

ART IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

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The large yellow-toothed, red-eyed monster loomed large over the bed, "...and I could put pretzels on a plate for him, and maybe a banana... and two, no- one marshmellow...". This is an excerpt of a conversation a five year old client was having with me as she carefully drew marshmellow and banana shapes on a plate. We were working on a "drawing plan" to help her gain control over a recurring nightmare. The drawing then became the map of the plan, which was later put into action. These offerings of pretzel, banana, and marshmellow under Jessica's bed successfully tamed her nightmare monster, and turned a hideous creature who appeared "all mouth" into a curiosity.

In my experience working with children, moving an abstract notion (nightmare) into a concrete image is a turning point in their ability to manage extreme unsettling emotions. For Jessica the concretizing and externalizing of the monster figure enabled her to manage her fear long enough to work toward creating a solution.

It is difficult for me to write about art therapy as the influence and impact of the work is in the "doing of it". My hope in writing about Jessica's therapy is to illustrate the use of art in therapy. I'll continue with a discussion about art therapy from the perspective of how and what art expression contributes to the psychotherapy process. The following article is based on many of Harriet Wadson (1980) ideas.

IMAGERY

Much of preverbal thinking takes the form of images. As infants we recognize our parents by sight long before we have words to explain them. Imagery continues to be a central feature in our experience. A corner of a nightstand with a photograph, a narrow hall leading to a staircase, a stand of fir trees at a particular time of day and season. These experiences play a part in the formation of our personality development. They are loaded with value and quality that informs our feelings, thoughts, and beliefs. Freud (1963) talks about dreams being experienced primarily in visual images. Images created in art therapy are a fertile source from which experiments, explanations, and discoveries can be made. It is powerful to watch the impact a freshly created image has on a client, seems a symbol of their existence, a mark in time and space.

IMAGES/WORDS

Verbalization is our primary mode of communication, we are more adept at manipulating it. In that art expression (as adults) is less schooled, we are less able to be in control. Often surprises or

accidents appear on paper or clay which become a well-spring for insight, learning, and growth. For children, making art seems a natural language. Children have a certain ease and facility with art materials that often surpasses their verbal ability. Pictures may spur development of language around difficult thoughts and feelings. Emotional responses tapped by the painted image can be experienced in the safety and containment of the therapy room, which seems to function as a rehearsal or practice for the real thing.

Verbalization is a linear communication, with rules of language, logic and sequence. Art is spatial in nature, unrestricted by rules of logic and sequence. Many complexities can be shown at one time. When working with a family, it is possible to engage them together on one large paper to graphically describe the family constellation and how it works. Multi-layered perspectives can then be clarified and worked with.

THE ART WORK

The production of a tangible object acts as a projection screen for clients who initially have difficulty recognizing and owning their feelings. The ability to separate from feelings, yet have the feelings embodied in the artwork, seems to be a valuable step in the process of recognition, ownership, and hopefully, integration. An art piece is permanent. This permanence has an interesting effect. It serves as a document to a process, and is not subjected to the distortions of time and memory. The art can be used in many ways - to track growth, document change, distinguish past, present, and future, or to illustrate and delve into an experience or feeling state. The art pieces provide an opportunity for the therapist to know the client's experience on a different level. It is a direct statement from the client involving the presence of the therapist which demands a different sort of attention. I've found this to enhance and broaden the therapeutic alliance.

This brings me full circle, back to Jessica and her nightmare work. The origins of her monster figure remain a mystery. We were able, however, with the employment of her creativity and artwork to bring her to a place where she could face and manage her fears, by her own hand.

Wadson, H. 1980. Art psychotherapy. NY. Wiley and Sons.

Freud, S. 1963. New introductory lecture on psychoanalysis (ed. Stachery). Part II: dreams., Vol XV London, Hogarth Press.