

A photograph of a pottery workshop. In the foreground, a wooden table is covered with various pottery-making tools and materials. There are three wooden boards, each with a lump of dark grey clay. A person's hands are visible on the right, using a knife to shape a piece of clay. Another person's hands are visible on the left, also working with clay. In the center of the table, there is a collection of wooden tools, including several long, thin, pointed tools and two larger tools with flat heads. A wooden rolling pin is also visible on the right side of the table. The background is slightly blurred, showing more people and the interior of the workshop.

Evaluation

WELLBEING POTTERY
AT THE RANCH



"Clay invites the connection with our hands. Whenever I touch the clay, I am also being touched by it...

As the hands reach out, they hesitate: will this other-than-me be friendly or hurt me?

Can I caress it safely or will I be abused? Will it be cold and unresponsive, or can I have lots of it and get my needs met? Can I realize myself in this environment without being shamed?"

Cornelia Elbrecht

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Cover image: Working with clay outdoors in the wildlife area of The Ranch youth centre during the penultimate session of the *Wellbeing Pottery* programme. In addition to the creative processes, this session uses the natural world as a framework for focusing on 'transitions' and 'endings', supporting young participants to move on from the group and celebrate their achievements together.

Overview

Wellbeing Pottery is part of the Children and Young People's Social Prescribing offer for North and West Bristol, delivered by Southmead Development Trust's 'Link Forward' initiative.

***Wellbeing Pottery* has been the region's only 'Arts-on-Referral' initiative for Children and Young People since 2021.** It was designed to support the personal, emotional and social needs of vulnerable Children and Young People working with the Primary Care Network and schools across North and West Bristol. Since then, *Wellbeing Pottery* has supported nearly 100 Children and Young People and their families in the Locality.

This document is an evaluation of a 10-week term of *Wellbeing Pottery* delivered to a group of Children and Young People between September - December 2024.



Image: Large 'Eye' made by a participant whose referral suggested they were carrying a sense of shame around their behaviour. In *Wellbeing Pottery*, they could *articulate* this through art-making and be witnessed in a safe, non-judgemental space.

Overview

The *Wellbeing Pottery* programme has been designed in collaboration with an Art Psychotherapist who specialises in working with clay and has extensive experience facilitating Creative Health sessions with groups of Children and Young People. **The programme focuses on supporting Children and Young People who face barriers to their emotional and physical health** by incorporating expressive sensory-motor processes, art-making, psychoeducation tools and group work to enhance their wellbeing. The programme's carefully-considered person-centred structure aims to help **participants explore and develop their social, emotional and practical skills and build peer communities** through collaborative creative activities, so that they can tap into their potential and increase their confidence by making joyful connections to themselves and others.



Image: A participant who finds it hard to manage their impulse controls, particularly around anger, enjoys the energetic and focused experience of throwing a pot at the wheel.

Overview

The *Wellbeing Pottery* programme runs for 10 weeks. Each week consists of a 1.5-hour session taking place after school during term time. After the fifth week, there is a week break for half-term, and this is a key component to the programme as it guides participants around being able to manage transitions and change.

The group is 'closed', meaning the same Children and Young People are invited to attend each week and new members are generally not permitted. This structure gives young participants the opportunity to settle into the space, get to know each other, integrate, form bonds, and experience a group process that is safe and contained outside of a school and family dynamic.



Image: 'Giraffe' and 'Cat', made by a participant during a session making 'animal spirits' – a theme that helps to draw out personal strengths and celebrates individuality in a playful and safe way.

Overview

Wellbeing Pottery sessions are delivered in a welcoming, friendly setting, taking place in a dedicated art room at The Ranch – a youth centre based in the heart of Southmead. The art room has a fully-functioning kiln and has been designed to be used by Children and Young People for ceramics and other visual art forms.

The programme is facilitated by a professional Creative Health practitioner and co-facilitated by an experienced Link Worker. Each session takes young participants on a journey using the clay as a material to build resilience, explore shared and internal experiences, have fun, make mess, learn new skills, and create beautiful and lasting works of art to take home. Participants and their parents/carers are supported between sessions by the Creative Health practitioner and their own personal Link Worker.



Image: The art room at The Ranch.

The Need

Wellbeing Pottery supports Children and Young People living in marginalised localities experiencing some of the lowest UK indices of multiple deprivation, including **our priority communities with Children and Young People being disproportionately affected by disadvantage, including poverty and social isolation.** Some face a diversity of barriers to their wellbeing and have been affected by Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) including acute, chronic or complex trauma.

Children and Young People are signposted to the programme by their personal Link Worker, having shown an interest in creativity and art-making during their 1:1 sessions. Their Link Workers, families and schools may also have noted that they express themselves more easily in non-verbal and/or creative ways and so, combined with meeting their other needs, may benefit from working with clay in a gentle group environment.

Children and Young People may be referred to *Wellbeing Pottery* experiencing one or more of the following:

- **Loneliness and isolation**, with concerns around socialising and building friendships in and out of school.
- **Low mood and depression**, including issues around self-confidence and self-esteem.
- **Emotionally-based school avoidance (EBSA)**, supporting concerns around avoidance or exclusion from education.
- **Social anxiety**, triggered by bullying or attachment issues and manifesting in EBSA, panic attacks, etc.
- **Difficulties managing behaviour**, including emotional dysregulation, aggression, Attention Deficit Disorder, Autistic Spectrum Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Tourette's Syndrome, etc.

The Need

- **Grief**, following a bereavement or loss.
- **Physical health condition**, experiencing chronic illness or a physical disability, and managing anxiety or pain, or supporting transitions from hospital to community.
- **Learning challenges**, contributed by any of the above or having a diagnosed/undiagnosed learning difficulty(ies), neurodivergence, or sensory issues.

Many participants who have attended *Wellbeing Pottery* have not met the threshold of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) or find themselves on long waiting lists for such services. In the absence of treatment, our *Wellbeing Pottery* programme offers them a safe, contained, playful, and creative therapeutic intervention to explore their artistic, emotional, social, and physical needs and identities.



Image: Whilst learning about ceramic techniques like 'slab-rolling' and 'sgraffito', a young participant uses their imagination to remind themselves of things that bring them joy during the session making 'positive affirmation tiles'.

The Need

We know that “creative and community mental health provisions have been promoted as a great way of reducing waiting lists for clinical mental health services... via NHS transformation programmes and social prescribing” (p.13, *‘Creative Health at a Glance Core20PLUS5, Major Conditions, & Falls Prevention’*, 2024 <https://ncch.org.uk/uploads/Creative-Health-at-a-Glance-Booklet.pdf>).

Evidence also suggests that Social Prescribing for Children and Young People can “Benefit personal and mental wellbeing and reduce loneliness” (*National Academy for Social Prescribing* <https://socialprescribingacademy.org.uk/what-is-social-prescribing/social-prescribing-for-children-and-young-people/>).

SOCIAL PRESCRIBING WEBINAR



Youth social prescribing in action - practical examples and learning from Wellbeing While Waiting

Image: Watch this *National Academy for Social Prescribing* webinar, ‘Youth social prescribing in action - practical examples and learning from Wellbeing While Waiting’ here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=50Mvwug1xv8>

The Need

Since 2021, the *Wellbeing Pottery* programme has worked with Children and Young people who:

- Have spent lengths of time in hospital for chronic physical health conditions.
- Have been assessed and/or treated by CAMHS.
- Have fled war and sought refuge in the United Kingdom.
- Are 'Young Carers'.
- Are 'Children in Care'.
- Have a close family member / sibling suffering with mental health issues, living with addiction and substance misuse, or having additional needs.
- Are at risk of sexual exploitation or abuse.
- Has a parent or relative in prison.
- Have witnessed domestic violence or directly experienced abuse by a relative or carer.
- Is suffering from chronic separation anxiety and attachment issues.
- Is at risk of being a persistent school absentee or coming out of persistent absenteeism.
- Has experienced the death of a close relative.
- Has witnessed gang-related violence.
- Have self-harmed.
- Have shown signs of distress around gender identity.
- Are neurodivergent and struggling to have their needs met or manage their own needs.

The Therapeutic Quality of Clay

"A lump of clay in the hand is a minor planet."

O'Shea (1983, p. 37)

Clay is an ancient and universal material. It is natural, elemental, malleable, earth-connecting, responsive, and transformative. It is used functionally, artistically, and therapeutically across the world. All these factors make clay **a magical material for Children and Young People to work with.**

Scaffolded by a carefully-considered, structured creative programme and trauma-informed, experienced facilitators, our young participants are given the opportunity to use clay in a safe and confidential group setting to process and share their feelings, witnessed by others, so they may be valued for their individuality.



Image: A young participant works with clay, tools, water and natural materials to experience a creative spectrum of sensory, functional and elemental therapeutic facets.

The Therapeutic Quality of Clay

Using a blend of psychologically-minded therapeutic arts techniques, *Wellbeing Pottery* offers children and young people the opportunity to:

- Be creative.
- Discuss difficult feelings.
- Play and make a mess, especially when they may never have felt safe enough or able to do so before.
- Make this mess and then tidy it away (a process that is often very cathartic for many children and young people).
- Experience things going wrong with their artwork or in relationships with others in the group, working out how to feel around those incidents with the support of the facilitators.
- Build social skills by being with other children and young people of different ages, and diverse backgrounds and experiences. This mirrors real social situations, where they can learn about social cohesion, respect, and power dynamics.
- Experience peer support, where they learn from and help other group members.
- Develop positive self-regard, confidence and insight through art-making, group processes, and the support of the facilitators and their peers.
- Learn experientially, acquire new skills, and enjoy this learning experience, catalysing a newfound enjoyment of education. (Wellbeing Pottery brings together the Arts and Science.)

The Therapeutic Quality of Clay

- See a process through from start to finish, using creativity and their own imaginations and skills as vehicles for this journey.
- Have autonomy in this process and experience co-production, whereby they contribute to and help establish the constitution and directives of the group.
- Experience and witness a slowing-down of creative processes, in a digital age, as they watch their creations take form to take home for themselves or gift to others.
- Find ways to manage and stabilise their emotions and challenging behaviours.
- Experience endings in a manageable, safe way.
- Make new friends.



Image: A participant with autism made a 'Cat in a Cave' during a session exploring 'Safe Spaces', giving the young maker the opportunity to use her own symbolic language to play with the idea of coming out of her comfort zone in an autonomous way.

Key Figures

Between September and December 2024:

- 10 Children and Young People were referred to *Wellbeing Pottery* by their Link Workers.
- Children and Young People were aged between 8-13 years old. 5 identified as female and 5 identified as male.
- Of those 10 referrals, two were unable to attend due to their parents/carers experiencing barriers to transport, one was overcome by anxiety, and the other chose not to attend.
- Of those 6 Children and Young People who attended, on average, a total of 5 participants returned each week.
- Participants were offered 10 sessions of *Wellbeing Pottery*, equivalent of 15 hours of an intervention over three months.



Image: 'Mermaid' made by a young participant during the penultimate session reflecting on the group 'ending' and 'moving on'. The theme focuses on 'transitions' and uses the metaphors of flowing rivers and seas as a processing framework.

Case Study

Amy (pseudonym), 8, attended *Wellbeing Pottery* between September and December 2024. She had been referred into the group by her Link Worker who noted that Amy found it difficult to verbalise her worries around the traumatic separation of her parents. She was described as a “very private” and “reserved” child, interested in art-making.

Although many Children and Young People are quiet during the first session, it was clear from the outset that Amy was indeed reticent. During our weekly ‘creative check-in’, for example, she avoided sharing her thoughts with the rest of the group and would spend whole sessions making in silence. But it also transpired that she was independent and self-contained, as well as a highly-skilled maker and an astute observer who imbedded the ceramic techniques shown to her each week.



Image: Amy's figurine (centre) waiting to be bisque-fired in the kiln room alongside other participants' work.

Case Study

It was noted that Amy did not follow the themes of the programme either; for example, where other participants made a 'safe space' or their 'spirit animal' she used each session to focus on a project of her own design, which she perpetually visited and re-visited each week. This work was a figurative interpretation of her friendship group, made up of three people whom Amy would make with great care and attention. Each person would be sitting or kneeling, and she would spend whole sessions working on just one figure.

It was also of interest, moreover, that Amy often rejected her work once it was complete. Regardless of the quality of aesthetic or build of her figurines (arguably a high standard given her young age), she would ask that the facilitators dispose of them without stating why she was making the request. Sometimes this was when the clay had hardened to 'greenware' and before it had



Image: Amy's unglazed figurines, which she rejected and asked the facilitators to dispose of.

Case Study

received its first (bisque) firing. Sometimes her work had been fired and Amy rejected them before glazing commenced. This was a curious process, which Amy was given the space and autonomy to go through, witnessed and held by the facilitators.

Over the subsequent and final weeks of the term of *Wellbeing Pottery*, Amy began to engage more with the facilitators and with other participants. She learned to ask for help, started to help others, and showed a particular interest in wiping down the tables and cleaning away her tools – the latter a process that is often viewed through a psychologically-minded lens as a cathartic one when Children and Young People are engaging in therapeutic mess-making. Amy also began to make other objects, mirroring her peers' work, and overcoming the rumination on what, upon reflection, may have been her way of processing a traumatic relational breakup.



Image: Amy's finished glazed figurine.

Case Study

To illuminate, by using the symbolism of her friendship group and the materiality of the clay, Amy may have been able to construct, reconstruct and deconstruct a group that represented love and safety, and work through the unbearable, unspeakable process of her parents' separation in her own way. And by handing over the additional pair of muted figurines to be taken care of by the adult facilitators, she could ask for help to individuate and differentiate from this challenging experience using her own internal language in her own timeframe, without fear of judgement or reprisal.

Amy left the *Wellbeing Pottery* programme keeping hold of one bold and bright glazed figurine, which she lovingly wrapped in jewel-coloured tissue paper in her final session.



Image: Amy's ceramic figurines.

Children's & Young People's Feedback

Describe your time at Wellbeing Pottery in 3 words:

"Happy, satisfied, excited [sic]"

"Fun, good, exiting [sic]"

"Good, exciting, interesting"

"Satisfying, free, nervous"

"Happy, calm, 😊"

How do you feel now?

"I can do things with people I don't know."

"It's helped me feel free."

"After the first session you learn to trust people."

"It was amazing."



Image: Taking care to wrap up the artwork during the final session, ready to take home.

Parents' & Carers' Feedback

"[At the start of term] She was withdrawn from everything. She was then able to be creative with her own ideas and is now happier within herself. Those changes happened because she met new people in a different environment. Thank you for everything."

"She had a very negative outlook and a strong dislike of school, being irritable and explosive. She was always happy to come to Wellbeing Pottery and is so reluctant to go to most things, especially without a friend of parent. She has clearly enjoyed the activities and the environment... the interest you took... there have been periods where she has been more cheerful and less explosive, and I think it was something positive to look forward to and helped 'fill up her cup'. Thank you for your kindness and warmth."

"[When she started Wellbeing Pottery] She was nervous with separation anxiety and we had both been victims of domestic violence. Her highlights were making friends and being creative, and I have noticed that she is now more confident, excited and happy."

"When he started Wellbeing Pottery, he was very low, he talked about not wanting to be alive, he was crying after school every evening. He has had few friendships because he struggles so much emotionally at school and at home. He's an extremely caring, kind, fun and clever boy and he's fascinated when it comes to learning and loves to try new things and learn new skills, but he was physically hurting other children every day at school. Especially when he felt ignored, burnt out, dysregulated, or being treated unfairly by other children. He absolutely LOVED his time at Wellbeing Pottery... (cont...)"

Parents' & Carers' Feedback

- *... He was so happy after each session and would talk very incessantly about everything he had learnt... particularly about how pottery works, the different glazing techniques. He really enjoyed using the wheel and felt very special and grown up using this. He really enjoyed going down to the river and playing with the clay there. And he really enjoyed meeting all together at the end for cake! He liked the safety of it being a closed session. He said when he was in the classes he didn't worry about school or hitting other children because he could just think about pottery. He seems to be more mindful... Wellbeing Pottery allowed him the chance to be mindful and not feel the pressure to learn a new skill. He was also surrounded by new children who don't have preconceptions about his behaviour. He could just be himself and not feel like he had to always justify his actions... (cont...)*

... Concentrating on the pottery allowed him to forget about his problems at school... it's been such a truly wonderful experience for him. The facilitators were excellent! They were so kind and thoughtful and welcoming. I think a lot of children would benefit from doing Wellbeing Pottery."

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