

Notes from the President Trudy Post-Sprunk

Recently I saw a young child named Julie ¹ who is a good example of how depression often is hidden behind a variety of symptoms. Play therapy is often an excellent way to deal with the underlying depression, perhaps without labeling it as such.

"Undoubtedly, depression has affected people for many thousands of years. It was the only recognized mental illness in antiquity and its description in the writings of Hippocrates ...rivals any modern description in clarity and perceptiveness. Today it is found in all countries and cultures" ² that children often mask typical depressive symptoms such as sullenness, withdrawal, etc. Instead, they try "to relive or act out an emotional problem through antisocial acts..." ³ My point is that the behavior we see, often is not the problem. The problem lies below the surface. It is the role of the play therapist to look below the surface and not to grant the surface manifestations relevance which is not warranted.

Julie is a five year old who was brought to therapy by her mother who was an attractive professional woman in her mid-thirties. Since her parents had separated, Julie had become uncooperative and aggressive. In addition, she began manifesting regressive symptoms such as bed wetting, poor fine motor skills, and inattentiveness. Her parents were puzzled by the inconsistent manifestation of her behaviors.

Often a child with these kinds of behaviors goes undiagnosed or is diagnosed with a behavior disorder. I suspected that Julie was depressed.

In the play room, Julie spent only a few minutes exploring before she found a miniature bride and groom. Taking these toys to the sand box, she angrily thrust them head first into the sand, leaving only their legs showing.

Next, she found several soldiers and army tanks and carefully encircled the bride and groom with a massive show of weaponry

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The soldiers then fired at the couple's legs. It was clear to me that she used this opportunity to express her rage about her parent's pending divorce.

After several rounds, Julie seemed calmer and left the sandbox to work with black markers and black construction paper. For several weeks, she acted out this scenario and slight variations thereof. Repeating a distressing scenario many times is usually necessary for healing.

Then she reached a turning point. One day she stood the couple upright in the back of the sandbox, cleared a circle of sand until the blue bottom of the sand box could be seen. She stood a woman and a girl figure of the edge of the table. Opposite these two figures, she placed a five inch sun.

Julie's behavior improved briefly until her parent's divorce was finalized and her father disappeared from her life. She said he had pulled too many "markers" and had to go away.

All children feel the loss of a parent through divorce and Julie was no different. We should not underestimate the loss that children feel in divorce situations. "The loss in divorce may not be final as in death, although many children do lose touch with one parent, but it involves loss of familiar places, from friends and relatives, and a change in standard of living

For Julie, the most significant change came when her father moved out and her grandparents moved in. She

became emotionally distant with her grandfather with whom she had been close. Nevertheless, he continued to provide reassurance, love, and caring. His efforts paid off when she eventually allowed a return of the closeness.

Toward the end of the therapy, Julie buried an adult male figure in a mountain of sand and place a cross over it. To her this was a burial plot. It was a key to me that she was nearing completion of her therapy process.

At the art center, she filled pages of construction paper with bright paint...first, a black page, then a pink page, and finally a light blue page. She no longer acted out and resumed doing well academically.

I believe that Julie will most probably always think of her parents as a couple. However, she is no longer depressed about their divorce and its effect on her life. She was able to bring her conflicts to the playroom, play them out with the aid of toys, and have the support of her family. The result was that her depressive symptoms dissipated.

1) Her name and other identifying factors have been changed.

2) McKnew, D. H., Cytryn, L., and Yohraes H. Why Isn't Johnny Crying? W.W. Norton and company Inc. New York. Page 21.

3) McKnew, D. H., Cytryn, L., and Yohraes H. Why Isn't Johnny Crying? W.W. Norton and company Inc. New York. Page 44.

4) McMahon L. The Handbook of Play Therapy Rutledge, London and New York. Page 143.