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## MentUwell. Preserving Youth Mental Wellbeing in Wartime Migration Crisis

### How Can Art Help

### Handbook for Parents and Educators

#### Introduction

The data revealed by the Romanian Government on June 2024 determinates that, between 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022 and 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2024 a total of 47.519 Ukrainian children were enrolled in the Romanian educational system as follows:

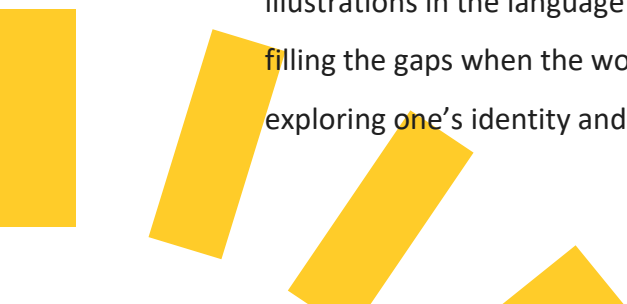
- Preschool education: 12.371 enrolled as audient, 5.874 enrolled as pupil, total 18.245
- Primary education: 9.074 enrolled as audient, 2.702 enrolled as pupil, total 11.776
- Secondary education: 11.254 enrolled as audient, 6.244 enrolled as pupil, total 17.498


With a 55,48% enrolled as pupil, we can say that the percentage represents the migrant children that want to integrate.

The research we conducted revealed certain needs and issues that can be satisfied and addressed in the educational system, mainly in what concerns the general and mental well-being of the migrant adolescents. Professionals involved in working with the migrant teenagers emphasized the importance of communication and integrating activities that can contribute to their mental well-being and can help them cope with the displacement, changes and uncertainty.

Language level was mentioned as a main condition for being enrolled as a pupil, promoting from audient status in school. Learning a foreign language takes a long time and the isolation is a real danger for the well-being of a teenager.

Art and creativity can play an important role in maintaining the well-being of adolescents in general and they can offer a way to express and communicate thoughts, emotions and bond with the peers whilst the language is still at a basic level. Art can contribute with images and illustrations in the language learning process, creativity can help articulating a message or filling the gaps when the words are not enough and, not at least, art and creativity can help exploring one's identity and can facilitate learning in school.

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It was proved that interactive, creative methods that involve drawing, graphics can make any physics and mathematics notions easier to understand and remember.

Art and creativity can facilitate social relationships with the peers, can help understanding and acceptance. Dance, drama, role playing, crafts, drawing, painting, clay molding, pottery, photography, video, animation, computer art, all these artistic and creative forms of interacting can also enhance and encourage personal development and enrichment.


Focusing on visual arts in all the forms and techniques, we can see in which areas art can benefit, help and contribute to the well-being of the migrant adolescents.

### Art Therapy

Defined as a modality that uses nonverbal language of art for personal growth, insight and transformation, art therapy can connect the inner life – emotions, perceptions, thoughts and feelings – with the external world and experience. It is believed that images can help us understand more about who we are and can enhance the quality of our life. Many people find that making art can be soothing and stress reducing.

It is also believed that art making is a potent form of communication. Art has proved to be an effective way to express emotions and feelings that words cannot. Art therapy is practiced with a variety of population but it proved to be a good way to enhance health and well-being.

A few characteristics that distinguish art therapy from other forms of art making:

- Drawing from within (Don Jones) – it is different from the usual request of art education to draw from reality, considering proportions and accuracy, is meant to explore inner experience, the emphasis is on expressing and rendering images that come from inside a person, no matter the drawing skills.
  - Art is a means of symbolic communication – art can offer insights and art making can be a healing process
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- The meaning is in the eyes of the author – if in other art forms the interpretation is a part of the process, in art therapy is a search of authenticity and meaning, the person who creates the image decides its meaning.
- Art can be healing – when people express themselves authentically through art, in the process, they might find relief from crises, trauma or strong emotions, they might have insights about themselves.
- Art can help self-exploration and emotional release – art expression is not a linear process and does not have the rules of language, so it can express complexities simultaneously and it can create a physiological response of relaxation or can help “cleanse”, discharge of strong emotions (catharsis)
- Art making does not require skills or special training – in art therapy, painting, drawing are simple methods of expression easily available to everyone and making art is a normalized experience.

**Tips for adults to encourage teenagers’ attempt to use art as therapy:**

- Encourage and appreciate the process, not the result.
- Listen and be open if the drawing/ painting comes with a meaning explanation
- Try not to express your like or dislike of the result, express interest in the process
- Provide diverse and different materials for art making
- Emphasize the importance of communication through images
- Appreciate and encourage sharing the results
- All emotions and thoughts are valid and be open when they are expressed

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## Art as a Tool of Identity Exploration

Adolescence is the time of exploring and building identity. Teenagers experiment different roles, different hobbies and forms of self-expression. It was believed that only “the talented ones” could attend art classes but it proved to be a preconception. Teenagers can and should be encouraged to try multiple forms of self-expression, to find the proper way of authentic exploration, to find their own way of telling stories without words.

Playing an instrument, drawing, making a collage or contemplating a painting and finding personal meaning in it is different from the vocational training a future artist might chose but helpful for the general well-being.

To explore identity using art is a manifestation of preferences, helps building stories beyond the words, the process is more important than the result. To build images about their values, their plans, their likes and dislikes, about their day, personal history can be shared, exhibit or just kept private, like a diary.

A few characteristics of art as a tool in identity exploring:

- It can require a few basic skills – classes that give a few tips of how to but to serve a purpose, e.g. guitar lessons to be able to play a favourite song, drawing lessons to learn proportions for a self-portrait, basic knowledge about colours and their combinations
  - The subjects focus on preferences and are formulated as proposals more than tasks
  - Exploration is encouraged in art history as well, not as a homework but as exploring meaning and preferences
  - Fashion design, product design can be explored as mood boards, as story boards
  - Personal history and memories can be collages, notebooks, hand-made photo albums
  - Small dioramas, layout or small models can be used to express preferences for daily life decision, e.g. decorating their own room, planning a future personal space, expressing likes and dislikes
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#### Tips for adults to support identity exploration through art:

- Encourage and support exploring different hobbies and learning different creative skills
- Ask for their opinion in aesthetic matters, how their room should look like, what looks better
- Have common projects like a theater play and build everything from scratch, costumes, décor etc.
- Encourage a daily creative journal, provide materials and refrain from evaluation when shared
- Encourage the process and persistence more than the result

#### Art as Emotional Catharsis

Art is not always pleasant and cozy, is not always relaxing and beautiful, as art history proved. Expressionism, Baroque, Postimpressionism are just a few art movements that proved the art is also about anger, sadness, violence, ugliness, negative emotions and not necessarily beautiful imagery. And this is the paradox, the beauty comes sometimes from authenticity and the strength to confront the negative emotions instead of denying them. Traumas, fears, uncertainties, they all fade once they are contained and become an image. For an adolescent is tempting to defy the rules, to test the boundaries, to ignore the norms. Fortunately, when this happens in visual arts, nobody suffers. The anguish, the spleen, the pain is simply “cleansed”, sometimes the result might be bold and aesthetically satisfying. A few characteristics of art used as catharsis:

- Can bring relief to the author
- Can satisfy the urge to defy norms and rules without real danger or damage
- Can empower the author by not complying with the usual expectations
- Can lead to emotional regulation, once the intensity of negative emotions was placed in a creative context, was proved to be unlikely to manifest in other life areas

- Can stimulate creativity and function as a disinhibitor in future projects once the aesthetic pressure is away
- It helps to confront negative emotions and to deal with them, building resilience and acceptance

**Tips for adults encouraging artistic process as catharsis:**

- Show acceptance and understanding if the piece is shared
- Do not express disapproval, shock or disgust
- If you discuss about art, you will not neglect the masterpieces that express sadness, anger, violence or art that is not “pleasant”
- Encourage authenticity and emphasize the way the author felt in the process, more than the result
- Assess the result with honesty and avoid normative evaluation

**Art as Visual Training**

The way artists see the world as colours, rhythm, line intersections and directions, forms and fragments of reality can enhance and enrich the life of a teenager and can contribute to their well-being by offering more interest to a common situation or image. They can find a certain appeal in noticing something unique, that speaks only to them. Adolescents become aware of personal preferences and they become sensitive to aesthetic characteristics of even trivial items. Some objects become desirable due to certain visual traits or because of the peer pressure. The visual training consists in populating the imagery of a teenager with better alternatives, in encouraging opinions, selections and visual analysis. An exhibition, a museum, an artistic album is not always enough nor attractive for a teenager whose world is full of pop culture colours and shapes.

Characteristics of using art as visual training:

- It involves patience and exposure to a good and art history confirmed selection of images and inspiring designs

- It involves attention, selection and decision
- Gives the ability to organize feelings, thoughts and perceptions about the world through images
- An artistic image can reveal some feelings or thoughts inaccessible through words

**Tips for adults that use art as visual training for adolescents:**

- Use images from art history as a challenge to find nuances, unusual colours, contrasts
- Facilitate access to less famous works of art and intercalate pop culture images as well to normalize artistic images
- Encourage opinions, preferences and selections
- Allow replicas, interpretations, interventions and encourage the personal involvement with the art work
- Emphasize, when used in a personal work, similarities with established artworks

### Art as a Sensory Experience

Art involves tactile and visual senses but also the physical movement. For a teenager, to feel the materials, to explore the diverse operations like mixing colours, gluing, sculpting, touching, moving objects, organizing surfaces, molding, cutting is an experience of self-discovery. It contributes to awareness, is most of the time soothing and relaxing, requires attention and involvement in the moment. Using different materials, textures, colours, even sounds, can enrich the experience and help self-expression on more than one level. Working with the materials and the body enhances the present moment but can help also defining or recalling the memories and perceptions.

Characteristics of art as a sensory experience:

- It helps enriching the sensorial experience
- It involves more senses, it requires mindfulness and involvement in the moment
- Multiple textures and materials expand the ways of self-expression
- Trains attention and focus, helps organizing visual and tactile information

- Creates a bond between the author and their surroundings
- Expands the connection between the material and emotional

**Tips for adults that encourage creative work as a sensory experience:**

- Insure a large range of textures and materials to encourage as many tactile operations as possible
- Work in stages and offer guidance when necessary
- Encourage associations and connections between the experience of realizing an object/ work, the senses involved and the message expressed
- Encourage initiative and accept suggestions

### **Art as Knowledge**

Even knowing the language, there are feelings, thoughts and experiences that are hard to express. The implicit language of art is a way of knowing about the deepest beliefs, values and the personality of the author. For a teenager is a way to get to the core of the feelings and thoughts in a very natural way. It is what the artist Paul Klee was convinced art's purpose is – "to make the invisible visible". A form of spiritual experience but based on real discovery and knowledge that needs no words to communicate.

To understand something better, to facilitate appropriation of a new notion, to get real involvement in the learning process, was proved that creativity has to be involved at some level. More than anything, it helps self-knowledge and self-discovery.

What we should know about the creative process:

- It involves preparation, gathering inspiration, ideas, materials, even documentation.
- The next stage is the one of involvement, also called incubation, a stage in which exploration, trials and errors, versions of the same topic are born
- Illumination is when achievement happens, decision and result.
- The last stage of the creative process is to verify the result, some changes or the final touches.
- Every person, in a creative enterprise, no matter the amplitude, goes through the stages and gets to know something about themselves based on them, the interests,



the ways of searching and finding, the forms of the final result, the transformed final product that gets shared with the public.


- The evaluation of a creative process consists in frequency, focus and duration.
- The final artistic product is the result of personal decision.

**Tips for adults helping adolescents to know their creative process:**

- Creativity can not be taught but it can be supported and encouraged
- Be permissive, without judgments or prejudices and encourage brainstorming and new ideas.
- Emphasize that art offers multiple ways of knowing and all of them are valid.
- Encourage commitment to the process and detachment of the result
- The ability to tolerate ambiguity and deal with contradictions is the key to creativity
- Offer a safe space and respect the stages of the creative process, do not forget that is individual and different for every person

**Art as a Form of Social Integration**

Art making and creative process are often perceived as solitary activities that require a lot of focus and seclusion from the world that might disturb the artist. For a teenager the process is a solitary activity most of the times but it is socially conditioned. The inspiration comes from the world they struggle to make sense of, the self-expression is important to be shared with their peers, it is important to be accepted and understood. In adolescence the contradictory attitude will be often encountered, the permanent oscillation between seclusion and public display, between defying the rules and searching for approval. Creative activities can balance and reconcile the contradictory directions. Artistic language is universal and permissive, can facilitate a better understanding but it can stay cryptic and private. Can be intimate and personal but can be shared and debated. The art making deals with the most individual and particular characteristics of a person but is universally and

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deeply human. A creative process shared with a group is a bonding opportunity, brings an influx of novelty and interest. Interaction, solidarity and the feeling of belonging are just a few of the advantages. Art making blurs the lines between individuals and respects, even celebrates the differences.

Self-expression, when encouraged to be honest and authentic, it is an opportunity of communicating and engaging in no word communication, an implicit one.

A few characteristic of art as a social integration:

- A facilitator is needed, to guide and propose topics and themes and encourage authenticity and moderate any possible debates.
- It is not enough to have teenagers working next to each other in the same space, a certain context should be created, a common subject, a common interest.
- To facilitate integration and interaction, the creative theme has to be adequate for the age, preferences and the concerns of the adolescents.
- A common work of art can be a good starting point, in art therapy one of the recurrent proposed subjects is “A Perfect World” (C. Malchiodi) – a work in which all participants add the element of their perfect world. In the collective image everybody can recognize their added element but the result is the common contribution.

**Tips for adults that use art for social integration:**

- Investigate teenagers’ interests, preferences and concerns to have inspiration for a proposed subject.
  - Display and exhibit all the works, evaluation is based on the involvement in the process, not the aesthetic value.
  - Encourage sharing and moderate debates.
  - Encourage acceptance and difference.
  - Emphasize the experience as a group and the shared interests.
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### Art as a Contribution in the Community


Art can be a powerful way to express common ideals and values and it has a subtle and meaningful impact. It doesn't matter the age, the form nor the aesthetic standards. We all remember the rainbows drawn by children during hard times, the "Tutto andra bene" ("All Will Be Fine") message that gave hope. It was simple, made by children but powerful and with a symbolic charge that made it emblematic. Fanzines, posters, stickers can always express the ideals of the members of a community but, more than that, it can set a vibe, it can actually contribute to the well-being of an entire society. The adolescents know what issues encounter in their community and they want to be part of solving the problem. Being active and involved, expressing the shared values contributes to the well-being of any teenager from any vulnerable group. Contributing through creative ways is a meaningful process for both parts involved. It can be a campaign for the environment, it can be an artistic festival, it can be a series of cultural events.

A few characteristic of artistic contribution in the community:

- It has to be authentic, real and coming from those directly involved
- It takes attention and altruism and enhances the feeling of belonging
- It requires involvement and teamwork
- It is centered on values and beliefs without being extreme or dogmatic
- The specific ways of art are gentle, subtle and low-risk
- Encourages initiative and bonding with the surroundings
- Prevents isolation, both individual and inside a social category or ethnic community

Tips for adults that encourage artistic involvement in the community:

- Let the teenagers identify the problem or ideal they want to act on.
- Facilitate learning contexts and moderate teamwork.
- Encourage leadership and initiative and help problem solving.
- Facilitate and promote the initiative, mediate connections between the community and the project initiators.
- Work with projects, in stages, to offer continuity and visibility.

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- Help where is needed but ensure and encourage autonomy.

### **Creativity and Artistic Activities with Migrant Teenagers in Wartime and Migration Crisis**

In crisis times it is important for the migrant children not only to survive but also to thrive. The well-being is connected to the possibility of self-expression, to the opportunity of self-discovery and sharing with the others. In wartime, migrant adolescents have to face a double crisis, the one inherent to the age and the one of uncertainty, of unknown and displacement. To reconcile the alterity with the belonging is challenging even for an adult. Learning a foreign language takes time and isolation of the migrant teenager is not desirable. Creativity can be stimulated and encouraged in all disciplines and forms of education and artistic activities can lead to self-expression that words cannot provide (yet).

The educational system based on European values is often supporting projects to foster cultural diversity and promote artistic expression. Educational programs, national or initiated by NGOs are supporting adolescents in their attempt to self-discover and self-express.

Art can provide a way of communicating without words, a universal language that can express the particularities, can integrate personal and cultural particularities in a wider perspective.



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