

# EXPRESSIVE PLAY THERAPY FOR HELPING TRAUMATIZED CHILDREN

## INTRODUCTION

Many of the children I see in Therapy come because of various problems such as having been abused, having been deprived, having suffered from some kind of loss or trauma. As well, they often have indiscriminately watched excessive amounts of television and have been exposed to an on-going onslaught of stimulation such as extremely loud music, video games, etc. They thus are exposed to age inappropriate images, which they imitate and that leave them over stimulated and confused. Since all the images are being made for them (images from television, toys made with every detail), their imagination becomes atrophied. One sees pale looking children who no longer know how to play creatively, have lost their ability to become actively involved and express themselves in a creative way. They will tell you they cannot paint or draw and become restless and anxious in a room without music in the background. If they do play, they mostly imitate and re-enact what they have seen on television. Their senses are so blunted and de-sensitized that they no longer see, hear or feel their natural surroundings from which they are alienated. Thus we often see in therapy children who, without the adequate protection of the parent/child bond have been at the mercy of an overwhelming chaotic environment which depersonalizes them, pollutes their inner world of imagination as well as undermines their ability to integrate their experiences by playing them out.

How can we as therapists counteract such effects as well as provide treatment within the weekly one-hour session? I attempted to resolve such a problem by developing a method in which each component (the child/therapist relationship, the milieu where the therapy takes place and the techniques used in therapy) is not only a tool of

treatment but also counteracts some aspect of the negative effects of media and technology as previously mentioned. Before I describe the components of my method in detail I will first consider the philosophical underpinnings which led me to this particular way of working with children.

## Principles Underlying Treatment

The methods I use in my therapeutic work are based on my concepts of human beings (garnered from the works of Jung (1960); Rogers (1961); and Steiner (1923) as having within them an innate wisdom which, if given a chance to be experienced, will lead the person to health, in his own unique way. The experience of my work with children has confirmed this conviction. Therefore, I see my role as facilitating this inner connecting and fostering the healing process. The healing comes from two directions: from the inside out and from the outside in.

The "inside-out" process takes place when the child releases the inner tensions and expressed feelings, giving expression to them in a creative way, using his imagination and sense of initiative.

The "outside-in" healing process originates in the environment the child is exposed to. A general attempt is made to provide varied, enriching and soothing sense impressions in a nurturing atmosphere that provides both freedom and safety. The link between the "inside-out" process and the "outside-in" process is the relationship as developed between the child and the therapist in the milieu in which the therapy occurs.

## The Major Components

**The Relationship.** The relationship, which develops between the child and the therapist, is crucial to the whole process.

The main tool of therapy is the therapist herself. As Carl Rogers (1961) described it, the main qualities the therapist needs to bring into the session are: being real, being unconditionally accepting, being understanding, and being able to communicate all this in her ability to be totally there for the client. In order to do this I must be in tune with myself, the child, and the stage of our relationship. I always keep in mind the child's uniqueness and innate wisdom, thus giving him a sense that I have faith that he has within him the power and resources necessary to create whatever world he chooses to share with me, in whatever way he chooses to do so. All this is done at times verbally but mostly non-verbally in my general attitude. I have never met a child, no matter how emotionally disturbed who did not respond to this attitude and did not form with me a positive relationship. This gave him the support necessary to develop the strength to eventually face his painful feelings, work through them and discover new strength he never suspected he had. Such "psychological holding" is necessary for a child's emotional and mental health. The relationship is indispensable to the reparation of the damage and the main facilitator and container of the self-healing process.

**The milieu.** By milieu I refer to the environment in which the therapy sessions take place. My goal in setting up a therapy-room was to create a safe and protected space, which would facilitate the self-healing process and reflect the sacredness of such a process. I chose to locate it in a small building in the back of my house rather than in an office building. In this way it allows for both the privacy such work demands and the intimacy and connectedness to the rest of my life. This, I feel, gives the child a greater sense of protection and being inwardly carried, as he struggles to find himself.

Inside the therapy-room I have tried to create a milieu where a child, who has been bombarded with chaotic, harsh, painful and

age inappropriate sense impressions, can now be exposed to a soothing, harmonious environment. The walls are painted in white with a warm rosy tinge. The room is well lit with windows that look onto the garden where the child can see flowers and vegetables grow and birds come and feed. A small door opens out onto the garden, which can also be used as an extension of the therapy-room. All furniture is made out of stained wood. There is a lot of drapery made out of light silk and dyed in a soft peach-blossom colour.

The layout of the room is very versatile. It allows freedom of movement and imagination and encourages creativity. It can be spacious and at the same time offers many enclosed, cozy spaces. It can be used in a variety of ways and lends itself to many activities (painting, woodwork, play therapy, drama, etc.). For instance, a stage was built in such a way that it could be used to put on a show, or to build a fort, or be used as a puppet theatre. The space under it can be used for storing or to crawl into.

All the material used, whether art materials or toys, have as much as possible the following qualities: (a) they offer harmonious, enriching sense impressions; (b) they are easy to manipulate, ensure successful results, and minimize frustration; (c) they are neutral enough that their form allows for the greatest possible freedom of imagination. For example, a box full of large pieces of coloured cloth, made out of jute, cotton, silk, velour is available to the child who chooses to play dressup. The colours and the textures of the various pieces of material have properties of their own (e.g. from a bright red velvet to a light blue silk, to a rough brown jute). The youngest child with the greatest motor difficulties can handle cloth. There is no limit to how a piece of cloth can be used (e.g. from a cloak, to a tent, to a weapon, etc.).

**Nature corner.** As a part of the nurturing environment I have set up a "nature corner". This is where I display many objects from nature, which can also be used in a variety of ways in the play sessions. These objects include crystals and stones of various kinds, shells, driftwood, pine cones, acorns, feathers, etc. In this corner I also put arrangement of branches and flowers in season. My goal in doing this is to expose the child to the richness of nature with its various textures, colours and forms. I see this as a way of helping him reconnect with his sense of wonder and his sense of belonging to a world, which is both predictable and every changing, thus counteracting the desensitization and alienation from his natural environment. Celebrations and rituals have decreased significantly in our modern way of life. The child must experience a rhythm in daily life in order to develop a sense of trust, safety, and inner security. The child and I celebrate the seasonal festivals. Such celebrations are a way of providing him with extra support and nurturing. We also celebrate birthdays and saying goodbye at the end of the therapy process. On such occasions we decorate the nature corner with simple ornaments we have made. We then will read a story, sing and play music or paint together, depending on the child's mode of self-expression. The theme of whatever activity the child chooses is related to the occasion (e.g. painting a birthday picture, singing a goodbye song). Then we have some special food at the table that has also been decorated accordingly (e.g. a gingerbread man at Christmas, a small birthday cake with birthday candles). I also give the child a small present I have made myself. This acts as a reminder of the positive and nurturing nature of our time together (e.g. a small gnome the child particularly liked, a candle, a small puppet).

**Ending the session.** Another important part of the atmosphere and environment created for the therapy is the ritual I have established at the end of each session. The

last ten minutes are spent sitting in the "cozy corner". This corner is next to the "nature corner" up on the stage. It is made up of hanging drapery and cushions to sit on. There is also a small table with a red velvet cloth on it, a beeswax candle and a crystal next to it. From where the child sits, he can survey the whole room. He can see the flowers and branches in the nature corner in front of him. The child lights the candle with a taper. I give him his favorite food and at times tell a short story, which often has to do with transformation of dark into light, with hope and trust in life. We then have a quiet time; the child makes a wish and blows out the candle. I have found this ritual very useful as a way of ending the session on a predictable, nurturing note. It also acts as a transition between the therapy time and going back into the world.

These sessions take place on a weekly basis for an hour, on the same day, at the same time. This establishes a rhythm, a point of stability in the life of the child, something he learns to count on.

Every element that constitutes the milieu is there to contribute to the creation of a free and protected space, which has, in itself, healing properties. The milieu is also there to provide the child with images of nurturing he can later internalize and build some ego strength from.

### **Techniques**

In the course of a therapy session I use a variety of techniques which come under the term of expressive therapies. These include art therapy, sandplay, play therapy, music, storytelling, crafts, photography, outings, cooking and play with companion animals. Art and play therapy are the main modes of therapy but the age, need and inclination of the child determine the choice is a particular technique.

The choice of these particular techniques is based on the crucial role of symbolic expression and imagination in mental health.

This is based on the Jungian approach to the psyche, which says that the unconscious manifests itself to consciousness through images or dreams and fantasies. Jung further describes how in order to function, especially in time of stress, the ego (the directing principle of the conscious) needs to draw on the richness and wisdom of the images of the unconscious. Therefore our well being depends on opening the pathway between the conscious and the unconscious; the images that rise out of the unconscious must be brought into awareness and be taken seriously by being made tangible through symbolic expression. This can be done through art, sandplay, writing, or any form of symbolic expression.

In the case of children who come into therapy and whose predicament I have earlier described, the pathway is blocked. A cork has been formed out of all the repressed painful feelings due to the experiences, the onslaught of images from their environment, etc. As well, the inner power of imagination has gone dormant. In order to open and release the repressed energy, one must make a space and time available for these negative, destructive feelings to come out in the form of images, and simultaneously exercise and encourage the power of imagination to come back to use. Once such feelings have been let go, once the energy is released and the imagination is working, the child can access his inner richness and wisdom.

This has been the first of two articles provided for us by

**Marie Jose Dhaese**, PhD. ATR, CET, RPT-S  
Centre for Expressive Therapy  
Hornby Island, B.C. VORIZO, Canada  
Marie Jose Dhaese has worked 30 years in child therapy. I was privileged to attend an all day pre-conference session presented by her at this year's APT conference in Portland. It is my hope you are able to gather some of the essence of her wisdom, belief, and practice. The winter issue of our

newsletter will feature the second article which elaborates on her specific techniques of expressive art.