

## **Children offer snapshot of troubled lives**

Ashleigh Raper reported this story on Friday, February 19, 2010

SHANE MCLEOD: Now to the treatment of people who've suffered trauma and in particular children.

One method that's often used to help children to cope with trauma and loss is creative arts programs - anything from art classes to learning a musical instrument.

Now a Sydney-based organisation is taking a chance on a form of art therapy that's more often used with adults.

Children were given a disposable camera and asked to take pictures that express their lives and now the results are now going on show.

Ashleigh Raper reports from the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney.

ASHLEIGH RAPER: Walking into the art exhibition it's hard not to notice the beautiful view of Sydney Harbour. But looking around the room at the pictures resting on easels the focus quickly shifts.

One of the photographers is 11-year-old Ethan. He explains why he took a picture of a letterbox overflowing with mail.

ETHAN: Because sometimes I feel lonely like the letterbox. Like no-one has looked at it or taken out anything from it for ages. It's like been forgotten. Because sometimes I feel a bit lonely and I thought I should take a photo of that to show that sometimes I feel lonely.

ASHLEIGH RAPER: For privacy and legal reasons it can't be reported what Ethan has been through but he's one of 20 children who've taken part in a program that's aimed at helping them deal with trauma.

The KidsXpress program uses music and drama as a way of providing them with an outlet to express their emotions and has been running since 2006.

This year photography was added. Photography has been used before to help adults suffering from mental illness but the KidsXpress chief executive Margo Ward took some convincing that it would work for children.

MARGO WARD: So this was an extension to what we normally do. I pondered over it for quite some time, being very aware that the children we were going to be doing this with were children who had been through some fairly difficult times in their life.

ASHLEIGH RAPER: Now she's seen the results.

MARGO WARD: One of the children who didn't used to be able to meet eye contact with you at all when he started the program is now totally engrossed in photography and thinks it's the most wonderful thing. And his father told me today his learning skills have gone through the roof. He's now having conversations he's never had before.

So this exhibit has actually given the children another platform to extend what they already learnt at KidsXpress.

ASHLEIGH RAPER: The brains behind the exhibition curator Vince Lovecchio says he was blown away by what the children came up with.

VINCE LOVECCHIO: If there's one word to sum it up for me personally and that's remarkable. Remarkable in the sense that they have accomplished the task they were set out to do with maturity.

There are some 11-year-olds in this exhibition who not only had reached their goal aesthetically but there is an incredibly emotive level in the photograph and that's a difficult thing to do. These photographs have such an honesty about them.

ASHLEIGH RAPER: A tree standing alone, a rusted wheel and a closed gate are just some of the images that the children chose to show how they felt.

Margo Ward says that's helped them deal with what they've been through.

MARGO WARD: Life comes in a whole range of different emotions and therefore they all need to be expressed.

I fear sometimes that we're bringing children up to believe happiness is only the emotion we need to express and these children have brought forth much more than that.

And I'm thrilled we didn't get a whole lot of photos of cupcakes and we didn't get a whole lot of photos of flowers. We got things and comments and narratives back from children that really meant something to them.

ASHLEIGH RAPER: Talking to Ethan it's clear that he has insight into his emotions. In the gallery he points out his favourite picture.

ETHAN: It's a sign that looks like it's been run over by a truck.

ASHLEIGH RAPER: So why is this your favourite?

ETHAN: Well I like how it's been like practically flat on the ground. Sometimes I feel sad and flat and stuff.

SHANE MCLEOD: Eleven-year-old Ethan ending that report from Ashleigh Raper.