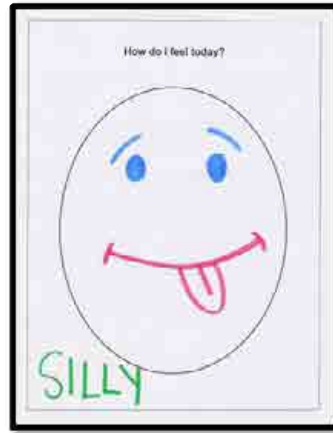
Another great way to open up communication about feelings is to use a feeling chart. There are many available free to print online but you could also create your own, or have the individual or group you are working with create their own. Make sure to include the four primary emotions – mad, sad, happy, and scared – and then add as many more as you would like. Feelings charts have many great uses – they can be handed out to colour, they can be used to talk about the different feelings, and they can be used as a communication tool to check in with a person and have them identify how they are feeling. This can open up whole areas of communication. For example, if someone identifies that they are feeling sick, you can find out why, what is going on with them physically. If someone identifies that they are excited, they can then elaborate about what is exciting them.



Draw the emotion:

This is an activity that could be done every day as a sort of check-in with the individuals you are supporting. It doesn't have to be used just with individuals who struggle with words – this can be used with anyone, individually or in a group.

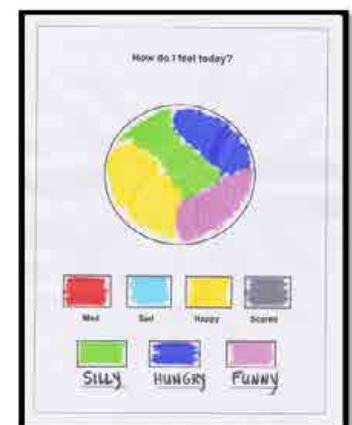
In this activity you would ask, 'How are we feeling today?' and provide each person with a piece of paper and some drawing materials such as markers, pencil crayons, or pastels. Encourage people to draw how they are feeling. Explain that this doesn't have to be a drawing of a face or person - it can be just colours, scribbles, shapes. Depending on the individual or group, this could be a five-minute activity or a twenty-minute activity. After everyone has had a chance to finish their drawing, check in with everyone and talk about the feelings. If someone doesn't have the words to say what is happening, help them to express it, but also allow people the freedom not to share if they would rather not.



Another way to do this activity is to provide people with a circle or 'face' shape on a piece of paper to fill in with the emotion of their choice. Regardless of the paper you provide, you can identify the four primary emotions and then allow room for other emotions.

Colourful emotions:

This is a similar activity to the first, but the focus is more on colour. This activity could also be used as a daily check-in with an individual or group. In this activity you would create a sheet with some boxes that would be labeled with feeling words. The idea would be to assign a colour to an emotion, and then again to indicate how you are feeling today. This also should include the four primary emotions, as well as spaces to add individual emotions. For example 'happy' could be blue, 'sad' could be yellow, and 'jealous' could be orange, but make sure you are letting the individual or individuals choose for themselves. The paper would then have a larger space for the individual to fill in how they are feeling today with the colours they have chosen to represent their feelings.



Mood pictures:

Another way to do a check-in is to have pictures to choose from that represent feelings. Having a whole selection of images to look at and choose from is useful. Weather and landscape pictures can be helpful for this. For example a picture of a storm can represent sadness or anger, and a clear blue sky can be happy. Be aware though - a picture of kittens could represent happiness to one person and sadness to another. It is important not to decide how someone is feeling based on the image they chose without talking to them first. Once the pictures have been chosen, get the individual to explain why they chose that picture to the best of their ability.

Pictures for choice:

Using images can also be helpful for enhancing communication around specific topics – as they say, a picture is worth a thousand words. In today's world we can access pictures of everything through the internet. These pictures can be very helpful to provide information and choice. Are you trying to help someone plan a trip? Show them travel pictures for certain places to help them to understand their options. Trying to explain a new place or thing? Show some pictures. Really, showing images instead of just using words can be very helpful in so many situations. It would be best to print the photos in colour, or to show them directly on a computer or tablet if that is possible.

Summary:

Art making, art activities, and visual representations can enhance communication for individuals who lack strong verbal communication skills, as well as for people who need some help and encouragement to express themselves. These are just some examples of ways to incorporate artistic expression into your everyday interactions and there are many more activities that you could try. Remember to always allow for choice, be patient, and respect a person's right to say no. Be creative, have fun, and come up with some artistic communication ideas for the people you support.

About the author:

Amanda is an art therapist and grief counsellor who has been working with individuals with intellectual disabilities for the past 15 years in many different capacities. Amanda has published a chapter in a book regarding adapting art therapy for people with disabilities and has contributed frequently to this newsletter. She has also presented at provincial and national conferences on the subject of using art therapy with people with intellectual disabilities.

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