

Resilience in children ENHANCED through

By Laura E. Young

On the surface, the arts program for children run by Diana Coholic looks like a great way to keep kids busy after school hours with activities such as painting, drawing, meditating, and writing.

But there is so much more to Coholic's Healing Arts Program (HAP) than paint and paper. Administered weekly as part of her social work research, in two-hour blocks of time, this creative period provides a deeper, even vital, outlet for the children who participate. Since 2006, Coholic and the HAP team have run and refined an arts-based program to help high-need children develop their self-awareness, self-esteem, and resilience. Sessions, run out of Laurentian's multidisciplinary qualitative research lab, target disadvantaged children, teaching them skills to help them cope with the challenges they face in their daily lives.

As one young child involved in the program said: "The group helped me get to know myself a little bit better, and it's helped me make some decisions ... based on my behaviour and stuff. My foster parents have said they've seen enormous positive changes."

In early 2009, Coholic received a grant of \$221,340 from the SickKids Foundation to pursue research into the effectiveness of holistic arts-based group approaches for personal development and resilience.

That September, Coholic embarked on the next three-year phase of the project. First, Coholic had to build the HAP team, hiring extra students and practitioners. There were six, 12-week groups over the fall. More groups are scheduled over 2010. There are currently nine undergrad and graduate



[Diana Coholic]

students working on the research with Coholic, including students from the concurrent education program and a social work student who is funded by a CIHR Health Professional Student Research Award (for student research training). Coholic has also hired several community practitioners.

The HAP program will reach approximately 36 children per year, or, 108 over the three-year phase. Each group consists of four children, many of whom are referred through either the Children's Aid Society or the Child and Family Centre of Sudbury, which came on board as a community collaborator in 2009. The children hail from the Greater Sudbury area, and range in age, from 8 to 13. "They are all high-need children with various problems and issues," Coholic says.

Coholic's research is readily available to practitioners through a DVD and training manual. In 2009, Hoi Cheu, director of Laurentian's Centre for Humanities Research and Creativity, produced the training DVD. In March 2010, Coholic's book on the program, *Art Activities for Children and Young People in Need – Helping Children to Develop Mindfulness, Spiritual Awareness, and Self-Esteem* will be published through the UK publisher, Jessica Kingsley.

Some of the children Coholic sees have difficult life situations. "It makes it hard for us to end the group with them. Some of them are very sad when it does end. On the other hand, we hope that we are offering some methods that will be helpful for them in the future, and certainly a positive and affirming place to be." ❏