

Multiple Methods Research Investigating the Effectiveness of Arts/Mindfulness-Based Group Methods for the Development of Resilience in Children with High Needs

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Article abstract

Our research explores the effectiveness of a holistic arts-based group program for the development of resilience in children with mental health problems. Art materials and experiential activities are used to teach children new skills and abilities, and to help them resolve issues that are interfering with healthy development. Mindfulness-based practices are an integral part of the group. Twenty-one children (8- 12 years of age) were assigned to one of three groups: (a) the holistic arts-based group, (b) an arts and crafts group (i.e., attention control) or (c) a wait-list control group. These groups nominally represent participants' activities during the first 12-week period. However, each group eventually was exposed to the holistic arts-based group program over a subsequent 24-week period. Individual perceptions of resilience and self-concept were assessed at four time periods using The Resiliency Scales for Children and Adolescents (Prince-Embury) and the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale. A preliminary analysis (mixed design MANOVA) indicated a general interaction effect between the experimental groups and time, Wilks' $\lambda = .57$, $F(12,111.41) = 2.19$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .17$. Follow up univariate analyses and interpretation of interaction effects demonstrated that the holistic arts-based group program significantly helped reduce the amount of self-reported emotional reactivity. This preliminary result (in the first year of a three-year research study) is consistent with previous qualitative analyses that found that the group program was suitable and feasible for children with high needs.

Multiple Methods Research Investigating the Effectiveness of Arts/Mindfulness-Based Group Methods for the Development of Resilience in Children with High Needs

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Abstract

Our research explores the effectiveness of a holistic arts-based group program for the development of resilience in children with mental health problems. Art materials and experiential activities are used to teach children new skills and abilities, and to help them resolve issues that are interfering with healthy development. Mindfulness-based practices are an integral part of the group. Twenty-one children (8-12 years of age) were assigned to one of three groups: (a) the holistic arts-based group, (b) an arts and crafts group (i.e., attention control) or (c) a wait-list control group. These groups nominally represent participants' activities during the first 12-week period. However, each group eventually was exposed to the holistic arts-based group program over a subsequent 24-week period. Individual perceptions of resilience and self-concept were assessed at four time periods using The Resiliency Scales for Children and Adolescents (Prince-Embury) and the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale. A preliminary analysis (mixed design MANOVA) indicated a general interaction effect between the experimental groups and time, Wilks' $\lambda = .57$, $F(12, 111.41) = 2.19$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .17$. Follow up univariate analyses and interpretation of interaction effects demonstrated that the holistic arts-based group program significantly helped reduce the amount of self-reported emotional reactivity. This preliminary result (in the first year of a three-year research study) is consistent with previous qualitative analyses that found that the group program was suitable and feasible for children with high needs.

Keywords : Resiliency, multiple Methods Research Investigation, Arts/Mindfulness-based Group Methods

In the first three years of our research, we studied the feasibility, acceptability, and benefits of holistic arts-based group methods for the improvement of resilience (including self-awareness and self-esteem) in young people in need. This exploratory research led to the development of the Holistic Arts-Based Group Program (HAP). Currently, we are investigating the effectiveness of the HAP compared with control and comparison groups. In the HAP, a wide variety of arts-based and experiential methods are used to teach mindfulness-based practices. Mindfulness is a holistic philosophy and practice that is demonstrating great promise in work with children and youth (Burke, 2010). Mindfulness was described by Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990, 1994), one of the pioneers in developing mindfulness-based programs in North America, as activity that encourages awareness to emerge through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment. Despite the challenges that young people in need experience, they can learn and benefit from mindfulness-based methods if these methods are facilitated in an engaging and non-threatening manner that meets their needs, and promotes and fosters success with the methods (Coholic, in press; Coholic & LeBreton, 2009; Coholic, Loughheed, & Cadell, 2009).

Our research is with children who have serious challenges such as those involved with child protection agencies and children's mental health services. While children in need are a diverse group of children, there are concerns regarding the health of these children and their future ability to fully participate in society (Boyd Webb, 2006; Charles & Matheson, 1991; Racusin, Maerlender, Sengupta, Isquith, & Straus, 2005). Young people in need often have difficulty focusing on and articulating their thoughts and modulating their affect, limited social skills, and trouble remaining grounded in the present moment (Hansen, 2006). Overall, they lack many of the characteristics of resilient children such as positive self-concept/esteem, self-awareness, hopefulness/optimism, emotional expression, emotional management in

stressful situations, and interpersonal problem-solving skills.

Ungar (2008) conceptualized resilience as a complex social construct that describes the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to health-sustaining resources, and a condition of the individual's family, community, and culture to provide these resources in culturally relevant ways. We agree that understanding resilience includes the importance of recognizing a dynamic relationship between youth, the resources they may have access to, and their culture and/or context (Chandler & Lalonde, 2008). In general, a review of resilience research with children in need demonstrates that there are calls for collaborative community-based approaches that are sustainable and strength-based, and which target multiple issues and outcomes (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Robards, 2009). Accordingly, the HAP aims to build various aspects of resilience such as self-awareness, social and problem-solving skills, emotional understanding and regulation, self-compassion and empathy, and the ability to pay attention and focus, within a context that is strengths-based and responsive to the participants' needs.

The Holistic Arts-Based Group Program (HAP)

The group program has been described in-depth in previous literature (Coholic, 2010; Coholic, Loughheed, & LeBreton, 2009). In general, the arts-based and mindfulness-based group methods teach the children how to pay attention; use their imaginations; identify and explore their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors; and develop their strengths. The HAP is a preventative type of program that can engage youth in a strengths-based helping process that is meaningful and relevant to them. Standard group work practices such as developing group rules and taking part in a closing activity are always an important part of the process. Each group session begins with a warm-up activity and at the halfway point, a nutritional snack is provided. Four young people per group works well. Although this may seem a small number,



young people in need have significant challenges and this number enables the two facilitators to manage the group activity and discussion.

The arts-based and mindfulness-based methods are simple and no special equipment is required. For example, one exercise that can be used to teach the concept of mindfulness is the “Jar of Thoughts”, which symbolizes how one’s mind looks and feels when it is full, busy, not focused or relaxed versus what it can be when one is mindful and self-aware. Using an empty glass jar that is half filled with water, children drop various colored beads and bobbles into the jar. Each object can represent a thought or a feeling. When enough objects have been dropped into the water, the children are encouraged to take turns passing the jar around the table shaking it. The discussion focuses on considering how well our minds can work when our thoughts and feelings are all swirling around and moving quickly compared to when they are calm and focused, that is, when the objects are resting at the bottom of the jar. The relevance of mindfulness can be explained as a way of helping us to keep our thoughts and feelings clear and understandable because with an orientation of mindfulness we are more aware of what we are feeling, thinking, and doing in the present moments of our lives. The discussion can then move to strategizing about how we can achieve mindfulness using some of the methods learned in the group (Coholic, in press).

A major focus in the group is using mindfulness to teach the young people how to be aware of, tolerate, understand, and not judge their feelings. Becoming more self-aware can help youth cope more effectively with their feelings rather than ruminating about a sad event or unconsciously acting out and projecting their feelings onto others. For one example, in constructing a “Feelings Inventory”, the children are encouraged to draw or paint their feelings inside a circle. The children can draw and label different shapes that demonstrate all of the feelings that they have experienced during the day. The size of the shape should denote how much each feeling has been experienced, for

instance, if Sally felt happy most of the day, she might draw happiness as the biggest shape. Colors, words, and images can also be utilized. Upon completion, children can discuss how they might reduce the size of some shapes (feelings) and increase the size of others. In the group discussion, the feelings can be validated and normalized, and the youth can be encouraged to contemplate how they could experience more of the feelings they want to feel (e.g., how could a feeling of happiness take up more space inside the circle and in their lives; Coholic, 2010, in press).

Research Design and Findings

Our research is in cooperation with the local child protection agency and the children’s mental health center who refer the young people to the group program. Criteria for inclusion are not stringent and include a need for self-esteem improvement, a willingness to attend, and an ability to function in a group as assessed by the child’s helping practitioner. Participation is strictly voluntary and the young people are matched in groups according to age and gender. To date, 86 children have been involved in the HAP.

The qualitative thrust of the research is guided by a grounded theory strategy that constructed knowledge from the analysis of post-group individual interviews, which were all audio and video-recorded and then transcribed. In the first three years of this research, the research was solely qualitative and exploratory because the holistic arts-based group program had to be developed and its suitability, feasibility, and potential benefits had to be established before we could consider studying its effectiveness.

The main category or story-line that emerged from the qualitative analysis was that the groups were “fun”. For example, the aspects of the group program that the children enjoyed and that were fun were grouped into three major categories: (a) arts-based activities and games including mindfulness-based exercises, learning things about themselves and ideas about life, sharing and expressing ideas, learning to use imagination, and being encouraged

to engage in a variety of activities; (b) eating snacks, as the children appreciated the food that was provided at break-time; and (c) making friends, as many children in need are marginalized and it was a normalizing experience for them to be in a group with children from similar backgrounds who have similar familial and life experiences. Moreover, it is through the experience of having fun and enjoying themselves that some of the children were helped to (a) develop self-awareness and to feel better about themselves and (b) learn emotional regulation and the healthy expression of feelings, which in turn enabled more effective coping with a variety of challenges including school (as perceived and reported by the children and/or their parents/foster parents; Coholic, in press).

Currently, we are using a multiple method research design where we continue to qualitatively analyze the group sessions and post-group individual interviews that assess each child's experience with the group, but we are also evaluating the effectiveness of the HAP for developing resilience and self-concept using comparison and control groups and standardized measures. Our hypothesis was that children who participated in the HAP would demonstrate better scores on resilience and self-concept than children who participated in an Arts & Crafts comparison group or who were in a control waiting group.

We used the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (2nd edition; Piers, Harris, & Herzberg, 2005) to assess self-concept, which is one of the most widely used self-report measures of psychological health in children and teens. We also used The Resiliency Scales for Children and Adolescents (RSCA), which is based on developmental theory and previous research in resiliency (Prince-Embury & Courville, 2008). This fairly new inventory consists of three stand-alone self-report scales [sense of mastery (20 items), sense of relatedness (24 items), and emotional reactivity (20 items)] that can be further divided into 10 sub-scales that provide a multidimensional framework for assessing resiliency.

The children were placed in one of three streams. Children participating in Stream A received the HAP after a 6-week wait period. Children in Stream B were the comparison group and they participated in the Arts & Crafts group first, waited 12-weeks, and then attended the HAP. Children in Stream C constituted the control group and participated in the HAP after a 24-week waiting period. This schedule resulted in the delivery of 9, 12-week HAP groups and 3, 12-week Arts & Crafts groups in a one-year period. The Arts & Crafts comparison group enabled a consideration of the non-specific factors of the HAP such as group support and positive attention.

To determine whether the HAP was influential with respect to participants' perceptions of self-concept and resilience, a mixed-designed MANOVA was conducted. Preliminary findings are promising and demonstrate that the intervention had a statistically significant effect on helping the children to decrease their emotional reactivity, meaning that the children learned to understand and cope with their feelings in more effective ways. In all three time periods in which the HAP was employed, participants self-reported lower emotional reactivity post-intervention. In general, the preliminary findings are promising and support continued study in this area.

Importantly, methods such as the HAP can engage children and youth in a creative, meaningful, and relevant manner in a process that is enjoyable and strengths-based. Mindfulness-based practices have the potential to help young people in need learn to focus on their feelings and thoughts without judging these experiences thereby promoting the development of self-awareness. In turn, a foundation of self-awareness can assist youth to build aspects of resilience including improved coping and social skills, problem solving skills, and feelings of self-esteem. Many young people in need are marginalized and in dire need of services that are not available or accessible to them. In our experience, they are not often interested in engaging in traditional counseling and some of them do not have the familial sup-



port necessary to do so. Group programs such as the HAP can offer these young people a preventative-type of service/experience that could help them build some foundational skills that are important for good mental health and functioning. If we accept that resilience is a condition of a community's ability to provide resources as much as it is implicated in an individual's capacity for growth, greater consideration is necessary regarding how we can attend to young people's needs in relevant ways.

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