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Child-Created Metaphors in Play Therapy

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Abstract

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The greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in the dissimilar.

- Aristotle

A child's play is rich in metaphorical representation. Translation of child-created metaphorical themes provides the play therapist important information such as the developmental level of the child, the child's approach to forming relationships, attachment issues and attunement in the child-parent relationship, traumatic experiences and the child's unique perspective of life experiences.

Knowledge of metaphorical representations is essential in understanding the meaning of a child's play and assists the play therapist in more accurately diagnosing and effectively treating childhood disorders (Mills & Crowley, 1986, Crowell-Norton, 2002, Benedict, 2004, Homeyer, 2004). Translating child-created metaphors and the visual language of children bridges communication between the child and the play therapist in the play therapy process and is a key component in providing in-depth play therapy for children.

Child-Created Metaphors

Thinking in pictures stands nearer to unconscious processes than thinking in words

- Freud

Children think in detailed and colorful pictures. They are visual-based thinkers. Visual thinking requires active and vivid imagination. Children draw on concrete sensory experiences to create visual images in play. These experiences are transformed into pictures (Grandin, 1995). Images with attached affect become associated with sensory experiences.

Children are metaphorical thinkers. Metaphorical thinking is the ability to make connections between two unlike things, by recognizing an inherent similarity or a common trait. A metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word or a phrase denoting one kind of object or action is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them. Metaphor is not only present in verbal language; it is pervasive in both thought and action (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The essence of metaphor is experiencing one thing in terms of another. In metaphorical play a child pretends one object is another object. A child ascribes meaning to one toy "as if" it is another object, such as pretending that a stack of blocks is a house or a castle.

Children as metaphor makers "paint pictures" in play using toys and play materials in visual non-linear communication. They create personal metaphors associated with sensory experiences to form a visual language. Metaphor flows from affect elicited in play images. They visualize and convert concepts into pictures and metaphoric images as a way to understand the abstract. To visualize or interpret one form or meaning from another is a high level, abstract form of thinking (Grandin, 1995).

Imagery is a primary sensory connection in the brain (Bell, 1991). Research evidences that a child's right brain hemisphere is engaged when processing metaphors. As the right hemisphere is engaged in mediating imaginative and emotional processes, it is likely where metaphorical language originates (Erickson & Rossi, 1979). The right hemisphere of the brain "thinks" in pictures/images and the left brain thinks in words. The left brain is linear and deals with parts of the sensory input in sequence, sorting and segregating, while the right brain deals with all the parts at once, integrating them into a whole picture/image (Wheatley, 1977). Images with attached affect are mapped into a source domain and later into a more abstract target domain in the child's brain (Lakoff, 1980).

Metaphorical Play

At the age of two years children can engage in metaphorical play, using symbols outside of themselves to represent themselves and other objects. At three years of age they are capable of assigning roles in pretend play (Piaget, 1963). A child's first baby blanket is an example of a transitional object that may represent the first symbol, the first mediator between the infant's needs and the outer world, the first object that stands for something else, a representation of mother (Winnicott, 1971).

A child's play is a multidimensional series of imaginative-metaphorical play actions with toys and play materials that is continually changing and difficult to define (Landreth, 1993). Children select, arrange, edit, and rearrange metaphor images in sequence in play sessions (Gardner, 1982). Children are always creating new visual images in a continuous flow in play therapy sessions. A visual language of play is used by the child to imaginatively convey experiences and feelings that are difficult to express on a cognitive-verbal level. A child can communicate visually on a deeper unconscious level to reveal experiences and emotions.

Children communicate about traumatic experiences by recreating the experiences in play, attaching metaphorical and symbolic meaning to toys that recapitulate the same emotions experienced in the actual events (Norton & Norton, 1997). Children use metaphors in imaginative play to safely disguise, through distance and displacement, traumatic events and the emotionally charged issues associated with traumatic experiences such as separation trauma, neglect, emotional, physical and sexual abuse, medical trauma and exposure to domestic violence (Pearce, 1977, Schaefer, 1993, Norton & Norton, 1997).

Distancing themselves from the content and the characters being enacted in their play allows children to "play out" problematic issues more safely with toys and play materials (Ginott, 1982, Garbarino, 1992). The use of metaphors enables children to transfer affect such as anxiety, fear, and anger to toys and objects rather than to persons (Cass, 1973). Children begin with "partially disguised" themes in play, testing the therapist's acceptance of the affect attached to the content of the play theme and continue with a progression of several presentations or variations of therapeutic issues disguised in metaphorical play themes to resolve trauma and heal in therapeutic metaphor (Erickson, 1963, Benedict, 2004).

Toys in Metaphorical Play

A child's play is always talking in the "visual language" of metaphor and association (Norton & Norton, 1997). Children use associations attached to the toys and images in play action to formulate a complex metaphorical language in their play. Toys are their words and play is their language (Landreth, 1991). Children use toys and play items to construct metaphor syntax and a visual language to communicate with the informed therapist. Learning the semantics of toys and play materials is essential in understanding this visual language.

Play is an extension of the child's self and play behaviors are idiomatic expressions unique to each child (Landreth, 1993). As extensions of the child's self, toys have very significant meanings. Children reach out and pull in the identity of the self with the toys (Norton & Norton, 1997). Toys trigger affect associated with experiences from the child's life. A child's association process in toy selection is guided and directed by the unconscious, moving intuitively towards understanding and processing related therapeutic issues and the resolution of trauma (Hart, 1989).

Children use toys in metaphorical play to "show" visually what they have experienced and how they feel. They select toys that have specific meaning to them. A wide selection of toys provides more choices for self expression and allows children to use the play media in a variety of different ways to "act out" experiences and emotional expressions (Neumann, 1971). The toy selection should include various categories such as (a) family/nurturing toys to express nurturing and protection needs, family issues and environment; (b) scary toys to explore mistaken beliefs, perceived threats, and past traumas; (c) aggressive toys to communicate power/control and trust/betrayal issues; (d) expressive toys to explore feelings, family relationships, and develop creativity; and (e) pretend/ fantasy toys to explore relationships, and practice new behaviors and developmental skills (Landreth, 1991).

The play therapist's understanding of a wide variety of possible meanings of the use of toys and play materials is essential in translating symbolic images in a child's play action (Norton & Norton, 1997). For example, toy animals such as lions, lion cubs, bears and bear cubs may be selected to represent family members, earlier stages of development and the need for nurturing and protection from parents and caregivers. Animals such as adult lions, bears, ferocious dinosaurs, sharks and alligators may represent victimizers, threats to safety and abuse. Dinosaurs may represent the past, death, and loss as children processing the loss of a significant relationship select dinosaurs more often than any other toy (Norton & Norton, 1997).

Toys such as balls are used to build safe and empowering relationships and may represent distance, safety, and trust in relationships. Dolls, family figures, and doll houses may represent family and home, a child's self at regressed stages of development, and child-parent interactions and relationships. Vehicles and airplanes may represent movement, freedom, and distance from issues. Boxes, tents, tunnels and enclosed areas may represent boundaries, containment, and the need for safety and security. Telephones may represent the need for communication, distance, protection and may depict relevant communication issues with the child's parents and caregivers. Money/gold coins may represent power/control, security, value and self-worth. Cameras may depict a still frame of the play image to freeze the visual image as proof, validation, and confirmation of the memory. Doctors kits may represent hurt, pain, injury or healing and the need for caring touch and more closely noticing the child's emotional wounds deep inside and not visible on the outside. Musical instruments may depict mood/attitude, contact, and communication without

words. Food and play dishes may represent the need for nurturing, safety and acceptance in the relationship. Art materials may represent visual imaging, tactile experiences, emotions, symbol, distance and a need for creative and unconscious expression. Sand, water and sand trays may represent emotions, creative expression, loss, containment, and depict a need for nurture and caring touch. Magical wands, swords and weapons may represent the need for power, control, safety and protection from others that have overpowered and hurt them. Puppets may represent family members, relationships, disguise and distance, and interactive style. Bop bags may represent power, aggression, self, relationships, nurturing, connection and to depict a need for physical affection. Tools may represent fixing, building, problem solving, decision making. Fright masks, such as monster, ghost and skeleton faces, and scary costumes may provide distance and depict victimizers, extreme fears and accompanying emotions in need of regulation and mastery (Norton & Norton, 1997).

Children typically select six to eight toys and play out three or four different play themes in a play session, as they move from toy to toy approaching imaginative-fantasy play (Norton, 2002). It is important to keep in mind that all toys can have opposite meanings. Metaphorical meaning is defined by the child's use of the toy and the context of the play theme (Ginott, 1982).

Reflecting Metaphorical Play Themes

Reflecting play at the experiential-developmental level presented by the child, in the child's words and play actions, assists the play therapist in understanding the meanings depicted in the play (Norton, 2002). Tracking, reflecting and rephrasing the play action out loud assists the play therapist in visualizing the image of the play as the child guides the play therapist on an "inner exploration" of the metaphoric images in the play session. Verbalizing the description of the play action allows the play therapist to visualize the images and more clearly understand the metaphorical meaning of the child's play.

Creatively reflecting through the toys provides the safety of distance and anonymity for the child. Voicing the toys and making them "come alive" in an imaginative way allows the play therapist to enter the play and experience the metaphors. Playing out the roles assigned by the child in experiential play therapy and taking the perspective of the toys deepens the connection and the therapeutic value of the play experience (Norton & Norton, 1997).

Entering the child's play and remaining in the metaphor communicates honor for the child, preserves the distance, and maintains the connection between child and the therapist so the child is not alone in the play experience. The play therapist enters the child's fantasy play and assists the child in the "metaphor frame" (Norton, 2002). The therapist stays in the metaphor frame, reflecting and nurturing it and allowing it to expand and deepen, sustaining the therapeutic dialogue in the play session.

Children shift, rotate, and rearrange the "metaphor frames" in play scenes to alter the perspective of the therapeutic issues represented in metaphor, allowing the therapist another view of the image and theme. This refines the image and provides a clearer intuition of the meaning of the metaphorical theme. Children are so consistent in telling their metaphors in play that each piece of the story is brilliantly sequenced (Norton, 2002).

A metaphor can have multiple and subjective meanings for the child and must be accepted and honored by the play therapist. The images may trigger counter transference and touch off an association in the play therapist (Siegelman, 1990). It is important that the play therapist reflect and respond to the play in a manner that adds insight and meaning to the child's experience and facilitates resolution and closure of traumatic events (Norton & Norton, 1997). Comprehension of metaphorical themes in a child's play assists the play therapist in accurately reflecting the content and emotional tone of the play, relating to children with depth and meaning and facilitating movement in the treatment process.

Translating Metaphorical Play Themes

If I can't picture it, I can't understand it

- Einstein

A child's play action with toys forms picture sentences in creating metaphorical themes that unfold in the play session. It is important to look at the play, not through the play. Seeing what the child sees is the key to understanding the play themes (Siegelman, 1990). Play therapists learn to listen with their eyes and genuinely feel the experience from the child's unique perspective (Landreth, 1993). Taking the unique perspective of the child and experiencing and feeling what the child feels is essential in recognizing and identifying the themes in a child's play. Image perspective is critical in decoding and translating metaphorical play themes.

A child's play has developmental and metaphorical-symbolic meaning (Pearce, 1977, Norton & Norton, 1997, Benedict 2004, Homeyer, 2004). Research evidences identifiable categories of thematic content in a child's play including; (a) safety and control themes, (b) power and aggression themes, (c) child-parent relationship and family themes, (d) nurturing and protection themes, (e) exploration and mastery themes (Benedict, 2004). Metaphorical themes include those of anger and sadness, trust or mistrust in relationships, rejection, betrayal and abandonment, insecurity, intra-psycho pain and abuse. Children communicate their state of well being in the first ninety seconds of a play session (Norton, 2002).

Children play out therapeutic issues in imaginative play four to five times in each play session, in a number of different scenarios, with a theme of the issue as an element of each play scene (Norton & Norton, 1997). Theme clusters emerge in metaphorical play (Benedict, 2004). In repeated play themes a child may select different toys and change the play action, yet the underlying meaning is the same (Landreth, 1991). Themes that are repeated during play therapy can be studied and charted. Key metaphors serve as "markers" for movement and progress in play therapy.

Metaphorical play themes can be used to chart the course and progress through the stages of play therapy (Siegelman, 1990). Charting metaphorical play themes can be useful in identifying shifts of sets and movement in play therapy as the child works and reworks perceptions, internalizes new working models, attains and refines developmental skills, and masters' emotions attached to trauma memories.

Metaphor Exercises

Translate the play themes in session by asking; what is the child's motivation for the play action/behavior? What are the child's emotions expressed behind the play action. What is the affect/emotion attached to the action and the play scene? How does it feel and what does it look like to the child? What are the symbolic representations of the toys and the content of the play action? Is the toy the self object for the child? What characteristics of the child are represented by the toy? What is the visual image presented by the child in the play scene? What is the child attempting to convey about self? Which significant parent/caregiver relationship is depicted in the play scene?

- Look for metaphors in the play. Look at the play, not through the play. Practice visualizing the pictures/ images. Attempt to see the picture through the eyes of the child and from the perspective of the characters/toys. Notice the physical properties and the concrete sensory experiences of the scene created by the child in the play session.
- Listen to your own description of the images in the play scenes as you track and narrate the play action out loud. Paraphrase and reflect the play action, listen and attend to the "key" words and phrases. Attend to the emotions and the affect behind the image. Write down the key words and phrases reflected to the child after the play session.
- Re-Image and replay in your "minds eye" the descriptive key words and phrases to amplify the image. Write down the possible metaphors and meanings of the play images.
- Translate the images into verbal thought and transfer them to your left brain by writing out a detailed description of the toys used and the play images in the session. Consider the setting, the action/interaction, the context of a significant relationship, the emotions behind the image and write down the possible meanings or themes of the play.

Imaging Exercises

Play therapists can learn to think in pictures and enhance visualization skills, increasing fluency in visual language in play therapy sessions. Visualization is directly related to comprehension of a child's play. Imaging exercises that stimulate visualization and imagery skills provide a useful framework from which to visualize, verbalize and understand play images. In these exercises, structure words are used by the play therapist in activating visualization and imaging. There are twelve "structure words" in the exercises, used in the following sequence to stimulate and amplify visualization and image making; (1) what, (2) size, (3) color, (4) number, (5) shape, (6) where, (7) movement, (8) emotion, (9) background, (10) perspective, (11) when, and (12) sound. The following exercises are based on learning theory and are an adaptation of imaging words, sentences, paragraphs, and pages of text in reading and cognition skills instruction (Bell, 1991). It is important that the play therapist follow the same sequence of imaging as presented in this framework model.

- Picture to Picture Imaging
- Toy Imaging
- Play Action Imaging
- Play Scene Imaging
- Play Story Imaging

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