Art therapy to help children and young people cope with the consequences of meningitis is being offered by the Meningitis Trust.

Meningitis can strike in an instant, but the effects can be permanent. They include brain damage and the loss of limbs, hearing or sight.

Although counselling may help adults, young children do not always have the verbal skills to articulate their concerns.

Some young people experience long-term psychological effects and the trust found that many were unable to express their distress in counselling. In response, a free, nationwide art therapy service has been introduced to help them cope.

Meningitis Trust services and education director Bridie Taylor says: ‘Meningitis can cause devastating life changes. We see the trauma the disease can cause, and do not want people to suffer in silence.’

A safe place

Art psychotherapist Helen Jury divides her art sessions into two. She says: ‘First I sit with the child while they work in whatever medium they choose, so they have a safe, encouraging presence and can get involved in their own world.

‘Then I look at what they have produced and ask what they were thinking about when they made it and what it represents. ‘After a difficult illness, there are often confused emotions and fears. Some children have already learned to dissemble and it is harder to get through to them. Others are open to a resolution and ready to acknowledge their feelings.’

The service is provided by a network of therapists registered with the British Association of Art Therapists. Initially, six one-hour sessions are offered, but more are available. They take place in a friendly and confidential environment.

‘The Meningitis Trust believes that as many as 500,000 people in the UK have had viral or bacterial meningitis. This means that a city with a population of 250,000 will have about 2,000 residents who have had some form of the disease. In each average-size town, there will be around 36 new cases every year.

The charity helps more than 20,000 people each year through its free support services, which include a 24-hour nurse-led helpline, counselling, home visits, one-to-one contact and community support.

Means of expression

Ms Taylor adds: ‘Children use art therapy to demonstrate their feelings. They can express themselves and explore their thoughts in a safe and confidential environment.’

The sessions are available to siblings of the affected child, who are often shocked by the infection and the disruption it has caused to their family. Some are upset because they have seen their mother tearful and frightened. Others may bear long-term consequences if their parents become overprotective.

Ms Jury says it can be hard to assess how effective art therapy is. ‘The nature of the artwork may change, or I might notice a sense of ease or contentment in the child,’ she says.

‘The benefit of using this therapy with children is that they are more in touch with their creative side’ NS

Jenny Knight is a freelance journalist

For further information go to www.meningitis-trust.org.uk

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