

Opening Doors to a Safe Haven – Creating healthy family landscapes through Expressive Therapies

Mark Pearson & Helen Wilson

Pearson, M. & Wilson, H. (2008). Opening doors to a safe haven – Creating healthy family landscapes through Expressive Therapies. *PACAWA Newsletter*, 42, 4-5.

How can family members strengthen connections through exploring and sharing the landscape of their inner world?

Expressive Therapies (ET) offers a wide range of modalities that can help build self-awareness, connection, and resilience.

Primarily, ET aims to support positive changes in emotional states, behaviour, beliefs and attitudes and to improve both the self-relationship and relationships with others. The goal of effective interaction is supported through catalysing 'emotional healing' in both conscious and unconscious levels of the psyche. In the style of Rogers' Humanistic approach (Rogers 1951) – a focus corroborated by current research in neuroscience (Schoore, 2003) - ET involves a client-focus that values and supports integrated self-expression, self-discovery and development of resilience.

Through providing experiential interactive exercises with the support of a trained facilitator, ET promotes self-awareness, self-esteem, cognitive clarity, resolution of distressing emotions, emotional and physical integration and opportunities for creative problem-solving.

ET acknowledges the debt that some of the underlying theoretical frameworks and modalities have to Jungian Psychology, Sandplay Therapy, Gestalt Psychology, Bioenergetic Therapy, and Transpersonal Psychology. There are close parallels with Play Therapy, Psychodynamic Counselling, Art Therapy and Humanistic Psychology.

Symbol Work and Body Mapping are just two ET activities that can contribute to enhancing empathy and communication within family groups. Symbol Work is an adaptation of the tools of Sandplay Therapy, allowing a counsellor to guide clients in creating pictures and stories that represent their most relevant issues. It helps a client create a visual/spatial 'landscape' of their inner and outer worlds and offers a counsellor access to detailed information in a non-threatening way.

A Symbol Work activity *The People in My Life* (Pearson & Wilson, 2001:62) involves selecting, from a collection of miniatures, symbols representing family members, then arranging these in and around a circle, in a configuration that reflects family relating. Colours and lines can then be added to highlight the way a client perceives the relating. In a group context, the first step is parallel creation, followed by debriefing with the whole group.

This activity enables a counsellor, and the group, to observe the way each member interprets the relational dynamics. The group discusses reasons for the selection of each miniature and the particular way of arranging them. It is not unusual for group members to re-examine opinions and beliefs and gain insights from observing the way others represent the group. Individual creations reflect issues of triangulation, differentiation difficulties, perceptions of sibling positions and the significance of extended family. While the debriefing is in progress, the counsellor may simultaneously witness the system in action.

Body Mapping involves self-awareness, drawing on a body outline, and expressing sensations and emotions verbally (Pearson & Nolan, 1995). It provides a foundation for self-reflection,

information about the inner landscape, and a stimulus to verbal disclosure that strengthens connection. Each person quickly sketches a body outline on a large sheet of paper. After a short period of relaxation and guided self-focus, they draw onto the body outline various moods, sensations, emotions and thoughts identified using colours, lines, and images. The group then engages in respectful listening and sharing. The fact that everyone in the group has internal experiences to share creates a base of equality. It is often amazing to children (who may be regarded as being THE problem) that their 'elders' also have things going on inside.

The following very brief vignette is a case of one family who found using ET the key to unlocking the door to a new land – a safe haven – a land of reduced fear and anxiety, of growth and differentiation for parents and reflection and interdependence for their son.

Family as Inner Landscape

Nathan's mother was nervous; his father irritated and angry; his older sister extremely resistant to the process; and there he was – a young 14 year old – the centre of all negative attention within the family. Coming to counselling was something this family did not want to do, but on the mother's insistence, they reluctantly showed up at my office.

It wasn't an unusual case; many family therapists have seen it all before. What was different was the way the therapist worked with the family, using an experiential ET approach to break the cycle of intense negative reactivity and to support the family, as a whole, in creating a family landscape that was nourishing, enlivening and growing.

Emotional toxins had soured the inner landscape of this family contaminating everything in sight. Every interaction seemed characterised by criticism, rejection, anxiety and ultimately feelings of abandonment in each person.

Julie and Rod wanted the family 'landscape' to be a peaceful and loving environment; they felt they were doing everything possible to make it that way and were puzzled by their son's behaviour. Nathan exhibited angry, aggressive behaviour in the home towards his parents and was regularly excluded from school for carrying 'weapons' in his school pack. He had been expelled from one school for physically attacking another student and engaging in aggressive behaviour. A change of schools didn't seem to make a difference. Six months after starting, the new school was now, as a last resort, threatening expulsion.

Rod, Nathan's father, spoke vehemently about his son needing to take responsibility. Julie reported feeling helpless in the face of her son's aggressive behaviours. Some of Nathan's more overt behaviours included kicking holes in walls at home, smashing the family television, and 'sneaking' out of his room between midnight and dawn, linking in with groups of youths whose sole aim was to destroy property or gardens in local suburbs, returning in time for breakfast, an all too familiar heated exchange between himself and his parents and then off to school.

When I first met Nathan, he responded respectfully to the counselling setting. With few words he told me about his fear that his sister (2 years older) was going to be killed by gangs in his old school. To defend her from what he believed to be an inevitable attack, he said he'd secreted knives and whatever 'weapons' he could in his backpack.

This revelation was news to his parents. They had moved both children to the new school so as to minimise driving for Julie who exhibited symptoms of extreme emotional distress. Nathan reported being told that some students at this new school brought handguns to school and so he felt that his sister was still at risk. His response was to be on the defensive and to attack first!

The family responded well to using expressive, creative tools in the counselling context. They felt they'd talked enough, yelled enough and couldn't think their way through the mess anymore. Sharing the narratives of their symbols, writings and drawings created in-session allowed for integration and understanding of the group mind. An example of how loosening the emotional and psychological 'log-jam' and cleaning up the toxic 'waste' in their landscape was achieved involved Rod in a therapeutic writing exercise; Julie created a body map (giving external form to her psychosomatic symptoms - migraine headaches and persistent stomach cramps), and Nathan chose symbols that, on exploration, reflected differentiation from his parents' way of being. Each person had a different way to explore and share their individual and group inner landscape.

The second-last session involved a group Sandplay. The family was asked to create a space for themselves in the sandtray, to decide on rules and proceed under the watchful eye of the Sandplay therapist. The landscape created brought forward a narrative of deep feeling of connection between father and son – so different to previous observable behaviours.

Two highly significant narratives emerged that became turning points in the family's functioning. The first was Rod's recognition of his deep love for his son, a love barely visible behind Rod's unquestioned adherence to the automatic, imposition of stringent, uncompromising rules around responsibility, set by his own father when Rod himself was 14 years old. Second was Julie's personal distress which had escalated over the period of the counselling with the family.

In this session she wanted to talk about her struggle with a legacy of childhood sexual abuse – something she had not yet taken to counselling. She was also grieving the recent accidental death of her father. Julie felt that she had no place to feel safe and had no-one to help her contain or process her overwhelming emotions.

Unexplored pain within the family had left Nathan with the feeling that his role in this family was tenuous at best and his psychological and emotional 'survival' there was in question. Using expressive techniques gave this family what it most sought – freedom from past fears, a sense of safety in self and with each other and learning about positive aspects of life and loving. As a result the family was able to easefully and exponentially improve the quality of their life together.

This case is presented with permission from the family involved and with gratitude for their love, fearlessness and generosity.

References:

- Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of Mind: Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. Heinemann: London.
- McNiff, S. (2004). *Art Heals: How creativity heals the soul*. Shambhala: Boston.
- Mitchell, R.R. & Friedman, H.S. (1994). *Sandplay: Past, present and future*. Routledge: London.
- Oaklander, V. (1988). *Windows to our Children - A gestalt therapy approach to children and adolescents*. Utah: Real People Press
- Pearson, M. & Nolan, P. (2004). *Emotional Release for Children - Repairing the past, Preparing the future*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishing.
- Pearson, M. & Wilson, H. (2001). *Sandplay and Symbol Work: Emotional healing and personal development with children, adolescents and adults*. Melbourne: ACER Press.
- Robbins, A. (1980). *Expressive Therapy - A creative arts approach to depth-oriented treatment*. New York: Human Sciences Press.
- Rogers, C. R. (1951). *Client-centered therapy*. London: Constable.
- Schore, A. N. (2003). Early relational trauma, disorganized attachment and the development of a predisposition to violence, in M. F. Solomon & D. J. Siegel, *Healing Trauma: Attachment, mind, body and brain*, W. W. Norton & Company: New York. Chapter 3, 106–167.

For further ET resources go to: www.expressivetherapies.com.au