Art Therapy-Based Curriculum to Address Bullying Among Middle School Girls

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Section I: Introduction

The issue of bullying in middle schools remains a persistent concern, particularly among adolescent girls. Students are often targeted by relational aggression, such as exclusion and rumor spreading, as well as cyberbullying, which can be psychologically damaging and challenging to detect by adults (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). These types of bullying can have a significant impact on a child's emotional well-being, contributing to anxiety, depression, and withdrawal from academic and social activities (Espelage & Holt, 2001). Girls who are bullied also show a decline in academic motivation and classroom participation as a result of bullying (Moore et al., 2017).

Although many school-based programs are designed to reduce aggressive behavior, they often do not support the emotional recovery of victims (Gaffney et al., 2019). Using person-centered principles, art therapy allows students to express difficult feelings in a safe and creative manner (Malchiodi, 2019). Additionally, this approach promotes trust and emotional safety, which are crucial to the healing process during the development of an individual's identity and social awareness during adolescence (Erikson, 1968). In addition to strengthening emotional resilience, art therapy can enhance peer relationships by allowing students to explore and reflect on their experiences (Kapitan, 2017).

Problem to be Investigated

The issue of relationship bullying and cyberbullying continues to be a significant concern in middle schools, particularly among adolescent girls. These forms of aggression, which often involve social exclusion, rumor-spreading, and digital harassment, can have psychologically detrimental effects and can result in anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and academic disengagement (Espelage & Holt, 2001; Kowalski et al., 2014). Research has shown that

relational aggression is more prevalent in girls during early adolescence, when identity formation and peer belonging are critical (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). The increasing use of smartphones and social media has expanded the reach of bullying beyond school hours, intensifying its emotional impact and making it more challenging for educators to monitor and address (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Underwood & Ehrenreich, 2017).

Despite the growing awareness of these issues, most schools do not provide structured, developmentally appropriate interventions to address the emotional needs of bullied students. There is a noticeable lack of comprehensive art therapy-based programs that emphasize emotional expression, peer support, and resilience building. Due to this, there is an urgent need to design and implement a person-centered art therapy curriculum that supports the healing and empowerment of girls who have been bullied.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research is to develop a person-centered art therapy curriculum aimed at preventing and reducing bullying among middle school girls.

Justification

The problem of bullying is widespread and complex, and has a wide range of effects, especially on adolescent girls. Global data from the World Health Organization (2020) estimates that nearly 30% of school-aged children worldwide are affected by bullying, either as victims or perpetrators. Considering this prevalence and the vulnerabilities associated with adolescence, it is critical to intervene early and effectively to prevent long-term mental health and social complications.

Researchers have found that girls are more likely than boys to experience relational aggression, such as social exclusion, spreading rumors, and manipulation (Crick & Grotpeter,

1995). The impact of indirect aggression on adolescent development can be especially damaging during this crucial period, during which a person's identity is being formed and their sensitivity to peer relationships is enhanced (Erikson, 1968).

The emotional and psychological effects of bullying on girls during adolescence are significant and long-lasting. It is common for victims to experience anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, as well as social withdrawal well into adulthood (Hawker & Boulton, 2000). It has also been shown that girls who experience relational bullying are more likely than boys to develop internalizing disorders such as depression and anxiety (Prinstein et al., 2001). The negative experience can further reduce motivation, concentration, and school attendance, thus impairing academic achievement (Juvonen et al., 2011).

Due to these challenges, bullying is associated with severe mental health risks, including suicidal ideation and self-harm. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2019), bullied adolescents are more likely to commit suicide and engage in self-injurious behavior than their non-bullied peers. Furthermore, some victims use substance abuse and aggressive behavior as coping mechanisms, resulting in difficulties with their emotional and social adjustment (Gaffney et al., 2019).

These concerns are not limited to global or Western contexts. A recent study conducted in Qatar revealed similar alarming trends, with 41.0% of students reporting victimization and 31.7% admitting to participating in bullying behaviors (Bener et al., 2023). As a matter of fact, the most prevalent form of bullying is verbal abuse, including teasing and name-calling, which is most prevalent in less supervised settings such as classrooms (67.5%) and hallways (64.8%). In addition to depression symptoms, somatic complaints, self-harm, and an increased risk of substance abuse, these experiences are associated with adverse physical and mental health

outcomes. As a result of these statistics, it is imperative that schools implement interventions addressing both the behavior management aspect and the psychological effects of bullying.

In addition, cyberbullying has become increasingly prevalent, which extends bullying beyond physical spaces to the digital world. Cyberbullying exposes victims to continuous harassment without the opportunity for adult intervention, which leads to feelings of helplessness and psychological distress (Kowalski et al., 2014; Moore et al., 2017). According to a recent WHO/Europe report (2024), approximately one in six school-aged children experience cyberbullying, and 11% have experienced bullying in the classroom. In addition, approximately 6% of adolescents admit to bullying other adolescents. As a matter of fact, cyberbullying rates have been rising since 2018, illustrating a growing global concern.

Although these issues are widely recognized, many schools lack comprehensive programs that enable students to process and recover from these issues. As an alternative to verbalizing difficult emotions, art therapy provides students with a safe, creative, and student-centered outlet for expression (Malchiodi, 2019; Kapitan, 2017). Trauma can be processed, self-esteem can be developed, and empathy can be fostered in a nurturing environment with the help of art therapy.

In spite of art therapy's well-documented benefits, it is underutilized as a method for bullying intervention in schools (Kapitan, 2017). This gap indicates the importance of programs that recognize the emotional toll bullying takes on students and provide them with tools that will help them heal, grow, and form positive relationships with their peers. Adolescent girls can benefit from art therapy as part of bullying prevention programs by enhancing their emotional resilience, reducing isolation, and improving their overall well-being.

Terms Related to the Study

In this research, the following terms are used.

Adolescent Girls

Girls between the ages of 11-14.

Art Therapy

A form of psychotherapy involving the encouragement of free self-expression through art (AATA, 2024).

Behavior Management

Strategies and techniques used to guide, control, or change behaviors to promote positive actions and reduce negative ones (Maag, 2018).

Bullying

Seeking to harm, intimidate, or pressure someone (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2019).

Cyberbullying

Bullying through digital communication platforms like social media, texts, or emails (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], n.d.).

Emotional Resilience

The ability to bounce back from difficult situations, stay calm under pressure, and adapt to challenges without being overwhelmed (APA, 2014).

Identity Formation

The process of developing a clear understanding of who you are, including your values, beliefs, and sense of self (Erikson, 1968).

Peer Relationships

The connections and interactions individuals have with others their own age, which plays a significant role in social development. These terms provide a foundation for understanding the study's focus on bullying, its effects, and the intervention used to address it.

Person-Centered Approach

A humanistic therapy model focusing on empathy, unconditional positive regard, and empowering clients in their healing process (Rogers, 2016).

Relational Aggression

A type of bullying that involves harming someone's relationships or social status. This can include behaviors such as social exclusion, spreading rumors, and manipulation. Unlike physical bullying, relational aggression targets a person's emotional and social well-being, making it particularly harmful during adolescence when peer relationships are crucial for identity development and emotional stability (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

Self-Esteem

How much a person values themselves and feels confident in their abilities and worth.

Social Exclusion

When someone is left out or isolated from a group, it often leads to feelings of loneliness or rejection.

Conclusion

It remains a pressing concern for adolescent girls during the critical developmental years of adolescence that bullying, especially relational aggression and cyberbullying, is prevalent. Adults are often unaware of these types of psychological harm. Nonetheless, they negatively affect a student's emotional well-being, academic performance, and social functioning for the rest of their lives. Although traditional school-based interventions are usually focused on behavior

management, they do not address emotional recovery and resilience. Considering that 41.0% of students in Qatar report being bullied, there is an urgent need for a comprehensive and student-centered approach to bullying prevention. By using the person-centered model of art therapy, students are able to express themselves in a safe, creative, and empowering manner, connect with their peers, and heal from their bullying experiences. Through the development of a person-centered art therapy curriculum specifically tailored to the emotional needs of middle school girls, it aims to fill a significant gap in the field. The following section presents an overview of this approach's theoretical and empirical foundation.

Section II: Review of Literature

This section examines the theoretical foundations and research studies used in the development of a person-centered art therapy curriculum that addresses bullying among adolescent girls. Based on humanistic, developmental, and cognitive-behavioral theories, this review examines how these theories relate to current school practices and art therapy practices. A recent study provides a better understanding of how students cope emotionally and academically with things such as relational aggression and cyberbullying. Besides having an impact on their self-esteem, these experiences can also negatively impact their academic performance. For this reason, art therapy is becoming increasingly popular among schools and therapists. This provides students with the opportunity to express their feelings in a safe and expressive manner. In addition, it allows them to build inner strength, understand themselves better, and connect with others more compassionately and empathically.

Person-Centered and Humanistic Foundations

Person-Centered Theory

Developed by Carl Rogers in 1940, person-centered theory emphasizes an individual's capacity for self-healing, growth, empathy, authenticity, and unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 2016). This approach is based on the principle that people are naturally capable of healing and growing, particularly in a safe, supportive environment where they feel truly acknowledged and accepted (Cornelius-White, 2019). When used in schools and therapy settings, this approach empowers students, creates an environment of emotional safety, and motivates them from within rather than by exerting pressure (Noddings, 2017).

By demonstrating genuine empathy and acceptance, a therapist or educator can encourage students to develop self-trust and to take responsibility for their own growth (Rogers, 2016). For

example, a middle school girl experiencing relational bullying may feel safer expressing her hurt when she is met with warmth rather than punishment. The development of a teacher-student relationship based on care and responsiveness increases emotional regulation, academic engagement, and peer connection (Cornelius-White, 2019). As Noddings (2017) points out, creating a caring relational ethic in schools can counteract the shame and isolation caused by bullying by giving students a sense of belonging. Therefore, the person-centered model not only addresses behavior, but also supports emotional resilience and belonging.

Person-Centered Approach in Schools

Rogers' person-centered theory prepared the ground for creating environments that help young people develop emotionally. The result is a relationship between the teacher and the counselor that is based on respect, warmth, and authenticity, which enhances student well-being and learning outcomes in schools. Rather than positioning educators as authorities who solve problems, the person-centered model encourages them to become partners in students' personal growth, supporting autonomy and emotional well-being (Cornelius-White, 2019). Bullying can be profoundly affected by this shift in dynamics. Shame and isolation are often internalized by girls who experience social exclusion or manipulation. However, when a caring adult validates a student's perspective and responds with empathy, the wounds can begin to heal. Several studies have shown that schools that prioritize empathy and connection, without relying on punishment or control, recognize better emotional resilience and healthier peer relationships (Cornelius-White, 2019; Noddings, 2017). It is especially relevant for girls, since they navigate aggression through nuanced social dynamics that require sensitive support.

Applications to Art Therapy in Schools

In schools, art therapy provides students with a safe space to make sense of their inner world, especially when verbal expression is difficult or intimidating. Based on person-centered values, this practice allows young people to express their feelings and experiences visually, at their own pace, without any pressure or judgment. For middle school girls who have been bullied, creative expression can provide a powerful alternative to silence or withdrawal.

Malchiodi (2019) explained that choosing colors, shaping forms, and giving images to feelings supports emotional release and helps make sense of distressing events. Moreover, a difference between structured talk therapy and art therapy is that art therapy focuses on the process of meaning-making rather than just the content of what is said. Practicing it in groups also fosters shared understanding and connection. Therefore, by sharing and supporting each other's stories, new relationships will emerge built on empathy and shared healing instead of competition or exclusion (Riley, 2001; Kapitan, 2017; Bazargan & Pakdaman, 2016). As a result of this kind of work, students are able to process the impact of bullying and develop the social-emotional tools they need to prevent it.

Developmental Theory

The developmental theory focuses on the emotional, cognitive, and social changes that occur throughout the course of a person's life. Educational contexts are specifically influenced by Erik Erikson's psychosocial stages and Jean Piaget's cognitive stages. Erikson emphasized that identity formation and peer belonging are important during adolescence, which are often disrupted by bullying or rejection from others (Moore et al., 2017). On the other hand, Piaget's work on abstract thinking at the formal operational stage explains how adolescents begin to consider social hierarchies and peer dynamics more critically, making them more vulnerable to emotional consequences of relational aggression (Vaillancourt et al., 2013). In complex social

environments such as middle school, difficulties in emotional regulation and a heightened need for acceptance may increase the likelihood of both experiencing and participating in bullying during this period.

Adolescent Development

Middle school girls are at a stage marked by high sensitivity to peer relationships and an emerging sense of self. This developmental window is specifically vulnerable to the effects of relational aggression and cyberbullying, which can damage self-concept and increase anxiety and depression. As Moore et al. (2017) and Perales et al. (2020) suggested, experiences during adolescence have long-lasting implications for mental health. Furthermore, a developmentally responsive intervention must address both emotional needs and social skills, which art therapy can uniquely support.

Piaget's Stage of Cognitive Development

In accordance with Piaget (1972), middle school students typically function within the formal operational stage around the age of 11. This is the stage at which adolescents begin to develop abstract thinking, logical reasoning, and the ability to consider hypothetical situations. This cognitive shift allows students to reflect on social experiences, peer dynamics, and personal identities that are influenced by bullying. In addition, it suggests that students at this age can benefit from therapeutic interventions that facilitate reflection and insight, such as those provided by art therapy (Malchiodi, 2019; Klorer, 2017).

Erikson's Stage of Psychosocial Development

Erikson (1968) discussed adolescence as a period of confusion between identity and role confusion, where individuals are trying to establish a sense of self and their own values. During this stage, relationship aggression and exclusion can interfere with identity formation and lead to

confusion and low self-esteem. Providing adolescents with support in school, particularly those that encourage expression, peer connection, and self-reflection, is essential for their successful transition through this stage. Thus, by providing a safe and creative environment, art therapy addresses the developmental need for exploration and validation of one's identity.

Adolescents who experience relational bullying during this critical period may find it difficult to form a cohesive sense of self, because the need for peer approval often clashes with feelings of exclusion or rejection. Erikson's theory suggests that failure to establish a stable identity during this stage may result in long-term consequences, including role confusion, social withdrawal, and increased anxiety and depression symptoms (Erikson, 1968; Moore et al., 2017). The purpose of art therapy is to provide students with a nonverbal, exploratory space in which to construct and reconstruct their identities symbolically through visual representation. It is through this creative process that adolescents are able to externalize their internal struggles, gain clarity, and receive validation in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. In addition to fostering self-exploration and narrative coherence, art therapy also serves as a buffer against the negative psychosocial outcomes associated with bullying during adolescence.

Cognitive Behavioral Theory

Cognitive Behavioral Theory (CBT) purports that thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are interconnected. Changing unhelpful thinking patterns can improve emotional states and behavior. CBT is often used in school settings to help students identify distorted thinking patterns, reduce negative self-talk, and develop healthier coping strategies. In particular, these tools are valuable to adolescents who are experiencing the emotional burden of bullying.

When girls are exposed to relational aggression, they may develop internalized beliefs that can damage their self-esteem or increase their anxiety (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Espelage &

Holt, 2001). By challenging and rephrasing these beliefs, CBT-based interventions improve emotional regulation and problem-solving (Espelage & Holt, 2001). Additionally, research suggests that emotional distress, such as depression, can interfere with the relationship between bullying and reduced academic performance, supporting the need for interventions such as CBT that target both emotional and cognitive factors (Patterson et al., 2020).

Several studies have demonstrated that CBT approaches based on art significantly reduce anxiety, depression, and behavioral problems in adolescents by facilitating insight, promoting self-expression, and supporting emotion regulation (Regev & Cohen-Yatziv, 2018). It is particularly useful for middle school girls who might find it difficult to verbalize their experiences with relational aggression. In addition to improving their emotional resilience and interpersonal functioning, guided creative expression allows them to reshape harmful beliefs and build healthier self-concepts.

Application to Bullying Prevention

The use of CBT-based interventions can assist adolescents experiencing bullying in identifying and challenging distorted beliefs regarding self-worth and social rejection (Espelage & Holt, 2001). These beliefs, when left unaddressed, can cause long-term emotional distress such as depression and low academic performance (Patterson et al., 2020). Middle school girls are specifically vulnerable to bullying because this stage of development involves high sensitivity to peer approval, emerging identity formation, as well as increased use of social comparison, particularly within female peer groups.

The desire for belonging and fear of exclusion usually intensify during early adolescence, making relational aggression more impactful. CBT principles can be integrated into art therapy to provide an additional layer of support by allowing students to externalize harmful thoughts

through visual expression, which makes abstract emotions more concrete and easier to understand. When combined with person-centered practices that prioritize empathy, safety, and empowerment, this process can be especially powerful (Rogers, 2016; Kapitan, 2017). By combining these approaches, a holistic therapeutic environment can be created in which students not only process trauma and develop emotional resilience but also develop healthier interpersonal relationships.

Nature and Dynamics of Girls' Bullying in Middle School

Relational and Social Aggression

Relational aggression is one of the main forms of bullying among girls, especially in middle school. Unlike physical bullying, it usually involves harmful behaviors such as social exclusion, spreading rumors, and manipulating friendships to isolate the target (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). These covert tactics usually occur outside the view of teachers and adults, during hallway conversations, on social media, or even through private messages, making them much harder to observe and document.

Because the harm from relational bullying is social and emotional rather than physical, there are no visible signs like bruises or injuries, and victims may be reluctant to report what happened for fear of being disbelieved or further excluded. This type of indirect aggression can be very damaging because it strikes at the heart of a girl's social world, which is central to her emotional well-being, especially during adolescence. Girls subjected to relational aggression may develop feelings of social anxiety, loneliness, and diminished self-esteem, which can negatively affect their ability to form healthy peer relationships and adjust socially (Espelage & Holt, 2001; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). The nature of relational aggression usually makes it harder

for adults to detect and intervene effectively, leading to prolonged emotional distress (Vaillancourt et al., 2013).

Cyberbullying and Social Media Influence

With the increased use of social media, cyberbullying has extended the impact of relational aggression beyond the physical school environment to digital platforms as well. Wang, Iannotti, and Nansel (2009) observed that digital bullying allows aggressors to harass their peers anytime and often anonymously, reducing opportunities for adult intervention. This digital expansion of bullying means that victims usually find it difficult to escape the bitterness, leading to deepened psychological harm (Kowalski et al., 2014). Cyberbullying can worsen feelings of helplessness and isolation, making it a high-risk factor for depression, anxiety, and even suicidal ideation among adolescents (Moore et al., 2017). The general nature of social media also builds up peer pressure and the fear of exclusion, which can severely reduce a girl's self-concept and emotional health during this critical stage (Hong, 2018).

As a result of the constant connectivity of the digital age, harmful messages, rumors, or images are easily disseminated, enhancing the emotional impact and making recovery more difficult for victims (Underwood & Ehrenreich, 2017). Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying is permanent and public, which can intensify humiliation and prolong emotional distress. It has been reported that victims often report sleep disturbances, difficulty concentrating, and a decline in academic engagement (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). In particular, girls, especially when online harassment targets their appearance or social identity, may internalize the harm by blaming themselves or withdrawing from social interaction. As a result of these risks, supportive school-based interventions are urgently needed. Through the incorporation of art therapy into such

interventions, students will be able to process digital trauma, rebuild self-esteem, and engage in restorative peer interactions.

Bullying Prevention Programs for Adolescents

School-based bullying prevention programs have been shown to reduce bullying, but the results are uncertain. Several programs, such as KiVa in Finland, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP), and ViSC in Austria, have been successful, especially when they are included in classroom lessons, whole-school policies, and teacher training (Gaffney et al., 2019). The most effective programs focused on developing social-emotional skills, improving peer relationships, and helping students manage their emotions (Ttofi & Farrington, 2009). CBT-based programs have also been effective in teaching coping and problem-solving skills (Espelage & Holt, 2001).

It should be noted, however, that not all programs are successful. There are some interventions that only led to slight changes in behavior and did not reduce anxiety or depression in students who are already affected by bullying (Gaffney et al., 2019). It is evident that while many programs are capable of reducing bullying overall, they may not meet the emotional needs of all students, particularly those who have already been harmed by bullying.

Art Therapy and Bullying Prevention

The use of art therapy has also been found to be effective in helping students who have been bullied. Especially for those who are unable to verbalize their emotions, it provides a creative and safe outlet for emotional expression. Bazargan and Pakdaman (2016) found that art therapy significantly reduced both internalizing and externalizing problems in adolescent girls, including anxiety and aggression. Klorer (2017) conducted a meta-analysis demonstrating the effectiveness of art therapy in improving emotional regulation and decreasing distress among

adolescents. Malchiodi (2019) supported the use of creative interventions to reduce symptoms of trauma and anxiety in youth.

Art therapy has been proven to enhance self-esteem and foster empathy among students by providing them with a safe and non-threatening environment in which to share their experiences (Riley, 2001). In group settings, it can encourage girls to form peer connections and feel less isolated, which is crucial when addressing relational bullying. After just five sessions, Safaria and Yunita (2014) found that school-based art therapy reduced anxiety related to bullying in adolescent girls. Yang et al. (2019) also found that an art therapy intervention reduced bullying victimization and increased life satisfaction among left-behind children in rural schools. Nevertheless, art therapy is rarely included in most school-wide bullying prevention programs, despite these positive outcomes (Kapitan, 2017).

Additionally, art therapy supports critical areas of adolescent development that are crucial to addressing the causes and consequences of bullying. By encouraging girls to explore their identity and express themselves, it helps them establish a clearer sense of who they are during a time when peer dynamics have a significant impact on their self-perception (Erikson, 1968). By engaging in guided art-making, participants are able to explore their emotions, identify personal triggers, and process difficult experiences in a non-verbal and empowering manner (Malchiodi, 2019). Through group art therapy, participants can witness and respond to each other's stories and artwork, which fosters deeper peer relationships (Riley, 2001). In addition to reducing feelings of isolation, social connections can enhance emotional regulation (Klorer, 2017). Moreover, the creative process emphasizes the strengths and resilience of students, reinforcing a positive self-image and promoting psychological well-being (Bazargan & Pakdaman, 2016). In addition, school-based art therapy interventions have been shown to reduce anxiety caused by

bullying (Safaria & Yunita, 2014) and improve students' satisfaction with their social experiences (Yang et al., 2019). As a result of these findings, it appears that comprehensive bullying prevention strategies should incorporate creative therapeutic approaches.

Conclusion

As a result, the literature supports a multidimensional understanding of bullying among adolescent girls, with a particular emphasis on the emotional harm caused by relational aggression and cyberbullying. Several theoretical perspectives have shed light on how bullying disrupts identity formation, emotional regulation, and peer relationships during an important developmental phase. These perspectives include person-centered, developmental, and cognitive-behavioral perspectives. It has been determined that school-wide interventions and CBT-based strategies are effective in reducing bullying behaviors, but they often fail to address the deeper emotional impact of bullying. Art therapy is proving to be a promising method for facilitating self-expression, emotional processing, and peer support, particularly for girls who have difficulty expressing themselves verbally.

Although art therapy has proven effective in helping adolescents cope with bullying, it is underutilized in most school-based prevention programs. The findings support the development of a person-centered art therapy curriculum that is specifically designed for middle school girls who are affected by bullying. The next section presents the methodology behind this curriculum, including its theoretical foundation, target audience, structure, and expected psychological and academic outcomes.

Section III: Methodology

In this section, the methodology utilized for the creation of the curriculum is presented. This curriculum is based on a person-centered approach and utilizes evidence-based approaches to address the psychological, social, and academic effects of bullying among adolescent girls. Using structured art therapy interventions as well as relational and reflective processes, the curriculum allows students to process their experience safely and creatively. It is based on research regarding development during adolescence, the social-emotional impact of bullying, and best practices in prevention and intervention.

Target Audience

This curriculum was designed for middle-school girls, typically aged 11-14, who have been identified as victims of bullying, who are at risk because of peer group dynamics, or who are exhibiting social-emotional distress within their school environment. At this stage of development, girls are in the process of forming their identities, self-concepts, and peer networks, making them particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of relational aggression and exclusion (Erikson, 1968; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). The group format provides participants with an opportunity to connect with their peers, to enhance their social skills, and to develop their empathy, elements that are particularly effective in the treatment of relational bullying and in the restoration of a sense of belonging (Riley, 2001). It is also important to note that group settings provide opportunities for participants to witness and reflect on shared experiences, thereby reducing feelings of isolation and shame (Safaria & Yunita, 2014).

The process of creative expression with peers promotes mutual understanding, increases emotional support, and models positive social interactions (Malchiodi, 2019). Moreover, group art therapy provides an opportunity for practicing communication and conflict resolution within a

supportive and guided environment, which is vital to helping girls reframe harmful peer dynamics and build healthier relationships (Klorer, 2017; Bazargan & Pakdaman, 2016). A referral may be made by a teacher, school counselor, or social worker based on behavioral indicators, student disclosures, or academic declines.

The curriculum was designed to be implemented by a licensed or credentialed art therapist, school counselor, psychologist, or other qualified mental health professional who has experience working with adolescents and has been trained in group facilitation, trauma-informed care, and creative therapeutic interventions. Even though an art therapist would be ideal to facilitate the group, the significant need for this curriculum requires it to be accessible to other trained professionals, especially since many schools may not have on-staff art therapists. Therefore, the curriculum is intended to be adaptable to a wide variety of school settings.

The facilitator should be capable of creating a safe, inclusive, and supportive environment where students feel heard and recognized. It is also important for facilitators to be familiar with topics such as bullying, relational aggression, and the development of adolescent identity to be able to guide discussions and activities effectively. In order to ensure continuity of support, promote generalization of coping skills, and monitor progress both within and outside of the group sessions, collaboration with teachers, administrators, and caregivers is highly recommended.

Curricular Structure

To meet the cognitive and emotional needs of middle school students, the curriculum combines person-centered therapeutic principles with structured art therapy activities. The curriculum consists of nine weekly sessions, each lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes. A warm-up is followed by an art-based directive focused on a theme (such as identity, boundaries,

empathy, or conflict resolution), a reflective sharing process, and a closing ritual to support stress reduction.

As part of the art therapy process, directives are sequenced in a way that gradually promotes emotional expression, insight, and peer connection, while a person-centered approach ensures a non-judgmental, empathic facilitation style that supports each participant's individuality. The use of activities such as mask-making, collaborative mural painting, or visual journaling facilitates peer empathy as well as the externalization of internal experiences (Malchiodi, 2019).

Why a Person-Centered Orientation?

It is common for middle school girls who face relational aggression to carry emotional burdens that are invisible but that have a profound impact. In this age group, the desire to be seen, heard, and accepted is particularly strong. According to Carl Rogers (2016), a person-centered approach meets this need by emphasizing emotional safety, empathy, and personal autonomy. Rather than enforcing behavioral changes through consequences or didactic lessons, this approach emphasizes building trust, listening with unconditional positive regard, and empowering students to explore their thoughts and feelings at their own pace.

A person-centered approach in the school setting can counter the punitive and performance-oriented culture that may alienate students who are already struggling socially or emotionally. This technique creates an environment in which vulnerability is met with respect rather than punishment. Several key goals are achieved as a result, including self-reflection, emotional regulation, and a deeper understanding of relationships (Corey, 2017). The ultimate goal of this approach is to promote sustainable, internally motivated changes in peer dynamics by reinforcing self-worth and promoting authentic peer engagement.

Curricular Outline

The curriculum is made up of themed sessions that follow a clear emotional journey:

1. **Session 1 - Building Safety & Group Agreements**

Icebreaker activity, collaborative poster, and discussion of boundaries and expectations.

2. **Session 2 - Identity and Self-Expression**

Self-portrait collage: exploring inner and outer identity.

3. **Session 3 - Understanding Emotions and Triggers**

Visual journal on "what I carry": naming internalized experiences and recognizing emotional triggers.

4. **Session 4 - Empathy and Peer Relationships**

Empathy drawing paired with shared storytelling to understand others' perspectives and strengthen social connection.

5. **Session 5 - Assertiveness and Self-Confidence**

Role-playing with masks to practice healthy, confident responses to difficult social situations.

6. **Session 6 – Understanding and Maintaining Personal Boundaries**

Personal boundary mapping: identifying what feels safe, uncomfortable and how to communicate boundaries clearly.

7. **Session 7 – Repair and Connection**

Paired collaborative art activity focused on repairing or improving "damaged" relationships and restoring connection.

8. **Session 8 – Personal Growth and Strengths**

Tree of strengths activity: reflecting on personal progress, inner resources, and new skills gained.

9. **Session 9 – Closure and Reflection**

Group mural or legacy piece; participants write letters to their future selves and share final reflection.

Conclusion

This curriculum was based on a person-centered, trauma-informed approach that emphasizes emotional safety, creativity, and relational healing. In addition to integrating structured art therapy interventions with developmental and evidence-based practices, the program addresses the complex social and emotional needs of middle school girls who are victims of bullying. As a result of the structured sequence of sessions, it is hoped that participants will develop self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and authentic peer connections, which can lay the foundation for long-term change in both individual and group dynamics. The following section presents the curriculum in its entirety, including the framework, session structure, and core interventions used to address the needs of bullying victims.

Section IV: Curriculum

This section presents the curriculum developed for this project, highlighting how art therapy and expressive interventions can be used to prevent and reduce bullying among middle school girls. The curriculum was designed to provide a structured, sequential approach that addresses emotional safety, self-expression, social-emotional skills, and personal growth. The 9-session curriculum, where each session builds on the previous one, seeks to create an emotional journey that guides participants from establishing trust and safety to reflecting on their strengths and growth. The full curriculum can be found in the appendix.

Art Therapy and Expressive Interventions in Bullying Prevention

Art therapy provides a trauma-informed, nonverbal way for students to explore identity, process emotions, and develop coping strategies. It is particularly effective for addressing the subtle and relational forms of bullying that girls often experience. By engaging in creative expression, participants can externalize and process difficult experiences in a safe, contained manner. This approach not only prevents emotional escalation but also fosters resilience and self-awareness, helping students navigate social challenges more confidently (Malchiodi, 2005; Bazargan & Pakdaman, 2016).

Art Therapy as Preventative and Restorative Practice

In addition to prevention, this art therapy-based curriculum serves as a restorative practice by allowing participants to process past experiences of relational aggression, rebuild trust, and strengthen social bonds. Guided activities, such as visual journaling, mask role-plays, and group murals, enable students to safely express and regulate emotions while practicing empathy, assertiveness, and conflict resolution (Riley, 2001; Kapitan, 2017). This structured,

creative process supports both individual growth and healthier group dynamics, offering participants tools to repair relationships and develop resilience over time.

Group Curriculum Models for Empowerment and Social Skills

Structured group art therapy programs have been shown to improve communication, empathy, and peer support among participants. When implemented in school settings, these programs can enhance self-worth, increase social competence, and promote positive relationships (Riley, 2001; Kapitan, 2017). By combining person-centered principles with developmentally appropriate activities, the curriculum not only addresses immediate social-emotional needs but also provides students with skills and strategies they can carry into future interactions.

Conclusion

In summary, this curriculum uses art therapy as both a preventative and restorative tool to support middle school girls affected by bullying. By combining trauma-informed practices with structured group activities, it fosters emotional expression, social skill development, and personal empowerment. The following section presents the curriculum in detail, outlining session objectives, materials, and step-by-step procedures that guide participants through this developmental and relational journey.

Section V: Discussion

This section brings together the main ideas behind the curriculum and reflects on what the research means in practice. After outlining the theoretical foundations, designing the sessions, and understanding what middle school girls struggle with socially and emotionally, this section focuses on the meaning, limitations, and future directions of the project.

Brief Summary of the Research

The purpose of this research was to create a person-centered art therapy curriculum for middle school girls experiencing bullying. The curriculum integrates person-centered and humanistic principles, developmental theory, and CBT-informed strategies. Across nine sessions, the program guides participants through an emotional progression: establishing safety, exploring identity, understanding emotions, building empathy, practicing assertiveness, setting boundaries, repairing relationships, recognizing strengths, and ending with reflection and closure.g

Art-making is the foundation of the process, serving as a bridge for expression, reflection, and communication. Through imagery, metaphor, and creative freedom, the girls are able to express experiences they may not yet have the words for. The curriculum was designed to be developmentally appropriate, culturally adaptable, and rooted in theories that support emotional growth during adolescence.

Discussion

Creating this curriculum became meaningful to me because of what I witnessed while working in the school environment. I saw how often girls struggled silently with issues tied to bullying, friendship conflicts, and self-esteem, even when they didn't have the words to express what they were feeling. These experiences showed me how deeply social and emotional challenges shape adolescents' daily lives. That was the moment I realized how much a

structured, art-based program could help, something that offered emotional support, skill-building, and a creative space where they could feel genuinely understood.

Developing this curriculum reinforced how interconnected social, emotional, and developmental experiences are for adolescents. Bullying affects not only social interactions but also self-esteem, confidence, and identity formation. Art therapy also provides a unique outlet for emotional processing. Students can externalize and visualize feelings, like frustration or sadness, and work through them in a safe, creative context. I've seen that even simple art prompts can open rich conversations and help students feel seen, validated, and empowered.

Person-centered theory informed the design by emphasizing empathy, acceptance, and relational safety. In my experience, girls respond more openly when they feel they are not being judged. This is why each session starts with a check-in and gives participants choice and autonomy, whether in the materials they use or the stories they share. Safety and trust are built gradually, allowing students to feel comfortable sharing vulnerabilities.

Developmental theory guided the selection of age-appropriate activities. Girls aged 11–14 are forming identities, navigating peer groups, and beginning to think abstractly. Symbolic art activities, like drawing emotions or mapping boundaries, match their developmental stage and help them process experiences that might otherwise feel overwhelming. Erikson's insights about identity and Piaget's formal operational stage supported the curriculum's focus on reflection and relational awareness.

CBT principles shaped sessions focused on understanding emotions, identifying triggers, and challenging negative self-perceptions. Many students blame themselves for bullying incidents or internalize harmful messages. Art serves as a bridge for expressing these thoughts visually, making it easier to discuss and reframe them. For example, students drawing a "storm

cloud" to represent inner confusion can then explore ways to cope with and manage these feelings.

Overall, this curriculum highlights that emotional growth requires both safety and structured guidance. Students need an environment that feels secure and supportive, combined with interventions that build skills in self-expression, assertiveness, empathy, and relationship repair. The sequence of the sessions, from safety and identity to strengths and closure, reflects a natural emotional progression that mirrors how adolescents heal and build resilience.

Limitations

Despite its strengths, this curriculum has several limitations. First, it is designed exclusively for girls. While relational aggression is often more prevalent among girls, boys also experience bullying and would require a tailored approach. Second, the materials provided for each session are limited. While simplicity helps maintain structure, some students may benefit from a wider range of creative options to suit different learning and expressive styles.

The curriculum is also tailored specifically for adolescents aged 11–14. Younger children may need more concrete or play-based activities, while older teens may prefer deeper reflection and greater autonomy in their art-making.

Another limitation is the need for trained facilitators with knowledge of trauma-informed practice, adolescent development, and art therapy. This requirement limits accessibility in schools or organizations without mental health professionals. Finally, the program is most effective in small groups, which fosters safety and trust but can restrict scalability and broader implementation.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should explore ways to make the curriculum more inclusive, flexible, and scalable. One direction is to develop a version specifically for adolescent boys, addressing their unique experiences, communication styles, and group dynamics. Expanding the range of materials in each session could also increase engagement and allow students to express themselves in ways that feel most natural. Similarly, adapting the curriculum for a wider age range would allow younger children or older adolescents to benefit from age-appropriate modifications.

Simplifying session procedures is another potential area of development, enabling the program to be implemented even without trained art therapy professionals. This could increase accessibility for schools with limited resources. Finally, exploring adaptations for larger groups would help ensure the program's impact is not limited to small-scale implementations, making it feasible for a wider audience of students.

Future research should also examine long-term outcomes, including whether skills in emotional regulation, assertiveness, empathy, and relationship repair are maintained over time. Evaluating the program in different cultural or school settings could reveal ways to increase its relevance and effectiveness across diverse populations.

Conclusion

This curriculum provides a structured, person-centered approach to supporting middle school girls affected by bullying. Grounded in developmental, person-centered, and CBT principles, the program uses art as a medium for emotional expression, reflection, and relational skill-building. By progressing from safety and identity exploration to strengths and closure, students experience both emotional support and practical skill development.

While the curriculum has limitations, it is designed only for girls, relies on restricted materials, targets a specific age group, requires trained facilitators, and works best in small groups, it provides a strong foundation for creative, developmentally appropriate, and trauma-informed interventions. Future adaptations can expand its reach, increase flexibility, and include boys, a wider age range, and larger groups. Ultimately, the program demonstrates the value of art therapy as a preventative and restorative tool, helping students navigate bullying, build resilience, and foster positive relationships.

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Appendix

From Bruised to BOLD

by Hania Mikati



An Art Therapy-Based Curriculum to Address Bullying Among Middle School Girls

Table of Content

Curriculum Introduction 02
Emotional Effect on Girls' Development 03
Effects on Self-Image, School Performance, & Social Skills 04
Bullying Prevention & Intervention Approaches 05
From Bruised to Bold 06
Session 1: Building Safety & Group Agreements 07
Session 2: Identity & Self-Expression 11
Session 3: Understanding Emotions & Triggers 15
Session 4: Empathy & Peer Relationships 19
Session 5: Assertiveness & Self-Confidence 23
Session 6: Understanding & Maintaining Personal Boundaries 27
Session 7: Repair & Connection 31
Session 8: Personal Growth & Strengths 36
Session 9: Closure & Reflection 41
References 45

Curriculum Introduction

This curriculum is designed to help middle school girls who are experiencing bullying, particularly relational aggression, get help through art therapy. It helps students explore their emotions, build resilience, strengthen peer relationships, and develop healthy coping strategies in a structured, developmentally appropriate, and creative environment. In nine sessions, the program integrates evidence-based research on bullying prevention with expressive art-making to address the psychological, social, and academic effects of bullying. We'll also talk about some of the psychological and academic impacts of bullying, focusing especially on the emotional impact on girls' development.

Emotional Effects on Girls' Development

It has been consistently demonstrated that bullying in early adolescence is associated with internalizing problems such as depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicidal ideation. According to Espelage and Holt (2001), bullying often results in long-term psychosocial distress in youth, which may last into adulthood. There is evidence that girls who are targets of relational aggression may internalize negative messages about their self-worth, leading to identity confusion and emotional withdrawal during a sensitive developmental period (Erikson, 1968). The covert nature of relational aggression-exclusion, rumor spread, and manipulation-can create deep-seated wounds that go unnoticed by adults (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

Effects on Self-Image, School Performance, and Social Skills

Bullying can negatively affect a student's academic and social performance. According to Juvonen, Wang, and Espinoza (2013), bullied students have reduced class participation, lower academic achievement, and less engagement with their peers. As a result of being victimized, youth may be afraid of ridicule, avoid school, or disengage entirely from the classroom community. Furthermore, Vaillancourt et al. (2011) found that peer victimization undermines students' self-esteem and impairs their ability to develop healthy social skills. As a result of continued peer pressure, girls may develop a mistrust of others, isolate themselves from potential friends, or adopt maladaptive coping mechanisms such as compliance or aggression.

As a result of these patterns, it is clear that schools need to implement interventions that are developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed, and emotionally supportive-especially for girls navigating the complex terrain of adolescent peer relationships.

Bullying Prevention and Intervention Approaches

An effective bullying prevention program has several key characteristics, including being comprehensive, sustained over time, culturally sensitive, and embedded within the broader school climate (Bradshaw, 2015). Nevertheless, traditional approaches, such as zero-tolerance policies or informational assemblies, fail to take into account the nuanced emotional and relational realities of bullying, especially among girls (Salmivalli, 2010).

Programs that promote social-emotional learning (SEL), empathy training, and peer relationship building have been shown to reduce aggression and increase positive peer interactions (Durlak et al., 2011). As well as providing students with the opportunity to express emotions nonverbally, art therapy is also beneficial in developing reflective capabilities and interpersonal skills. Using art therapy within a person-centered, group-based intervention framework allows students not only to process their own experiences but also to witness and connect with others' stories, fostering empathy, perspective-taking, and mutual respect.

From Bruised to Bold

Recognizing that both those who are bullied and those who engage in bullying often share underlying emotional pain, insecurity, or unmet relational needs, From Bruised to Bold is an art therapy curriculum designed to support healing, empathy, and self-growth among middle school girls. This program invites participants into a safe and creative space where they can explore identity, process emotions, and rebuild healthy peer relationships through expressive art-making and group reflection.

The curriculum consists of nine structured sessions that progress from safety and self-awareness toward empathy, empowerment, and closure. Each session builds upon the previous one, helping girls understand their emotions, develop assertiveness, set healthy boundaries, and repair connections with others. Through this process, participants learn that both hurt and harmful behavior can be transformed into insight, compassion, and resilience. Ultimately, From Bruised to Bold encourages girls to move from cycles of pain to cycles of strength—emerging more confident, connected, and emotionally aware.



Building Safety & Group Agreements
Session 1

Overview:

The first session focuses on creating a safe, welcoming environment. It establishes trust, sets boundaries, and encourages group cohesion, forming the foundation for all subsequent activities.

Facilitator Opening:

The facilitator begins by warmly welcoming everyone to the group and introducing the purpose of the program, to explore emotions, relationships, and personal strengths through art-making. The facilitator explains that this space is meant to be supportive and non-judgmental, where everyone's voice and feelings are respected. Students are reminded that there are no "right" or "wrong" ways to create art, and that the goal is self-expression, not artistic skill. The facilitator may also share a brief introduction about themselves, model openness, and invite students to introduce their names and one thing they enjoy or something that makes them feel safe.

Check-In:

- Begin with a simple feelings check-in using colors or emotion cards (e.g., "Choose a color that shows how you're feeling today"). Invite each participant to share, only if they wish.
- Introduce the group and explain that this is a safe and creative space. Together, create group agreements and boundaries (e.g., respect, confidentiality, kindness).

Objectives:

- Establish emotional safety and trust
- Create clear group agreements and norms
- Encourage initial self-expression and participation

Materials:

- Large paper or poster board
- Markers, sticky notes, pens

Theories:

- Person-Centered Theory (Rogers, 2016): A safe, supportive environment allows participants to feel acknowledged and accepted.
- Developmental Considerations (Erikson, 1968): Adolescents are highly sensitive to social acceptance; building safety is critical for participation.

Activities & Procedure (Step-by-Step):

1. Icebreaker – "Two Truths and a Lie" (10 minutes)

- Each student writes two true statements and one false statement about themselves on a sticky note.
- Students take turns reading aloud while others guess which statement is false.
- Facilitator encourages laughter and connection while focusing on respect.

2. Collaborative Poster – Group Agreements (20 minutes)

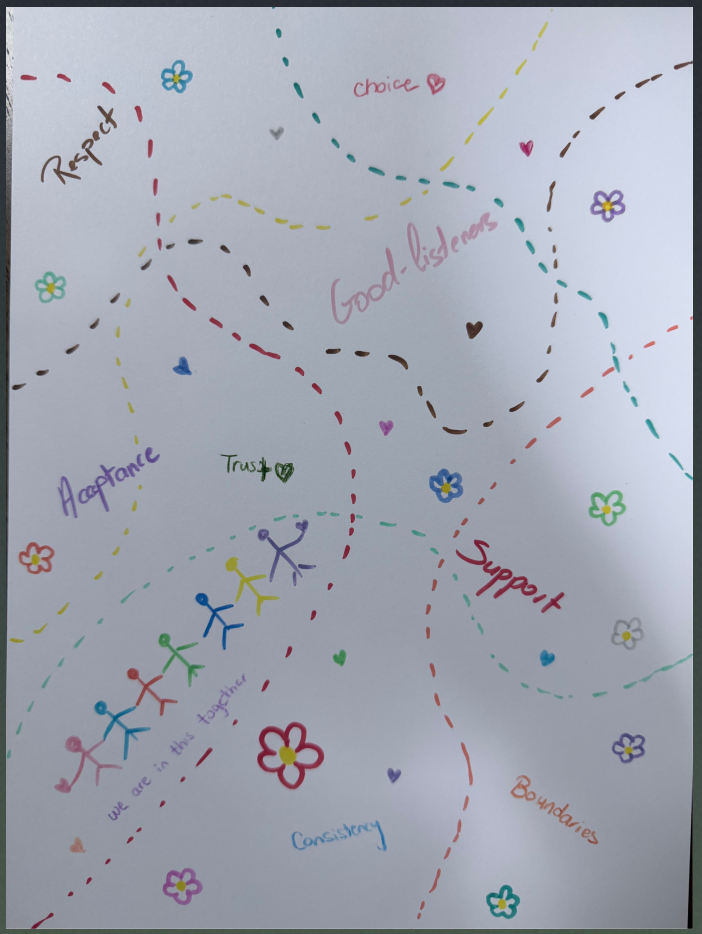
- Provide a large sheet of paper or poster board and markers.
- Ask students: "What do we need to feel safe in this group?"
- Write or draw responses on the poster collaboratively.
- Include agreements about confidentiality, respect, listening, and supporting each other.

3. Boundaries Discussion (15 minutes)

- The facilitator leads a guided discussion about personal boundaries.
- Use prompts: “What do you need to feel safe” and “What will be important to make sure everybody feels safe?”
- Encourage students to provide examples of positive and negative behaviors.

Expected Outcomes:

- Students feel safe and included
- Clear understanding of group norms
- Initial peer connections are formed



Example



Identity & Self-Expression

Session 2

Overview:

This session focuses on exploring self-concept and personal identity, helping participants reflect on how they see themselves and how others see them.

Facilitator Opening:

The facilitator begins by welcoming students back and briefly revisiting the group agreements created in the first session to reinforce safety and respect. The facilitator explains that today's session is about getting to know ourselves better, exploring what makes each person unique, and how we understand our identity. The facilitator encourages curiosity and self-compassion, reminding students that there is no "right" way to represent themselves, and that art can be a gentle way to explore feelings and stories that words can't always capture.

Check-In:

- Invite students to share one word or image that describes how they see themselves today.
- Encourage openness and remind them again that there are no right or wrong answers.

Objectives:

- How I see myself and how others see me
- Encourage creative self-expression
- Support self-awareness and self-concept

Materials:

- Paper, magazines, glue, markers, colored pencils

Theories:

- Erikson's Psychosocial Development (1968): Adolescents are forming identity; expressing self visually supports healthy development.
- Person-Centered Values: Self-expression in a supportive environment enhances self-trust and autonomy.

Activities & Procedure (Step-by-Step):

1. **Self-Portrait Collage – Exploring Inner and Outer Self (30 minutes)**

- Provide magazines, colored pencils, glue, and paper.
- Ask participants to create two sides of a portrait:
- Outer self: How others see me
- Inner self: How I see myself
- Encourage abstract representations, symbols, or colors to express feelings.

2. **Pair Sharing (10 minutes)**

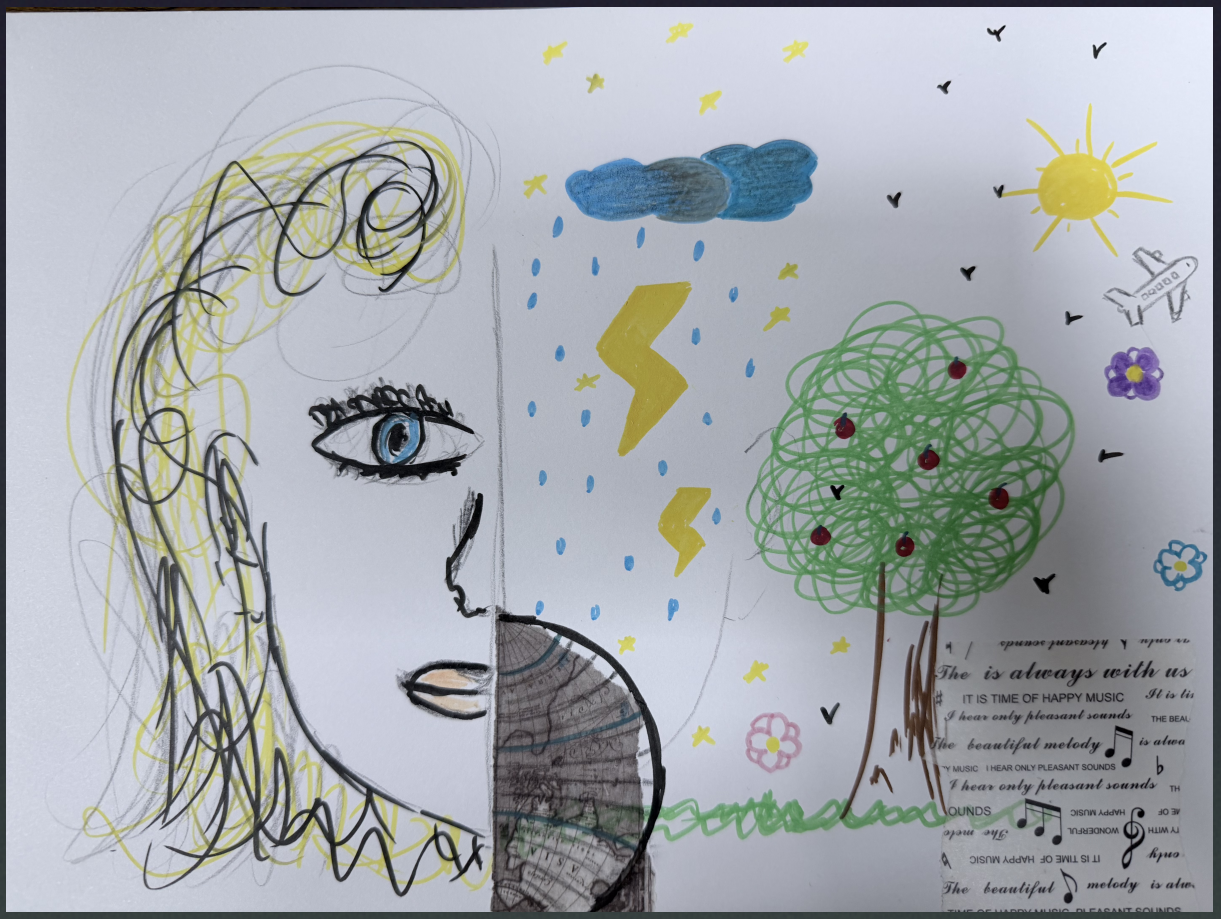
- Participants share their collage with a partner.
- Partner asks open-ended questions: "What does this part mean?" or "How does this show you?"

3. **Group Reflection (5 minutes)**

- Facilitator asks: "What did you learn about yourself or your peers today?"
- Highlight uniqueness and celebrate differences.

Expected Outcomes:

- Increased self-awareness and understanding of identity
- Confidence in personal expression
- Sense of validation from peer sharing


The is always with us
IT IS TIME OF HAPPY MUSIC
I hear only pleasant sounds
The beautiful melody

Example



Understanding Emotions & Triggers

Session 3

Overview:

In this session, participants are guided to identify and process emotions, recognizing what triggers negative feelings, particularly related to bullying experiences.

Facilitator Opening:

The facilitator welcomes the group back and begins by acknowledging that understanding emotions is a key part of feeling more in control of one's experiences. The facilitator explains that everyone feels a wide range of emotions, some pleasant, others difficult, and that emotions themselves are neither "good" nor "bad." They are messages that help us understand what's happening inside us.

The facilitator might say: "Today, we'll slow down and notice what our emotions are trying to tell us. Sometimes feelings can be strong, confusing, or even uncomfortable, but learning to recognize them helps us care for ourselves and respond in ways that feel right."

The facilitator reinforces that this is a safe space for exploring emotions and reminds the group that sharing is always optional. Participants are encouraged to focus on self-awareness rather than judgment.

Check-In:

Start with a "temperature scale", ask each student to rate their emotional energy level (from calm to overwhelmed).

Objectives:

- Name and explore personal emotions
- Recognize emotional triggers

Materials:

- Journals or notebooks, colored pencils, pens

Theories:

- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Principles (Espelage & Holt, 2001): Understanding emotions and triggers is essential for identifying distorted thinking and developing coping strategies.
- Developmental Theory: Adolescents can reflect on emotions and social experiences meaningfully.

Activities & Procedure (Step-by-Step):

1. **Visual Journal – "What I Carry" (25 minutes)**

- Give each participant a journal.
- Prompt: "Imagine you're carrying a backpack. Draw or write about the emotions, thoughts, or experiences you carry inside it about school or your peers."

2. **Trigger Mapping (10 minutes)**

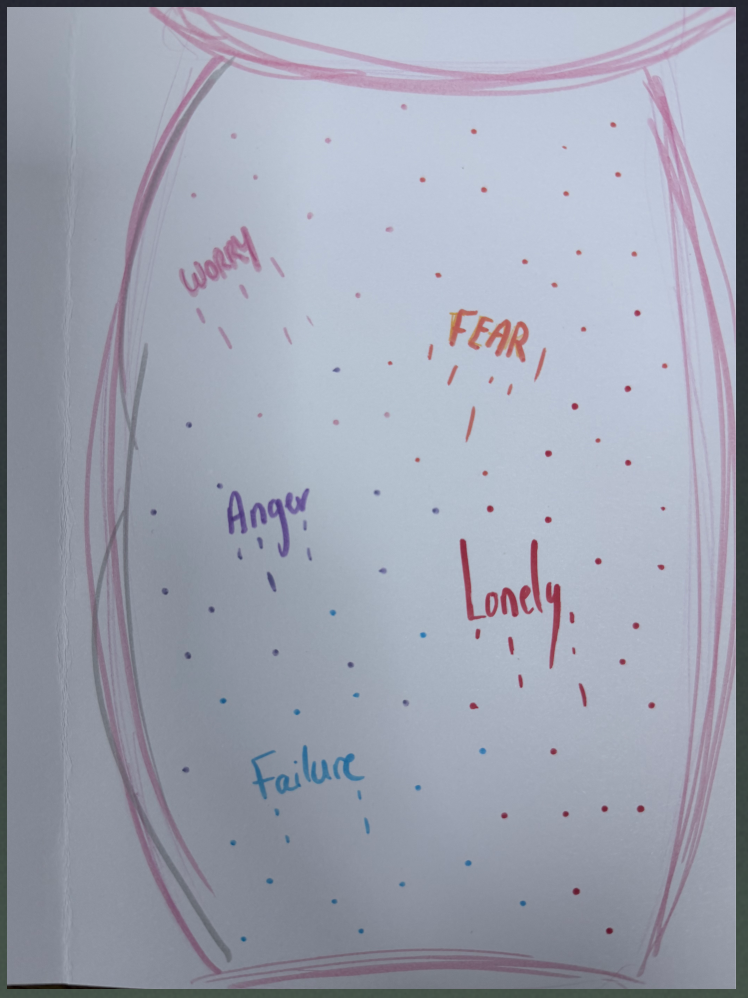
- Ask: "What situations or behaviors trigger these feelings?"
- Participants draw connections or arrows showing triggers to emotions.

3. **Group Discussion/Reflection (10 minutes)**

- Optional sharing with the group if comfortable.
- Facilitator asks: “When you look at what you’ve drawn or written, what stands out to you the most?” and “How do you usually respond when these emotions or triggers come up?”
- Facilitator models empathy, normalizes feelings, and highlights patterns.

Expected Outcomes:

- Improved emotional literacy
- Awareness of personal triggers
- Foundation for coping strategies



Example



Empathy & Peer Relationships

Session 4

Overview:

This session focuses on promoting understanding of others' perspectives, strengthens peer connections, and enhances social-emotional learning.

Facilitator Opening:

The facilitator welcomes the group and reminds everyone of the safe and respectful space they've built together. The facilitator explains that today's session will focus on empathy, understanding how others feel and seeing situations from different perspectives. The facilitator might say:

"Last time, we talked about understanding our own emotions and what triggers them. Today, we'll shift our focus outward, to think about how others might feel in different situations, especially when someone is being left out or treated unfairly. Empathy helps us build stronger friendships, support one another, and make our school a kinder place. We'll use art and storytelling today to explore what it's like to be in someone else's shoes."

Check-In:

Begin with a partner share, each girl turns to someone beside her and shares one good thing and one challenge from their week.

Objectives:

- Develop empathy for others' experiences
- Improve communication and social understanding
- Encourage collaborative expression

Materials:

- Paper, colored pencils, markers

Theories:

- Person-Centered Theory: Encourages relational growth through shared understanding (Rogers, 2016)
- Social-Emotional Development: Empathy-building supports healthier peer interactions (Noddings, 2017)

Activities & Procedure (Step-by-Step):

1. **Empathy Drawing (20 minutes)**

- Prompt: "Draw what you think a friend feels when they are left out or bullied."
- Focus on imagining feelings from another perspective.

2. **Paired Storytelling (15 minutes)**

- Participants share a story of a time they or someone they know experienced exclusion. "Can you remember a time when you or someone you know felt left out or ignored? What was happening in that situation? Who was involved? How did you (or the other person) feel in that moment? What thoughts or worries went through your mind? Did anyone try to help or show kindness? How did that make a difference? If no one helped, what do you wish someone had done or said? What would you do differently now if you saw someone being excluded? How can we make sure our classmates or friends feel included and respected?
- Partner repeats what they heard to check understanding.

3. **Group Discussion (10 minutes)**

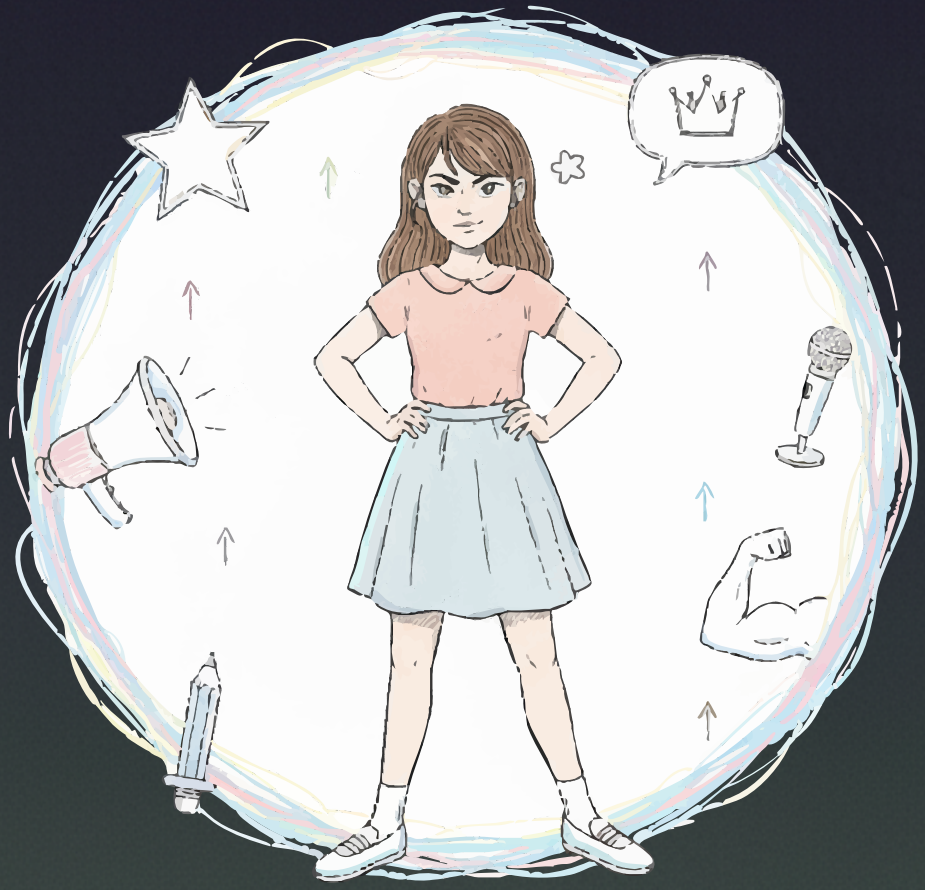
- Facilitator guides discussion on common experiences and feelings.
- Facilitator asks: "What did you notice or learn when you imagined the situation from your friend's perspective?" and "How can showing empathy change the way peers treat each other at school?"
- Emphasize listening without judgment, perspective-taking, and validation.

Expected Outcomes:

- Increased empathy and perspective-taking
- Stronger peer bonds
- Awareness of social dynamics



Example



Assertiveness & Self-Confidence

Session 5

Overview:

This session focuses on empowering participants to respond to bullying assertively and practice self-confidence.

Facilitator Opening:

The facilitator welcomes the group and explains that this session is about learning how to stand up for ourselves while staying kind and respectful. They remind participants that everyone deserves to feel safe and heard and that assertiveness is not about being mean, it's about expressing our needs clearly and calmly. The facilitator might say something like: "Today, we'll explore how we can protect our feelings and express our needs in healthy ways. We'll use creativity to practice what it feels like to be confident and strong, even in tough moments."

Check-In:

Invite students to use a metaphor check-in: "If your mood today was an animal, what would it be? How come?" This is intended to lighten the mood and encourage creative self-awareness.

Objectives:

- Understand what assertiveness means
- Recognize the difference between passive, aggressive, and assertive communication
- Practice using assertive statements
- Build confidence and self-respect

Materials:

- Art supplies (markers, colored pencils, paper), masks

Theories:

- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy: Helps participants identify unhelpful thinking patterns that lead to passive or aggressive behavior and replace them with balanced, assertive responses (Beck, 2011).
- Person-Centered Approach: Encourages authentic self-expression and self-trust within a safe, nonjudgmental group environment (Rogers, 1980).

Activities & Procedure (Step-by-Step):

1. **Assertiveness Exploration (10 minutes)**

Facilitator leads a short discussion using visuals or examples:

- Passive: staying quiet even when upset
- Aggressive: speaking harshly or hurting others
- Assertive: expressing needs calmly and clearly

Ask students to give examples from school life that fit each type.

2. **"My Strong Voice" Art Activity (20 minutes)**

- Give each student a blank mask template.
- Ask them to decorate it to represent their assertive self, the version of themselves that speaks kindly and confidently.
- Encourage them to write or draw empowering words (e.g., brave, honest, kind).

3. **Role-Playing Practice (20 minutes)**

- Present realistic school scenarios (e.g., being excluded, having rumors spread, or being teased).
- Students practice assertive responses using "I" statements (e.g., "I feel upset when you do that," "Please stop, I don't like it").
- Encourage strong posture, calm tone, and eye contact.

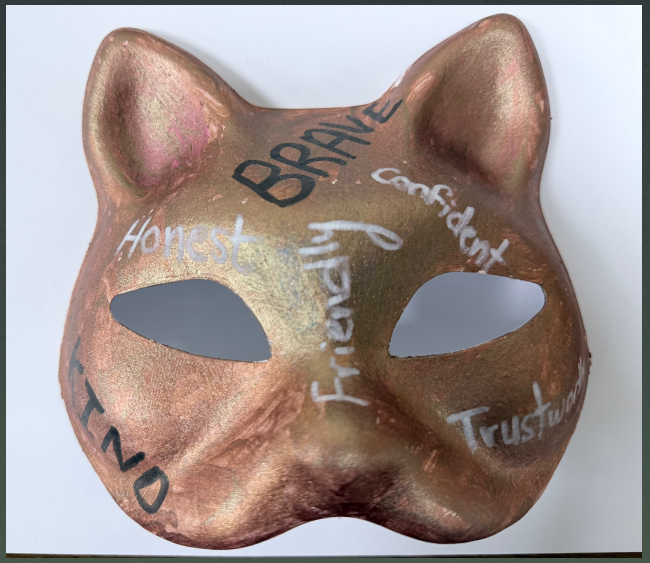
4. **Reflection (10 minutes)**

Facilitator invites reflection:

- "How did it feel to speak up for yourself?"
- "Was it easy or uncomfortable?"
- "What does being assertive mean to you now?"

Expected Outcomes:

- Increased awareness of assertive communication
- Improved emotional confidence and clarity
- Development of respectful self-expression
- Strengthened self-esteem and empowerment



Example



Understanding & Maintaining Personal Boundaries

Session 6

Overview:

This session helps participants recognize their emotional and physical boundaries and learn how to maintain them in friendships and peer relationships. It's built based on the previous session by translating assertiveness into practical, everyday boundary-setting skills.

Facilitator Opening:

The facilitator opens by saying: "Last time, we learned how to use our voices confidently. Today, we're going to learn about boundaries, which are like invisible lines that help keep us safe and respected. Everyone's boundaries are different, and that's okay. Knowing and expressing them helps us build healthy friendships."
Facilitator can demonstrate with a metaphor: "Think of boundaries like a bubble around you. Some people you let close inside, others you might keep at arm's length. It's all about what feels safe and comfortable for you."

Check-In:

Use a visual and grounding check-in: "If you could draw your personal space as a shape, what would it look like today, a circle, a square, a cloud?"
Students briefly explain their drawings.

Objectives:

- Identify personal physical and emotional boundaries
- Recognize when boundaries are crossed
- Learn how to communicate limits clearly and respectfully
- Develop self-awareness and self-protection skills

Materials:

- Large sheets of paper, colored markers or pencils, collage materials.

Theories:

- Attachment and Emotional Safety Theory: Healthy boundaries promote secure relationships and emotional regulation (Bowlby, 1988).
- Trauma-Informed Approach: Emphasizes empowerment, choice, and safety for participants who may have experienced relational harm (SAMHSA, 2014).

Activities & Procedure (Step-by-Step):

1. **Discussion: "What Are Boundaries?" (10 minutes)**

Facilitator explains physical vs. emotional boundaries with relatable examples:

- Physical: "I don't like when people touch my hair."
- Emotional: "I need time alone when I'm upset."

Ask students for examples of times they felt uncomfortable or when someone respected their space.

2. **Personal Boundary Mapping (20 minutes)**

- Give each student a blank page and ask them to draw a large circle representing themselves.
- Inside, they can write or draw what feels safe or okay (e.g., "hug from a friend," "sharing secrets with my sister").
- Outside the circle, they draw or write what feels uncomfortable (e.g., "being teased," "people shouting at me").
- Decorate the map to reflect personal comfort zones.

3. **Communicating Boundaries Practice (20 minutes)**

- Read short examples (e.g., "A friend reads your journal," "Someone calls you a name as a joke").
- Ask participants to respond assertively, using statements like "That makes me uncomfortable," or "Please don't do that."
- Reinforce that saying "no" can be kind and respectful.

4. **Reflection (10 minutes)**

Facilitator prompts reflection:

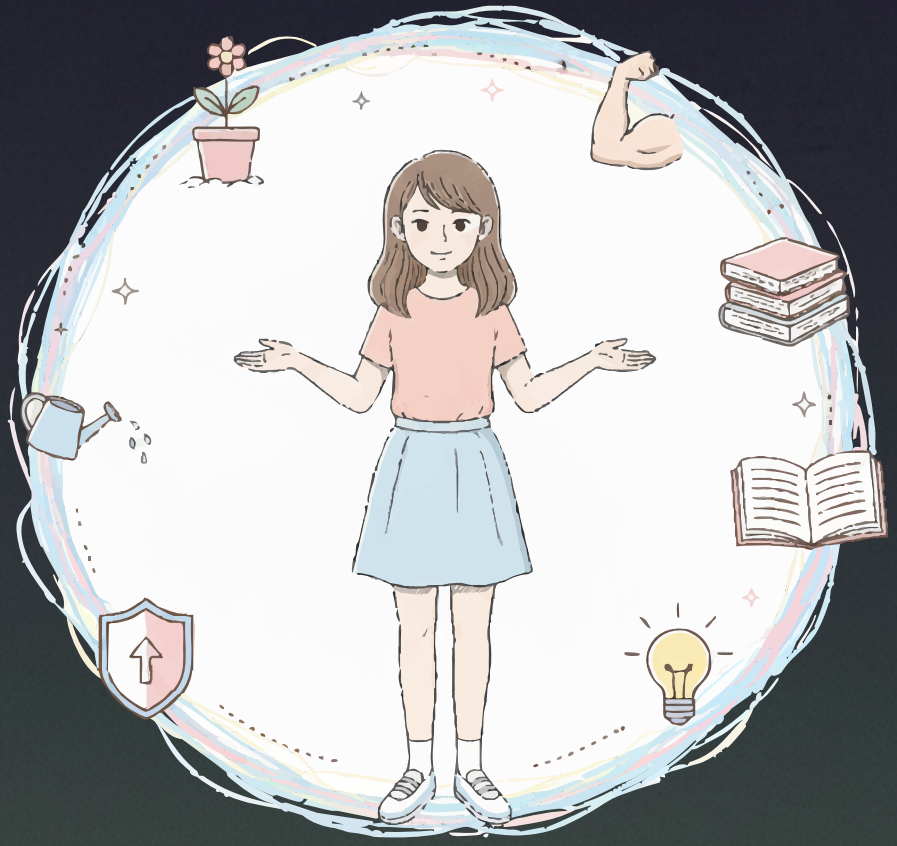
- "What did you learn about your own boundaries?"
- "Why is it important to protect them?"
- "How can you support a friend's boundaries?"

Expected Outcomes:

- Increased understanding of personal limits and comfort zones
- Improved ability to communicate and respect boundaries
- Enhanced emotional safety and self-protection
- Strengthened peer relationships through mutual respect



Example



Repair & Connection

Session 7

Overview:

This session focuses on restoring trust and rebuilding relationships after experiences of conflict, bullying, or emotional hurt. It encourages students to explore empathy, forgiveness, and reconnection, both with others and within themselves.

Facilitator Opening:

The facilitator begins by welcoming participants and introducing the theme of repair and reconnection.

"Sometimes friendships or relationships get hurt, maybe because of misunderstanding, teasing, or something unkind that was said or done. Today we'll explore how art can help us repair and reconnect. Repair doesn't always mean becoming close again, but it does mean finding peace and understanding, for ourselves and others."

Check-In:

Ask students: "Think about a close friendship. If it was a weather forecast today, what would it be, sunny, cloudy, stormy, or calm?" Invite brief sharing, using humor or gentle prompts to ease into the theme.

Objectives:

- Understand the role of empathy and forgiveness in repairing relationships
- Strengthen collaboration and emotional communication
- Experience reconnection through shared creative processes
- Build trust and group cohesion

Materials:

- Large sheets of paper or canvas, paints, brushes, and markers
- Glue, colored papers, and collage materials, reflective journaling pages

Theories:

- Relational-Cultural Theory (Jordan, 2010): Healing occurs through mutual empathy, authenticity, and connection.
- Person-Centered Approach (Rogers, 1980): Emphasizes empathy and unconditional positive regard as foundations for interpersonal growth.
- Trauma-Informed Practice (SAMHSA, 2014): Encourages safe opportunities to rebuild trust and agency after relational harm.

Activities & Procedure (Step-by-Step):

1. Discussion: What Does "Repair" Mean? (10 minutes)

The facilitator introduces the idea that repair is about understanding and growth rather than blame. Use simple examples like apologizing, listening, or giving space when needed.

Prompt reflection:

- "What helps you feel better after a conflict?"
- "What makes it harder to reconnect?"

Encourage open discussion about what repair can look like in friendships.

2. Collaborative Art Activity – "Mending Together" (25 minutes)

Students pair up (or work in small groups) to create an artwork symbolizing repair and connection.

Instructions:

- Ask students to tear up colored papers.
- Invite pairs to "repair" or rebuild these materials together into a new piece of art, symbolizing healing and connection.
- Encourage communication during the process: deciding together on placement, colors, and symbols.
- Remind students that they are repairing through collaboration, patience, and creativity, not perfection.

3. Reflection and Sharing (15 minutes)

Facilitator guides reflection with prompts such as:

- "What did it feel like to work together on one piece?"
- "How did your group handle differences or ideas?"
- "What does your artwork say about connection and healing?"

Students may write a short reflection or title for their artwork. Group discussion can follow, focusing on empathy, patience, and growth.

Optional Journaling Extension:

Students can write a brief letter (not to be shared) to someone they would like to forgive, reconnect with, or simply release. The facilitator emphasizes this is a private act of reflection, not a requirement to reach out to that person.

Expected Outcomes:

- Improved empathy and communication skills
- Increased emotional resilience and relational insight
- Strengthened trust and cooperation within the group
- Development of symbolic understanding of repair and healing



Example



Personal Growth & Strengths

Session 8

Overview:

This session focuses on helping participants recognize their inner strengths, growth, and resilience developed throughout the program. It provides a space to reflect on their personal journey and celebrate progress in emotional awareness, confidence, and relationships. The theme centers around empowerment and self-recognition, essential protective factors for girls recovering from bullying experiences.

Facilitator Opening:

The facilitator begins by welcoming the group and acknowledging how far they've come:

"Over the past few weeks, you've shared, created, and learned so much about yourselves and each other. Today, we'll take a moment to celebrate that growth. Each of you has shown courage, creativity, and kindness, and today's session is about recognizing those strengths that live inside you."

Remind the group that there's no right or wrong way to express growth — it can be through color, symbols, or shapes, and that each person's journey is unique.

Check-In:

Invite participants to share one word or symbol that represents "growth" for them this week.

Example prompts: "If your growth were a color, what color would it be?" or "What is one thing you're proud of since we started?"

Objectives:

- Increase awareness of personal strengths and progress
- Reinforce self-esteem and resilience
- Encourage reflection on personal and relational growth
- Foster a sense of empowerment and closure as the program nears its end

Materials:

- Large drawing paper or canvas, colored pencils, markers, and watercolor paints.

Theories:

- Positive Psychology (Seligman, 2011): Recognizing and building on strengths enhances self-efficacy and well-being.
- Person-Centered Theory (Rogers, 1980): Growth and self-actualization occur when individuals are accepted and encouraged to explore their potential.
- Developmental Theory (Erikson, 1968): Strengthening identity and self-concept is crucial during adolescence for forming a positive sense of self.

Activities & Procedure (Step-by-Step):

1. **Discussion: Recognizing Growth (10 minutes)**

Facilitator introduces the theme with reflection prompts:

- "Think about the girl who first walked into this group on day one — what's different about her now?"
- "What have you learned about yourself?"

Encourage participants to think about both small and big moments of change.

2. **Art Activity – "Tree of Strengths" (30 minutes)**

Each participant creates a "Tree of Strengths" artwork.

Instructions:

- Draw or paint a tree that represents you.
- The roots symbolize where your strength comes from (family, faith, creativity, resilience, etc.).
- The trunk represents your core self, your values and what keeps you steady.
- The branches and leaves represent your personal growth, new skills, and positive changes developed throughout the group.

Encourage participants to add words, symbols, or colors that represent their unique strengths. Provide encouragement, gently helping participants name their strengths if they struggle ("I've seen how kind and brave you were when sharing last time, maybe that's one of your roots").

3. Reflection & Group Sharing (15 minutes)

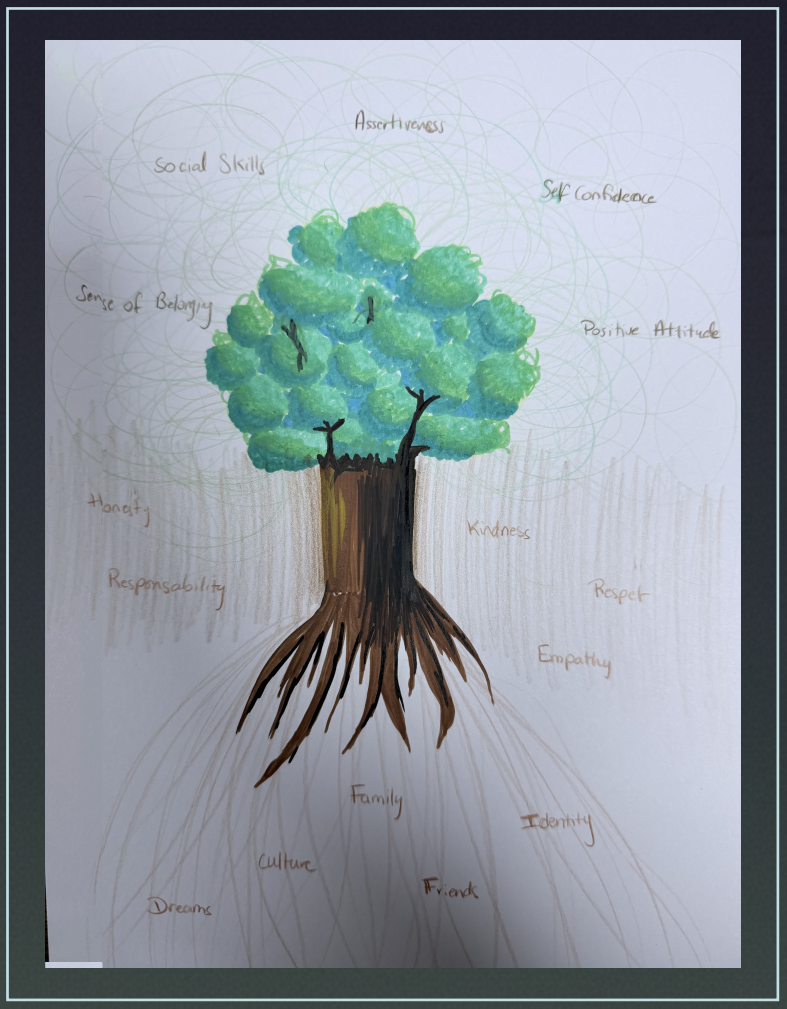
Invite participants to share parts of their artwork if they feel comfortable.
Prompt with questions like:

- "Which part of your tree feels the strongest right now?"
- "Is there an area you want to keep growing in?"

Affirm each participant's contribution, emphasizing self-worth and personal empowerment.

Expected Outcomes:

- Strengthened self-concept and confidence
- Recognition of internal and external growth
- Increased ability to verbalize and visualize personal strengths


Assertiveness
Social Skills
Self Confidence
Sense of Belonging
Positive Attitude
Honesty
Kindness
Responsability
Respect
Empathy
Family
Identity
Culture
Friend
Dreams

Example



Closure & Reflection

Session 9

Overview:

The final session offers participants the opportunity to reflect on their journey, say goodbye in a meaningful way, and leave with a sense of accomplishment and emotional closure. It emphasizes gratitude, future goals, and the importance of carrying learned skills and self-awareness forward.

Facilitator Opening:

The facilitator warmly welcomes everyone to the final session:
"Today is our last session together. Over the past weeks, you've all shown so much courage, creativity, and care, for yourselves and each other. This session is about looking back at everything we've learned, appreciating how far we've come, and creating something meaningful to take with us."
The facilitator acknowledges that endings can bring mixed emotions and assures participants that it's okay to feel happy, sad, or even uncertain, all feelings are welcome.

Check-In:

Invite a gentle reflective check-in:
"If this group were a journey, what part of the journey are you at right now, the mountain top, the forest, the river, or the path home?"
Allow a few voluntary shares to open emotional space for the session.

Objectives:

- Facilitate emotional closure and transition
- Reflect on personal and group experiences
- Reinforce learning and internalize coping strategies
- Celebrate progress and connection

Materials:

- Large canvas or poster board for a legacy piece, markers, paints
- Collage materials, envelopes, stationery, and pens for letters to future selves

Theories:

- Person-Centered Approach (Rogers, 1980): Emphasizes empathy, authenticity, and self-awareness during transitions.
- Narrative Therapy (White & Epston, 1990): Encourages reflection and meaning-making through storytelling.
- Group Therapy Principles (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005): Proper closure is essential for emotional integration and preventing unresolved feelings of loss.

Activities & Procedure (Step-by-Step):

1. Reflective Discussion: Looking Back (10 minutes)

Facilitator invites the group to look back at their journey together:

- "What is something you've learned or discovered about yourself through this group?"
- "Was there a moment that stood out to you or made a difference?"

Encourage open sharing while maintaining emotional safety and positivity.

2. Group Art Activity – "Our Legacy Mural" (25 minutes)

Participants collaborate on a group mural or large art piece symbolizing their shared journey.

Instructions:

- Each participant adds a personal symbol, color, or message representing what they are taking away from the group.
- Encourage collaboration, overlapping colors or connecting designs to reflect unity and shared growth.
- The mural becomes a collective reminder of resilience and hope.

3. **Individual Reflection – "Letter to My Future Self" (15 minutes)**

- Each participant writes a private letter to their future self, reflecting on what they've learned, what they want to remember, and what they hope for moving forward.
- Provide envelopes for participants to seal and keep or have the facilitator return to them after a set time (e.g., six months).

Prompt ideas:

- "What do you want your future self to remember from this group?"
- "What do you want to say to yourself when you face hard days again?"

Expected Outcomes:

- Emotional closure and integration of experiences
- Strengthened sense of identity and empowerment
- Reinforced connection and support among peers
- Confidence in applying skills beyond the group



Example

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This curriculum offers a structured, art-based program designed to support middle school girls as they navigate bullying, identity development, and peer relationships. Through nine themed sessions, students explore emotions, build empathy, strengthen boundaries, and develop healthier ways of expressing themselves. Each session blends creative interventions with person-centered, developmental, and cognitive-behavioral principles to promote confidence, resilience, and connection.

Developed from real school experience and grounded in research, this curriculum provides a safe, supportive space where girls can reflect, grow, and rebuild trust in themselves and others. It serves as both a preventative and restorative approach, helping students understand their inner world, strengthen their relationships, and leave with the tools they need to navigate adolescence with greater clarity and self-worth.

