

# The Hockey/Art Alliance

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## Abstract

*Ice hockey can be a violent sport as evidenced by the fighting among the members of an ice hockey team of 13-year-old boys from mixed racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. Two series of eight art sessions were used to help the boys develop respect for themselves and others, to solve conflicts without combat, and to build more positive interpersonal relations. Through the art experience, the boys expressed their feelings and came to know one another in a more gentle and reflective way than on the ice and in the locker room. Their relationships with their coaches became more respectful as well. The coaches noted less fighting and more cooperation during practice and games, and the parents reported improved behavior at home as well. The Hockey/Art Alliance has been developed to be a model program that can be used by other groups in various settings.*

## Introduction

Art and ice hockey? Strange bedfellows indeed! But the combination has been beneficial to 13-year-old boys from a mixture of backgrounds. Although team sports promote cooperation and camaraderie, professional ice hockey is often a violent sport, and its influence on young hockey players can encourage combat in the locker room as well as on the ice. By its nature, ice hockey is a fast game in which skaters often crash into one another in trying to control the puck. And when angry, there is a ready weapon at hand in the hockey stick. Thirteen-year-old hockey players generally have not yet learned the self-control to curb physical expression of sudden anger.

Could art help? We thought so. Thus, the Hockey/Art Alliance was formed to build positive interpersonal relationships, to promote teamwork, and to teach productive ways of dealing with conflict without combat. Fundamental to the program was the teaching of respect for the self and for others. The group with which we worked was an ice hockey team composed of sixteen 13-year-old boys from two neighborhoods. One is an affluent community of well educated white families. The other is a working class, mostly African-American neighborhood. A few of the boys came from a background of poverty and very unstable families. Some were wards of the state. The ice rink for which the boys played had secured grants to fund the purchase of

equipment and attire for those who couldn't afford this considerable expense. A rule of the rink is that gang affiliation automatically bars a boy from the team.

The Hockey/Art Alliance came about as the result of a request to one of us (GW) to provide therapy for Bob, a star player who was a ward of the state. He was living with an aunt who couldn't manage him. His mother was in prison and his father had substance abuse problems. He was frequently absent from school and from ice hockey practice. He was fighting with other members of the team, and his behavior became so combative that the fathers of three of his teammates approached the coach to ask what was wrong with him. The coach told GW that many of the other kids were also fighting with each other. We felt that individual therapy would not be beneficial in this situation but that work with the whole team would help both the targeted boy and his teammates. In addition to improving behavior on the ice and in the locker room, it was our hope that the learning we fostered would carry over into other areas of the boys' lives.

In establishing the Hockey/Art Alliance, we recognized that art would introduce a dimension beyond the teaching of anger management and positive interpersonal relations. It is well established that artmaking provides a form of self-expression and communication that goes beyond words, especially for a group of adolescent boys who may not be very articulate and who may be resistant to talking about feelings. Further, we wanted to encourage the boys to create together as a way of bonding and having fun in a more gentle and reflective activity than speeding across the ice.

Although the benefits of team sports for young people are taken for granted and much has been written about using art with children and adolescents (Franklin, 1992; Henley, 1997; Kramer, 1958, 1971, 1979; Landgarten, 1987; Levick, 1983; Linesch, 1988; Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1970; Moon, 1998; Riley, 1994; Rubin, 1984; Unger, 1995; Wadeson, 2000), we have found nothing in the literature about the combination of art and team sports. In this respect, the Hockey/Art Alliance was truly unique.

## Methods and Results: First Year

A meeting with parents was arranged to get their permission and support. We scheduled a series of eight 1½-hour weekly art sessions to be held right after team practice in the art therapy classroom at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). The parents, the coach, and the assistant coach transported the 16 boys. The parents did not remain for the sessions, but the coaches were an integral part of the

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team-building activities. We hired two UIC senior art therapy students to help with the art activities, Summer Current and Rachel Fenwich. They also arranged for pizza and pop since the boys had practiced hard for school and had not yet had dinner. Funding for this initial pilot series was provided by a small private donation.

### The Wirtz Three Level System

The Wirtz Three Level System, developed by GW to match appropriate art activities to therapeutic progress (Wirtz & Kowalczyk, 1993; Wirtz-McKeever, 1982), provided the framework we used in developing activities for the Hockey/Art Alliance program. The first level focuses on building trust; the second on facilitating expression in art and words; and the third on making the connection between art and feelings and applying group learning to life outside the group.

We implemented our program by (a) directing the team members to set their own rules, (b) building a reward system that set clear limits to help the members follow their own guidelines, (c) helping the members to work towards their goals while building trusting relationships with adults and each other, and (d) encouraging the members to help each other through open, honest, and appropriate verbal communication.

### Level One: Building Trust

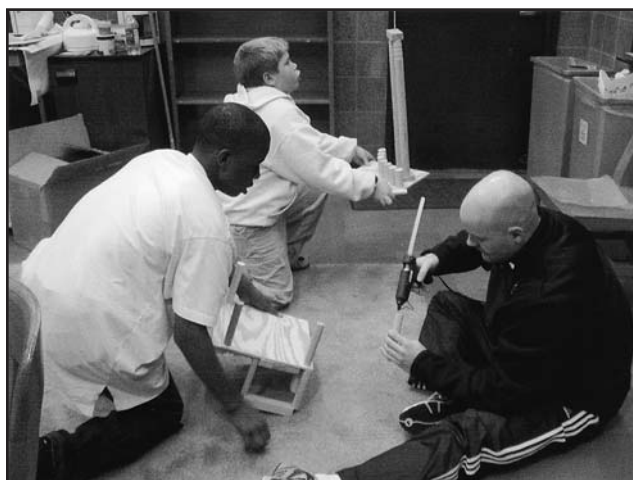
At the first session, we discussed teamwork, self-respect, and respect for others. Respect was encouraged initially with an entering and leaving ritual. We art therapists lined up at the door and each boy shook our hands, looked us in the eyes, and greeted us or said goodnight. We directed the boys to develop a set of rules on which they would rate themselves each week. After much discussion about showing respect and dealing with conflict, they settled on the following (with some rephrasing by us to make the rules applicable to all):

1. I respected other team members.
2. I respected myself.
3. I gave no put-downs.
4. I was honest with the coaches.
5. I was honest with teammates.
6. I didn't talk while others were talking.
7. In discussions, I stayed on the topic.
8. I asked permission before touching other peoples' things.
9. When upset with someone else, I said, "I'm having a problem with the way you are doing that."
10. When someone told me he was having a problem with what I was doing, I said, "I will work on that."
11. When someone else was carried away, I said, "You've gone too far."

Rules were added on an ongoing basis as problems arose around such issues as boundaries, honesty, and staying on the topic.



**Figure 1**  
The Art Room (Note rules hung on the blackboard.)



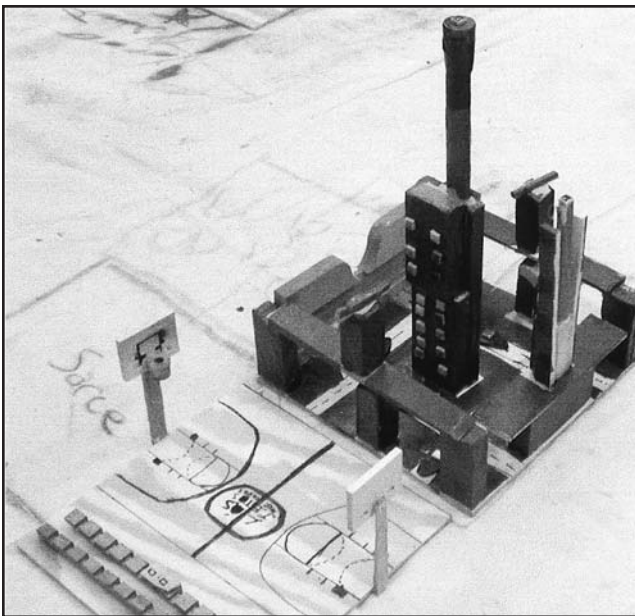
**Figure 2**  
The Coach Helping with Hot Glue

The rules were incorporated into a point system with a reward at the end of the series. Each boy could earn a total of 4 points each session: 1 point for coming to the session, 1 point for making art, 1 point for following the rules during the session, and 1 point for following the rules during practice and games. There was discussion around the awarding of points with the boys commenting on each other's behavior and the coaches adding their judgments as well. This was an opportunity for much feedback and learning. In the process, we were also training the coaches to help the boys develop positive ways of interpersonal coping. For example, during practice the head coach had thrown a wastebasket when angry and apologized at the art session for his inappropriate behavior.

Boys who earned a total of 32 points for the eight sessions were rewarded at the end of the series with a special event. In the latter sessions, those who were lacking points had an opportunity to earn bonus points by taking on extra responsibilities, such as cleaning up for others, so that at the end of each series, the whole team was able to attend the event. It was a celebration in a skybox party room at a



**Figure 3**  
Joining Buildings



**Figure 4**  
Basketball Court Beside the City Hall

professional hockey game with a dinner that included a sumptuous dessert bar. This event was privately donated. As an initial incentive, we also distributed some donated hockey souvenirs at the beginning of the art series.

### The Art Project

The art project over the 8 weeks was designed to foster individual expression and team-building. One of us (HW) had found through supervising art therapy students that inner city youngsters often had difficulty conceptualizing on paper but were more adept with three-dimensional materials. We provided carved wood pieces and glue and directed the boys to construct buildings that would then be arranged to form a city. The city of individually made buildings was meant to be a metaphor for productive teamwork. Using wood construction also ensured a successful project.

The UIC art therapy room had tables that were put together in a large square. The 16 boys had to work in rather close proximity to one another (Figure 1). At first there was much jostling. To get across the concept of private space and respecting others' boundaries, each boy was given masking tape to designate his space on the table. They could also designate shared space. They were directed to ask permission before entering the space of another. Early in the group, one of us (GW) accidentally reached into the taped off space of Bob to pick up a marker, and he called her on it. She apologized for breaking a rule by going into his space without his permission and asked for his forgiveness, which he granted. In this way, respect for boundaries was modeled as a means of building trust. We applied this concept to other interactions as well. The coach was in charge of the hot-glue gun in one corner of the room. The boys had to take turns requesting his assistance. This was important in fostering a more positive and respectful relationship between the boys and their coach-mentor (Figure 2).

### Level Two: Facilitating Expression in Art and Words

As the work progressed from week to week, the buildings grew in height and elaboration. We began introducing more materials such as colored tissue paper and tiles for decorating the structures. One of the boys from an impoverished background seemed stumped in creating anything. He sat still and silent through the first couple of sessions. It turned out that although he was 13 years old, he had not used three-dimensional art materials before. With a little initial help, he built a very creative station with buses. Some of the boys began to work together spontaneously, joining their buildings (Figure 3). Toward the end when the boys identified their constructions, we asked what else might a city need. They concluded that it needed a basketball court and an ice rink, so several of the boys worked together to build these additional structures (Figure 4).

When the boys put their buildings together at the end, Bob, who frequently clamored for attention, said, "I want mine in the center," and he put his city hall there. The other boys accepted this and placed their buildings around his. A boy who kept himself apart wanted his space station removed from the other buildings. We discussed this as a group, and the boys decided it was all right for him to have his building at a distance. However, they asked him to remove some of his missiles, which he did. After the city was complete, each boy told the group what his building meant to him. A boy whose parents were heavy drinkers made an elaborate bar. The group discussed the process of working together. We photographed the boys with their city (Figure 5), and then each boy took his building home.

### Results

Our pilot project was more successful than we had expected. Bob stopped fighting and was no longer truant from school or missing from hockey practice. Halfway through the art series, he was still late to practice, but by



**Figure 5**  
The Team and Their City



**Figure 6**  
The Team and Their Trophy

the end, he was never late. What had begun as a chaotic group of rowdy boys ended as a group that was cooperative and respectful, despite the high spirit of their interactions. Parents reported to the coaches that they noticed positive changes in their sons as well. The coaches told us that the boys cooperated more on the ice and in the locker room with consequent improvement in their teamwork. At the beginning of the art series, they were fighting with each other and losing their games. An added bonus was that as a result of their improved teamwork, they won both their league trophy and their division trophy. The coach brought the large, elaborate trophy to our concluding celebration (Figure 6).

## Methods and Results: Second Year

Flushed with success, we applied for funding to continue the Hockey/Art Alliance. We were awarded a grant from Blackhawk Charities, a foundation with interests in supporting work with youth, particularly in the neighborhood surrounding its home in the United Center, a sports venue that is the home of the Chicago Blackhawks and the Chicago Bulls. Because the Art Therapy Graduate Program at UIC, which was in that neighborhood, had closed, we

moved our venue to the United Center where we were given a party room with several round tables. As a result, the boys made art in small groups (which improved behavior), but we still processed the art and discussed the rules and points with the whole team. Our art therapy students had graduated, so we hired art therapist Kerren Lloyd and recreation therapist Rene Foy. Logistics were made easier by purchasing pizza and pop from the United Center rather than bringing in the food.

## Level Three: Making the Connection Between Art and Feelings and Applying Learning to Life Outside the Group

Because this group had already established basic trust and had begun to express feelings in their art, for the second series we tried a more personal art project—making photo-collage books. We photographed the boys full-length in poses of their choice and gave them Xerox copies to include in their art. Each boy created the following during the course of the series:

- Week 1: A folder for holding his art
- Week 2: A picture of the team using small, full-length photos of all members and coaches (Figure 7)
- Week 3: A picture of himself using photo, tissue paper, magazine images, and other art materials
- Week 4: A small, decorated bag in which others put constructive comments about him
- Week 5: A self-collage using images and the comments from others
- Week 6: A self-portrait showing strengths and weaknesses
- Week 7: A book cover

Each boy also donated a color Xerox copy of his favorite picture for a team book. During this second series, there was much less need to reinforce the rules for respectful conduct or to set boundaries for personal space.

## Results

Although several new boys had joined the team and a few of the original members had moved on to a more senior team, most of the boys who participated in the second series had also participated in the first. Over the course of the series, the changes that we noticed amazed both the coaches and us. Instead of constantly scrapping, by the end of the series some of the boys were hugging each other and saying such things as, "I love you, Man." They reported that they had gotten to know each other better and in a different way. This was readily seen when the boys spoke about their art. For example, one boy described his picture of himself as a confused teenager (Figure 8). Another placed himself in the center of a red, green, and black African flag and said he was proud to be an African-American. Others used magazine images of flashy cars and sexy women to express their interests. When they thumbed through magazines that showed scantily clad women, some were embarrassed until

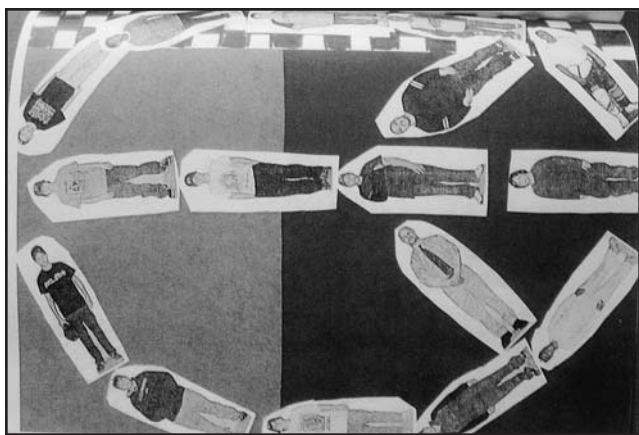


Figure 7  
Photo Collage of the Team

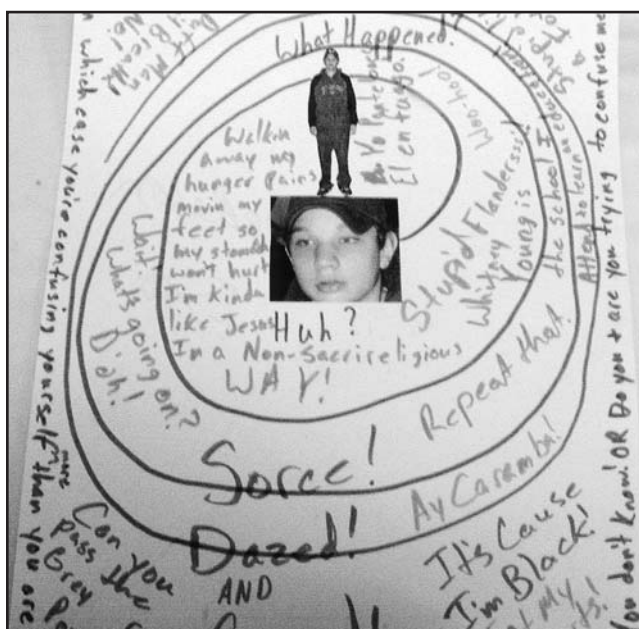


Figure 8  
Self-Collage as "Confused Teenager"

one of us (HW) asked if they were interested in girls. They then readily incorporated women in their pictures as this was now seen as a masculine interest. Some spoke of girlfriends. When Bob added a large sheet of pink tissue paper to his collage, he was careful to explain that he simply liked the color; it did not mean that he was a "fag." This occasioned a lengthy discussion of the naturalness of sexual interests of all sorts at this age and a comparison of sexual-orientation prejudice with racial prejudice. You could have heard a pin drop!

In awarding the points, boys often suggested that another be given a bonus point for such things as cleaning up for everyone at his table or bringing over pizza for others in his group. They were also able to anticipate problems, sometimes agreeing to switch to another table if they were seated with someone with whom they had been scraping. The coaches reported that parents had commented on further improvements in their son's behavior.

Bob had regressed a bit between the first and second series of art sessions. He was coming late to practice and sometimes missed practice completely even though the coach had arranged rides for him with teammates' parents. During one of the art sessions, the coach explained to Bob that he felt disrespected by him when he didn't call to say he would be late and that he was being inconsiderate to teammates' parents by being out when they came to pick him up. Subsequently, Bob called the coach in advance any time he had to be late.

One boy who had broken his wrist and couldn't play throughout the season seemed sort of "out of it" during some of the sessions (in fact, we were worried that he might be using drugs). However, he expressed the importance of the group experience when he showed his completed book. He had made a page for each team member that included his positive attributes. He said that the team was his family, the coaches his parents (one was female), and the team members his brothers. Finally, for the team book, the assistant coach made a cover showing the city and all the boys' names. As mentioned above, the book contained a color Xerox copy of each boy's favorite picture.

The results of the second series indicated greater positive change than did the first. We attribute the difference to several factors: (a) most of the boys had been primed by their experience in the group the previous year, having already established trust (Level One) and experienced art expression (Level Two); (b) the second year art project focused much more on feelings about self and others; and (c) there was more discussion of the meaning of the art in the second series. In sum, making art together and sharing its meaning provided the boys with a more self-disclosing, reflective activity and a more gentle way of relating than their customary interaction on the ice hockey team.

## Future Plans

Our grant will provide funding for another Hockey/Art Alliance series next year. We will begin with a different group, as the boys with whom we have worked will graduate to a more senior team. Once again we will begin with Wirtz's Level One, using simple projects that guarantee success. When the group has reached more advanced levels, we plan to use a more personalized art project to foster looking at one's self and at team relationships. We may encourage more drawing and less collage to promote creativity, though we will probably keep the book format as the boys were very pleased with their books.

We have developed pre- and posttest questionnaires that we will distribute to the boys, the coaches, and the boys' parents to measure change. Our hope is to develop a model program that can be utilized by other kinds of teams in other settings (e.g., a school basketball team).

## Conclusion

Although the combination of art and ice hockey was initially somewhat accidental, we have found it to be very fruitful. Our program has already received publicity through

coverage by the *Chicago Tribune* (Marcus, 2004). We plan to develop more strategies for reaching youngsters through art and sports alliances. We hope to report quantifiable results from our pretest-posttest questionnaires to enable others to secure funding to develop comparable programs.

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## Call for Papers

*Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association* is seeking submissions for a special issue of the journal that focuses on men in regard to the field of art therapy.

### Special Issue: Men in Art Therapy

The focus of this special issue is to explore the unique concerns of men in the art therapy field, their experiences as art therapists, their use of artmaking as a healing process, and the particular needs of male clients. Articles should focus on the male perspective on art therapy theory and practice including, but is not limited to, research focusing on the minority status of men in the field of art therapy; inherent differences between men and women that may affect art therapy practice; differences and similarities between men and women regarding salaries, job selection, and career paths; experiences of male art therapists electing to work with or being matched to male consumers; cultural stereotypes that affect men as both providers and recipients of art therapy services; male cognitive and verbal and visual communication differences; art therapy professional concerns including recruitment of students and retention of practitioners; consumer's perspectives regarding male art therapists; and special concerns when working with male consumers. Authors are encouraged to include artwork pertaining to the experiences of men in art therapy. Men are strongly encouraged to submit articles for this special issue due to their personal connection to this topic.

**The deadline for submissions is April 30, 2006.**

Please refer to the "Guidelines for Submissions" and "Attention Authors" pages published in every issue of the journal for specific requirements regarding style and format of submissions. Send submissions to: *Art Therapy* Editor, c/o AATA, 1202 Allanson Road, Mundelein, Illinois 60060-3808.