



*Strengthening Families & Communities*

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## **PAINTING FROM THE HEART WORKSHOP**

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## **Painting from the Heart Workshop**

“Painting from the Heart” will return to Bridgeport this summer. The five-week support group will be using a method known as “process or expressive art.” Last year, Casey found process art to be so useful in getting children to communicate their thoughts and emotions that the division plans on holding another session this summer.

Process art enables the painter to express their thoughts and feelings through the use of paint and brush strokes. It’s not a controlled form of art, like painting a particular object. This free flowing method of painting is said to help children and adults deepen their connection with themselves, says Ivette Negron, a social worker for the Bridgeport division.

A small group of children between 6 and 8 years old and parents participated in the 2002 process art workshops, lead by Negron and Bill Metzger, a social worker. “Process art can help not just the kids but adults as well. It can help guide them with parenting,” says Negron.

Mary Harris Miller, Bridgeport’s team leader for the post-adoption program, points out that since some adoptive and foster children have been traumatized in their early years of life before they were able to speak, they did not have the vocabulary to express their experiences. The paintings can help provide insight into what some of these children are feeling.

“A lot of feelings of fear and anger came out (from the paintings),” says Negron, “feelings that the kids kept calling ‘empty heart’ or ‘broken hearts.’ ”

“I think social workers need to have an array of skills and techniques to help families facilitate attachments with children who have experienced multiple losses and trauma.”

And Miller says she’s witnessing an increasing number of parents asking for alternative therapy. “They don’t see psychotherapy as the only solution,” she says, “there needs to be a combination of different treatment modalities to treat children with trauma issues.”

Casey’s post-adoption program, says Miller, tries to create permanency for these children and, to achieve this, parents need to understand the loss these children feel and the distrust some of them may have.

“The program seeks to find creative ways to help (foster and) adoptive families make emotional connections,” says Miller.

Most participants appeared to benefit from the workshops, according to Negron, and they helped the children develop their social skills. For instance,

boundary issues were common, with the children trying to learn to respect one another. After completing their paintings, the children critiqued each other's work, Negron explains, giving them an opportunity to learn how to provide constructive criticism that respected the artist's feelings.

Meanwhile, another child's painting opened up a discussion about the fear she and her sister had while living in an orphanage and how they had to look out for each other.

It's not always about getting the children to open up, however. "Sometimes it's the family that can't formulate an attachment to the child," says Miller. "Families need support in developing those emotional connections."

"Process art helped show us if an adult was being too flexible or too rigid and how that could impact their parenting style," says Negron.

One parent, for instance, used the therapy to help her in better parenting a 9-year-old child that she was in the process of adopting who had been severely traumatized, says Negron. The paintings had revealed that "there were a lot of control issues for the parent and we talked about how these would affect her parenting style. ... Process art gave this parent a new strategy to help in parenting and a tool that promoted conversations with her child."