

# Drawing Resilience

## Visual Booklet for Art-Based Psychosocial Support for Syrian Children



Dr. Mohammad Kalthom  
Supported by: HRA Communication Fund



# Why This Booklet?

## Why do we need a different approach?

In the Syrian context, the arts are still most often used as recreational or educational activities and are rarely understood as a means of supporting children's mental health and psychosocial well-being. In addition, many professionals working with children have not previously been exposed to approaches that use artistic expression as a non-verbal tool for communication and emotional regulation. This booklet is presented as a **preparatory introduction** to expressive arts. It introduces expressive arts approaches and explains the psychosocial logic behind their use, without assuming prior knowledge or specialised training.

## What does this booklet offer?

The booklet aims to:

- Expand practitioners' understanding of the role of art in psychosocial support
- Provide visual examples that help imagine this type of work
- Prepare the ground for accepting these approaches in the local context
- Support professional discussion around the possibilities of using art with children.



# Who Is This Booklet For? And How Can It Be Used?

## Who is this booklet for?

- Health and mental health professionals
- Facilitators and staff working in community-based organisations
- Teachers and non-formal education practitioners
- Teams working with children in post-conflict contexts

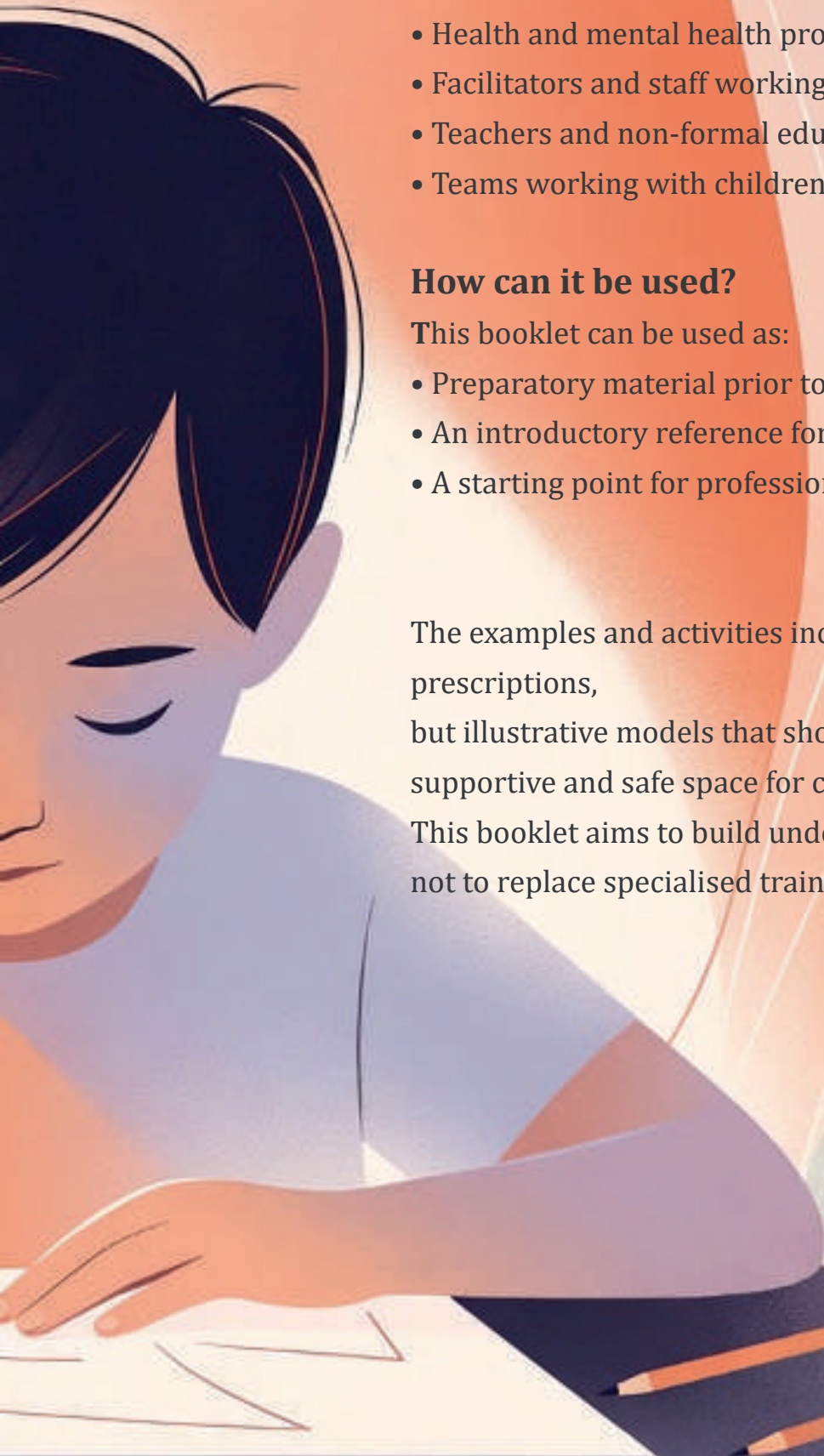
## How can it be used?

This booklet can be used as:

- Preparatory material prior to any training or programme
- An introductory reference for work teams
- A starting point for professional discussion on the use of art

The examples and activities included are not ready-made prescriptions, but illustrative models that show how art can be used as a supportive and safe space for children.

This booklet aims to build understanding and confidence, not to replace specialised training or supervision.



# Ethical and Core Principles in Using Arts with Children



Using arts with children in sensitive contexts requires awareness and clear boundaries. Even simple activities may open unexpected emotions or memories if used without care. These principles are not intended to restrict practice, but to protect both the child and the facilitator.

## Core principles:

- Expressive arts are not psychotherapy in themselves
- The aim is to support further learning, training, or structured treatment
- Participation in any artistic activity must be entirely voluntary
- Children are not asked to explain what they draw or justify their choices
- Silence, refusal, or lack of engagement are natural responses that must be respected

## The role of the facilitator:

- Provide a safe space
- Encourage the child's involvement by being attentive, open-minded, emotionally responsive and non-judgmental
- Encourage free expression
- Accompany the child without interpretation or analysis
- At times, engage in simple parallel drawing to reduce pressure and shift attention away from observation

## It is not the role of the facilitator to:

- Infer psychological meanings from drawings
- Link drawings to personal experiences or events
- Search for "indicators" or "symptoms"

## When should an activity be stopped?

- The child appears clearly distressed or confused
- Sudden withdrawal or psychomotor tension is observed
- The child explicitly expresses a wish to stop

**Calm and supportive stopping is part of safe practice.**



# What Do We Mean by Expressive Arts?

## We mean or appreciate:

- The process, not the product
- The experience, not evaluation
- Personal meaning, not external appearance

## Expressive arts may include:

- Drawing and colouring
- Cutting and pasting (collage)
- Music and listening
- Simple movement and rhythm

## These forms are chosen because they:

- Do not rely on language and explicit narrative
- Are suitable for children and practiced already
- Can be adapted to different contexts

## Why non-verbal expression?

### Many children:

- Are not familiar with verbal expression of own emotions
- Do not have the vocabulary to describe their feelings
- Or do not feel safe enough to talk about them

### Art provides:

- A safe distance
- An alternative to verbal expression
- A sense of control and choice

The activities included in this booklet are not intended to be applied literally. „They are illustrative models that help explain the logic of working with art and imagine how it can be used.

When we speak about expressive arts, we do not mean **“beautiful drawing”** or **“artistic results”**.



# Practical Example 1

## My Safe Home

### Activity idea

This activity explores the concept of safety through drawing, without the need to talk about experiences or events. The aim is not to draw a “real Home”, but to imagine a place that gives the child a sense of comfort and reassurance.

This activity is used as a model to show how art can help a child express an inner feeling in a symbolic and indirect way.

### What does this activity support?

- A sense of internal safety
- Non-verbal expression
- Imagination and personal choice
- Awareness of own wishes and needs

### Materials

- Drawing paper
- Colours (wooden or wax crayons)

### General application idea

The child is invited to draw a place where they might feel safe - because it may be a fantasy place, not a real one.

They are not asked to link the drawing to their real-life experiences.

The place can be real or imaginary.

### Preparatory notes for the facilitator

- It is preferable to focus on the experience rather than the outcome
- If the child wishes to talk about the drawing, the facilitator does not ask for interpretation of elements, but rather asks questions such as: What makes you feel comfortable here? Who would you like to be with?





## Practical Example 2

# Colours of My Feelings

### Activity idea

This activity is based on a simple association between feelings and colours, without the need to name or explain emotions verbally. It allows the child to express how they feel in the present moment through visual choice.

This model illustrates how art can be a gentle way to connect with emotional states without entering direct discussions.

### What does this activity support?

- Emotional awareness
- Emotional regulation
- Free expression of all kinds of feelings without evaluation

### Materials

Paper and variety of colours

### General application idea

The child is asked to choose colours that express how they feel today and place them on the paper in any way they find suitable: lines, areas, dots, or free forms.

There is no “correct” colour for a specific feeling.

### Preparatory notes for the facilitator

- Avoid teaching fixed associations between specific colours and emotions
- Open a simple conversation about the colour from the child’s perspective: why they chose it, what it reminds them of, or a story they remember that includes this colour.

# Practical Example 3

## Who Am I? (Identity Collage)

### Activity idea

This activity offers a simple introduction to the concept of identity through collage. Identity here does not refer to broad definitions, but to small things the child is proud of, likes or feels a sense of belonging to.

This model shows how art can help a child express themselves without direct or language-based questions.

### What does this activity support?

- Sense of self
- Personal choice
- Symbolic expression
- Establish boundaries between “me” and “not-me”

### Materials

- Paper
- Image or shape cut-outs
- Glue
- Colours

### General application idea

The child is invited to choose images or shapes that represent things they like, places, activities, or colours that feel like “them”, and arrange them freely on the paper.

They are not asked to explain their choices.



### Preparatory notes for the facilitator

- Do not turn the activity into a discussion about personal identity
- Respect ambiguity or simplicity in the child’s choices
- The aim is expression, not definition; allow space for the child to talk about their artwork only if they wish

# Practical Example 4

## My Strength Tree, Collage

### Activity idea

This activity provides a visual example that helps the child think about what supports and strengthens them, using the image of a tree as a symbol of growth, continuity, and the future.

### What does this activity support?

- Identifying sources of strength
- Continuity, a sense of growth, and thinking about the future
- Visual organisation of ideas

### Materials

- Paper
- Image or shape cut-outs
- Glue
- Colours

### General application idea

The facilitator invites the child to draw a tree and may explain that:

- The roots can represent things that support them
  - The branches can represent things they like, things they are good at, or things they wish for in the future
- The child is free to choose what to include and where.

### The facilitator's role

#### The facilitator may:

- Explain the symbol in a simple way
- Help organise the page (“Shall we start with the roots?”)
- Offer general supportive comments

(“The tree has many details”)

### What is preferable to avoid

- Turning the activity into an assessment of the child's abilities
- Linking elements to difficult situations
- Imposing fixed structures



# Practical Example 5

## Music, Breathing, and Colour

### Activity Idea

This activity introduces music as a tool for sensory and bodily awareness rather than background or entertainment. Through mindful listening and gentle breathing, the child notices how sound affects the body and expresses this sensation using colours and lines. The focus is on sensory experience, not on understanding music or analysing emotions.

### What does this activity offer?

- Uses music to support sensation and regulation
- Encourages awareness of breathing and the body
- Links sound, movement, and visual expression
- Supports a smooth transition from sensation to drawing

### Materials

- Short music tracks (1–2 minutes, without lyrics)
- Paper and colours

### General application idea

1. The child listens to the music while noticing their breathing.
2. The facilitator may gently suggest breathing with the rhythm.
3. The child expresses the felt sensation through colours and lines, which may be fast, slow, soft, or repetitive.

### The facilitator maintains a calm, supportive presence and may:

- Gently remind the child to attend to breathing and bodily sensations
- Offer simple drawing suggestions
- Keep the atmosphere non-demanding

### Preferable to avoid

- Linking music to memories or events
- Rigid breathing instructions
- Interpreting or evaluating the drawing
- Overly intense or emotionally charged music



# Practical Example 6

## Rhythm and Body

### Activity Idea

This activity uses rhythm and movement to support bodily awareness, helping the child notice speed, breathing, and shifts between activation and calm. By responding to slow and fast rhythms, the child experiences these changes in an embodied and simple way. The focus is on bodily experience, not on performance or accuracy.

### What does this activity offer?

- Increases body awareness
- Supports noticing speed and slowness
- Helps regulate breathing and emotional activation
- Introduces rhythm as a tool for calming or activating the body

### Materials

- Simple rhythms provided live or through recordings (clapping, tapping, or rhythmic audio)
- Space for gentle movement

### General application idea

The facilitator introduces simple rhythms and invites gentle body movements (e.g. touching the chest, moving shoulders, light tapping). Both slow and faster rhythms are explored, with attention to bodily sensations and breathing.

### Facilitator's role

#### The facilitator may:

- Gradually adjust rhythm speed
- Invite slower or faster movement responses
- Gently draw attention to bodily experience
- Ensure movements remain comfortable and non-demanding

#### Preferable to avoid

- Forcing strong or rapid movements
- Turning the activity into physical exercise
- Evaluating performance or accuracy
- Ignoring signs of fatigue or discomfort



# Practical Example 7

## Imagined Dream Drawing

### Activity Idea

This exercise presents an example of using drawing to express a dream or fantasy in an imaginative way, without the need to remember personal dreams or narrate a story. The dream may belong to an imagined boy or girl, or take the form of a dream scene.

The focus is on transforming ideas into a visual image, not on interpretation or meaning.

### What does this exercise offer?

- Creating space to express vague or unclear thoughts
- Using images instead of words
- Emotional release that helps confront and organize certain thoughts
- Supporting imagination and visual experimentation

### General Application Idea

The facilitator can explain to the child that some dreams, fantasies or thoughts are unclear, like images, colors, or sensations.

### The child is invited to draw:

a color, shape, line, or any image that expresses this feeling, without trying to make it understandable or “logical.”

### The facilitator may:

- Reassure the child that ambiguity is normal
- Encourage free expression (“It doesn’t have to be clear”)
- Maintain a calm and non-pressuring atmosphere

### What to Avoid

- Asking the child to explain the dream or its details
- Linking the drawing to real-life experiences or events
- Interpreting symbols or colors
- Asking “Why did you dream like this?”



# Practical Example 8

## Future Self Portrait



### Activity Idea

This exercise uses drawing to help the child imagine how they would like to see themselves in the future. It does not matter whether the image is realistic or imaginary; it can be a real character, an older version of themselves, an animal, or even a superhero. The key is expressing a desired self-image. The focus here is on imagination and hope, not planning or realism.

### What does this exercise offer?

- Supporting a positive self-image
- Creating space for imagination and aspiration
- Expressing wishes and values
- Building a supportive dialogue with the facilitator

### General Application Idea

The facilitator invites the child to draw themselves as they would like to be in the future.

It can be clarified that:

- There is no “right” form
- The drawing can be imaginary or realistic
- Details are completely optional

After completing the drawing, a simple conversation about the image can follow.

### Facilitator’s Role During the Exercise

- Encourage imagination (“You can be anything you like”)
- Help add visual details if needed
- Accompany the child in conversation without directing or correcting
- Keep the dialogue positive and non-pressuring

### What to Avoid

- Turning the conversation into an evaluation of abilities
- Linking the future to duties or obligations
- Correcting or limiting imagination
- Comparing the child to others

# General Notes for Facilitators

## Working with the Arts: Accompaniment, Not Interpretation

Working with the arts alongside children does not mean leaving the child alone, nor does it mean interpreting what the child produces or linking it to deep psychological meanings.

**The role of the facilitator is conscious accompaniment, which includes:**

- Presence
- Encouragement
- Asking simple questions about “what”, not “why”
- Respecting each child’s individual pace

Here, art is a safe space for exploration. Disclosure or analysis, if any, should be based on a specific methodology and may take place at later stages.

## Practical Points During the Process

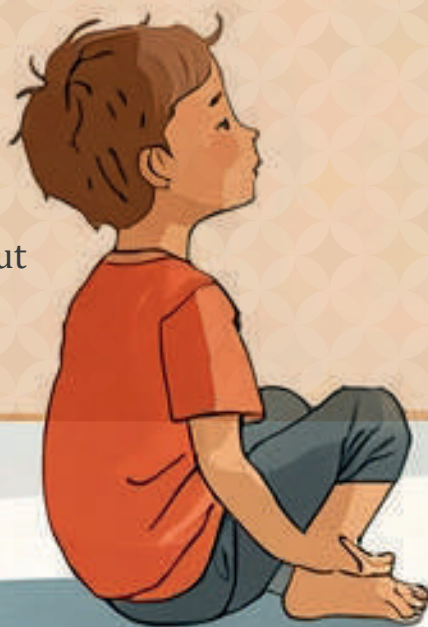
- Allow the child freedom of choice regarding: Drawing, Movement and Stopping.
- Use simple, non-evaluative language
- Focus on the experience, not on the outcome
- Do not correct, interpret, or compare

If the child does not wish to participate, this choice should be respected as natural.

## Individual and Group Work

In group settings:

- Public sharing is not requested unless the child agrees and wishes to do so
- Artwork is not displayed for comparison, but for sharing experiences and ideas
- Silence is respected just as much as speech



## **What if the child does not want to draw or move?**

This is normal, Possible responses include:

- Offering alternative options
- Introducing activities in an interactive way rather than as an obligation

## **What if the child appears sad or emotionally affected?**

- Do not pressure the child to speak
- Pause calmly if needed
- Offer simple support and a calm presence
- Informing the parents

If distress continues, seeking specialized support is recommended.

## **Do we keep the children's drawings?**

The decision should belong to the child:

- They may keep the drawing
- Leave it behind
- Or tear it up

The drawing belongs to the child; it is not a documentation tool.

## **Can the exercises be repeated?**

Yes. Exercises may be repeated or adapted depending on the context,

## **What is this booklet not intended for?**

This booklet:

- Does not aim at diagnosis or assessment
- Does not provide psychological treatment
- Does not replace training or professional supervision
- should be considered carefully when used with children with severe mental health conditions



## **The activities included are illustrative models intended to:**

- Introduce expressive arts
- Build trust in these approaches
- Prepare the ground for using these methods in deeper and professional ways over time

## About the Project

This booklet was developed as part of a project aiming to translate academic knowledge on expressive arts into visual and simplified formats, suitable for the Syrian context and directed toward professionals working with children.

The booklet focuses on introduction, preparation, and shifting perceptions of the arts as a supportive tool for mental and social well-being.

About the Author

Dr. Mohammad Kalthom

Researcher in Expressive Arts and Psychosocial Support

University of Music and Theatre, Hamburg

m-kalthom@hotmail.com

supported by:

HRA Communication Fund



**This booklet is an invitation to  
experiment..  
a starting point,  
not an endpoint**