



Giving Fear a Face: The Role of Visual Art and Creative Expression in Supporting Children Affected by War

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ABSTRACT

Children who have experienced war, forced displacement, and prolonged uncertainty may encounter emotional difficulties that are challenging to recognize and communicate through language alone. This article explores the potential of visual art education as a supportive environment for emotional expression, creative autonomy, and the development of a sense of personal agency. Drawing on the author's educational practice with Ukrainian children affected by war since 2022, it examines how drawing, painting, clay modeling, tactile exploration, and imaginative storytelling can provide alternative ways of approaching complex emotional experiences. Particular attention is given to the symbolic representation of childhood fears and the transformation of frightening images through artistic modification, humor, and narrative development. The discussion also presents the author's educational methodology, its adaptation for the Marmi Art School in Gdańsk, Poland, and the interdisciplinary project *Overcome Your Fear*, developed in collaboration with a psychologist. The project involves the creation of 24 illustrated associative cards intended to facilitate conversations about childhood fears and emotional states. The article considers the educational and psychological relevance of these practices while distinguishing supportive art education from clinical art therapy. It offers a practice-based reflection on the possibilities of visual communication rather than an empirical assessment of therapeutic effectiveness.

Keywords: visual art education, childhood fears, emotional expression, war-affected children, psychological trauma, forced displacement, tactile creativity, clay modeling, visual storytelling, emotional self-regulation, associative cards, creative resilience.

INTRODUCTION

A child's emotional world does not always correspond to the language available to describe it. Fear, anxiety, uncertainty, and loneliness may be experienced intensely long before a child develops the vocabulary or emotional awareness necessary to explain these feelings. This becomes particularly evident when working with children whose lives have been disrupted by war, displacement, and the loss of familiar surroundings. A child who has been separated from friends, forced to leave home, or placed in an unfamiliar educational environment may struggle to communicate the reasons for emotional discomfort, even when surrounded by caring adults. Some children withdraw from conversation, while others express their distress indirectly through behavior, imagination, or seemingly unrelated concerns. In such circumstances, the expectation that a child should simply explain what is wrong may become another source of pressure. It is therefore important to consider forms of communication that do not depend entirely on verbal expression and that allow children to approach difficult experiences at their own pace.

My interest in the relationship between visual art and children's emotional experiences developed through my professional work as an artist and educator, particularly after 2022, when I began teaching children whose childhoods had been affected by the war in Ukraine. Their experiences encouraged me to reconsider the role of creative education beyond the acquisition of artistic techniques. Drawing, painting, and modeling remained essential components of my teaching, but I became increasingly attentive to the emotional processes that accompanied artistic creation: the hesitation before making the first mark, the satisfaction of discovering an



unexpected color combination, the frustration of an unsuccessful attempt, and the confidence that sometimes emerged when a child realized that an image could be changed rather than abandoned. These observations gradually shaped my understanding of artistic practice as a space in which children can experiment not only with materials and forms but also with choices, meanings, and imagined possibilities. Although art education should not be confused with psychological treatment, creative activities may provide supportive opportunities for expression and participation, a possibility also examined in research on arts-based approaches involving children exposed to traumatic events [1, 2].

Creative Autonomy and the Experience of Personal Agency

One of the most significant challenges associated with forced displacement is the disruption of predictability and personal control. Children rarely participate in the major decisions that determine where their families will live, when they will move, or whether they will return to familiar surroundings. Their daily routines may change suddenly, relationships may be interrupted, and environments that once seemed stable may become unfamiliar. Under these circumstances, the opportunity to make even small independent decisions can acquire particular importance. Artistic activity offers a setting in which choices are visible, immediate, and relatively manageable. A child can decide whether an imagined landscape will contain mountains or water, whether a character will be large or small, or whether a composition should be developed through bright colors or restrained tones. Unlike many circumstances outside the classroom, these decisions belong to the child, and their consequences can be observed directly in the emerging artwork.

This understanding became an important principle of the educational methodology I developed in 2022. The program combined foundational instruction in drawing, painting, color, composition, and the representation of volume with creative exercises encouraging imagination, experimentation, and individual expression. Rather than treating the finished image as the sole measure of success, I began placing greater emphasis on the process through which children developed their ideas. I was interested in how they responded to unexpected results, whether they felt comfortable changing an original plan, and how they interpreted mistakes. In a conventional educational environment, an unsuccessful line or inaccurate proportion may be regarded primarily as an error requiring correction. Within a more exploratory approach, however, the same occurrence can become the beginning of a new visual solution. A misplaced shape may turn into an architectural detail, an accidental brushstroke may suggest a landscape, and an abandoned character may acquire an entirely different identity. These possibilities help establish an atmosphere in which artistic learning remains rigorous without becoming dominated by the fear of failure.

I believe that this balance between technical development and creative freedom is especially relevant for children who have experienced prolonged uncertainty. Artistic education should provide knowledge and discipline, but it should also preserve the child's opportunity to make discoveries independently. When students are allowed to select materials, develop personal interpretations, and revise their work, they can experience themselves as active participants in the creative process rather than passive recipients of instructions. The resulting artwork becomes more than an exercise completed according to a teacher's expectations; it becomes evidence of a sequence of individual decisions. This does not mean that artistic success automatically produces psychological resilience, but it suggests that thoughtfully designed educational activities can provide positive experiences of competence and self-directed action.

Tactile Art and the Transformation of Abstract Experience into Physical Form

My approach to children's creative development has also been influenced by a longstanding interest in tactile perception and three-dimensional artistic forms. During my professional education, I explored the possibility of experiencing visual art through touch, texture, and physical interaction, an interest that became central to my graduation project involving the creation of a tactile book for children. The project encouraged me to consider how artistic images might be understood not only through observation but also through the movement of the hands and the exploration of material surfaces. A tactile object possesses qualities that a conventional drawing cannot fully reproduce: weight, resistance, volume, and a physical presence that invites direct interaction. This understanding later became an important element of my teaching practice, particularly when I



began combining painting and drawing with clay modeling, relief compositions, and the construction of small sculptural figures.

Working with clay introduces a distinctive relationship between imagination and material reality. A child may begin with a vague idea of an animal, a fantastic creature, or an unfamiliar object, gradually discovering its appearance through the process of shaping the material. The clay can be compressed, stretched, divided, joined, and reconstructed, allowing the form to change continuously. When children subsequently paint the finished figure, they connect sculptural thinking with color and decorative expression, transforming a simple material into an object with recognizable character and personal meaning. This process involves fine motor coordination, spatial perception, attention, and the integration of visual and tactile information. It also allows children to engage with an image through physical action rather than observation alone, which may be particularly valuable for students who prefer practical exploration to verbal explanation.

The sensory dimension of these activities deserves careful consideration. Repetitive movements, the resistance of clay, and concentration on a gradually developing form may provide some children with a welcome opportunity to focus on immediate sensations rather than persistent worries. The transformation of an undefined piece of material into a recognizable object can also offer a concrete experience of progression and completion. Nevertheless, individual responses to sensory materials differ considerably, and it would be inappropriate to assume that clay modeling or tactile exploration is universally calming. Some children may dislike particular textures, become frustrated by technical difficulties, or prefer to express themselves through drawing and painting. For this reason, my educational approach emphasizes flexibility and individual choice, allowing students to engage with materials in ways that correspond to their interests and comfort. The significance of tactile creativity lies not in a guaranteed therapeutic effect but in its ability to broaden the range of experiences available within artistic education.

Visualizing Fear and Reconsidering Its Meaning

My interest in childhood fears developed naturally from these experiences with visual and three-dimensional art. Fear can be particularly difficult for children to describe because it is often experienced as an internal condition without clear boundaries. It may be associated with a specific memory or situation, but it may also appear as a general sense of insecurity, uncertainty, or anticipation. I began considering whether an emotion that feels invisible and overwhelming might become easier to explore when represented as an external image. Instead of asking a child to explain fear directly, an educator might invite the child to imagine its appearance, asking whether it resembles an animal, a shadow, a storm, an unfamiliar creature, or something entirely different. The resulting image does not need to be realistic or recognizable to anyone else, because its meaning emerges primarily from the child's own associations.

The distinction between artistic representation and psychological interpretation is essential in this process. A child's use of dark colors, exaggerated proportions, or unusual imagery should not be treated as a reliable indicator of a particular mental state. Artistic choices may reflect personal preferences, cultural references, imaginative interests, or the visual qualities of the materials available. I therefore approach such exercises as opportunities for expression and conversation rather than methods of psychological assessment. When a child creates an image of fear, the important question is not what the adult believes the image means but how the child chooses to describe it. The character may have a name, a place where it lives, a particular behavior, or an imagined history. By developing these details, the child can begin to interact with the image as something that exists within a creative narrative rather than as an undefined internal experience.

An additional stage of the exercise involves exploring whether the image can be transformed. A frightening creature may be given an absurdly large hat, brightly colored shoes, tiny wings, or an unexpected expression. Its enormous shadow may become smaller, its threatening posture may change, or it may acquire a companion who alters the direction of the story. I am particularly interested in the role of humor within this process, not because a child's fear should be dismissed as irrational or amusing, but because a playful change in perspective can sometimes introduce an alternative way of understanding a threatening image. When the child becomes the author of the character's appearance and behavior, the visual narrative is no longer fixed. The creature that



initially seemed powerful may become confused, clumsy, vulnerable, or unexpectedly friendly, and the child can decide whether this transformation feels appropriate.

Such activities require sensitivity because humor is not suitable for every child or every situation. An educator should never insist that a frightening experience is harmless or pressure a child to laugh at something that causes genuine distress. Some children may prefer to create a protective figure, imagine a secure environment, or invent a story in which the frightened character receives assistance. Others may not wish to explore the subject at all. In my practice, the central principle is that the child retains control over the creative process and can decide how closely to approach a difficult subject. The objective is not to remove fear through a predetermined artistic technique but to create conditions in which emotional experiences can be represented, reconsidered, and discussed without coercion.

The Overcome Your Fear Project and the Development of Visual Communication Tools

These reflections have become the foundation of my ongoing interdisciplinary collaboration with a psychologist on a project titled *Overcome Your Fear*. The project involves developing a collection of 24 illustrated associative cards representing childhood fears, anxieties, and emotionally challenging situations. Our discussions began with a practical question arising in psychological work with children: how can an adult initiate a meaningful conversation when a child does not know how to describe an internal experience or feels uncomfortable discussing it directly? Children may struggle with feelings related to separation, loneliness, uncertainty, rejection, or loss without possessing the language necessary to explain their experiences. We therefore began exploring whether visual characters and symbolic situations could provide an additional form of communication, allowing children to recognize something familiar in an illustration before attempting to express it verbally.

My contribution to the project involves developing the visual structure and artistic language of the cards. I consider how composition, scale, facial expressions, body posture, color, and spatial relationships can suggest emotional situations without imposing a single interpretation. The challenge is to create images that are sufficiently clear to invite recognition while remaining open enough for children to establish their own associations. An illustration showing a small character standing apart from a group, for example, might suggest loneliness to one child, uncertainty to another, or a desire for solitude to someone else. These interpretations should not be regarded as interchangeable psychological conclusions, but they demonstrate why visual ambiguity can sometimes be useful in supportive communication. The child remains the primary interpreter of the image, while the adult listens, asks open-ended questions, and avoids drawing conclusions that are not supported by the child's own account.

In a possible application of the collection, a psychologist might present several cards and invite a child to select an image that feels familiar or interesting. Rather than immediately asking about a personal fear, the psychologist could begin by discussing the illustrated character: what might the character be feeling, what may have happened before the scene, and what could help the character feel safer? This approach may create an opportunity for indirect discussion, particularly when the child finds it easier to speak about a fictional figure than about personal experiences. If the child wishes, the conversation may gradually move toward individual feelings or memories, but such disclosure should never be treated as an obligatory outcome. The cards are being developed as a potential supplementary resource for communication, not as a diagnostic test, and their practical usefulness will require appropriate evaluation before claims about effectiveness can be made.

The project also allows me to connect my experience in artistic education with questions of visual communication and emotional recognition. Creating illustrations for this purpose differs from producing conventional children's book images because their intended function is not limited to storytelling or decoration. Each composition must invite engagement while remaining sensitive to the possibility that children will interpret it through very different personal experiences. The collaboration with a psychologist is therefore particularly important, as it helps distinguish artistic intentions from professional considerations regarding emotional safety and appropriate use. I see the collection as an evolving interdisciplinary initiative that may contribute to the development of supportive creative tools, while recognizing that its final application and effe-



ctiveness must be determined through further professional work.

Educational Adaptation and the Marmi Art School Experience

The development of these ideas is closely connected with my broader experience of designing and implementing educational programs for children affected by forced displacement. In 2026, I was invited to contribute my expertise to the establishment and launch of the Marmi Art School in Gdańsk, Poland, an educational environment intended to serve children, including Ukrainian families who had relocated because of the war. This opportunity required me to adapt my previously developed methodology to a new social and educational context, taking into account differences in children's previous learning experiences, language confidence, artistic preparation, and familiarity with their surroundings. My work included structuring the curriculum, preparing educational materials, organizing artistic activities, and implementing the program in practice, while maintaining the balance between technical instruction and creative freedom that had become central to my approach.

I considered it particularly important that the educational environment should be welcoming without lowering expectations for artistic development. Children who are adjusting to a new country may benefit from predictable routines, opportunities to communicate with peers, and activities that allow them to experience progress without constant comparison. At the same time, they deserve access to meaningful artistic education that introduces new skills, challenges their imagination, and encourages independent thinking. The adapted program therefore combined drawing, painting, composition, and color studies with tactile activities, clay modeling, decorative techniques, and imaginative assignments. Lessons were structured to support gradual progression while allowing children with different levels of experience to participate actively. Rather than requiring every student to produce an identical result, I encouraged individual interpretations and treated the development of artistic confidence as an important part of the learning process.

This experience reinforced my understanding that art education can serve several purposes simultaneously without becoming a clinical intervention. It can provide a structured learning environment, encourage communication, introduce children to new cultural experiences, and offer opportunities for creative achievement. A child who completes a painting, develops a sculptural character, or participates in a collaborative project may experience satisfaction that extends beyond the technical result. Such experiences do not erase the difficulties associated with displacement, but they can contribute to a broader educational environment in which children encounter stability, encouragement, and opportunities to develop their abilities. For me, the work at Marmi also demonstrated the importance of adapting an established methodology to the needs of a particular community rather than assuming that a single educational format will be equally appropriate in every context.

Artistic Education, Emotional Support, and Professional Boundaries

The relationship between creative activity and emotional well-being requires a careful distinction between educational practice and professional psychological treatment. Art therapy is a specialized field involving the use of artistic processes within a therapeutic relationship and requires appropriate professional qualifications [3]. Art education, by contrast, is primarily concerned with the development of artistic knowledge, creative skills, visual understanding, and individual expression. Although educational activities may have emotionally supportive qualities, these benefits should not be presented as equivalent to clinical outcomes. This distinction is particularly important when working with children who have experienced traumatic events, because their needs may extend beyond what an artistic workshop can appropriately address.

Within my own practice, I aim to create an environment in which children can participate without being pressured to disclose personal experiences. Creative tasks may involve imaginary characters, emotional landscapes, sculptural objects, or visual stories, but the interpretation of these works remains open. A child may choose to explain a drawing in detail, invent a fictional narrative, or simply enjoy the process of working with materials. None of these responses should automatically be treated as evidence of psychological improvement or distress. I also recognize that creative activities may sometimes bring difficult emotions to the



surface rather than provide immediate comfort. When this occurs, it is important to respect the child's boundaries, allow the activity to change or stop, and seek support from qualified professionals when necessary.

Research on creative arts-based interventions suggests that artistic approaches may have potential benefits for some children and adolescents exposed to traumatic experiences, although findings vary according to the type of intervention, the population studied, and the outcomes measured [1, 2]. These findings provide a valuable context for considering the role of creativity in emotionally sensitive educational settings, but they do not establish the effectiveness of any particular teaching method or illustrated card collection. I therefore regard my work as a practice-based exploration informed by artistic education, observation, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Its purpose is to investigate how creative experiences may support communication and personal expression while remaining within the professional responsibilities of an art educator.

CONCLUSION

My work with children affected by war has gradually transformed my understanding of the relationship between artistic technique, imagination, and emotional experience. What began as an interest in teaching drawing, painting, and three-dimensional form developed into a broader inquiry into how children use images to communicate ideas that may be difficult to express in words. The tactile book created during my professional education, the methodology developed in 2022, the adaptation of the educational program for the Marmi Art School, and the ongoing *Overcome Your Fear* project represent different stages of this inquiry. Although these initiatives have distinct purposes, they share an interest in making artistic experiences accessible, participatory, and responsive to the individuality of each child.

I do not believe that art can erase traumatic memories or provide a universal solution to childhood anxiety. Emotional recovery is complex, and children who have experienced war may require different forms of support over time. Nevertheless, I believe that artistic education can offer something valuable within this broader process: an opportunity to make decisions, experiment without fear of failure, transform imagined situations, and communicate through forms that do not depend entirely on language. When a child draws a frightening creature, reshapes it in clay, changes its appearance, or invents a different ending to its story, the experience remains first and foremost an act of creativity. Yet it may also become an opportunity to explore feelings, consider alternative perspectives, and begin a conversation that would otherwise have been difficult to initiate.

The central idea guiding my work is that children should not be expected to explain every difficult experience before they are ready. Sometimes an image can appear before a word, and sometimes a fictional character can express something that a child cannot yet describe directly. By respecting this process and combining artistic freedom with appropriate professional boundaries, educators can help create environments in which creativity becomes a meaningful part of children's learning and self-expression. For me, the value of such work lies not in promising that fear will disappear, but in offering children the possibility of approaching their experiences with imagination, curiosity, and a growing awareness of their own creative abilities.

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