

Art Education as a Healing Method Helps Sensitive Teenagers Grow up in Modern Chinese Family Education

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Abstract

With the Chinese society's emphasis on education, adolescent mental health problems have become increasingly prominent. Especially in the high-pressure family education environment, the emotional needs and psychological difficulties of highly sensitive adolescents are more prominent. This study not only focuses on the mental health of adolescents, but also aims to provide a new solution for family education and adolescent mental health through the unique perspective of art therapy. Art therapy integrates art and emotional connection to help promote the spiritual recovery of the individual. By exploring the restorative role of art in modern Chinese family education, we expect to provide new educational ideas for parents and educators, and promote the comprehensive and healthy development of adolescents.

Keywords: Art Education, adolescent mental health, art healing, the effects of art therapy, the way of family rearing, fine arts, Chinese youth

1. Introduction

The youth is a special social stratum, its growth environment and the life style have the bright characteristic. At present, the society generally agrees that it has become a consensus to strengthen the mental health education of adolescents (Zhan & Zhang, 2023). However, highly sensitive adolescents are the largest group of young people with psychological problems, and they are the most concerned group by the society, but there is no clear method in the field of art therapy to help them grow up (Boyes, 2021; Gao et al, 2023). Therefore, it is particularly important to use non-verbal art forms to heal and assist the growth of highly sensitive adolescents. This article focuses on dealing with inner contradictions, correcting self-distortion and promoting the formation of identity through art therapy (Nie, 2020). It can help highly sensitive adolescents tap into their inner emotions and experiences to relieve psychological stress, enhance self-awareness and self-control, and thus improve their quality of life and well-being.

2. Art Healing and Education

2.1 Highly Sensitive Teenagers Urgently Need External Help to Grow Positively.

Highly Sensitive Children (HSC) refer to children who are particularly sensitive to their external environment and inner emotions (Pluess et al., 2018). This is an innate trait rather than a disease or symptom. This trait is mainly manifested in emotional aspects. Compared to other children, highly sensitive children delve deeper into processing information, are more sensitive to subtle changes, more prone to overstimulation, and may exhibit more intense emotional reactions. These characteristics enable them to respond more positively and effectively to setbacks, thus possessing greater self-control than the average person. Especially for those highly sensitive children in their teenage years, they may experience deeper thinking and more emotional fluctuations. In this situation, they are easily troubled by various negative behaviours (Aron, 1999; Ebeh et al., 2018). They may show deeper concern for various social issues and hold stronger opinions on inequality. When facing negative evaluations from others, they often exhibit more radical and extreme behavioural responses. At the same time, they may display more acute reactions to physical instability and social pressures. In this situation, we need to focus on the group of teenagers and understand their special psychological characteristics. They often exhibit such emotional characteristics: a “polarized” state, possibly “extreme excitement” or “extreme anger or depression”; they show stronger responses to sensory inputs; their attention is less focused when encoding and

extracting information, making emotional breakdowns more likely; they like to use language to express their emotions, opinions, and thoughts, maintaining sensitive attention to everyone and everything; there is a more urgent need for control, which may be rigid or lacking flexibility; they exhibit more negative behaviors when facing setbacks; they become more fearful and cautious in new situations; their tolerance for setbacks is often low; they lack self-control and are often in a passive position. They place great importance on external perspectives and judgments. Boyce uses the delicate orchid as a metaphor to depict sensitive, vulnerable adolescents who often face imperceptible threats at home, at school, and in their daily lives (Boyce et al., 2021). Orchids are one of the closest and most valuable plants in the world. Like orchids, they are vulnerable to the surrounding environment, which can even pose a threat to their health and survival, and if neglected or harmed, they will wilt and decay; And because of its unique charm, it has become the ideal object for many young people, so they have more potential than other peers to succeed. If we do it with care, we can tap into their infinite potential for beauty, honesty, and success in life.

China's repressive family rearing model, deeply influenced by traditional cultural, historical, social and psychological factors, has brought huge psychological trauma to those highly sensitive teenagers (Chen, 2010). How to effectively prevent and treat "highly sensitive" students has become a topic of general concern in current education circles. Recently, a growing number of scholars have begun to explore the connection between the home environment of adolescents and those who are highly sensitive young adults (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). The study found that some factors in the parenting style and parent-child relationship will have a certain degree of influence on the "highly sensitive" children. Highly sensitive adolescents show extremely sensitive senses and emotions, awkward and shy in unfamiliar social environments, and poor verbal expression; In the course of life, achievements can be presented in two extremes, one is excellent achievement, the other is insignificant achievement. At present, the research on "high sensitivity" at home and abroad mainly focuses on children, but there are few studies involving teenagers. Psychologist Elaine Aron, who has conducted more than a decade of research in this area, has concluded that parenting style is a key factor in determining whether hypersensitivity is a strength or a weakness (Aron, 2013). They found that children tend to have much stronger emotional responses to their own parents than they do to others. According to attachment theory, with the full play of family function and more support, the mental health level of adolescents will also improve, on the contrary, members are prone to a series of psychological and behavioral problems. Figure 1 illustrates the dominance sensitivity hypothesis, with the horizontal coordinate representing the degree of positivity of the environment or experience, and the vertical coordinate representing the degree of dominance of the outcome of adolescent development. According to the graph, a good family environment has a positive effect on the growth of highly sensitive adolescents.

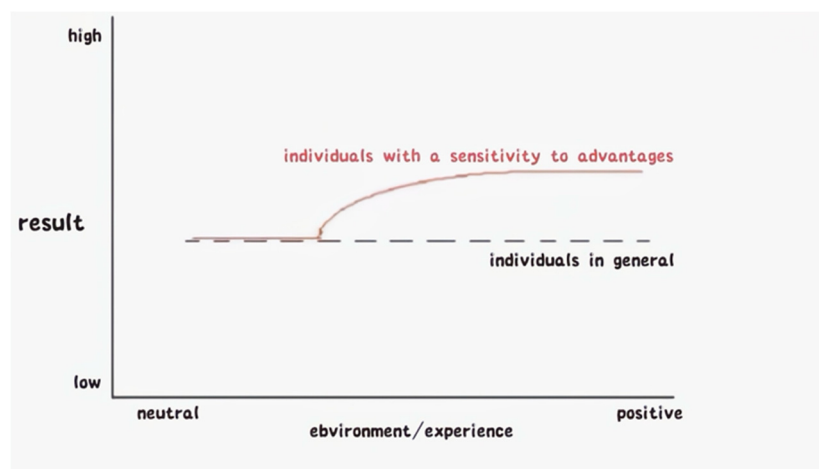


Figure 1. Schematic diagram of the dominant sensitivity hypothesis

As for the causes of highly sensitive adolescents, whether it is genetic determinism, environmental determinism, intergenerational inheritance, or a combination of factors, the uniqueness of these children is indeed worthy of our high attention.

2.2 Art Therapy Can Help Highly Sensitive Adolescents Develop Better

In the process of growing up, the family environment is a very important factor, which will have a profound impact on the psychological and behavioral health of adolescents (Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002; J. Wang, Hu, & L. Wang, 2018). With the increasing complexity of family structure and function and the intensification of social competition, “high IQ” has become the consensus of many parents today, but this view has led to the formation of bad personality and mental health problems in some middle school students in our country. According to the research data at home and abroad, it can be concluded that the experience gained by adolescents in their early life experience has a profound impact on their future development. Therefore, understanding the relationship between family rearing style and mental health is of great significance for guiding the healthy growth of adolescents. In contemporary Chinese family education, there are suppression education, demeaning education and “three high” family education models (Gao et al., 2023). In these models, “highly sensitive” adolescents suffer setbacks in the early environment, and even have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) because of their high sensitivity to the external environment, neuroticism and easy crying.

2.2.1 By Looking at Works of Art, We Can Open Up Our Innermost Emotional World

The effect of art on the brain is a complex and diversified process, which involves many factors (Bolwerk et al., 2014). This kind of feeling and perception is transmitted to people's consciousness through the nervous system and is accepted, which is what people call the visual effect. When we participate in an artistic activity or view a work of art, visual and perceptual areas are activated, triggering our perception of the beauty of color and line. The brain integrates visual information to form a complete cognitive system. The reason why art healing has an advantage is that it has direct access and strong expression. Painting therapy is a method to help clients improve their mental state and enhance their self-ability through the art of painting. Through the study of Gazzaniga's “split brain” and the research of Sperry and Gazzaniga, we deeply understand that there are significant differences in the physiological function of the left and right brain. The left brain plays a crucial role in language, logic, analysis, algebraic thinking, cognition, and behavior (Hartford Hospital in the United States, n.d.). The right side of the brain is mainly responsible for visual, spatial and imaginative, artistic and creative thinking, aesthetic and behavioral expression. The right brain is the department responsible for intuition, synthesis, geometry, graphic thinking, cognition, behavior, etc. The functional division of the left and right brain is shown in Figure 2.

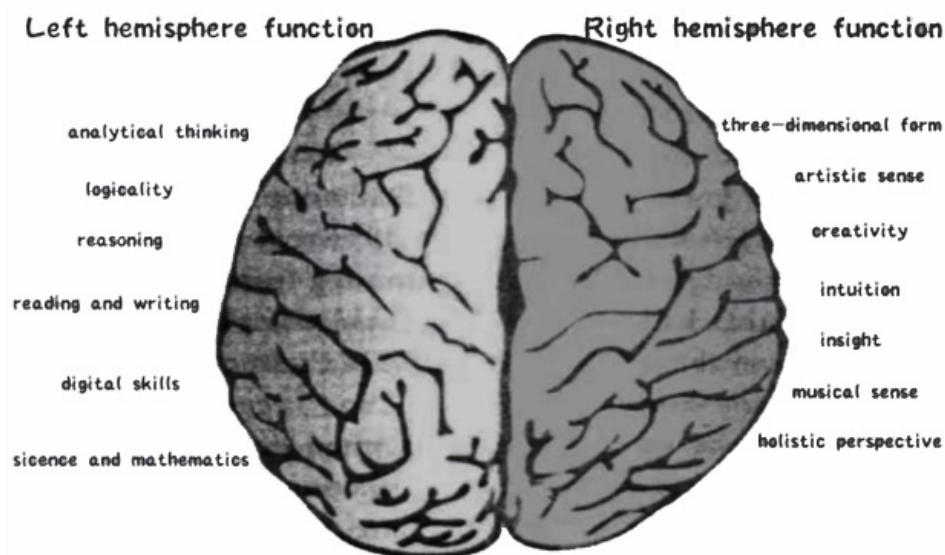


Figure 2. Functional division of Left and right brain - from “Upper Brain and Lower Brain”

Vision is the product of cooperation between brain and senses. It is not only a way of processing images by retina, but also a complex computational process of retinal imaging by cerebral cortex. Therefore, when we engage in artistic activities or appreciate artworks, the neural stimulation reaches our right brain, activating our visual and perceptual areas, triggering our perception of the beauty of colors and lines. The brain integrates information through the left brain, forming a complete cognitive system. (Art and Healing Network, n.d.) The

series of interactions and changes transmitted by vision stimulate the transformation of the brain from sensory stimulation to neural activity, which has a profound impact on the internal psychology and triggers a rich variety of neural activity. When highly sensitive adolescents appreciate paintings, their visual and perceptual areas will be stimulated, which stimulates the release of dopamine and the increase of dopamine levels in the brain, thus producing a sense of pleasure and satisfaction, which further enhances the emo

tional connection between highly sensitive adolescents and art works, enabling them to gain a sense of identity in art works. Thus alleviating the self-containment mentality brought about by the early environment.

2.2.2 Using Art as the Medium, Shaping the Inner Environment, Thereby Changing the Surrounding Environment

After the mid-nineteenth century, psychology has shifted from the realm of philosophy to the domain of science, with psychologists placing greater emphasis on verifying the impact of color psychology through experiments. Colors wield a magical power in the human psyche, capable of bringing joy and satisfaction (McDonald, 2013). The psychological benefits of colors are manifested in their realistic, emotional, and abstract qualities. The emotions evoked by cool and warm colors go beyond mere temperature differences, offering a range of emotional experiences (Ebara, 2021). Artists achieve a therapeutic effect by observing and depicting nature or the human psyche. The essence of art therapy lies in using language and vision as mediums of communication and observation (Zheng, 2021). Artists infuse their emotions into their artwork, conveying inner thoughts in a unique manner. Unconsciously, artists express their emotions during the painting process, alleviating inner pain. The emotional experiences of artists influence the message conveyed by their work, transcending the canvas. (American Art Therapy Association, n.d.) In art creation, highly sensitive adolescents engage in artistic endeavors based on emotional cognition and personal insights, visualizing inner feelings through the presentation of colors and shapes, thus revealing their inner world and mental state. The emotional cognition of creators is expressed in artistic works, this expression can evoke empathy in people, while also helping us better understand the dilemmas faced by creators. Artworks convey a perspective on reality and the future, which can help individuals better understand themselves, enabling them to face life more positively. The therapeutic ability of fine arts is achieved at the level of consciousness, actually through deepening individual self-awareness. The meanings contained in artworks are often related to the individual's unconscious, where unconscious psychological activities and thought patterns have a significant impact on artistic creation. Artworks, as symbols of the creator's inner subconscious, are visualized through imagery, clarifying their deeper meanings, while the subconscious is continuously brought into consciousness through this form, promoting harmony between the creator's inner and outer worlds, thereby aiding in the release of negative emotions. Furthermore, research has revealed that constructing emotion-centered images can not only stimulate brain activity in the limbic system but also integrate with the hippocampus, leading to more precise and specific cognitive expressions (Banwinkler et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2017). The cognitive differences before and after art therapy can be thoroughly assessed through the presentation of art. During the process of artistic creation, the brain and its neural connections are greatly awakened. For those engaging in art therapy, the materials and techniques they choose may result in artistic effects similar to meditation, aiding in relaxation and providing a sense of balance and stability. Simultaneously, when individuals select creative materials and colors, their bodies and senses experience a novel stimulation, which may ignite a passion within them that is usually imperceptible, a vital sensory experience needed to overcome negative emotions. Emotions can be expressed through the use of color, facilitating emotional release and others' understanding of their feelings. Art therapy, as a form of art psychotherapy, can help highly sensitive adolescents overcome psychological distress, enhance aesthetic abilities, cultivate positive character traits, and promote overall well-being (Sun, 2020). The internal struggles faced by highly sensitive adolescents stem from immense pressure from their families, economic hardships, strict parenting styles, and violent and impoverished surroundings, factors that may even lead to abuse, insults, and neglect. Highly sensitive adolescents cannot bear it psychologically, so they will develop negative emotions such as anxiety and depression, affecting their physical and mental health development. Through the artistic creations of adolescents, caregivers in family education can identify potential depressive factors, thereby transforming their parenting styles, reducing the impact of harmful substances in family education on sensitive adolescents, and providing them with a safer, more beautiful, and healthier growth environment. Recent scientific research shows that art therapy may use higher brain structures to suppress and alleviate conditioned fear and anxiety responses occurring in lower brain regions (Richard Carr). In other words, art therapy can stimulate our higher-level thinking abilities. It is for this reason that expressive art healing has great applicability in the field of family education. It not only helps parents to have a deeper experience with themselves and their children, but also stimulates their rich imagination and inspiration while cultivating their children's hands-on, language, and

communication abilities, promoting the formation of creativity and insight, relieving and resolving emotions, helping them discover themselves, and contributing to the comprehensive development of their personalities.

2.2.3 The Use of Art Therapy in Oppressive-Style Parenting Helps Highly Sensitive Teenagers

Through art education to achieve psychological healing, the approach can involve many aspects because art is not just painting, but also sculpture, design, handicrafts, and various other forms. Painting and drawing art therapy belong to psycho-art therapy, using the process of painting to create, using non-verbal tools to express suppressed emotions and conflicts in the subconscious, and finding relief and satisfaction in the painting process, thus achieving a good therapeutic effect. This method is suitable for people of all ages, whether adults or children, who can express their feelings and conflicts through painting to achieve the effect of healing diseases. The process of painting therapy can be divided into several stages. First, the cathartic stage where individuals express their emotions and conflicts in their hearts through painting to release tension and anxiety. This process is important because it helps reduce mental burdens and makes people feel easier and more at ease. Next is the storytelling stage, where individuals express their traumas and injustices in their hearts through painting, helping themselves soothe their emotions and alleviate their distress. In this process, individuals may draw symbolic patterns, such as band-aids, scenes locked in chains, etc., all reflecting their inner distress and troubles. Moving on to the healing and restoration phase, people gradually calm down, using painting to heal and restore their souls. They may repeatedly draw their favourite, familiar, and skilled patterns, which helps alleviate mental fatigue and anxiety. At this stage, individuals may also create warm and compassionate paintings to replenish psychological energy and spiritual nourishment. Finally, in the sublimation stage, people express beauty and aspirations through painting, presenting a more perfect state of life. This stage is the golden period of creation, where individuals can tap into more brain resources, fostering creativity and imagination. Overall, art therapy through drawing and painting has a significant psychological therapeutic effect, allowing individuals to express their feelings and conflicts, reduce tension and anxiety, and achieve healing. Furthermore, it is a meaningful and creative art form that brings joy and satisfaction to the soul during the creative process. Another approach is through activities such as sculpture and handicrafts, allowing individuals to personally shape their works to enhance self-worth and a sense of accomplishment. We provide tools and materials for sculpture and handicrafts, encouraging individuals to try different ways and styles of creation, inspiring creativity and imagination, allowing you to express your emotions and thoughts while creating, and sharing your inner world through your work. Another approach is to introduce the concept and methods of art therapy, promoting communication and co-operation between individuals and others through collective creation and interaction. When working collectively, individuals are encouraged to express opinions and thoughts, as well as listen to others' opinions, to enhance empathy and communication skills. Using art therapy and collective creation help individuals establish healthier interpersonal relationships and social support systems.

In conclusion, the approach to achieving psychological healing through art education needs to prioritise individual feelings and needs, providing diverse art forms and activities to encourage individuals to express their inner worlds to promote their psychological well-being. These methods can be flexibly adjusted according to individual differences.

3. Conclusion

In art education, we should take cultivating people's aesthetic perception ability as the goal, attach importance to children's psychological guidance and guidance, and help them form a sound and stable personality quality. Through the healing function of art, the developmental frustration generated by the early high anxiety and high pressure family education of highly sensitive adolescents can externalize the causes of emotions and difficulties into images through visual forms, and through the viewing and appreciation of images, the individual unconscious information containing repressed emotions and trauma, as well as the collective unconscious information obtained by genetics, can be realized. Thus, it can promote the expansion of consciousness, self-integration and self-reflection, and finally realize the integration of body and spirit to achieve the purpose of healing. Therefore, in the study of art education, we can not only limit the exploration of a single discipline or a specific field, but should grasp the essence of art education as a whole, so as to better guide practice.

This research presents an adapted version of the Attachment Doll Story Completion Task for children in middle childhood (ADSCT for m-c), a measure for classifying children's representations of mother-child attachment relationships into four attachment types: secure, avoidant, ambivalent, and disorganized. The ADSCT enables interviewers to partially circumvent the sophistication and defensiveness of middle childhood children's story completions. A sample of 185 children in the 4th and 5th grades, and 50 mothers of children from one 4th and one 5th grade class of that sample participated in the study. Children underwent the ADSCT for m-c procedure.

Homeroom teachers, classmates, and the child reported on the children's psychosocial adaptation. A sub-sample of the mothers completed measures of maternal caring attitudes and practices. Associations between the different attachment types and distinct forms of adaptation showed that secure attachment exhibited positive social relationships and a low level of psychosocial and behavior problems; disorganized attachment showed the poorest adaptation, manifested in psychosocial problems, behavior problems, social problem, aggressiveness, and victimization. Avoidant attachment exhibited social problems, peer rejection, behavior problems, and compulsive thought. And ambivalent attachment showed social vulnerability, and intermediate level of adaptation, between the better functioning of the securely attached and the problematic functioning of the insecurely attached. Concurrent validity of the ADSCT for m-c with maternal attitudes and practices, and discriminate validity with reference to key cognitive variables were good.

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The authors declare that there are no competing or potential conflicts of interest.

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