



Crossings – Group Art Therapy for Ukrainian Refugee Children

Kohtumised – rühmakunstiteraapia Ukraina sõjapõgenike lastele

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School art therapy is a support service that helps students on their educational path and has been used in Estonian schools for the past decade. It provides an opportunity to pause, reflect on school experiences and move forward faster. Group art therapy allows participants to share experiences, listen to others and offer mutual support. This is particularly important for children and young people who have been forced to leave home and start school in a new linguistic and cultural environment, often without knowing how long they will stay.

Expressing oneself through art helps overcome language barriers and fosters a safe, culturally sensitive, verbally pressure-free environment for sharing personal stories. Previous studies (eg Atkhar & Lovell, 2018; Dieterich-Hartwell & Koch, 2017; Gordon, 2024) show that art therapy can enhance refugee children's sense of security in a new environment and support the development of their sense of identity.

This presentation focuses on group art therapy supporting the adaptation of Ukrainian children attending Estonian schools. The study aimed to investigate the effects of short-term group art therapy on self-esteem, feelings of loneliness, relationships and adaptation. When planning art therapy interventions, therapists (n = 4) considered the key therapeutic factors identified by Taylor (2019) as suitable for groups of children and adolescents: cohesion, universality, instilling hope, imitative behaviour, socialisation techniques and interpersonal learning. Art therapy drew on participants' resources and strengths, addressing topics from the perspective of past coping experiences and desired future outcomes.



Sixty students participated in art therapy groups of three to six, depending on the number of Ukrainian children attending the school. The art therapist conducted eight sessions per group, with data collected during the first and last sessions.

The presentation describes the results through the art therapists' experiences and the participants' before-and-after measurements (data analysis scheduled for spring 2026).

Biography

Marika Ratnik holds a PhD in Educational Sciences (Doctor of Philosophy), Master of Health Sciences (Art Therapies). Creative therapist (art therapy) supervisor and family therapist. Head of the art therapy curriculum at the Institute of Natural and Health Sciences, Tallinn University and lecturer in visual art therapy. In 2024-2025 Marika was project manager of the collaboration project 'Bridges of Belonging' between NGO Mondo and Tallinn University (art therapy for Ukrainian refugee children). The project is funded by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Private practice of art therapy with children, young people and families. E-mail: marika.ratnik@tlu.ee

Eha R  utel holds a PhD in psychology, Master of Public Health, registered solution-focused psychotherapist, creative arts therapist (art therapy) and supervisor. Currently working as a Distinguished Professor of Creative Arts Therapies at the School of Natural Sciences and Health of Tallinn University, Estonia. As the initiator of the arts therapies' specialty at Tallinn University and a member of the occupational committee at the Estonian Qualifications Authority, she has been involved in development of the concept of arts therapies and qualification requirements for arts therapists in Estonia. Art therapy practice with adults and adolescents with mental health challenges. E-mail: eha@tlu.ee

Recent Publications

Ratnik, M., & Espenberg, E. (2024). Workshop: **Family Art Therapy and Art-Based Family Work: joint creation by family members breaks down illusions and opens the door for change**. Conference 'Singing About the Dark Times – Creation and Resistance in the Arts Therapies'. 17th ECArTE conference in Gent Belgium.



Rüütel, E., Luik, M., & Ratnik, M. (2020). **Musical activities as a tool for a class teacher to include students in a school lesson.** *CFMAE: The Changing Face of Music and Art Education*, 10, 107–122.

Ratnik, M., & Rüütel, E. (2019). **The field of work of the school art therapist and its unique potential for the school's support team.** *Problems of Education in the 21st Century*, 77(1), 141–155.

Rüütel, E. (2025). **Framing the picture: A solution-focused approach to art therapy.** In: Hills de Zárate, M., Waller, D. & Vaculik, C. L. (Eds.). *The Routledge international handbook of art therapy practice*. (pp. xxx–xxx). Routledge.

Tibar, K., Rüütel, E., Värnik, A. (2024). **Self-compassion focused art therapy model for suicidal persons.** *Journal of Creativity and Human Development*.
<https://www.creativityjournal.net/contents/issue-6-creativity-development-programmes/item/407-art-therapy-for-suicidal-persons>

Krüger, V., Macedo, E., Addressi, A.R., Rüütel, E., Warner, C., Carvalho, A., & Bunt, L. (2020). **Learning how to learn: The role of music and other expressive arts in responding to Early Leaving from Education and Training (ELET) in the STALWARTS project.** *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy*, 20(3).
<http://doi.org/10.15845/voices.v20i3.3084>