

Advocate's Childhood Trauma Treatment Program uses art therapy to help abused children reclaim their lives.

**F**ourteen-year-old Teri\* was a ward of the state living in a foster home when the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services referred her to

**Advocate Health Care's** Childhood Trauma Treatment Program (CTTP) for care (see page 4). "Spiteful, downhearted, combative, withdrawn—Teri showed all the signs of suffering years of abuse," says Heather Randazzo, L.C.P.C, a board-certified art therapist who works out of CTTP's Bolingbrook office.

"She was fighting with her peers, arguing with authority figures, struggling in school and engaging in risky behaviors."

As part of Teri's treatment, Randazzo encouraged her to create a place for her negative feelings so they would not weigh her down. First, the teen decorated the outside of a small box in bold colors and painted the word "hate" in black. Then one by one, she wrote down the name of her abusers on strips of paper and put them into the box. This helped her to talk about what happened and work through what she endured.

"Children and adolescents often don't know how to communicate their feelings, especially when they don't trust adults," says Randazzo. "Art therapy can put them in touch with their emotions and give them an alternative outlet to express themselves. And art is a universal language that is accessible to any age, race, culture and economic status—so everyone can benefit."

## The science of art therapy

There are two layers to art therapy, which is an established health care profession that helps people resolve conflicts, develop interpersonal skills, manage behavior, reduce stress, increase self-esteem and achieve insight. One layer explores the healing power of the

creative process itself. Through this therapeutic process patients have the opportunity to develop and utilize the life skills of making choices and problem solving. This translates into better choices at school and in social situations. "In making art, abused children are able to make decisions and have a sense of control over what they are creating, which is huge," explains Randazzo. "Just finishing a piece of art gives them a sense of accomplishment—that they have mastered something. It is a very rewarding feeling that these kids rarely have experienced."

The other layer encourages people to use art within the therapeutic relationship to

communicate and resolve issues, emotions and conflicts that they are unable to express in their daily lives. "As part of the process, I have some children use paint, crayons or markers to draw their house, their family, a road or themselves," explains Randazzo. "The way they draw—which things they draw first or where they appear on the page—can reveal a lot of information about what they have been through, what emotions they are feeling and how they



\*not her real name

# thousand words



view themselves. That helps me guide their treatment.”

Randazzo invites other young clients—like Teri—to use magazine cut-outs, paint, ribbon and other craft supplies to decorate the exterior of a box to reflect what they show to others; they decorate the interior to express how they feel about themselves. “The box becomes a metaphor for their lives,” says Randazzo. “They may put their favorite music or colors on the outside, but put a picture of a broken heart inside.”

Over several art-therapy sessions, Teri was able to redirect the anger and hatred she felt away from herself and toward her abusers. “Through the process of creating the box, Teri was able to separate herself from her traumatic experiences,” explains Randazzo. “As her feelings became validated, her situation became more manageable and her daily life more stable.”

Today Teri’s box sits on a shelf—and so does a lifetime of anger that was once inside this troubled girl. She has begun to heal. ■



## Thirty years of healing abused children

Up until the 1970s the sexual abuse of children was rarely talked about. It was not until psychologists brought to light post-traumatic stress disorder in soldiers that anyone examined the lasting effect abuse has on children. Recognizing that effect as a treatable mental condition, doctors began to develop a clear way to help restore the psychological health of children who have suffered maltreatment, psychological trauma or sexual abuse.

Thirty years ago the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services had no place to refer abused children for treatment. In response, the Childhood Trauma Treatment Program was developed in 1979 to provide specialized and comprehensive psychotherapy and support to children and their families. Last year alone, it provided care to 550 children in need.

Demand for CTTTP’s services is extraordinary, but resources to pay for this much-needed specialized care are severely limited. The combination of the State of Illinois’s proposed budget cuts, expiring government grants and reductions in support from referring childcare agencies will severely curtail the services the program offers, if alternate funding cannot be secured.

“Without adequate funding, many vulnerable children will not have access to the therapy and counseling they need to deal with the challenges they face,” says the Program’s executive director, John F. Smith, Ph.D. “The trauma suffered by these children is long lasting—abused children can be affected for the rest of their lives and in some cases they continue the cycle by becoming abusers themselves.”

### Charitable support is needed to:

- Enhance the program’s art, play, sand-tray and other expressive therapies.
- Continue an internship program that trains up to six future therapists per year, spreading CTTTP’s services across Illinois and to other states.
- Reach out to the community through the Darkness to Light program—the much-needed prevention component—which educates adults on how to recognize and react to children of abuse.
- Acquire tools needed to assess seriously troubled children.

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