

FISHING FOR FEELINGS

INTRODUCTION

My well worn “Fishing For Feelings” game originated years ago in a therapy session with three siblings. It was a spur-of-the-moment elaboration of a much more mundane and boring feelings activity. The 11 yr old sister came up with the idea. With the help of her 6 yr old brother, she drew, colored, cut out, and paper-clipped a dozen brightly colored “feelings fish.” The 8 yr old sister and I scrounged for materials to create a fishing pole, and came up with a pencil, a telephone cord, and a refrigerator magnet.

Thus this greatly popular game--now a standard activity in my child and family counseling practice--was born. I have added a few new touches over the years: a boat (my swivel office chair), a pond (blue and green painted cardboard), more fish and a slightly more upscale fishing rod. But the game still has the look and feel of a spontaneous, homemade game. As such, it is not only useful in its own right, but also serves as an inspiration to other children and families to create their own unique, home-made “feelings game.” (see Description, Step 6)

RATIONALE

The typical child who comes into therapy has some difficulties in his or her ability to recognize, label, and appropriately express emotions. The Fishing for Feelings game provides several benefits for the child:

- ◆ Used in the early stages of therapy, the fun nature of the activity helps to establish rapport between the child and the therapist, and lowers the child's anxiety about exploring uncomfortable emotions and situations.
- ◆ The activity aids the assessment process, by providing the child a means to comfortably convey information about emotions, about his or her perceptions of the situations that precipitated the emotions, and about behavioral reactions.
- ◆ In playing the game, a child with a limited "feelings vocabulary" learns new terms that will help him or her to more accurately recognize and label emotions.
- ◆ The discussion that ensues can help the child to make the important connection between precipitating events, perceptions, feelings, and behavioral reactions.
- ◆ The problematic emotions, situations and behaviors that the child identifies during the game can be integrated into the treatment plan, thus modeling a problem-solving procedure for the child.
- ◆ Use of the game with a family (and also the invitation for the family to invent their own "feelings game") provides insight into family dynamics and also an opportunity to model, teach, and support healthy communication skills.

DESCRIPTION

Materials needed (Use your creativity to come up with your own version of these items!):

- 1) "Fishing pole" with magnet on the end of the line.
- 2) Cutout "fish" with a paper clip placed at the "mouth" of each fish and one feeling-word written on each fish.

3) Optional: fishing pond, boat, bucket and/or cooking pot.

Step 1: Therapist introduces activity. (“Hey, would you like to go fishing? ... OK, now what do you need to go fishing?” This is the therapist’s opportunity to ham it up, introducing the boat, pond, pole, fish, etc. in ways that will arouse the child’s interest and sense of playfulness. Be sure to explain that these fish are “feelings fish”.)

Step 2: Child throws the line among the fish and pulls gently until magnet “catches” one of the fish. Child pulls up fish and reads the feeling word.

Step 3: Therapist asks the child to tell about a time that he or she experienced that feeling. Therapist can follow up with additional questions as appropriate, to elicit information about child’s perception of the precipitating event, child’s behavioral response, etc. Then fish can be placed in a “bucket” or “cooking pot”, etc.

Step 4: Continue the process as long as interest holds and time allows. Therapist may want to take a turn as well, taking the child’s needs into consideration and carefully steering the discussion along lines that will be helpful for the child.

Step 5: At a later time, therapist may want to use information that the child introduced during the game for further discussion or for elaboration in other activities.

Step 6: The child can also be invited to make his or her own “feelings game” at home. This can be a good activity for a parent and child to do together.

APPLICATIONS

The Fishing for Feelings game is helpful with almost all children, ages four and up.

The game helps quiet children to open up and provides an opportunity for active children to move around. This activity is especially useful for the ADHD child, as it is an “active” way to teach the child to talk about his feelings.

The game can be used with a single child, with groups, and with families.