



## ***Art Therapy Methods in Socio-Pedagogical Work With Forced Migrant Children Arteterapia w działaniach społecznych i pedagogicznych z dziećmi z doświadczeniem przymusowej migracji***

### **ABSTRACT**

**RESEARCH OBJECTIVE:** This study aimed to summarise the experience of using art therapy in social and pedagogical activities with forced migrant children, to identify the peculiarities of its impact on children at SpilnoHub Krakow project.

**THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS:** The research problem is the question: how does art therapy affect forced migrant children? The methods were theoretical analysis of the literature on the subject, the counselling NGO's materials, and experimental checking of using art therapy techniques in working with forced migrant children.

**THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION:** The study identifies specific problems that arise in children from families of forced migrants. The features of art therapy as a method of psychotherapy, which, through the process of creativity, enable a person to improve his or her psycho-emotional state, are determined. The experience of using art therapy techniques in working with migrant children is summarised.

**RESEARCH RESULTS:** Art therapy in the work with forced migrant children is a leading tool in the work of both NGOs and local social institutions, but it is usually used in combination with other tools of social and psychological support.

**CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND APPLICABLE VALUE OF RESEARCH:** There is a lack of empirically proven results of its impact at different stages of adaptation of forced migrant children to a new sociocultural environment. We consider group work with families with children who have approximately the same list of problems to be a promising area of research in the field of art therapy.

→ **KEYWORDS:** ART THERAPY, FORCED MIGRANT CHILDREN,  
SOCIO-PEDAGOGICAL WORK, SOCIALISATION, MENTAL HEALTH

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## STRESZCZENIE

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**CEL NAUKOWY:** Celem niniejszego badania było podsumowanie doświadczeń związanych z wykorzystaniem arteterapii w działaniach społecznych i pedagogicznych z dziećmi z doświadczeniem przymusowej migracji oraz określenie specyfiki jej wpływu na dzieci w ramach projektu SpilnoHub Kraków.

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**PROBLEM I METODY BADAWCZE:** Problemem badawczym jest pytanie: W jaki sposób arteterapia wpływa na dzieci zmuszone do migracji? Metody badawcze obejmowały analizę teoretyczną literatury przedmiotu, materiałów organizacji pozarządowych zajmujących się doradztwem oraz eksperymentalną weryfikację stosowania technik arteterapii w pracy z dziećmi z doświadczeniem przymusowej migracji.

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**PROCES WYWODU:** W badaniu zidentyfikowano specyficzne problemy pojawiające się u dzieci z rodzin z doświadczeniem przymusowej migracji. Określono cechy arteterapii jako metody psychoterapii, która poprzez proces twórczy umożliwia człowiekowi poprawę jego stanu psycho-emocjonalnego. Podsumowano doświadczenia wykorzystania technik arteterapii w pracy z dziećmi migrantów.

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**WYNIKI ANALIZY NAUKOWEJ:** Arteterapia w pracy z dziećmi zmuszonymi do migracji jest głównym narzędziem stosowanym zarówno przez organizacje pozarządowe, jak i lokalne instytucje społeczne, ale zazwyczaj jest ona stosowana w połączeniu z innymi narzędziami wsparcia społecznego i psychologicznego.

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**WNIOSKI, REKOMENDACJE I APLIKACYJNE ZNACZENIE WPŁYWU BADAŃ:** Brakuje empirycznie potwierdzonych wyników dotyczących wpływu arteterapii na różne etapy adaptacji dzieci z doświadczeniem przymusowej migracji do nowego środowiska społeczno-kulturowego. Uważam, że praca grupowa z rodzinami dzieci z podobnymi problemami stanowi obiecujący obszar badań w dziedzinie arteterapii.

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→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** ARTETERAPIA, DZIECI Z DOŚWIADCZENIEM PRZYMUSOWEJ MIGRACJI, PRACA SPOŁECZNO-PEDAGOGICZNA, SOCJALIZACJA, ZDROWIE PSYCHICZNE

## Migrant Children. Problems

The war in Ukraine is forcing families with children to seek protection in other countries. Considering it as a temporary forced migration, i.e., as a change of place of residence for a certain period of time or permanently against people's wishes, it can be determined that this situation is extremely stressful, especially for children. Children are more vulnerable than adults to the negative effects of stressful experiences.

Studies show that traumatic events that affect a person before the age of eleven are three times more likely to lead to serious emotional and behavioural problems than in older people (Vaaranen-Valkonen & Zavarova, 2022, p. 45).

In childhood and adolescence, mental health plays a crucial role in shaping character, communication skills, stress resistance, and self-confidence (Kolpakchi, 2018). Signs of mental health are a person's ability to be emotionally resilient, the ability to recognise and manage their emotions and feelings, the ability to empathise, interact constructively with society, and cope with stressful situations. Thanks to emotional resilience, a person is able to respond adequately to traumatic events, stressful situations, and events that cause emotional stress, while maintaining emotional flexibility, balance, constructive decision-making, and developing the ability to adapt to different living conditions.

Forced migrant children have poorer mental health than their non-refugee peers (Frounfelker et al., 2020; Hodes & Vostanis, 2019). The psychological state of migrant children depends on their ability to adapt to the new environment and the level of acceptance of new living conditions.

In the context of forced migration, the ability to adapt is complicated by the trauma of war experienced by children.

Considering three areas in the process of socialisation of migrant children: activity, communication, and self-awareness, it can be determined that children usually find it difficult to recognise themselves as migrants, their socialisation is accompanied by stress, rejection of the new society, and a personality crisis (Kushnir, 2023).

Migrant children face difficulties in educational institutions. The most common problems include: the need to form new role relationships, to gain a new status among peers and teachers, a lack of knowledge of the language and traditions of another country, and sometimes bullying. This leads to a decrease in the level of self-esteem and self-respect of the child, generates anxiety, aggressiveness, withdrawal, and insecurity (Yakymenko, 2023).

Adapting to the new environment, children, with or without the help of their parents, often reject their national identity, thus fully assimilating, or, on the contrary, because they want to preserve it, face additional difficulties in socialisation.

In addition, problems in the socialisation of families with children are compounded by the uncertainty of future life: living without plans for the future, day by day, if the family has not finally decided whether to stay in Poland.

## **Art Therapy as a Method of Psychotherapy. Key Characteristics**

Art therapy is one of the means of working with children. Art therapy is a method of psychotherapy that, through the process of creativity, enables a person to improve their psycho-emotional state (Kulish & Siryk, 2024).

Art therapy mainly uses non-verbal ways of self-expression and communication, which makes it especially valuable in working with children who often find it difficult to express their feelings in words. Art therapy offers a trauma-informed, bottom-up approach where participants can access, explore, and connect their feelings and experiences through art making and express themselves without the pressure of verbalisation (Malchiodi, 2022).

Art therapy offers a child to express his or her emotions and feelings through drawing, sculpting, and constructing with natural materials. Children's experiences and feelings are more directly and vividly expressed in artistic activities than in words. A child may not speak or may not admit to a problem, but he or she can draw, sculpt, and express himself or herself through body movements, thus manifesting himself or herself, showing his or her true needs and aspirations (Danilyuk & Burkalo, 2021).

For children of preschool and primary school age, therapy sessions are safe, and through creativity, a child can express their emotions, feelings, develop creativity, thinking, memory, attention, motor skills, verbal communication, and improve self-regulation skills (Kulish & Siryk, 2024).

The sessions take into account the fact that childhood is an important period of child development, and it is during this period that the child's creative activity begins to develop, which is expressed in the ability to transform the surrounding reality, create something new, and manifests itself in construction games and artistic creativity.

Children's imagination and aptitude for playful activities are clearly manifested in the process of art therapy sessions with children. Art materials and play objects play an important role in the process of communication with children. It is important what kind of art materials, colours, placement of objects on the sheet, sizes, and shapes children use. The description and description of the drawing is also important. Art therapy helps to release and get rid of negative emotions using such techniques as smearing, shading, leaf drawing, drawing on glass, finger painting, Ebru technique (a special drawing technique because the work is done with paints not on paper, but on water, and then transferred to any surface, such as paper or fabric), clay and plasticine modelling, sculptures made from scrap materials (boxes, plastic bottles), creating paintings with seeds, drawing with threads, drawing with balloons with air, etc. The technique of collaborative work and group collages is widely used.

Art therapy means the involvement of professional art therapists who have undergone specialised training. In other words, we are talking about art therapy as a tool of psychological assistance that contributes to the formation of a healthy and creative personality.

## Art Therapy for Refugee Children

Art therapy is a useful form of therapy for refugee children (Goździewicz-Rostankowska, 2023).

Art therapy offers a unique avenue for refugees to express and process their emotions, experiences, and traumas in a safe and supportive environment. Creative activities (drawing, painting, and sculpting) allow children to explore and communicate aspects of their internal world that may be difficult to articulate verbally (Drabant & Edwards, 2015).

Studies have shown that art therapy helps in different ways.

Empirical research has begun to provide evidence for the effectiveness of art therapy interventions in reducing symptoms of trauma, anxiety, and depression among refugee populations (Taiwo & Ndubuisi, 2024).

A specific focus on the use of art therapy within Syrian child and adolescent refugee populations provides its effectiveness in enhancing the mental well-being and resilience of these young refugees (Al-Hroub, 2023); reducing stress in refugee youth (Feen-Calligan et al., 2020).

Refugee youths' self-esteem and confidence increase through collaborative and side-by-side art making. Results highlighted the importance of social connection, self-esteem, confidence, and a sense of safety for making positive connections during art making (Bryant & Suleman, 2024).

For adolescents, art therapy helps to increase self-esteem, resolves conflicts among peers, and improves interpersonal skills; it is also effective for adolescents at risk of aggression, auto-aggression, and depression (Kolpakchi, 2018).

The Art therapy programs for refugee adolescents from Burma decreased their trauma-related symptoms. Initial results showed a higher prevalence of depression among adolescents. Follow-up results showed improvements in anxiety and self-concept (Rowe et al., 2017).

Art therapy is used to improve self-esteem and self-awareness, cultivate emotional resilience, enhance social skills, and reduce distress (American Art Therapy Association, 2017).

Kevers et al. (2022) evaluated the impact of a 12-week Belgium school-based art therapy programme on refugee youth mental health, wellbeing, and social peer relationships. The researchers emphasised the importance of understanding the relationship between refugee youth and their peers, as they found that weak connections led to long-term mental health concerns, whereas strong connections mitigated such risks (Kevers et al., 2022).

Considering the practice of using art therapy in work with migrants, it can be determined that it occupies a leading place among the tools in the work of both NGOs and local social institutions. For example, the HEART programme has become widespread (Healing and Education through the Arts). It was introduced by the international organisation Save the Children, which is an arts-based approach to providing psychosocial support for children, youth, and adults around the world (Save the children, 2021).

Art therapy sessions have also become widespread at UNICEF-supported centres. According to Article 39 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the child has the right to psychological recovery and social reintegration of the child victim of armed conflict.

UNICEF's policy has also developed the need to build an environment conducive to the child's recovery and reintegration. This includes providing education for children but also organising other forms of activities, including facilities for play and artistic activities:

- art therapy exhibition "In Between – Stories of a Refugee" – a moving exhibition created by children in Trinidad who have arrived from other countries like Venezuela, Cuba, Dominican Republic, St Vincent and the Grenadines, and Pakistan. The work emerged from an art therapy workshop where the children explored their journey and their homes, their hopes and their dreams through a series of murals (Moore, 2019);

- at the Edu Hub in Warsaw, during art therapy sessions with migrant children from Ukraine, the “exposure method” is used in the following way: 1) the children named and depicted difficult emotions; 2) they meditated and were asked to go to a place in their imagination where they felt safe; 3) the children were then asked to depict these safe places. Throughout this process, the therapist remains neutral. It is crucial that the work is independent to encourage the manifestation of hidden emotions, anxieties, or fears. Exercises like this are aimed at restoring self-regulation and helping children return to a state of calm and hope (UNICEF, 2023);
- in Croatia, the pre-school and primary school systems were used to help children who had experienced the war in the Balkans and who had been displaced by it. The Step by Step to Recovery Project involved using art therapy to help parents and children articulate and express their emotions (Jolley & Vulic-Prtoric, 2001).

Ways to influence migrant children: 1) giving voice, 2) rebuilding trust, opening wounds, 3) sharing stories, healing pain, 4) exploring identity, discovering a new-self (Akthar & Lovell, 2018).

It should be noted that art therapy is usually used in combination with other tools of social and psychological support for families with children who are forced migrants.

In particular, educational institutions in Poland provide support for parents (e.g., seminars for parents), activities in schools attended by refugee children, group sessions, and art therapy (Kawalska, 2022).

In Turkey, it was conducted a comprehensive workshop for Syrian refugee children, integrating art therapy, movement therapy, and music therapy to address symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, and depression (Ugurlu et al., 2016).

## Art Therapy in the Work With Forced Migrant Children in the SpilnoHub Project (Krakow)

The main goal of the project is to create a safe space for expressing emotions, building relationships, and restoring a sense of agency, in particular through artistic expression and art therapy methods. The main beneficiaries of the project are families with children.

The use of case management by the centre's team of specialists, which includes a psychologist, social worker, teacher, play therapist, and art therapist, allows for a comprehensive diagnosis of the level of children's socialization. The main diagnostic tools are: 1) individual conversations with children (to find out their thoughts, feelings, experiences); 2) observation of the child's behaviour in the team during role-playing games, team games, analysis of the products of children's activities (drawings: the 'Kinetic Family Drawing' technique, the 'Portrait' technique, emotion cards, and others) to find out their inner experiences, peculiarities of thinking and emotional state; 3) interviews (do you have friends, do you go to school, what do you do in your free time, etc.); 4) parental meetings (an opportunity for parents to share their parenting experience, discuss the child's problems, goals of psychological and pedagogical support, receive feedback

on the child's development, achievements and difficulties, and recommendations for improving the child's psycho-emotional state).

The generalised results of social and psychological support provided to 60 families with children who were forced migrants by the team of specialists at SpilnoHub Krakow (September 2024 – March 2025) determined that children have various manifestations of socialisation problems that have arisen due to forced migration. Among the common problems were determined stress, anxiety, emotional instability (from extremely positive emotions to extremely negative ones), intensification of emotional manifestations (when emotional reactions are very violent), communication problems, and disturbed relationships with peers and adults (misunderstanding, conflicts).

The SpilnoHub project (Krakow) holds art therapy sessions on the basis of The Open Art Studio, Saturday's creative workshops, and The Little Explorers' Academy.

Group art therapy sessions with migrant children are conducted in the following stages: 1) free activity before the actual creative process – direct experience, at this stage the child begins to use different visual materials, experiment with different colours, first draws in one colour, then another, then mixes them, this causes different emotional experiences in the child; 2) the process of creative work – the creation of a phenomenon, visual representation, at this stage the child is increasingly fascinated by the creative process, as if immersed in it, creating original, unique drawings that express the child's inner world; 3) distancing, the process of considering the drawing, at this stage children are offered to put the work in a place where it will be clearly visible; 4) verbalisation of the child's feelings, thoughts that have arisen as a result of considering the creative work.

Joint art therapy sessions with children and parents are common.

Meetings with the therapeutic robot Paro, which resembles a seal. The initial experience of using Paro was mainly focused on care facilities, especially as a form of therapy for dementia patients (Calo et al., 2011). However, its use in art therapy sessions with migrant children helps to reduce stress and improve mood through interactive and engaging therapy sessions.

It should be noted that art therapy at the SpilnoHub project (Krakow) is part of a system of comprehensive work with families with children. Along with art therapy, play therapy, bibliotherapy, fairy tale therapy, chess therapy, individual sessions with psychologists, and educational classes are implemented. This significantly expands the channels of influence on children and families. Such a comprehensive approach in working with families with forced migrant children does not allow for determining that only art therapy sessions had a positive impact on their psychological state.

The experience of using the system of comprehensive work with forced migrant children (art therapy is a part of it) shows its effectiveness. It was determined that group art therapy sessions promoted a sense of achievement and pride. That experience of success supported participants' self-esteem. The group format of therapy provided a space for interaction, support, and sharing of experiences, which was critical for migrant children with vulnerable emotional states. Creativity, art, and group work allowed children to develop greater self-awareness, social skills, and reduce anxiety.

## Conclusion

Forced migration, combined with the war trauma experienced by children, complicates the process of adaptation to a new environment and causes additional problems in the process of children's socialisation. Art therapy in the work with forced migrant children is a leading tool in the work of both NGOs and local social institutions, but it is usually used in combination with other tools of social and psychological support.

The generalised results of social and psychological support provided to 60 families with children who were forced migrants by the team of specialists at SpilnoHub Krakow (September 2024 – March 2025) determined that group art therapy sessions promoted: a sense of achievement and pride; a space for interaction, support and sharing of experiences, which was critical for migrant children with vulnerable emotional states; allowed children to develop greater self-awareness, social skills, and reduce anxiety. But the comprehensive approach in working with families with forced migrant children (complex impact on children through the combination of art therapy with other tools) did not allow for determining that only art therapy sessions had a positive impact on their psychological state.

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