

# The Big Book of Therapeutic Activity Ideas for Children and Teens

Inspiring Arts-Based Activities  
and Character Education Curricula

Lindsey Joiner



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*It takes a village to raise a child.*

African Proverb

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# Introduction

*All children are artists. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up.*

Pablo Picasso

Several years ago, I was a young therapist starting out at my first job running day-treatment programs at a local community mental health center. I had just completed my master's degree in counseling. I was a good student and I felt prepared by the graduate program that included courses in group therapy, counseling theory, and counseling children. I was excited and ready for the real world. Or so I thought.

I learned very quickly that while the academic knowledge is essential for mental-health professionals, there is no substitute for experience. When I arrived for my first day of work to run the two-hour day-treatment program for children with behavior problems, I realized I had no idea what to do or what kind of activities would work. After spending several days crying and thinking I had chosen the wrong profession, I got busy. I searched the internet and bought as many books as I could find on working with children. Many of these books contained good handouts and topics to discuss. With the help of those books and a good behavior plan, I made it through my first several months of the real world.

As time went on, I discovered that while the therapeutic worksheets and handouts from the resource books provided something for the children to do and the behavior plan helped to manage their behavior, they did not seem excited about the group. I slowly began to venture outside the box and try to put a therapeutic spin on creative activities. As I become more and more comfortable using these activities, I found the participants in my group to be more excited about coming to group. Attendance and behavior began to improve. Art and other creativity methods seemed to be natural forms of expression for children.

Later, I accepted a position supervising all of the day-treatment programs at the community mental health center. I had the opportunity to work with children aged 2 to 18, and learn from many of the other therapists at the center. My knowledge of creativity therapy increased and I encouraged other therapists to implement more expressive arts and creativity into the programs. I also learned a lot from many of the other therapists working at the center about creative counseling. While supervising these programs, I coordinated and implemented many of the activities described in this book.

I recently accepted a position in our local school system working with children. Most school counselors do not have as much time to spend with children as therapists in an outpatient setting. As a result of this experience, I have developed and included brief activities that would be appropriate for these settings. There are also many ideas that would be helpful in classroom guidance situations. Most of the activities are cost-effective and easy to do.

The book is organized into five chapters to assist in quickly locating the type of activity needed. The first chapter includes icebreaker activities that can be used to begin individual and group counseling sessions and build rapport with children and teens. Many of these icebreakers would also work well with adults. The second chapter includes bibliotherapy (using books,



poetry, and other forms of literature as part of counseling or therapy) and cinematherapy (using movies or television shows as part of counseling or therapy) activities. The bibliotherapy activities that accompany several children's storybooks would work well with elementary-school-aged children. The cinematherapy activities are appropriate for use with upper middle school and high-school-aged adolescents. These activities would also work well with adults. The third chapter includes a variety of art therapy activities. These activities focus on the development of social skills, conflict-resolution skills, positive-thinking skills, and many other important therapeutic skills through a variety of modalities including painting, interactive activities, creative writing, and beading. The fourth chapter focuses on ideas to use for monthly character education topics. The activities for each month coordinate with some of the common themes and associations of the month. For example, February includes therapeutic activities associated with Valentine's Day, July includes ideas for Summer Sand Castle Building, and August has ideas for Back to School Events. The final chapter includes ideas for conducting therapeutic day camps. This section offers topic ideas for the camps, activity descriptions, sample schedules, and handouts. It also provides ideas for making the camp activities work in other settings.

Most of the activities in this book are applicable to a range of different settings (schools, community agencies, day care centers, etc.) and will work with a wide range of ages, from early elementary school to adults. These resources and activities can be adapted for individual or group sessions. Some of the activities can be completed quickly within a single group session, while others could be completed over several sessions as a unit or area of focus for several sessions. Based on the needs of the child and group, many of the activities are flexible and can be modified for use with different type of groups and within the amount of time available. Please be creative and feel free to make any needed adjustments so that the activities will work for the children and teens in your setting.

When first introducing some of these activities, you may encounter some resistance (especially from adolescents) to participating and completing the activity. While it is beyond the scope of this book to completely address the issue of resistance, there are a few things you can do to engage children and adolescents and encourage them to participate. Begin by presenting activities in a non-threatening way. Let the participants know that they do not have to share their artwork with the group unless they choose to do so. If adolescents know that they will not be "put on the spot," they may be more likely to participate and give the activity a chance. Remind them that they are not being judged or graded on their final product. Instead, it is the process that is the important part. Give the participants some choice and autonomy in completing the project. Try not to use a "one size fits all" approach or correct participants who are not completing the activity exactly as it is designed. By allowing the participant to choose what materials to use and how to design his or her project, you may learn of a better or more unique way of doing things. Participate and complete the activity along with the group. If the children and adolescents see that you are willing to do what you are asking them to do, they may be more likely to participate. Clearly when working with young children and teenagers it is important to ensure that none of the materials used with them contain swearing, profanity, inappropriate sexual references, excessive violence, or any references to ideas beyond their understanding. So it is important to always check that any books, videos, or DVDs that you intend to use with your groups are appropriate to their age and understanding.

The use of a basic behavior plan may help in getting started with the group and with some of the activities in the group. Allow students to earn points for displaying a good attitude,

participating in the group, and attempting the project. These points can be exchanged for a special snack or reward at the end of the group time. As the group becomes more and more willing to participate, these rewards can be faded out. If one student is unwilling to participate, go ahead and complete the activity with the rest of the group. Ignore this child's behavior while making the activity as fun and engaging as possible for the rest of the group. After watching the fun everyone else is having, the child may become more willing to participate. Remember to remain positive and provide consistent praise to the participants who are engaged in the activity.

At times, some of the activities may bring up difficult feelings or emotions for the participants. It is important to discuss this with group members at the beginning of the group session. Confidentiality is a critical issue for groups. Complete an informed-consent process with the group explaining the group rules, the expectations, confidentiality and limits of confidentiality, as well as other pertinent information during the first session of the group. Let group members know that keeping private the information discussed in group is a key to the success of the group. Explain that you will keep all information discussed confidential, but you cannot guarantee that other group members will do so. Remind members frequently about the importance of confidentiality and trust within the group. Be sure to watch for conflicts and issues within the group and discuss these in an open and honest way with the group as soon as they arise, to prevent them from impacting the unity of the group. If a group member is struggling with a particular issue or painful emotion, you may have to use your best judgment about how to address the concern. At times, the staff members and other participants can provide feedback and help the participants process the feelings within the group setting. However, some issues that come up (abuse, neglect, trauma, etc.) may not be appropriate for addressing within the group setting. The staff member will need to communicate with the participant's parent or guardian and consider a referral to more intensive counseling services. Consult with a colleague or supervisor and consult ethical guidelines if you are unsure how to handle a difficult situation within the group setting.

My hope is that you will find this book helpful. It is a book I wish had been available when I first started in the mental-health field. It is a collection of activities that I have gathered from personal experience and from watching and learning from mentors and colleagues. The activities have served me well as I have counseled children and teens in a variety of settings. My primary goal for the book is to assist you in making the counseling process not only productive and therapeutic, but also fun and engaging for children and teens. I hope the activities and resources assist in making working with children and teens an exciting, creative, and rewarding experience for you and your clients. Thank you for choosing this book. I hope that it serves you well in your work with children and teens.

# Opening Activities

## Warm-Ups, Icebreakers, and Other Brief Activities

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*Begin at the beginning...and go on till you come to the end: then stop.*

Lewis Carroll, *Adventures in Wonderland*

Icebreakers do exactly what they sound like they do—they put both the child and you at ease so that productive work can take place. Many of these activities can provide a lot of information while making the child comfortable with you as the counselor and the counseling process.

## PICTURE PROMPTS

### Materials needed

- Card
- Old magazines (home magazines, women's magazines, and magazines about family life are great sources...especially the advertisements)
- Glue

### Purpose of the activity

- To put the child/adolescent at ease
- To introduce self to counselor or group in a non-threatening way
- To provide a prompt for further self-exploration
- To stir the creative thought-process
- To involve uninterested or depressed adolescents in counseling (it does not require much effort)

### Description of the activity

Using old magazines (which is a great way to recycle), cut out pictures of images and phrases that could foster memories or associations with others. The possibilities for such images are endless, but some examples include images of families on vacation, people sitting alone, and nature scenes. Glue these onto card, cut to the size of the pictures, and laminate if possible. Keep a basket with a variety of images. When the child or adolescent arrives, ask him or her to select an image that identifies how he or she is feeling. You can then ask him or her to verbally elaborate on that choice, journal about the image, or draw a response to the image. If journaling or drawing is chosen as a means of responding, then the counselor can process the response with the client when complete.

### Variations of the activity

- **Group Introductions**—Ask each group member to select a picture and use the picture to introduce him- or herself to the group
- **Picture Pair Share**—Divide the group into pairs and give each pair an image. Ask everyone to think about a memory or association with the picture, and ask them to share their associations with their partners. When this is complete, ask them to introduce their partners to the group and tell them about their response to the picture.
- **Now and Later**—Ask the child to select a card that reminds him or her of how things are now and how he or she wants things to be later. Allow the child to draw, journal, or collage about the activity and then discuss with the child.

- **Now and Then**—Ask the adolescent to choose a card to represent how things are now and how things were in the past. Allow the child to draw, journal, or respond to the pictures and then discuss.
- **Me As I Want To Be**—Let the child select a card to represent how he or she wants to “be” in the future, discuss what steps the child would need to take to be like the picture, and allow the child to take the picture as a visual reminder of his or her goal.
- **Behavior Reminder**—For a child who has difficulty maintaining a certain behavior at school (such as staying in his or her seat), find a picture of a child of similar age and background exhibiting the behavior appropriately and tape the picture to his or her desk as a visual reminder.
- **Picture This**—Counselors can use this variation to provide encouragement to children. If an adolescent is close to meeting a goal (such as graduating from high school), the counselor could give the adolescent a picture of a graduate cap or diploma, and a short message or inspiring quote could be written on the back of the image. These are often very meaningful to clients. This could also be used after a goal has been reached, to “commemorate” the occasion.
- **Calming Card**—For children with anxiety or anger issues, assist them in selecting a picture of something soothing and calming to them (the beach, a dog, etc.). Discuss ways to self-soothe and relax. Let them take the picture as a reminder of how to calm down and focus when feeling anxious or upset.

## INITIALLY YOURS



### Materials needed

- Paper
- Markers

### Purpose of the activity

- To begin the counseling session with an activity using familiar aspects of self
- To promote self-esteem and self-expression
- To build rapport between the counselor and child

### Description of the activity

Most individuals are comfortable with their own names and initials. After all, we use them numerous times a day! Begin by giving the adolescents a sheet of paper and pack of markers (or other drawing materials). Ask them to write their initials on the paper and then turn them into a meaningful picture. Tell them that all of their initials can be used or just one initial. They can make the initials as big or small as they choose. Share with the group (if used in a group setting). See the above illustration for an example of this activity. Can you see the initials “LMJ” in the butterfly? (Hint: Check the wings and body!)

### Variations of the activity

- ABC, Easy as 123—Complete the above activity but use the first initial of their name and the number of their birth month. For example, my name starts with L and I was born in June so I would use an “L” and a “6” to complete the activity.

- 
- Name Game—Complete the above activity but use the participant's first name or last name.
  - Block Letter Shape—Provide group members with large alphabet stencils. Have members cut out one or all of their initials and decorate as they choose. They can make designs or draw symbols of things that represent themselves.
  - Designs for U—Provide pony beads (round, solid colored beads available at craft stores, or see the Resources section at the end of this book for websites that offer craft supplies), alphabet beads (also available at craft stores) and cord. Let the group make name jewelry (bracelets, anklets, necklaces, etc).