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## Dyadic Expressive Arts Therapy for Parent-Child Attunement in Children's Attachment-Based Trauma Treatment: A Literature Review

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**Dyadic Expressive Arts Therapy for Parent-Child Attunement  
in Children's Attachment-Based Trauma Treatment: A Literature Review**

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

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Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Expressive Arts Therapy

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### **Abstract**

This literature review explores current research about the use of expressive therapy methods in parent-child dyadic treatment, with a focus on attachment-based healing for children's trauma treatment. I aim to answer the following question: how can expressive arts therapy be used to enhance nonverbal communication, foster attunement, and deepen connection between parent and child as an integral part of a child's attachment-based trauma treatment? Children have an inherent need for an intimate emotional bond with a primary caregiver during the first few years of life and this early attachment relationship sets a foundation for mental, emotional, and physical health throughout the lifespan. Therapy for children who have experienced attachment-based trauma is centered on building supportive, safe relationships with an attuned adult; this often takes the form of dyadic therapy in which the therapist works with the child and parent to strengthen their relationship. Quantitative, qualitative, and art-based studies about dyadic art therapy, music therapy, and dance/movement therapy approaches were reviewed in-depth. The results demonstrated many positive impacts of dyadic expressive therapy for improving mental wellbeing and developing more attuned connections between parents and children, though most of the studies discussed did not specifically focus on traumatized children. Recommendations are made for further empirical research about multimodal dyadic expressive arts therapy, dyadic expressive therapies for attachment trauma, and longer-term studies.

*Keywords:* attachment, dyadic therapy, expressive arts therapy, trauma, children

*Author Identity Statement:* The author identifies as a queer cisgender woman of European ancestry ('white') and Jewish lineage from the U.S. She is also the mother of a young child.

## Introduction

The relationships between parents and children are critical to the healthy development of children, and ultimately, future healthy adults (Deneault et al, 2023, Kim et al, 2021; Malchiodi, 2019). Attachment theory, originally developed by Bowlby (1988), posited that babies have an inherent need for an intimate emotional bond with a primary caregiver during the first few years of life and this early attachment relationship sets a foundation for mental, emotional, and physical health throughout the lifespan. When a parent consistently responds to their child's needs, a secure attachment pattern can be formed, allowing the child to feel safe enough to explore the world. This requires a parent to be available, helpful, sensitive, and responsive to a child's communication, especially when the child is seeking comfort or protection. When a parent does not provide this secure base, a child may develop an insecure attachment pattern, which can lead to a variety of psychological, personality and behavioral problems in subsequent years. (Deneault et al, 2023; Lieberman & Van Horn, 2008; Muir, 1992; O'Neill et al, 2021)

Therapy for children who have experienced attachment-based trauma is often centered on building supportive, safe relationships with an attuned adult. Dyadic therapy is a specific treatment approach in which the therapist works with a child and parent to strengthen their relationship; this is often part of attachment-based treatment since it is focused on the main attachment relationship in the child's life. A major focus of this dyadic work is to foster the parent's attunement to the child's experience; when a parent is attuned, they interpret the child's affect and mirror it back in a way that shows it was understood (Armstrong & Howatson, 2015).

Nonverbal communication skills, which include gesture, facial expressions and vocal tone, are essential for developing secure attachment and co-regulating emotions and behavior. Parents' ability to use these skills and to interpret a child's nonverbal cues has a significant

impact on children's emotional and socialization skills and patterns. Therefore, focusing intentionally on nonverbal communication in dyadic therapy is necessary for supporting the development of a healthy parent child-relationship and the child's overall wellbeing. (Colegrove & Havighurst, 2017; Malchiodi, 2019)

Expressive therapies are thought to be uniquely useful in treating trauma because they offer non-verbal, embodied ways to access and express traumatic experiences (Malchiodi, 2019; Richardson, 2015; Southwell, 2019). The sensory and embodied nature of the creative arts allows clients to gain awareness and ability to process implicit memories and feelings in a way that is not possible with talk therapy alone (Perryman et al, 2019). Non-verbal communication is particularly important with young children who have not yet developed the language skills to express their feelings and experiences verbally. Creative methods such as visual art, music, movement, and sand tray can be effective in helping them process traumatic experiences, tell their trauma narratives, lower stress arousal, build self-regulation abilities, foster self-efficacy, and develop the capacity to relate to others in healthy ways (Desmond et al., 2015, Southwell, 2019).

Despite this evidence, the expressive arts are not typically used in the most common dyadic therapy frameworks for trauma treatment. Some expressive therapy interventions such as the Joint Painting Procedure (JPP) have been developed specifically for evaluating and enhancing the implicit communication between parent-child dyads (Gavron & Mayseless, 2015; Miao Wong & Hung Ho, 2022). However, there is little empirical research about the use of expressive arts therapy in dyadic attachment-based trauma therapy.

This literature review explores the current research about the use of expressive therapy methods in parent-child dyadic treatment, with a focus on attachment-based healing for

children's trauma treatment. This paper aims to answer the following question: how can expressive arts therapy be used to enhance nonverbal communication, foster attunement, and deepen connection between parent and child as an integral part of a child's attachment-based trauma treatment? By reviewing the literature about various expressive therapy interventions with parent-child dyads, I hope the findings will be useful for other clinicians to incorporate into their work with children and families. Given that this is an under-researched topic within the mental health field, my hope is that this project will identify possibilities for supporting attachment-based trauma treatment in children through expressive arts therapies and offer more insight into the value of these approaches so that more children may benefit from them.

### **Literature Review**

Attachment theory, originally developed by Bowlby and Ainsworth in the 1950s through the 1980s, has become broadly accepted in the field of psychology. The theory suggests that children are born with a biological instinct to bond with their primary caregiver as a means of survival. The quality of this early caregiving relationship forms the basis of a child's sense of self and relationships with others, due to the development of an internal working model. Since then, much research has been conducted over the past several decades about the fundamental impact of parent-child attachment on children's development. Research confirms that the subtle interactions between parent and infant are critical in determining the health of the child's development in subsequent years. (Deneault et al, 2023)

For the purposes of this paper, the term 'parent' will be used, as most of the research is focused specifically on parents and children, however, this term is meant to include biological, foster, and adoptive parents and other primary caregivers who serve in a parental role.

A meta-analysis by Deneault et al (2023) of 41 studies found that children who have secure attachments to their parents are more likely to develop prosocial behavior with other people in their lives. The researchers defined prosociality as kindness to others, or behaviors that take into consideration and support the wellbeing of other people, including peers, other family members, and strangers.

The presence of parental mental health issues increases the risk of children developing mental health issues. When parents respond insensitively, intrusively, or unpredictably to their children's needs, an insecure attachment is formed; this can result in emotional, social, and physical challenges for those children, which may persist into adulthood. (Lavey-Khan and Reddick, 2020; Southwell, 2019) In addition, when a child experiences emotional neglect, it can result in internalizing behaviors, cognitive impairment, and social withdrawal, as well as a variety of mental health challenges in adulthood (Jacobsen & McKinney, 2015). Therefore, assessing the nature of parent-child relationships, promoting parent wellbeing and parenting competence, and supporting the development of healthy parent-child relationships in early childhood is critical for children's well-being. The main ingredients of forming secure attachment are attunement and nonverbal communication between parent and child. In these early years of life, most communication is nonverbal, including body language and gestures, facial expressions, eye contact and vocal sounds. (Malchiodi, 2019)

### **Attunement**

Attunement is the ability to notice/read nonverbal cues, including facial gestures, eye signals, posture, voice tone, and breathing. According to Malchiodi (2019), it involves three types of embodied responses to another person's state of being: listening, understanding, and validating. The theory of attunement was birthed from the psychoanalytic concept of the

nonverbal connection between mother and infant. Psychobiological attunement is a specific form of attunement that provides a sense of psychological and physical safety. Research by Daniel Stern indicates that there is a process by which mother and infant tune in to each other in a back and forth rhythmic interaction which includes sounds, touch, facial expressions, and affect. Children learn about being in relationship with others through this rhythmic attunement with a primary caregiver. Studies have shown that this nonverbal rhythmic interaction takes place in the prefrontal cortex of the brain and is essential in regulating social and emotional behaviors. Thus, depending on the attunement or misattunement that a parent provides, these interactions can lead to patterns of regulation or dysregulation for the child. (Kossak, 2023)

Engagement in rhythmic activities such as arts, dancing, singing, drumming, and breathing can help regulate the nervous system due to the attunement to self and/or others. Improvisational music making can facilitate a shift in affect, deeper interpersonal connections, and a sense of safety. Studies on partner dancing show how synchronizing rhythms with another person can bring more harmony to relationships. In another study, artists responded to questions about how they felt while painting, then viewers of the paintings in a gallery responded to questions about how they felt while viewing the art. There were many similar patterns across the artists' and viewers' responses, which points to the mirroring of emotional or embodied experiences that can take place when viewing art. The mirror neuron system in the brain activates in response to viewing art, which can also regulate the nervous system. Over time, imagery can be utilized to rewire internal feelings, create new resonance and change trauma rhythms. (Kossak, 2023)

### **Nonverbal Communication**



Nonverbal communication between a parent and child is key in developing secure attachment and is a critical part of co-regulating emotions and behavior. This has a significant impact on children's emotional and socialization skills and patterns, as their primary caregiving relationships are where children's emotional and communication patterns are formed. Parents' response to their child's emotional expression impacts the attachment relationship which then impacts the child's other relationships in life. Children whose parents respond sensitively and consistently to their nonverbal cues show greater resiliency, better emotion regulation, and can maintain positive relationships. Deficits in nonverbal information processing have been linked to psychopathology including aggressive behavior, depression and social anxiety in children and teens. When a parent does not accurately interpret their child's emotions, the child may experience a decreased capacity to express emotional arousal which can then influence a parent's ability to gauge what support the child requires. (Colgrove & Havigurst, 2017)

Parent-child dynamics contain both implicit aspects, which are unconscious and nonverbal, and explicit aspects, which are conscious and verbal. Implicit interactions are at the core of the dynamic and can be best expressed and transformed through the visual and symbolic language of creative arts. (Gavron & Mayseless, 2015; Miao Wong & Hung Ho, 2022)

### **Early Trauma and Disrupted Attachment**

Trauma can be defined as an event in which an individual believes they or someone else is in imminent danger and cannot control the way they experience that event. Whether it is caused by one isolated event such as a natural disaster, or on-going exposure to violence or abuse, childhood trauma disrupts children's development and leads to serious short-term and long-term health consequences for children. (Wymer et al, 2020) Early relational trauma—sometimes called developmental trauma or complex trauma—typically occurs within a child's

relationship with a primary caregiver. It is chronic and prolonged, and because it happens during a critical phase of development, it has serious physiological and behavioral impacts. Aside from abuse and neglect, some parents may unintentionally cause chronically stressful experiences for children by responding inconsistently to the children's needs. This unpredictable relational environment can cause attachment trauma in which children are in a constant state of fear. Sometimes parents are inconsistent in parenting due to their own mental health issues, socioeconomic challenges, or lack of awareness about the effects of their behavior on their children. (Terradas et al, 2021)

### **Expressive Arts Therapy and Trauma Treatment**

Expressive arts therapy is an approach to therapy in which various creative arts are used to facilitate healing. This encompasses modalities such as visual art, music, dance and movement, writing, drama, and play. Oftentimes, a single art modality is used therapeutically, such as art therapy or music therapy, and these fall under a broader umbrella of “expressive therapies.” In expressive arts therapy, or intermodal therapy, more than one art modality is used in combination. (Malchiodi, 2019; Richardson, 2016)

These multisensory and experiential approaches are often used to treat psychological, emotional, social and behavioral issues in children, including the effects of trauma and disrupted attachment. Since the expressive arts offer playful and nonverbal means of interaction, they can be very useful for addressing mental health challenges in both parents and children and fostering the development of healthy relationships between the two. These nonverbal means of expression allow for deeper layers of experience to be shared and understood, and the sensory-based aspects of creative art forms can foster secure attachment, empathy, and self-regulation in early childhood. (Miao Wong & Hung Ho, 2022; Malchiodi & Crenshaw, 2015; Southwell, 2016)

During the preverbal beginning stage of life, the first modes of interaction in infancy are through the senses—primarily through touch. Implicit memories and the wiring of the brain and nervous system are first formed through touch between infants and parents. The sensory and tactile nature of the expressive arts can replicate these positive experiences of early attachment, and support children in accessing and expressing visual or other types of sensory experiences of attachment trauma that cannot be accessed or expressed verbally. (Urquhart et al, 2020)

Southwell (2016) offers one salient example: *yourtown's* Expressive Therapy Intervention (YETI), a program developed for preschool-aged children with emotional and behavioral challenges due to trauma. Many of the children in the YETI program displayed symptoms of developmental trauma, disorganized or disrupted attachment. The program is integrated into case-managed holistic family support program serving marginalized families in two sites: a regional child and family support center and a domestic and family violence refuge. YETI used a variety of creative arts modalities and play therapy to support the young clients' social emotional wellbeing, positive self-concept, attachment relationship quality, and behavioral adjustment. The theoretical framework was informed by Pearson and Wilson's intermodal model of expressive therapies, child-centered play therapy, and sandplay therapy, child-parent relationship therapy/filial therapy, and the neurosequential model of therapeutics. The children engaged in 30-60 minute weekly expressive therapy sessions with an expressive therapist, and parent-child therapy sessions were offered instead of or in addition to the individual sessions. In the parent-child sessions, the expressive therapist provided modeling and support for the parent in developing their ability to respond properly to the child's attachment needs during play.

A two-year outcome evaluation was conducted using the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) for pre/post intervention assessment, a caregiver survey, and clinicians' end-of-therapy

reports. 41 children between the ages of 0-5 participated in the outcome evaluation. The findings suggested that this type of creative attachment-based trauma treatment can cause significant positive effects on preschool-aged children's trauma treatment. The CBCL analysis showed statistically and clinically significant progress with behaviors related to elevated stress arousal and self-regulation as well as internalizing behaviors. Between the intake and exit, mean scores in all scales and subscales reduced with a significance of .01 in every case except for the somatic complaints subscale. The number of children classified on the clinical/borderline ranges on the three main problem scales (internalizing, externalizing, and total problems) at intake decreased significantly by the exit. (Southwell, 2016)

This study demonstrates that utilizing a variety of expressive arts approaches in individual and dyadic therapy can be effective in treating trauma in young children. Given that the children who participated in the YETI program presented with trauma histories and disrupted attachment, the multimodal expressive therapy approaches appeared to support their healing processes. It would be helpful to compare the effects of individual expressive arts therapy vs dyadic expressive arts therapy in this program with the same population.

### **Dyadic Expressive Therapies**

Dyadic therapy, or parent-child therapy, is a common treatment for children with attachment-based trauma. Given the neurobiological and developmental insights about expressive therapies discussed in earlier sections, combining expressive arts therapy with dyadic therapy makes sense. In her book chapter, Malchiodi (2019) describes sensory-based attunement as foundational for children's trauma treatment in the context of dyadic work. One method is mirroring, in which a parent or clinician reflects or embodies the movements or nonverbal communication of the child; this supports the development of self-regulation and attuned

relationships. This is partially due to the mirror neurons within our brains, which fire when we observe another person having a particular experience and cause us to instinctively empathize with that person's experience. Another method is entrainment, or synchronizing rhythms, which facilitates self-regulation and positive parent-child attachment. This connects to babies' earliest experiences of attachment: hearing their mothers' heartbeat and being gently rocked or swayed to calm and soothe. Regulating entrainment activities use the voice or sensory activities based on the resting heart rate. This usually involves playing music at a different rhythm from person's internal rhythm to slow down their physiological responses; the internal functions such as breath and heartbeat adjust to external rhythms automatically. (Malchiodi, 2019)

### ***Dyadic Art Therapy***

A two-part study conducted by Armstrong and Ross (2023), studied 105 parents and parents and their children between 0-3 years old to measure the impacts of participating in a 12-week dyadic art therapy group focused on improving attachment relationships and wellbeing. The parent-child dyads were referred due to concerns about their relationships. The dyads were quasi-randomized into two groups, ending up with 50 dyads in the art therapy group and 55 in the control group. They used the Art at the Start model of group art therapy, in which groups of six to eight dyads met for an hour and a half to loosely explore art materials with the support of art therapists. The focus was on following the infants' needs. (Armstrong & Ross, 2023)

The first part was a controlled trial which used standardized self-report measures of psychological wellbeing, including the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) to measure parental wellbeing, and the Mother Object Relations Scale short form (MORS-SF) to measure the parents' perceptions of the attachment relationship. Pre and post test scores for each dyad were analyzed, focusing on three variables: wellbeing, warmth, and

intrusion. The data showed that wellbeing significantly increased for the parents in the intervention group and significantly decreased for the parents in the control group ( $p < .001$  for each). There was a significant increase ( $p < .001$ ) in warmth in the dyadic relationships in the intervention group and no significant change in warmth ( $p = .25$ ) for dyads in the control group. There was a significant decrease ( $p < .001$ ) in parents' perception of their children as intrusive in the intervention group and a significant increase ( $p < .001$ ) in parents' perception of intrusion in the control group. In all three variables, both groups began with the same baseline measures. (Armstrong & Ross, 2023)

The second part was a close observation which used analysis of video footage with 37 dyads from the art therapy group during home visits that took place at the beginning and end of the group. The video clips were analyzed using software that coded each frame according to eight channels of communication and connection: touch, proximity, shared goals, emotional presentation, connection, language, responsiveness, and boundaries. Three types of behaviors between parent and infant were considered for each channel: positive, flat, and negative. The results showed that overall, the positive behaviors increased significantly, and the flat behaviors decreased significantly; the amount of negative behaviors was low from the beginning so the change was not significant. (Armstrong & Ross, 2023)

This study provides strong support for utilizing art therapy to foster attachment between parents and young children. Since research shows that parental wellbeing is directly linked to the wellbeing of their children, the first measure was very relevant. In part two, the breadth attachment behaviors that were measured a helpful, and the calculated improvement with these behaviors offers insight into the new levels of attunement that came from the art therapy process. The comparison of an intervention group to a control group makes it particularly insightful, and

the researchers shared detailed information about the similarities of participants in each group (based on demographics and initial evaluation of the dyadic relationships). The study of dyads who were specifically presenting with concerns about their mother-child relationships also made this especially relevant to my research topic.

The qualitative portion of a study by Gavron and Mayseless (2015), which was part of a larger mixed-methods research study on the Joint Painting Procedure (JPP), investigated the specific processes of change and therapeutic benefits of the JPP when used within the parent-child relationship. The JPP is an assessment and treatment protocol that directs parent-child dyads to paint first separately and then together on the same paper in a five-step process. The JPP was intended to measure the implicit aspects of this relationship. Eighty-seven mother-child dyads with children between 9-12 years of age participated in the JPP, who were recruited from four public schools and via social media. Detailed observations were written about all aspects of the interactions during each phase of the JPP process; each phase was also photographed along with the final product. The qualitative analysis was based on observing the relationships using narrative and phenomenological research perspectives and it was carried out in three phases. The researchers took into account the verbal interaction and reflections, implicit interaction through art-making (the way of creating, themes, and metaphors), and explicit and implicit behavior and emotional affect of both participants (separately and together as a dyad).

In most cases, the mother-child relationships that were observed in Gavron and Mayseless (2015) went through a transformation process that fostered their positive connection during the JPP, as indicated by the participants and analysis of the art products. About half of the dyads went through a full transformation process and about a third experienced a partial transformation process. In addition, the research revealed several dynamic processes of the JPP

which occurred for most of the families during the process, including: pleasure and fun, mutual bidirectional affect, development and involvement of the relationship, mutual regulation, mentalization, mutual recognition, and transformation of the relationship. The first six processes occurred in interconnected ways that evolved the relationship and, if enough of the processes were present, led to transformation of the relationship. Overall, the study found that the JPP facilitates new ways for parents and children to communicate with each other and be together.

In one case vignette, a 10-year-old girl began the session withdrawn, and over the course of the process—when she and her mother connected their drawings and painted together—she became more joyful and freely self-expressed in a way that the mom described as very rare. The mother and child ended up creating a red box on the paper that they described as solely theirs; only they could open it. In another case study, a 9-year-old girl arrived with low affect and appeared angry when her mother painted a path between their paintings. When it was time to paint together, the girl said she preferred to paint alone, but when her mom began painting grass, flowers and butterflies toward the daughter's part of the page, the girl started painting similar types of images toward her mom. This implicit expression shifted the dynamic, and the child began painting and talking more freely as they painted together. Afterwards, the girl explained that in the process, she discovered that it is fun and she felt happy to paint with her mother. Overall, the study found that the JPP facilitates new ways for parents and children to communicate with each other and be together. (Gavron & Mayseless, 2015)

This study provides strong qualitative evidence that a dyadic art therapy technique can bring about positive transformation in parent-child relationships, specifically with school-age children. It seems that attunement and nonverbal communication were strengthened in the process. However, there was a lack of demographic, sociocultural, or mental health data about



the participants. The mental health status, potential trauma history, and attachment relationships of the participants are unknown and trauma treatment was not a focus of the study. Additionally, without situating the participants within the context of their environment or sociocultural histories, it is unclear what factors may have contributed to their experiences of trauma. The research was based on only one session of the JPP; it would be helpful to conduct a similar study that uses the JPP in a longer-term basis and includes a diverse group of participants. Furthermore, the wellbeing of the mothers and children was not discussed and no presenting problems were shared; this seems to be a critical factor in the research. (Gavron & Mayseless, 2015)

Art-based research was conducted by Miao Wong & Hung Ho (2022) to study the application of the Joint Painting Procedure (JPP) as an art-based method to measure the implicit relationship between Chinese mothers who survived intimate partner violence (IPV) and their children. Participants included 16 mother-child dyads (10 mothers, ages 27 - 44 years old, and 16 children, ages 7 - 13 years old) who resided in an abused women's shelter in Hong Kong. Participants were referred to the study by social workers at the shelter. Prior to residing at the shelter, the mothers had experienced IPV and the children had directly witnessed it. The dyads engaged in the JPP, and mothers with more than one child engaged in the JPP process multiple times—once with each child. The data included: JPP artworks, field notes, participant background information sheets, and audio recordings of discussions after painting.

In descriptions of the art created by two mothers and four children, the children displayed a sense of agency through explanations of their heroic characters, images and artistic elements focused on safety and protection in their paintings. In addition, the mothers' need for a personal space boundary was revealed and resolved between mothers and children in the art process. For

example, with one dyad, the child painted on the flower that the mother had painted, and she responded by telling him, “That is my flower. You are painting on my flower” (p. 6). The child stopped and shifting to paint another part of the paper. Later, when he accidentally painted on a part of the mother’s path, he immediately moved away from the path without prompting. In the post-painting reflections, the mother brought up those moments and remarked, “I am so pleased to see it, because it means that he listens to me...he knows that’s my path...he knows that I don’t want him to paint it.” Overall, the process allowed mothers and children to visualize and communicate about each other’s inner experiences which had previously been difficult to verbalize with one other (e.g. worries, concerns, and affection). The children did not want to stop painting and in their reflections, mothers and children expressed happiness, appreciation and valuing of their experience of painting together. The mothers’ need for children to respect their personal space boundary may have indicated a rebuilding of their sense of identity and their relationships with their children while living independently from their abusers. The study has shown that the JPP method can enhance understanding of mother-child relationships in the context of IPV, as the art process prompted participants to connect and share information in unique ways. (Miao Wong & Hung Ho, 2022)

This study shed light on the positive impact of this dyadic art therapy approach in supporting attachment while healing from the trauma of domestic violence. This is particularly salient to the research question explored in this paper. The case studies described were illustrative of the power of the JPP method on several levels, however it would have been helpful to find out about the other types of artwork and experiences from other dyads in the study. The researchers’ theoretical framework centered the strengths and agency of the participants throughout the study, and they described the ways in which they were intentional in addressing

potential power imbalances (between researchers and participants, and between mothers and children). The researchers described the participants as collaborators in the process, viewed the mothers and children as the knowledge holders about their relationship and agents of change within that relationship, and gathered information directly from the dyads' interpretations of their own artwork. They took additional steps to set up an experience that felt non-threatening, safe and enjoyable for the participants. More specific background information is needed; for example, the length of time that participants had been living independently from their abusers. More information about the mental health backgrounds of participants may be important to include as well. (Miao Wong & Hung Ho, 2022)

### ***Dyadic Music Therapy***

Jacobsen & McKinney (2015) evaluated the psychometric qualities of the APC-R (revised assessment of parenting competencies), a music therapy tool for assessing relationships between parents and children. A total of 51 parent-child dyads participated, composed of an 18-parent clinical group with emotionally neglected children and a 33-parent nonclinical group with non-neglected children. All children were between 5-12 years of age. The APC-R is composed of a structured series of video-recorded interactive exercises to evaluate nonverbal communication skills and the parent's response to the child. The protocol included four improvisational music activities which were performed twice (in two identical sessions). The study compared the scores from the APC-R in a clinical group of dyads with nonclinical group and with standardized parenting competency tests. Parents filled out two self-report questionnaires, the Parenting Stress Index (PSI) and the parent-child relationship inventory (PCRI), as a screening tool to assess the differences between the two groups. Music therapists analyzed the video recordings based on criteria in the following categories: Autonomy Analysis, Turn-Taking Analysis, Emotional

Response Analysis, and Mutual Attunement. Then the dyads were scored based on the five categories of the APC-R: Mutual Attunement, Nonverbal Communication Skills, Positive response, Negative response, Parent-child interaction in music. The study found that the APC-R was a reliable, consistent and valid tool for measuring parent-child interactions and parenting competencies. In all five APC-R categories, the mean scores of the clinical group were significantly lower ( $p \leq .001$ ) than the mean scores of the nonclinical group. The findings support the use of this tool as a standardized assessment, which could be pivotal in identifying and preventing childhood emotional neglect.

This study provides clear data supporting the use of music therapy not only as a means for attachment-based trauma treatment with children and parents, but also prevention of early relational trauma in the form of emotional neglect. This type of preventative measure could serve as a powerful tool for supporting families that are at risk of early childhood trauma. In considering limitations, the clinical group included more single parents and younger parents than the control group, which is an important area to explore in future research; it would be useful to repeat this study with matched parental characteristics in both groups. Some demographics of participants were not included in the article, such as race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, immigration status, etc. This information is important to consider as well as potential cultural bias of the assessment tool and/or the music therapists conducting and analyzing the assessment. (Jacobsen & McKinney, 2015)

An explanatory mixed methods study by Nemesh (2018) focused on family therapists implementing a music intervention in 38 family sessions focused on family roles. The intervention used music as a form of communication between family members and musical instruments as intermediary objects; the premise was that secure attachment is based on parental

attunement which naturally occurs through rhythm, voice, music, and movement. Music-making was utilized as a playful way to communicate and create experiences of mutual enjoyment, cooperation and creative problem solving. The intervention was based on two theoretical models. One was Alvin's free improvisation music therapy, which focuses on creating space for free expression and using instruments for internal projections and representations within structured family roles protocol. Afterwards, they engaged in verbal reflecting and processing to gain more insight. The other model was experiential family therapy by Satir et al, an action-oriented approach which focuses on practicing and exploring new experiences during the therapy session. These models were combined with current research in neurobiology and neuroplasticity. The goal of the sessions was to recreate experiences of attunement within family relationships using music and play. The therapists were trained in these music-based interventions and then they implemented the interventions with families. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected from Session Evaluation Questionnaires that the therapists completed after each family-based musical session; the questionnaires contained 21 questions on a 5-point Likert scale and six open-ended questions.

Overall, the results pointed toward therapeutic value in the intervention. The mean score for the item about therapeutic value on the questionnaire was 4.21 (with 4 indicating "very much" and 5 indicating "extremely"). The following themes emerged from the qualitative data, within four broad categories: clinical applicability, future implications, confidence to implement, and therapeutic value of the musical intervention. The therapists' questionnaires and interviews showed that the interventions clarified family roles and dynamics, promoted positive change in embodied way, increased positive connection by allowing individual family members to express

feelings, needs, desires in more comfortable way, promoted cooperation, open communication, attunement, and fun. (Nemesh, 2018)

This study offers useful approaches for addressing family roles and improving family relationships through music therapy, however, the focus of the study was on the therapists who were trained to implement the music interventions, and little information was given about the families who participated. Since the clients' diagnoses, presenting problems and treatment goals are unknown, it is unclear whether these music therapy approaches served in treating trauma or attachment problems. However, the themes and results were salient to the research question in terms of fostering attunement between parents and children and can be clearly applicable to attachment theory. (Nemesh, 2018)

### ***Dyadic Dance/Movement Therapy***

Quantitative research by Kedem et al (2021) explored the effectiveness of parent-child dance/movement therapy (PCDMT) by comparing the effects of a dance/movement therapy group involving mothers and children with a DMT control group of children without mothers present. Eighty kindergarteners participated who were receiving therapy mostly due to issues with emotional regulation and behavioral concerns. The researchers randomly assigned the kindergarteners into two groups: 40 children engaged in a dance/movement therapy group with their mothers and 40 engaged in a DMT group without their mothers. Four different variables were measured: child's self-perception, child's behavioral problems, mother's perception of the mother-child relationship, and mother's mental wellbeing. Several quantitative measures were used: the Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance for Young Children (PSPCSA), the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL), the Relationship Questionnaire with the Son/Daughter (RSDQ), and the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI) for the mothers. In addition, the

therapists leading the groups filled out the Therapy Session Report (TSR) at the completion of the therapeutic process to reflect on the experiences in the groups and evaluate clients' progress. The PCDMT groups focused on the relationships between the mothers and children as it manifests through their movement interactions in the group.

The results showed that both DMT groups had a positive impact on children's and mothers' mental health, with the PCDMT group results showing higher effectiveness than the regular DMT group for three out of the four variables. The data showed that both groups improved the children's self-perception, significantly reduced their behavioral problems, caused some improvement in the mother's perception of their relationship with their children, and significantly improved the mothers' wellbeing. Participants in the PCDMT group showed greater improvement in children's self-perception and greater reduction of behavioral problems than the children in the regular DMT group. The mothers in the PCDMT group reported marginally significant improvement in their perceptions of the mother-child relationship compared to the mothers of children in the DMT group. The mothers in both groups showed the same amount of improvement in self-perception. The researchers discussed connections to attachment theory in the results; they highlighted the movement mirroring techniques which activated the mirror neuron system and promoted the children's development of connection and empathy with others as well as an experience of containment and visibility by their mothers. (Kedem et al, 2021)

These results provided compelling evidence about the effectiveness of dyadic dance movement therapy to improve children's emotional and behavioral problems, children's self-perception, and mothers' perception of their relationships with their children. Further information about the parent-child relationships, including attachment concerns and trauma histories, and further assessment of the relationship dynamics would make the data more salient.

Collecting data about the children's perception of the parent-child relationship could also provide more relevant information. The study's comparison of the same therapeutic approach with dyads to a control group without dyads provided specific insight into the impact of attachment-based treatment with mothers. However, the quantitative data offers a limited perspective on the impacts of the groups on the participants; including qualitative data could bring additional relevant information. (Kedem et al, 2021)

Doonan and Brauninger (2015) used quantitative and qualitative methods to evaluate the impacts of a DMT group focused on interactive attachment between 20 mother-infant dyads. The dyads included babies whose ages ranged from three months to three years. The families participated in four weekly 45-minute dance/movement sessions that contained an opening song, play in a parachute, free movement together to various music, and a closing ritual. This was all guided by a dance movement therapist. For quantitative data, the parents filled out the Positive Affect Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) to measure their affect before and after each session and answered three open-ended questions after each session. For qualitative data, the parents responded to seven questions about their experiences in the group, and five themes emerged: social interaction, mother-baby interaction and bonding, attunement, fun, and baby imitation.

Quantitative results showed increased positive affect and decrease in negative affect in the mothers both after each session and over the course of all sessions. There was a significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) increase in positive affect after the first two sessions, and a significant decrease in negative affect after the first, second, and fourth sessions. Qualitative results showed that overall, the mothers' main reasons for returning to the DMT groups were social interaction, fun, and attunement, and they identified mother-infant bonding, attunement and social interaction to be the most beneficial aspects of the groups. Specifically, the attunement exercises had the most



impact on the mother-infant relationship; these encouraged mothers to closely observe their babies and facilitated interaction between the mothers and babies. Seven out of 15 mothers reported increased attunement in their relationships with their infants. Trends in the mother-baby interactions were identified based on the babies' developmental levels, which aligned with various aspects of attachment theory and research. (Doonan & Brauningner, 2015)

The results from this research affirmed the positive impacts of dyadic DMT groups on mother-infant attachment, with a major focus on the mothers' experience. This can be useful for general application to dyadic therapy and could be useful to treating attachment-based trauma; however, the researchers did not include any information about the participants' mental health, including trauma history or ruptures in attachment. The young ages of the child participants make the DMT groups appear to be more preventative than treatment-oriented, though it was not framed that way by the researchers. Strengthening attachment relationships as early as possible is ideal and this approach offers a different vantage point than the original question of this literature review. The study had a lack of information about inclusion/exclusion criteria and demographic information about the families. Another limitation is the lack of control group to compare the effects to dyads who did not experience a DMT group. (Doonan & Brauningner, 2015)

### ***Dyadic Expressive Arts Therapy***

Empirical research on parent-child expressive arts therapy—involving two or more creative arts modalities—appears to be very sparse, or possibly nonexistent. The recently published studies are focused on single art modalities; it appears that only books and non-research articles contain information about multi-modal or intermodal work with parent-child dyads. There are some research articles focused on using multimodal expressive arts therapy for

children's individual trauma treatment without a parent present. This is a major area for future growth in the research field about dyadic therapy with parents and children.

### **Discussion**

Creative arts are a useful means for facilitating attunement and nonverbal communication between parents and children, and thus fostering healthier attachment. Within the context of trauma treatment for children, supporting healthy attachment experiences is imperative. Consistent parental sensitivity to a child's affect and needs is crucial, and the aforementioned studies have shown that expressive therapies can serve as a way to develop this connection across art modalities, approaches and children's ages. The research studies reviewed here have demonstrated through quantitative, qualitative and art-based methods the power of visual art, music, dance and movement to support children in building more supportive relationships with a parent and, in turn, improving their mental health.

The studies reviewed in this paper showed the positive impacts of dyadic expressive therapy for developing positive attachment between parents and children. Though broader research has shown that higher levels of parent sensitivity, attunement and nonverbal communication between parent and child are helpful for trauma recovery in children, many of the studies discussed did not specifically focus on traumatized children in their research populations. All the expressive therapy interventions reviewed appear to be useful for integration in dyadic therapy with traumatized children, however, there is a need for more research that focuses specifically on the impacts of dyadic expressive therapy for this population.

Two of the studies specifically focused on populations who experienced trauma. Miao Wong and Hung Ho (2022) used the JPP with families who experienced intimate partner violence, a traumatic experience for the mothers and their children. Jacobsen and McKinney

(2015) used the APC-R music therapy assessment tool with children who experienced emotional neglect as compared with children who did not. In addition, the Southwell (2019) study of the YETI program focused on children who experienced trauma and/or attachment concerns. The rest of the studies focused either on children with emotional or behavioral challenges or on dyads whose mental health status was unknown.

All the studies in this review except for the Southwell study focused on dyadic group therapy experiences, which may differ significantly from expressive dyadic therapy that is done individually with only one dyad and a therapist. In group settings, the dyads are influenced by the interactions with other parents and children whereas in individualized dyadic settings, the focus is solely on the single dyad. Though in many of the studies, the group format offered valuable socialization and additional support for the parents, this difference in format is important to consider. Comparing the effects of each therapeutic format is recommended for further research.

The long-term effects of the expressive dyadic therapy interventions are unknown in all the studies. The data collected was based on short-term and medium-term therapeutic experiences and there is a need for longitudinal research or follow-up studies to examine whether the positive results of the groups extended into the parent-child interactions and wellbeing beyond the termination of the groups.

Some common themes across the arts modalities discussed in the literature review include: experiencing fun and playful interactions, free expression, bonding through creative expression/exploration, mutuality and joint engagement, exploring needs through creative interactions, and parents practicing following the children's lead.

One noteworthy finding of this literature review is that the current published empirical research on dyadic expressive therapy is only focused on single art modalities. Although books have been written about multimodal expressive arts therapy for children's attachment-based treatment, there is a major gap in the research about multimodal or intermodal expressive arts therapy in this context. Given the results of the research reviewed here, it would be greatly beneficial to research specific dyadic approaches that integrate more than one art form.

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**THESIS APPROVAL FORM**

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In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

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