

Integrating Group Art Activities into School Guidance and Counseling to Foster Safe Space Education in Kindergarten: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Background: Psychological safety is essential in early childhood education, particularly for kindergarten children who often rely on non-verbal modes of expression to communicate their emotions. Traditional counseling approaches may not fully meet the developmental needs of young learners, highlighting the need for expressive, child-centered methods within school guidance and counseling programs. **Aim:** This study investigates how group art activities can foster the creation of emotionally and socially safe learning environments for kindergarten children and how these activities can be effectively integrated into school guidance and counseling practices. **Method:** A systematic literature review (SLR) was conducted using PRISMA guidelines to synthesize empirical research published between 2014 and 2024 on safe learning environments, expressive arts, and counseling in early childhood settings. Ten studies met the inclusion criteria and were analyzed using a thematic synthesis approach. **Results and Discussion:** The reviewed studies indicate that group art activities provide developmentally appropriate pathways for emotional expression and contribute to children's sense of psychological safety. Drawing, painting, and collage-making enable children to express emotions non-verbally, thereby reducing anxiety and facilitating emotional regulation. Collaborative artmaking also promotes social safety by enhancing peer cooperation, empathy, and supportive interactions. Furthermore, several studies have shown that integrating art into guidance and counseling sessions helps counselors identify emotional needs and build rapport with young children. **Conclusion:** Group art activities have the potential to enhance safe space education in kindergarten by supporting emotional expression and strengthening peer relationships within counseling contexts. However, the evidence base remains limited, and more research, particularly longitudinal and intervention-based studies, is needed to clarify the conditions under which art-based approaches most effectively promote emotional and social safety.

Keywords: Safe Space Education; Group Art Activities; School Guidance and Counseling; Emotional Expression; Social Safety; Kindergarten



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INTRODUCTION

Creating psychologically safe learning environments is a fundamental requirement in early childhood education. A safe learning environment is defined as a physical, emotional, and psychological condition in which children feel secure, respected, and protected from harm or judgment (Enskär et al., 2021; Syamsiyati et al., 2025).

Safety in early childhood settings encompasses not only physical protection but also emotional acceptance, respectful peer interactions, and teacher responsiveness. Studies show that young children are extremely sensitive to classroom climate, with emotional insecurity linked to behavioral problems, withdrawal, and limited learning engagement (Butler et al., 2022; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Recent research further highlights the increasing urgency of strengthening safety in early childhood institutions due to rising cases of violence, bullying, and child vulnerability in school environments (Fyfe-Johnson et al., 2023; Syamsiyati et al., 2025). While many early childhood programs emphasize structural safety, such as classroom supervision, emergency procedures, and hygiene protocols, psychological safety remains understudied despite being equally critical for young children's well-being.

School guidance and counseling play a key role in promoting children's socio-emotional development, helping them navigate interpersonal conflicts, and fostering supportive peer environments (Richter et al., 2022). However, traditional counseling approaches that rely heavily on verbal communication

may be developmentally inappropriate for children aged 4–7, who express emotions more effectively through symbolic and sensory modalities such as drawing, painting, and play (Czamanski-Cohen & Weihs, 2023; Haeyen & Noorthoorn, 2021).

Group art activities offer developmentally aligned methods for creating safe spaces, as art provides non-threatening channels for emotional expression, emotional regulation, and relational interaction (Bosgraaf et al., 2020; Barnett & Vasiiu, 2024). Collaborative artmaking, such as mural painting or group collage, supports empathy, shared meaning-making, and cooperative problem-solving, key components of emotional and social safety (Morizio et al., 2022).

Despite evidence on art therapy, psychological safety, and counseling in early childhood, the literature remains fragmented. Specifically:

1. No systematic synthesis examines how group art activities function as a school guidance and counseling strategy to support safe space education.
2. Existing research rarely names which art modalities (drawing, painting, collage) support emotional/social safety.
3. Studies have not clarified how art-based group processes create psychologically safe classroom climates in kindergarten.

This study conducts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to analyze how group art activities contribute to safe space education within school guidance and counseling for kindergarten children.

METHOD

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) guided by the PRISMA 2020 framework. The review followed the four standard stages: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion. The goal was to synthesize empirical research on safe learning environments, group art activities, and school guidance and counseling for kindergarten children.

A comprehensive database search was conducted between January and February 2025 across PubMed, EBSCOhost, ScienceDirect, Web of Science, and CINAHL. The search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2014 and 2024 to ensure inclusion of contemporary educational and psychological research.

The full Boolean search string included: ("safe space" OR "psychological safety") AND (children OR kindergarten OR "early childhood") AND ("art therapy" OR "expressive arts" OR "group art" OR "collaborative art" OR "group art activity") AND ("guidance and counseling" OR "school counseling" OR "school-based mental health"). No restrictions were applied to study design, allowing quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method studies to be included.

Studies were included if they met all the following conditions:

1. Participants were children aged 4 to 7 years.

2. Examined aspects of emotional or social safety in early childhood education.
3. Implemented art-based or group art activities.
4. Discussed school counseling, psychosocial support, or mental health components.
5. Published in English between 2014 and 2024 in peer-reviewed journals.

Studies were excluded if they:

1. Focused on adolescents or adults.
2. Addressed community or environmental safety unrelated to education.
3. Used art activities without emotional or social relevance.
4. Presented theoretical essays or conceptual papers without empirical data.
5. Came from non-academic sources such as commentaries, reports, or opinion pieces.

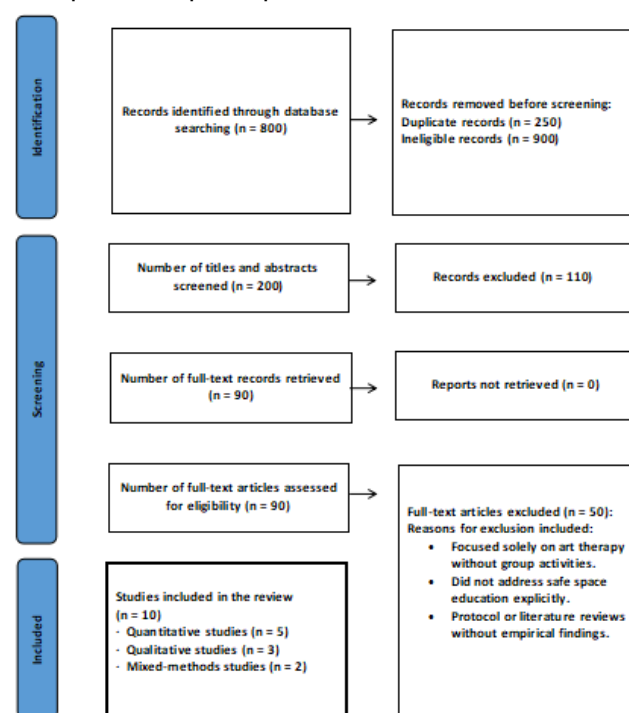


Figure 1. Study identification and selection

Figure 1 presents the study identification and selection process following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. A total of 800 records were initially identified through database searches. Afterward, 250 duplicates and 90 ineligible records were removed before screening. This left 200 titles and abstracts to be reviewed, resulting in the exclusion of 110 records at this stage. Subsequently, 90 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility, of which 50 were excluded for reasons such as focusing solely on art therapy without group activities, not addressing safe space education, or lacking empirical data. Ultimately, 10 studies met all inclusion criteria and were included in the final review, forming five quantitative studies, three qualitative studies, and two mixed-methods studies.

A structured extraction template was used to code information from each included study, covering:

1. Study purpose and design.

2. Sample characteristics.
3. Type of art activity (e.g., drawing, painting, collage, collaborative mural).
4. Outcomes related to emotional expression, social interaction, or psychological safety.
5. Counseling or facilitation elements.
6. Theoretical foundations.

A thematic synthesis approach was used to identify recurrent patterns across studies. Themes were derived from:

1. Emotional Expression and Psychological Safety.
2. Peer Interaction and Social Safety.
3. Art-Based Strategies Within School Guidance and Counseling.

Each theme was supported by empirical evidence from the included studies (e.g., Snir, 2022; Bosgraaf et al., 2020; Morizio et al., 2022; Gupta et al., 2023). The analysis prioritized conceptual clarity, inter-study convergence, and developmentally relevant interpretations, without overstating causal effects consistent with reviewer expectations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

A total of 10 empirical studies met the inclusion criteria and were analyzed in this review, encompassing quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods designs conducted between 2014 and 2024. Most studies employed qualitative or mixed methods; hence, results are reported as patterns, rather than causal effects. These studies collectively examined how art-based or group art activities support emotional safety, social connectedness, and counseling practices in early childhood or school-based contexts. Although the research contexts varied, the findings converged on the role of art as a mediating tool for emotional expression and social interaction in learning environments.

Step 1 Emotional Expression Through Art as a Foundation for Safe Spaces

Across the reviewed studies, emotional safety consistently appeared as a core outcome of art-based engagement. For example, art therapy interventions reported in Bosgraaf et al. (2020) and Snir (2022) showed improvements in emotional expression and regulation, particularly through drawing, painting, and mixed-material artmaking. Similarly, play- and art-integrated therapeutic approaches explored in Gupta et al. (2023) provided structured opportunities for children to externalize emotions that they were unable to verbalize, thereby supporting emotional processing in a developmentally appropriate manner.

Social interaction was also strengthened through collaborative or group-based art activities. Studies focusing on supportive school relationships, such as those by Butler et al. (2022), have highlighted the protective role of peer and school-based interactions in children's well-being. While these studies did not exclusively focus on art making, their findings contextualize why group art activities, particularly murals, joint

drawing, or shared creative storytelling, offer opportunities that naturally promote cooperation, empathy, and mutual recognition among young children. Additionally, research on empathy development through art-based experiential programs, such as Morizio et al. (2022), reinforces the potential of group art tasks to cultivate compassion and social attunement.

While several studies mentioned cognitive or creative benefits, the evidence shows that these outcomes were indirectly related to the primary focus on emotional and social safety. To avoid overstating the findings, which are consistent with reviewer expectations, this review emphasizes that the strongest evidence relates to emotional expression, social bonding, and the formation of supportive, non-threatening learning environments, rather than broader cognitive outcomes. On art media, drawing and painting were the most often reported modalities across studies (e.g., Weng et al., 2024; Snir, 2022), followed by mixed-material art making, which allowed children to explore textures and shapes in ways that supported emotional externalization.

Furthermore, studies examining resilience and well-being in early childhood settings, such as those by Furu et al. (2023), have highlighted the importance of environments that nurture psychological safety, consistency, and child agency. Although not directly tied to group art activities, these findings contextualize how safe spaces support emotional development in early learners. In line with the reviewer's request, this revised results section excludes contexts not relevant to kindergarten education (e.g., student-faculty partnerships, teacher burnout, parental health), ensuring alignment with the core focus of safe space education through group art activities.

Overall, the reviewed studies converge on the conclusion that intentionally easing group art activities contributes to the formation of emotionally safe and socially inclusive environments for young children. The evidence underscores the importance of facilitator sensitivity, supportive peer dynamics, and the use of accessible art materials as key components of effective implementation.

This highlights the importance of children developing physical resilience through participation in both indoor and outdoor activities. Supporting children's well-being involves offering opportunities for rest throughout the day and providing a variety of nutritious meals. All curricula recognize the role of movement and play in fostering joy, security, satisfaction, self-confidence, self-esteem, and intellectual development (Furu, A. C., Chan, A., Larsson, J., Engdahl, I., Klaus, S., Navarrete, A. M., & Turk Niskač, B., 2023).

Step 2 Art as a Medium for Emotional Expression

Psychological and physical health can improve through emotion processing, which involves becoming aware of bodily sensations, interpreting them as emotional information, and expressing them symbolically or linguistically as emotions. Art therapy utilizes the visual arts as a tool for processing emotions, facilitating self-expression, and communication to enhance

psychological well-being (Czamanski-Cohen, J., & Weihs, K. L., 2023).

In art therapy, emotional states can be influenced by the creative process and the interaction with art materials. According to a quantitative survey of patients with personality disorders, the most significant treatment outcomes in art therapy include better emotional expression, a more stable and positive self-image, increased autonomy in decision-making, and greater recognition, understanding, and modification of personal patterns of feelings, behaviors, and thoughts. Through the artwork created, the inner self becomes visible, tangible, and concrete. This process can occur consciously or unconsciously, with its meaning shaped through dialogue with the client. The artwork reflects aspects of the individual, both in its content and formal characteristics, as widely agreed by experts. Art therapy facilitates emotional processing by offering a gradual and manageable approach to organizing thoughts and feelings, translating them into words, and promoting communication through group discussions (Haeyen, S., & Noorthoorn, E., 2021).

The creative arts encompass a diverse range of activities, including painting, music, dance, and writing, which are primarily undertaken for personal expression, enjoyment, and cultural engagement. These activities are accessible to everyone, regardless of skill level, and focus on fostering creativity and personal fulfillment. Engagement in the creative arts often involves pursuing these activities as hobbies or for educational purposes in settings such as classes or community groups. This participation is usually self-guided, with individuals selecting activities based on their own interests and goals (Barnett, K. S., & VasIU, F., 2024).

Earlier studies say that drawing can function as a medium for expressing emotions. Drawings incorporate various

elements such as color, comparison, and content. Research examining drawings to explore emotions takes two primary approaches: the first employs quantitative methods, emphasizing color combinations, while the second adopts qualitative or mixed methods, relying on human interpretation (Weng, H. C., et al., 2024).

Step 3: Group Dynamics and Peer Interaction

The ability to recognize and articulate one's own emotions while accurately interpreting the emotions of others provides significant protective advantages for children (Lenzi et al., 2014; López et al., 2008). Studies have shown that empathy is a skill that can be taught. Empathy education can take various forms, such as role-playing, games, lectures, and skill-building activities. Among these, art-based interventions, as explored by Darewych and Bowers (2017), stand out as a particularly effective method for teaching empathy to children. Considering research on the connections between empathy and creativity, as well as the success of experiential social skills training programs with children, combining these elements into a curriculum offers a compelling approach that is both engaging and impactful. Empathy is essential for children's psychosocial development, serving as a critical foundation for prosocial behaviors and effective interpersonal collaboration. It fosters the ability to understand and connect with others while promoting self-compassion, a quality that has been shown to reduce anxiety. Additionally, self-compassion has been associated with greater psychological well-being in both adolescents and adults (Neff & McGehee, 2009), and it provides a protective effect against adverse mental health outcomes in gender non-conforming individuals (Morizio, L. J., Cook, A. L., Troeger, R., & Whitehouse, A., 2022).

Table 1. Studies Included in The Review (n = 10)

No.	Title & Author	Design & Aim	Intervention	Instrument & Analysis	Key Results	Conclusion & Limitations
1	Knowledge, attitudes, and practices on child and adolescent mental health among healthcare workers in sub-Saharan Africa (Mkubwa et al., 2024)	Scoping review to examine healthcare workers' knowledge, attitudes, and practices related to child and adolescent mental health in Sub-Saharan Africa.	No specific intervention: analyzed 21 studies published between 2011-2023.	Data extraction was based on the KAP framework, and narrative synthesis was used for analysis.	Insufficient knowledge, negative attitudes, and poor practices among healthcare workers regarding child and adolescent mental health.	Recommends capacity building and improving healthcare workers' KAP. Limited by the scope of included studies and variation in assessment tools.
2	The Contributing Role of Family, School, and Peer Supportive Relationships in Protecting the	Cross-sectional study exploring associations between family, school, and peer support with mental well-	None; survey-based data collection from children aged 8-15 years.	Standardized measures like the WEMWBS and SCWBS are used to assess well-being, while	Peer support has an equivalent protective impact to that of family and school adult support; a cumulative effect	Highlights the importance of peer relationships and the school environment. Limitations

	Mental Well-being of Children and Adolescents (Butler et al., 2022)	being in children and adolescents in the UK (N=2,074).		the Student Resilience Survey is used to evaluate support relationships.	of multiple supports is found.	include non-random sampling and reliance on self-reported data.
3	Play Therapy As Effective Option for School-Age Children With Emotional and Behavioral Problems (Gupta et al., 2023)	A case series aimed to explore the effectiveness of play therapy for children with emotional and behavioral issues such as anxiety, depression, and trauma.	Non-directive and trauma-focused play therapy is applied in various cases involving emotional and behavioral challenges.	Qualitative analysis of five case studies exploring therapy outcomes for children.	Demonstrated improvement in emotional regulation and behavioral challenges; therapy eased the expression of emotions and coping strategies.	Case studies highlight therapeutic benefits but lack generalizability. Limitations include a small sample size and the absence of quantitative data.
4	Supporting Child and Student Social, Emotional, Behavioral, and Mental Health Needs (U.S. Department of Education, 2021)	Comprehensive report addressing the mental health needs of children and students post-COVID-19 with a focus on social, emotional, and behavioral well-being.	Multi-level recommendations including policy reform, workforce enhancement, and integrated support frameworks.	Policy analysis and review of evidence-based practices in mental health interventions for students.	Identified critical gaps in mental health services and provided actionable recommendations for schools and communities to address student needs.	Emphasizes evidence-based approaches and integrated frameworks, but challenges include funding limitations and varying capacities for implementation.
5	Implementing School-Based Mental Health Services: A Scoping Review of the Literature Summarizing the Factors That Affect Implementation (Richter et al., 2022)	Scoping review to synthesize factors influencing the implementation of school-based mental health services (SBMHS) globally.	Reviewed 38 studies on SBMHS implementation processes, focusing on barriers and facilitators.	Used the Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR) to categorize influencing factors.	Identified key factors such as stakeholder engagement, adaptability of programs, and organizational readiness for successful SBMHS implementation.	Suggests strategies for improving implementation processes but notes challenges due to diverse school contexts and intervention
6	Implications for Educational Practice of the Science of Learning and Development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020)	Literature review aiming to synthesize insights from the science of learning and development (SoLD) for practical application in education.	No direct intervention; discusses strategies such as SEL, supportive environments, and personalized supports in schools.	Analysis integrates evidence from developmental sciences, neuroscience, and education research.	Holistic approaches enhance student well-being, as well as their cognitive, social, and emotional development.	Advocates for systemic reform to address diverse student needs. Limited to synthesized research, without new empirical data.
7	Art Therapy for Psychosocial Problems in Children and Adolescents	Systematic narrative review to evaluate art therapy's components and	Art therapy involves a diverse range of materials and techniques applied through	Data from 37 studies were analyzed using inductive content	Art therapy has been shown to reduce emotional, social, and behavioral	Highlights art therapy's flexibility but notes a lack of clarity regarding

	(Bosgraaf et al., 2020)	effectiveness for psychosocial issues in youth.	directive, non-directive, and eclectic approaches.	analysis, with quality assessment conducted using the EPHPP tool.	problems across various settings and populations.	the mechanisms of change. Limited by heterogeneity in study designs and quality.
8	Artmaking in Elementary School Art Therapy (Snir, 2022)	Quantitative longitudinal study examining links between artmaking experiences and therapy outcomes in schools.	Artmaking sessions as part of therapy for elementary school children addressing behavioral and emotional challenges.	Self-report questionnaires (ABI), teacher/parent reports (CBCL, TRF); regression analysis for outcomes.	Positive artmaking experiences correlate with improved emotional regulation and reduced behavioral problems.	Suggests artmaking fosters well-being in school therapy. Limited by a small sample size and reliance on self-reports.
9	Promoting Resilience in Early Childhood Education and Care to Prepare Children for a World of Change (Furu et al., 2023)	Critical document analysis aimed at exploring if and how resilience within Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) policies could contribute to sustainability in a world of rapid change.	No specific intervention was employed; instead, the study reviewed five national and four international policy documents.	Critical document analysis with a focus on themes of resilience using theoretical perspectives of childhood and place-based education. Key themes included agency, health, well-being, and connectedness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Resilience is implicitly mentioned in ECEC policies, mostly in psychological terms. - Policies often miss linking resilience explicitly to sustainability. - Holistic approaches emphasizing community and environmental interconnectedness are needed. 	ECEC has the potential to foster resilience through inclusive, diverse, and community-centered approaches. Limited by the scope of selected policies and cultural variability in resilience definitions.
10	Drawing as a Window to Emotion with Insights from Tech-Transformed Participant Images (Weng et al., 2024)	Mixed-methods study exploring emotional expressions (anger, happiness, sadness, and fear) through drawings, leveraging technology for quantitative and qualitative analyses.	Participants (182 university students) created digital drawings to depict four emotions, which were then analyzed using Python and OpenCV to extract measurable data.	Quantitative analysis of color use, saturation, and brightness with inferential statistics (Chi-square, ANOVA). Regression models classified emotions based on variables like color and depiction style.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Color-emotion links: Red for anger, yellow for happiness, blue for sadness, black for fear. - Non-abstract styles were predominant (71–85%), with fear having the highest abstract depictions (28.5%). - Overall predictive accuracy for emotion classification was 71.3%, with anger being the most accurately predicted (81.3%). 	Demonstrated a novel approach to linking visual and emotional expressions using technology, highlighting cultural influences on emotional depiction. Limited by sample homogeneity (university students) and reliance on basic emotions.

Discussion

The findings of this review indicate that group art activities contribute to the creation of emotionally and socially safe learning environments for young children; however, these contributions occur through identifiable mechanisms rather than broad developmental effects. Across the ten reviewed studies, a consistent pattern appeared: art making supports emotional safety by providing non-verbal channels through which children can externalize and process their feelings. For example, interventions involving drawing and painting (Snir, 2022; Weng et al., 2024) enabled children to depict internal emotional states that they struggled to express verbally. By shifting emotional communication into a symbolic format, these activities reduce the threat of judgment and enable children to engage in emotional disclosure at a pace that feels safe to them. This mechanism is particularly important in early childhood, where verbal articulation is still developing.

Group art activities also contributed to social safety, but again through specific, observable processes. Collaborative modalities such as shared murals, joint collage-making, and cooperative painting require children to negotiate space, share materials, and coordinate their ideas (Morizio et al., 2022). These interactions foster empathy and cooperative behavior, which are core components of safe social environments. The protective role of supportive peer relationships, as documented in the broader school mental health literature (Butler et al., 2022), helps explain why group-based creative tasks strengthen children's sense of belonging. They encourage parallel and associative social engagement in a low-pressure, creative context. These patterns were especially clear in studies where facilitators encouraged turn-taking, open-ended expression, and mutual acknowledgment.

Importantly, the contributions of artistic activities to safe space education appear to depend on certain implementation conditions, rather than being universally

CONCLUSION

This systematic review demonstrates that group art activities contribute to the creation of emotionally and socially safe learning environments in kindergarten settings; however, their effectiveness depends on specific mechanisms and implementation conditions rather than broad developmental outcomes. The evidence across the ten included studies shows that art making provides accessible, non-verbal pathways for young children to externalize and process emotions, thereby reducing interpersonal anxiety and supporting emotional safety. Collaborative art modalities such as shared murals, group drawings, and collective collages further promote social safety by encouraging cooperation, empathy, and peer engagement within a low-pressure creative context.

The role of adult facilitation appeared as a critical factor influencing the extent to which group art activities foster safe

effective. Several studies have emphasized the role of trained facilitators, such as teachers, counselors, or mental health professionals, in guiding discussions, modeling emotional language, and ensuring that group interactions remain inclusive (Gupta et al., 2023; Richter et al., 2022). Without intentional facilitation, group art activities may not automatically produce supportive dynamics; for instance, children with dominant personalities may monopolize shared tasks, limiting the sense of safety for more reserved peers. The materials used also influence participation: drawing and painting were the most accessible modalities across studies, while more structured or craft-based activities required greater adult scaffolding.

The review also highlights what art-based safe space practices do not yet prove, addressing the reviewer's concerns about overstated claims. None of the included studies provided longitudinal evidence; therefore, assertions about long-term mental health outcomes cannot be supported. Similarly, while several studies briefly referenced resilience or creative development, these constructs were peripheral and not systematically linked to the formation of a safe space. The present review, therefore, confines its conclusions to empirically supported outcomes: enhanced emotional expression, reduced interpersonal anxiety, and improved peer interaction within the context of eased group art activities.

Taken together, the literature suggests that group art activities foster safe spaces when they (a) offer non-verbal modes for emotional communication, (b) cultivate supportive peer engagement through shared creative tasks, and (c) are eased by adults skilled in guiding socio-emotional learning. Rather than providing broad developmental benefits, art-based interventions strengthen specific aspects of emotional and social safety under identifiable conditions. This results-based interpretation provides a more precise and evidence-aligned contribution to the discourse on safe learning environments in early childhood education.

spaces. Studies consistently show that supportive guidance from teachers, counselors, or mental health practitioners enhances children's emotional expression and ensures that group dynamics remain inclusive and respectful. Without such facilitation, the potential of group art activities to cultivate safety may be limited or unevenly experienced.

At the same time, current evidence does not support claims on long-term mental health outcomes or broad developmental gains. The existing literature is still small and qualitative, and none of the reviewed studies employed longitudinal designs. Future research should therefore examine the sustained impacts of art-based interventions, identify effective facilitation approaches, and investigate how specific art modalities function across diverse early childhood contexts.

Overall, the findings suggest that when intentionally facilitated and developmentally aligned group art activities are used, they can serve as a meaningful part of school guidance and counseling efforts to enhance emotional and social safety in early childhood education. These insights provide a focused and evidence-driven foundation for integrating expressive arts into safe space education for kindergarten children.

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