

**EXPRESSIVE PLAY THERAPY
FOR HELPING TRAUMATIZED CHILDREN
PART III**

This is the third in a series of articles provided for us by Marie Jose Dhaese, Ph.D., ATR, CET, RPT-S. In Part III, she presents us with more techniques that she has used in her work with children over the past 30 years. Ms. Dhaese founded the Centre for Expressive Therapy on Hornby Island, British Columbia, Canada. To find out more about her work, go to

MUSIC

Singing and music making can also be used as a therapeutic tool. The materials. The musical instruments are normally stored away on shelves. They are brought out according to the age, need and inclination of the child. The instruments available are drums, tambourines, and bells of various kinds, cymbals, and a xylophone. There is also a Kantele, a string instrument that is tuned in pentatonic scale and therefore only makes harmonious sounds. I attempt to provide instruments that easily lend themselves to the expression of the whole range of moods and feelings (e.g. the drum can convey aggressive feelings, the Kantele a more introspective mood, the bells happiness, etc.). How and when it is used. Music is used either as part of the play or with some children it is used, on occasion as a main mode of self-expression. The child then uses it in the same way as another child might use art. It is for him a safe way of releasing repressed feelings that is also ego strengthening. It can also be a step towards verbalizing feelings, as when the child is asked to give the music played a title or when he sings a song about his life, pain and wishes. In some situations I use singing as a way of reflecting back to the child what he is doing and expressing in his activities, or as a way of summing up the sessions. For instance, I now work with a mentally handicapped boy who responds to singing and not the spoken word. Singing has become our way of verbally communicating in the session. I also use playing a piece of music together as a way of interacting and forming a relationship with children who are more comfortable with that particular medium than with art. We both take turns playing and also play together at the same time. In the case of a child with a limited range of expression of feelings, I use this exercise as an opportunity to introduce him to different possibilities (from loud to soft, from fast to slow). Music is a useful tool to help create a soothing, nurturing atmosphere as well as communicates acceptance and understanding. For instance, in the case of a child wanting to spend his time curled up under a blanket in the fetus position, I might play on the Kantele in a way that reflects, in the music, the mood of the child, as I sense it. Thus I found

that the use of music brings many more possibilities to the therapy session.

STORYTELLING

Storytelling is another form of symbolic expression, which encourages the use of imagination. It is a way of providing the child with images that will soothe the inner chaos and state of anxiety as well as enrich his world of imagination. Images can heal or destroy. Such images counteract the effects of the destructive ones the child has been exposed to. The materials. A variety of story books for children of various ages are stored on a shelf. Near it there is a rocking chair for the child to sit in while telling or being told a story. The "cozy corner" with its comfortable cushions is another possible place conducive to such an activity. How and when it is used. As mentioned before, storytelling, in the form of the child telling a story is used as a means of self-expression in conjunction with art and sandplay, when the child is encouraged to tell the story of the picture he drew or the world he created in the sandplay. Another way of encouraging the child to express himself symbolically in the form of a story is by suggesting making one up together. First we choose a theme, such as dreams, sadness, anger, Christmas, etc., then we each take turns and together we make up a story on that particular theme. In such an instance, storytelling can be used as a means of approaching painful subjects in a non-threatening way. I also use storytelling in the form of the child being told a story. At times I choose the story myself. I do this especially with children who have been deprived and have suffered various traumas. It is a way of providing them with nurturing images, which give a sense of hope, that darkness and despair can be overcome and transformed into light and warmth. Such stories also give examples of alternate ways of coping with life. Storytelling is sometimes followed by painting or drawing the images that stand out most for the child and discussing them to help him relate them to his own life. At times the child goes to the shelf and picks a story he wants to hear. This sometimes becomes a ritual at the beginning or at the end of each session. I once worked with a child who, for the first four months of therapy, asked me to read the same story at the beginning of each session. Storytelling is also used within the play session, as

a way of providing images that activate the self-healing process. Such stories are similar to guided fantasies, which I make up spontaneously during the play. They are related to what the child is struggling with and offer possible solutions. I often use images related to the ones the child has already created in his symbolic play. For instance to a child, who in her previous play sessions had been looking for a big white whale, I told a story, while she was hiding under a yellow cloth, about herself swimming in a river of golden water, finding the whale, riding it, playing in the water with it. I found that in other similar cases the children used such images later on in following play sessions and built on them to make new discoveries. In my experience, telling the child a story as part of the play is less threatening, and thereby more effective than using deliberate guided fantasy. I have found that storytelling is a very valuable tool of therapy both as a means of self-expression and a vehicle to provide nurturing images that activate the self-healing process.

CRAFTS

I only use two kinds of crafts: making soft toys and, in the winter, candle-making. **The materials.** In the "craft corner" I store a basket of uncarded wool dyed in many bright colours, a basket of pieces of felt of various colours, a sewing basket with needles, scissors, embroidery threads, pipe cleaners and old stockings. I also have hot plate and candlemaking materials (beeswax, wick).

How and when it is used. Elementary school age children choose to use crafts mostly of their own initiative. However I encourage children who are particularly inwardly lethargic to use crafts as it encourages them to use their hands, to use their imagination and to become involved in the creative process necessary to make something out of nothing. Crafts demand inner and outer involvement. It is an ego-strengthening, nurturing activity, which can also have a soothing and centering effect. For instance, I now see a child who begins each session by making a small gnome out of wool and felt. This gives her a chance to settle herself down, talk about her week, before she begins to play. I use candlemaking as part of celebrating the winter festival. On occasion I include the child's caregivers in such a session to expose them to a simple non-commercial way of celebrating, new to most parents I have met. In the case of a child who likes sewing and feels threatened by other modes of expression I may suggest to him, when relevant, that he make each member of his family, himself included, in the form of small dolls or finger puppets. As he chooses the colour of the clothes, the colour of the hair of each

one, whom he starts with, a lot of valuable information comes out. The child then begins to discuss his feelings about each member, the nature of this relationship to each one, etc. The next step is to make the dolls or puppets, talk to each other, re-enact family scenes and thus explore possible solutions to their problems.

OUTINGS

How and when it is used. I take on outings children aged ten and up who are at a stage where they need to release a lot of energy and can safely do so without the boundaries of the playroom. I have found that running in the woods or by the ocean, throwing stones in the water, burying them in the sand, climbing trees can be most therapeutic for such children. Going on a hike can be used as an ego-strengthening activity in which I involve children who are particularly lethargic and lack self-confidence. The goal is then to help them go beyond their usual physical limits and therefore discover new strengths. This is done with a lot of encouragement and awareness of safety. With children who have been deprived and have been minimally exposed to their natural surroundings, I make an effort to take them to a forest or a large park once during each season. For instance, in the winter we might go where there is new snow or before Christmas to gather cedar boughs to decorate their home. As we are walking we might make up stories or songs related to what we see. If we go by the ocean or up a small mountain I might take binoculars for them to look at blue herons, seals, eagles, mountain peaks, etc. I also bring a camera and food for a picnic. I have found that the beach and the woods can be a marvelous playroom, where, within the security of the relationship, the child can feel safe to release a lot of energy and make new discoveries about himself and the natural world around him.

FOOD

Nurturing being such an important element of the therapy process, I also use food as a concrete vehicle to provide the child with an opportunity to be fed and to feed himself. Cooking also provides nurturing because of the human contact involved in cooking together and eating together. In the same way as crafts and various art forms, it demands involvement of inner and outer capacities. Cooking can also be used as a means of self-expression. **The materials.** When working with a child who has asked to cook I bring a hot plate or toaster oven, a pot, a frying pan, or muffin tins or a cookie sheet. I also bring staples such as flour, eggs, milk, butter, etc. I keep in the room for every child a bowl of fruit of various kinds, a bowl of nuts, a jar of animal cookies, a jar of fruit juice and a cup and a plate.

How and when it is used. With children who have been deprived physically and emotionally. I find that, at the beginning of the therapy process, their main interest is food, and what they like best to do is cooking. We then bake together simple food such as muffins or make pancakes. In further sessions we may go on to making shapes out of cookie dough. The children can then begin to express themselves and use their imagination. Eventually we might go on to making and using coloured play dough. With this particular medium, the child can then express and resolve his painful feelings, as he feels ready to. At the beginning of such a process which might take several months, I am often the one doing most of the cooking and the child mostly the eating. By the end of such a process I am mostly watching the child and reflecting what he is expressing, just as I would with any other mode of therapy. I also use food as part of the closing ritual at the end of each session as previously described. I then give all children a piece of fruit, or a few cookies with a cup of juice. I serve it always on the same plate, and in the same cup. I soon learned that was very important to the children. I have found that giving the child food is an important metaphor to carry all the way through the therapy process. The concrete nurturing it provides allows the child to eventually move on to a more symbolic form of self-nurturance.

ANIMAL COMPANIONS (my co-therapists) I have found that with most children my two dogs, black standard poodles, act as an icebreaker, especially with teenagers. As my dogs show a lot of enthusiasm when a child comes back to see me, they make the child feel very welcome. When a child needs comfort and curls up in a corner, the dogs join him. Their quiet presence brings an added sense of safety and warmth to the playroom. When we go on outings they become the child's playmates as the child runs after them or plays hide and seek with them, etc. However, some children do not like dogs and in such a case I do not bring them to the playroom. In the case of a child actually being afraid of dogs, I might slowly introduce him to them. Usually after a few months, the child will proudly be walking down to the nearest park with the two dogs on leashes. For many children, especially the ones who have had mostly negative experiences with human beings, my dogs are the first creatures they are able to make warm, positive contact with. On the basis of such an experience they then allow themselves to do the same with me.

SUMMARY

With each of the techniques previously described in this paper, I keep in mind the major factors. First, that the purpose of each technique is to provide the

child with a tool to express the whole range of feelings and resolve them in a way he feels safe and comfortable with. Second, that the purpose is also to strengthen and engage his whole self and provide him with nurturing images he can internalize and build on, images which also counteract the noxious effects of his environment. The choice of techniques comes as a result of following the child, as he searches for his own unique means of self-expression. This demands a close observation of and feeling with the child, as well as a trust in the wisdom and healing capacities of his psyche. The relationship, the milieu, the techniques, altogether in their constant interaction, form the vessel which gives the child the emotional and physical safety and freedom necessary to psychologically heal himself as well as activate the healing potential that is within his psyche.