

The Use of Expressive Techniques in Family Assessment and Psychotherapy

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Abstract

In his work with families, the psychotherapist often meets difficulties of communication between children and their parents. The oral communication has been disturbed by dysfunctional relational patterns.

When the oral techniques of communication don't have results anymore, the expressive techniques can be very useful. The psychotherapist can use the drawing, the storytelling, the role-playing, the guided fantasy and the playing with puppets like mediators of family relations, by implying them in the same kind of activities. With the help of these techniques, the parents and the children enter the playing world. Thus, they become more relaxed and the emotional communication is obtained more easily.

I will present in this article the methods of psychological evaluation in which I used expressive methods as ways that helped the identification of the roles and patterns of communication between family members.

Keywords: *psycho-diagnosis, expressive-creative methods, children, family*

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I. Introduction

Expressive techniques and games are used by many therapists who work with children and families, both in the evaluation phase and in the therapeutic intervention phase. Especially for children, these techniques are particularly useful.

Having a weaker ability of awareness and/or of verbal expression of the feelings experienced, the child often finds it difficult to express his opinion about the problems which lead his family to turn to a psychologist. However, he does offer extremely valuable information through expressive-creative means. As they represent an indirect means of communication, expressive-creative methods are less threatening for the child. What he expresses through drawing, moulding, storytelling and drama, can show his own fantasies, anxieties, fears, frustrations, attitudes, patterns of behaviour and thought, impulses, resentments, wishes, needs, and feelings. It is very often that projection remains the only way through which the child speaks about himself.

Virginia Satir (1988) used games, family sculpture and drawing to assess the relationships between family members and to develop awareness through experience. The therapist helps the family to develop new awareness about its operation, putting them specific questions or using specific techniques. Then, family members are supported to realize the new dynamics of their family.

Through observation of the modalities through which family members relate with the help of expressive techniques, the psychotherapist can identify the role played by everyone in the family, the patterns of communication, the difficulty with which the family confronts, the resources of the family. All of these are often unknown by the family members. The parents have the occasion to be aware of things about themselves, about their children and their relationships. At the same time, the parents and their children can experiment a way of communication more affective and more intuitive. The metaphor of drawing, storytelling and role-playing helps children communicate more easily things about themselves, to their parents.

The therapist should never interpret images of drawings, collages and family games. The family must make their own interpretations. "The Dynamics of relationships show things we cannot see. It is very important to move our observation from static to dynamic." (Rodolfo de Bernart, 2010)

Carla Sharp (2001) believes that play therapy is the best way to assess and treat the relationship between children and parents. Therapists can foster better empathy and understanding between children and parents. Through the game, the therapist can more easily see the underlying dynamics of the relationship. Also, with the game the family plays, the therapist may make changes necessary in this relational dyad. Eliana Gil (1994) states: "When adults are able to relate to children and enter into their world, reaching a size of the contact that strengthens mutual connection or

emotional connection." When the parents play with the children, there is a deeper emotional connection.

An important prerequisite of play therapy is that a child will reveal how they perceive themselves and the world, through creative and imaginative ways. (Irwin and Rubin, 1976)

The benefits of the game therapy for the family manifests itself in many ways. The thoughts, feelings are exhibited and the hidden perceptions of each family member; family members are engaged in a pleasant task, it facilitates communication, reveals the dynamics of operation of a particular family system. (Mortimer, D. A., 2001)

II. Case study

Alina and Cosmin were married for fourteen years and they have two daughters: Laura who is five years and a half and Irina who is nine years old. Alina wanted the divorce three years ago because she felt very unhappy in her relationship with Cosmin. He is twelve years older than her and initially she felt protected by him. She saw him as an escape from the familial environment, having a conflictual relationship with her father, which she describes as being aggressive and alcoholic.

At present, Alina accuses her ex-husband that he was drinking and he was neglecting her and their daughters during their marriage. Alina said that their relationship was very conflictual and Irina was raised in this tension. Cosmin didn't want the divorce and he was very jealous when his ex-wife introduced him the new boyfriend, with whom she got married last year.

At present Alina and Cosmin are in court to decide upon the custody of their children. Cosmin wants that his daughters visit him at his home. Alina wants the unique custody. She motivates this by the fact that the girls are scared by their father and they refuse to go with him.

Cosmin doesn't have a personal relationship with his daughters for six months. Both Laura and especially Irina are very excited with the actual husband of their mother. They tell him "father" and they call their natural father "Cosmin". They see Mr. Andrei (the actual husband of their mother), as a saviour, by saying that he gave them a house, a car, clothes and he takes care of them.

Both the girls and their parents were psychologically evaluated in order to realize a report of psychological expertise for the court. I will present in this article the methods of psychological evaluation in which I used expressive methods as ways that helped the identification of the roles and patterns of communication between family members.

1. Evaluation of the father's relationship with the girls

Common meeting Irina-Father

Irina showed more resistance to meet her father at the cabinet. She cried as a demonstration, saying that she's afraid, but hindered the actual reason for her refusal. "I do not want to see him. I do not love him."

She showed pictures of Mr. Andrei, on the phone, saying "That's Daddy." Seeing Irina's refusal, her mother revealed that she understands her resistance saying that the girl was a witness to her ordeal. The mother told Irina to accept the meeting with the father "to escape, to be over with the process for once."

At the meeting with her father, Irina was very agitated, saying she's afraid and her stomach aches. She showed more rejection behaviour of her father: she wanted her mother to come with her in the cabinet, cling to her and hardly accepted to be alone with her father in the cabinet. Frequently and ostentatiously looked at the picture of Mr. Andrei on the phone during the meeting, refusing to look at her father and refused to collaborate with him in the game.

Method

Irina and her father were asked to make a drawing on the same sheet of paper.

Results

Irina divided the sheet into two.

Father, smiling: "That's smaller. Yours is bigger." Irina does not look at him at all. Each of them drew in silence on their half page. They were then asked what each of them sees in the drawing of the other one.

Irina: "I see a horse standing near a pool of water. That's all. A tree and 7 birds flying overhead."

Father: "A house, some grass, a smiling sun, clouds."

Then they were asked to draw, each of them on one sheet of paper, something important to them, to the soul.

Irina again split the sheet into two, refusing to share. She drew her current family in a neat house. She emphasized the ground under the house and the fence up to mid house level. Then she said what she sees in the father's drawing. In her father's drawing Irina saw two people, two girls.

Father said they are Irina and Laura, they are his soul. She said she did not believe him. She accused him he is not a real father. I write below a relevant dialogue between the father and Irina:

Irina: "If you two have separated, why should we go with you?"

Dad: "But children do not separate from their parents. Can you answer a question?"

Irina: "No."

Dad: "Who am I?"

Irina: "A man."

Dad: "Not a Dad?"

Irina: "No."

Irina: "A father is to show me love, to give me money and happiness. Not to let the children down."

Assessor: "When did you feel this?"

Irina: "All the time when I was with him. When he had things to do, he stood on the laptop. Shut up! He told us. He let our mother down. She cried that her eyes were injured. Do not mind me."

Dad: "Who stood with you to the hospital when you were sick?" (the Father refers to the fact that he accompanied Irina twice in the hospital when she

was little)

Irene: "Mother stayed. She came and told me stories. The Princess will be saved by the Prince."

Dad: "What can I do to get back together and be together again?"

Irina: "Nothing."

Dad: "But you do not pity me? I'm a father. I love you."

Irina: "Nothing."

Dad: "Whatever happens you are my child and I love you so much. I'll do anything for you."

Irina: "I cannot forgive you because you tormented mother. She was the most loved person in my life. Because you lied so many times. He promised my mother he does not drink until the last chance."

Assessor: "What do you think is the reason your father comes to see you?"

Irina: "He insists to see us to make us unhappy."

At the end of a meeting with her father, Irina said she did not want to see him, do not want to be touched by him, she enjoyed that he left. She does not seem to have any positive feeling towards him. Father had tears in his eyes and enjoyed having communicated to her. "For years I have not talked to Irina."

Irina reproached her father that two years ago he did not give her a power of attorney to go to Greece for her birthday. She said that they wanted to move there with the home and school and sometimes come in Romania. "And I did not want to meet him. But not related to Greece.", she added.

Discussion

In Irina's relationship with her father there appears to be a strong alienation and elements of parental alienation.

Symptoms of parental alienation are:

- denigration against father
- weak rationalizations for impairment
- lack of emotional ambivalence
- The phenomenon of "independent thinker". Irina insists that she decided to completely reject her father, without any contribution from the mother.
- Strong alliance with the mother in the parental conflict.
- Presence of mother's scenarios. She takes the suffering that the mother lived in the relationship as if it were hers. She even said that she wants to divorce her father.

In conclusion, Irina withstands the contact with her father for reasons of parental conflict, conflicts felt in an anxiogenic way and after which she remained with a state of insecurity and also of unreasonable reasons, taken from the mother.

The drawing technique evidenced the intensity with which she rejects her natural father and the manner in which she searches her safety in her actual family.

The meeting attended by Laura and the father

At the first meeting, Laura is hiding behind the armchairs, was agitated, shaking, saying that she is afraid to stay with her father. She wanted her mother to

stay with her. While declaring that she is afraid of him, nonverbal behavior showed a rather playful trend than genuine reactions of fear.

When asked why she is afraid to be alone with her father, Laura replied that she has no idea why she is afraid of him. Below there is a reproduction of a sequence of dialogue with Laura in the presence of both parents. It can be seen how the girl reproduces things she does not understand and that do not deal directly with her biological father relationship.

Assessor: "Did your father do something wrong to you?"

Laura: "He did not do anything wrong. He gave me rotten food. He didn't make food at home. He did not flush his toilet at all. He threatened Irina. I did not exist then. I cannot forget what he did to Irina. My mother told me. Or not. I thought so. I thought that he no longer loves Irina."

Assessor: "What is Mr. Cosmin for you?"

Laura: "Bad luck."

Assessor: "What is bad luck?"

Laura: "I do not know. (Laughs, looking at her mother). He did not really look after me when I was at his home. I did not know he is my father ... I realized that he gives me gifts so I go to him and love him more, but I do not love him at all."

Assessor: "Why does he want you to go to his house?"

Laura: "So I have children, I clean up, to get me married. It's mother I love the most."

When they were alone in the cabinet, Laura has worked well with her father through drawing. I noticed that they can have a good relationship of communication both verbal and non-verbal.

Method

They were given a large sheet of paper on which they were asked to draw at the same time.

Results

Each made their drawing on their share of the sheet.

Psychologist towards the father: "What do you understand from Laura's drawing?"

Father: "A girl with purple dress with a bow in her hair."

Laura: "Since when a girl is a little girl? I wanted to draw Alina, my mother." (note: she drew her mother with a dress identical to that which Laura was wearing.)

Laura, on her father's drawing: "It's a house, some birds, a tree, a lake and a garden. It's nice a little bit of everything."

They watch each other, they smile while talking about their drawings.

Psychologist: "Can you draw together on one sheet of paper?"

Laura seems pleased. She said to her father: "This time you start first."

Psychologist: "Can you work?"

Laura: "We try."

Father draws a horse, without body, waiting for Laura to complete it. Laura draws the grass. Laura

to the father: "You continue."

Father draws the rest of the horse and Laura the soil under, highlighting it.

Father draws trees. Laura continues with the ground.

Laura to her father: "You continue."

She watches him drawing.

The father draws a girl. Laura draws the grass. She tells him to draw the sun.

Dad: "You continue now. It's your turn to put something."

Laura: "You."

Dad: "I continued. I've done enough."

Laura colours the sun.

Laura: "You. She handles the green pen so he can draw the sun."

The story of the drawing

Laura: "He should tell."

Dad: "It's grass, it is a kind of forest, it is a horse, two girls. A younger and an older one. It's a sun."

Laura: "You always dream about what I say. He has already said everything."

Psychologist: "Who are the girls in the drawing?"

Laura: "It's me with Irina. We are in the garden with a horse. There are horses who protect us."

Psychologist to the father: "Why did you draw the girls?"

Dad: "It's them I love the most in my life. They are my soul. Laura, you know that I love you."

Laura: "Nodding that no."

Dad: "Why do you think that? I would like you to come to me like before."

Laura: "I've asked you to go to the seaside and you would not want. I was upset."

Psychologist: "With whom did you want to go to the sea?"

Laura: "With Andrei, with my daddy."

Psychologist: "What do you want from Mr. Cosmin?"

Laura: "To be nice to me, as my real daddy is. Take me to the sea, take me to the park, take care of me, not to give me bad food."

Laura agreed to see pictures of her since she was small, on her father's phone. About some moments she said she remembers. She became amused by the pictures and wanted to show them to the psychologist.

Psychologist: "Do you like that he drew you?"

Laura: "A little."

Psychologist: "Laura, are you still afraid of your father?"

Laura: "A little. She makes a gesture with the fingers."

Psychologist: "How was the meeting?"

Laura: "Less beautiful. More." She shows with her fingers more.

Psychologist: "Does he still seem a bad man?"

Laura: "Less."

Discussions

Laura imitates her sister's attitude and

behaviour in relation to her father. What she was told about it conflicts with what she feels. She lives a confusion linked to the paternal image.

Between Laura and her father there is a basis for positive affectivity that Laura cannot manifest, being in alliance with the mother and Irina, on the exterior plan.

2. Meeting to assess the relationship between mother, Irina and Laura

Method

Dramatization using puppets

The girls and their mother were suggested to choose a puppet, to identify with it, and then to come together to invent a story in which the protagonists are the chosen characters.

Results

We show below how each presents itself by the chosen puppet:

Irina: "I am Malefica. I am the villain of the film. I am 20 years old, young, beautiful and I hate children. Those friends that have betrayed me."

Laura: "I am the Princess Snow White. With yellow hair. I'm good. I am a child, 10 years old."

Alina: "My name is Ana. I am 12 years old and I am alone in search of friends with whom to play."

Then each said where they come from and what they want to do.

Ana: "I am from the countryside. I left because I was bored at home, I do not have friends. There aren't children around. My parents are busy."

Malefica: "I come from the King's palace. I slipped away. He's very hard on me. He puts me all the time at work. When I do something good I say "Bravo, my dear." Another time he beats me."

Snow White: "I want to show you my palace."

Then they started the game they imagined, in which they played the roles chosen.

Irina dramatizes: "the King calls Malefica (role played by her). I do not know if he lets me talk to you. Maybe I will be punished."

Girls are meeting the next day.

Malefica says that the King makes her work. He took her out of the woods promising a better life. Her parents died in Troy. King was the father now. Malefica was to be married. King did not agree. "He wants me to marry a drunkard, bad and ugly soul. I'll marry the one I love. "

Ana: "Let's go see the castle because I do not want my parents to come to find me."

While visiting the castle, the king yelled after Malefica. (played by Irina)

Ana: "Why you going there if you're unhappy? Let's stay with me. My parents are good."

Malefica: "I have a secret. I cannot. I am a witch. My husband is wizard like me."

Ana: "If you are a witch why do you stand all the King's evils?"

Malefica: "I'm very fond of him because of Troy he took me and saved me."

Irina brings Malefica's husband and then called him Andrei.

"Both are good witches. "

Malefica tells Andrei that she wants to run. Ana wants to take them with her but that they do not come with these clothes black. "I know you now, but the clothes give the feeling of malice "

They change their clothes and name (identity). Malefica is Mara. "I'm Andrei and Mara"

Snow White: "You do not want Andrei and Alina? Wait that I sit down and fix my crown."

Ana: "Are you sure of what you want to do? Perhaps the King will mind."

If you've changed the clothes and names, it would be better to leave everything behind. Not to forget. Delete everything with a sponge.

Mara (the new name for Malefica) are reluctant to leave. "What if they do not want us?" They go to Ana's parents. Alina plays the roles of the parents. She shows how Ana's mother receives all with a welcome: Snow White, Andrei and Mara.

Ana's mother: Come in. "I was just preparing the meals. They all sit at the table." They wanted to stay there all their life.

Irina plays the role of the King spontaneously. " Malefica, Malefica..." a crying in the background. The voice is coming.

Mara: "Lock the doors. Then everyone sit down and quiet."

Ana's mother: "Who is Malefica?"

Mara: "Me."

Ana's mother: "You said you were Mara."

Mara: "The first time I did not lie. I told him that I am Malefica. I am like this in reality, just that I was dressed like this."

Ana's mother: "What should I think? Who are you? The one that comes to my house or that one?"

Malefica: "I had a very hard life. My parents are dead. The King told me that he took me. He converted me into his maid. "

Snow White: "Open the door."

Malefica: "The King is bad. I do not want to go back."

But I was Witch: "Take a bouquet of flowers and candies. Magic."

I gave up the image of the other.

Ana: " This is how I like you."

Snow White: "Now I can open it?" He wants to hear the cry. She is not afraid of him.

Ana: "Well, I'm afraid of him. And my parents too. Maybe he does us something wrong."

Snow White: "He has a wand that can do magic."

Girls showing how all the characters sit inside and fear the King's shouting (played by Irina).

Snow White goes to talk to him.

King cries: "Malefica, Malefica... Who are you?"

Snow White: "Malefica."

King's role is played by Irina. King has a magical bracelet that sees how Malefica dressed. He closes Snow White and wants to take care of her.

Ana: " We are four and five with Snow White,

the King is alone. He cannot do anything to us. He was unable to enter our house.”

The King looks for Malefica. He finds out where she is and goes after it. Ana’s father confronts him, casts him.

King to Malefica: “ But I've raised you.”

Malefica: “Yes. But you treated me very badly.”

King takes Malefica.

Andrei (played by Irina): “ Get your hands of her! Do not you put your hands on my wife.”

The king flies to another realm. The king wanted to take Malefica to put her to work.

Then: Malefica and Andrei were married.

Snow White went to the castle and she locked the door.

Notes: Irina leads the game. Laura wants to play, she is not heard and withdraws. Andrei and Malefica took their house.

Alina concludes at the end of the game: “Mara now has a husband and friends and a house and escaped the King.”

Discussions

Irina seems to have entered the small conflicts between parents, as her mother's ally. She has the image of the good mother - the victim and of the bad father - the aggressor. Irina identifies herself with her mom, she wants to be like her mother when she grows up, repeats everything she hears from his mother. Also in the puppet dramatization performed with her mother and Laura, Irina reproduced symbolically the story of her mother that needs to be saved by a good husband from the hands of a male abuser. The mother, in the role of Ana, seems more a spectator at the scenario created and played to a great degree by Irina. The mother encourages Irina in her decisions in the play and she seems satisfied by the end of the play.

Irina lives her mother’s drama in the plan of the play and she identifies herself with her mother. In the play, the character interpreted by her wants a reconciliation with the character that symbolically represents the father : The King.

At the end of the play, Laura retreated because she felt in extra in the scenario of the mother and Irina. Laura values her mother, but at a fantastic level trying to oppose the maternal image that has an authoritarian, punitive side.

3. Meetings attended by both parents and the girls.

Method

Each of them had drawn three designs to be called "We in the past, present and future". then introduced the drawings to each other. Each then showed their drawings and explained them.

Results

Drawings of Irina:

All are separated in their quadrant.

Past: The Mother is stylish, she received a Christmas gift from Irina. She wrote besides it “I love you”. It has only colored hair and nails. Laura is out to play. Irina was in her room. The Father has a bottle of beer beside him.

Present: The Mother is very elegant, colorful. Laura has a colorful dress, she sits near Aurora, their car, sitting in the sun. Irina wears a dress the same color as the mother’s.

Father stands alone in the park at night at 7 o’clock.

Future: The mother is the house. Laura cut her hair. Irina is elegant like her mother, a lady. She has blonde hair as her mom. It is the only colored and has a dress like the mother’s. Beside her father she makes a question mark. Let him go back to the country where he came from.

Mother’s drawings:

Past: I am alone with two children, locked in a cage, without a bit of femininity (her hair, dressed up to the ground). She draws herself holding Irina’s hand in a room. Laura is with her toys in another room. She had little childhood. Father is turned back, alone in an alley.

Present: She draws herself with both girls holding their hands, from the back. In one corner is the head of a man. The girls are turned towards the sun. Now he's headed toward us but I do not want him.

Future: She draws with both girls, holding their hands, all the same size, from the back. In the future I would like him not to exist. I would like not to have any past but I have children.

Laura’s drawings:

Past: I was sitting outside happy with mommy, day and night. Dad was surfing. For Irina she draws a wolf looking at a bird. I stood at the window and saw how I will go by train.

Present: Right as we are in the room, everybody is drawing now.

Future: Me, Mommy and Irina do ballet. I fail but I want to learn. Father is eating cherries. Between the group girls-mother and father she draws a fountain.

Father’s drawings:

Past: Alina and I sit on the bench. Irina and Laura are in the cradle. We are in the park.

Present: Two rooms in two houses. Laura watches TV, Irina draws, mother sits with the laptop in front. I alone without the girls, I watch TV.

Future: A miracle. Sitting on the bench with the girls. Mother does not appear.

I know what I want and I cannot get. I want to come to see the girls.

Discussions

These drawings evidenced the very different perceptions that each of them has regarding the relationships between them. With the help of the drawings they had the opportunity to talk about their frustrations, fears and desires. The drawing facilitated a more intimate dialogue between them. Both parents realized that they want a personal relationship with their daughters without interfering in each other’s life. Irina showed once again how much she identified herself with her mother and how she takes her mother as a model in the future.

Laura is the only one who wanted that there is a relationship between all four in the future. It was a surprising change of attitude of Laura during

the meeting in which both parents participated. There was no availability to relate to her father, her expression was frozen on her face, she resisted any contact with her father, although she did not reject him, as did Irina. Both girls stood very close to their mother, clung to her hands and had moments when they said like an echo the complaints raised by the mother to the father.

III. Final discussions

For the evaluation of the relationship between parents and children we have used as expressive methods the drawing, the story based on drawings and dramatization using puppets. The techniques "Drawing together" and "Drawing us in the past, present and future" and creating stories helped to identify issues projected in relationships, interpersonal perceptions and communication availability of the participants. We observed relational roles, partnerships and ways of verbal and non-verbal communication.

The technique "Puppet dramatization" revealed that Irina identifies with her mother's life and I could understand the reason for her alienation from her natural father. Also it was observed that Laura is fair on the unconscious plan to her father, although she cannot behave differently from the mother and Irina. Involving children and parents in the expressive-creative activities facilitated a better emotional communication between them. They were able to more easily express themselves than through verbal dialogue, their opinions and emotional experiences. Communication was more spontaneous and authentic.

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