

Focusing on Solutions Through Art: A Case Study

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The author integrates solution-focused therapy with art therapy in a way that is most suitable for young children between the ages of six and thirteen and has proven especially helpful in the school environment. The methods developed are exemplified in a case study of a boy at the ages of nine and eleven. The art functions as a medium for conversation, an avenue for the expression of strong feeling, concretises reframes, makes metaphors visual, enhances exceptions, externalises the problem and makes solutions real.

INTRODUCTION

Art Therapy

Art, for children, is a natural medium of expression when they do not have the words to describe their experiences or feelings. Virginia Axline, a play therapist using the Rogerian approach, claims that play is a child's natural medium for self-expression (Axline, 1975). Violet Oaklander states: 'Specific techniques for helping children express feelings through the use of drawing and painting are endless' (Oaklander, 1988: 53).

Earlier, psychoanalysts like Anna Freud (1947) and Melanie Klein (1950) used art to make interpretations about the client's inner conflict so that the child gained insight into the problem. Art therapists, however, do not offer interpretations of unconscious material. Landgarten believes that it is essential for the therapist to understand the client's own interpretation (Landgarten, 1987). Rhyne says that the therapist and the client work together, pool their resources, to make sense of the picture in terms of the client's behaviours (Rhyne, 1987). Garai, who uses a humanistic approach to art therapy, also emphasises the importance of the therapist tuning in to the client's own symbolic messages (Garai, 1987). Art therapists use art for a variety of purposes: to express strong emotion, to gain mastery, for sublimation, and for increasing awareness. But their goal is the same as the psychoanalysts', to produce insight, insight into the problematic situation and insight into strengths and resources.

Art As A Medium For Emotional Expression

Art is a most ancient means of expression and healing. Naumburg (1966), Rhyne (1973), McNiff (1981), and Kramer (1993) all use art as a means of self-expression

and as a release of strong feeling. Kramer wrote: 'Affect can be safely discharged in play and also in art' (1993: 27). With this expression, the conflict is concretised and this allows the client to gain detachment and examine her problems with growing objectivity (Naumburg, 1966). Shaun McNiff sees art as giving new meaning to life situations and so relieving the person from a sense of passive endurance. Art, then, is a means of expression that surpasses and transcends verbal expression. It speaks from the unconscious and enables clients to say what they dare not say or cannot express in words. It gives people an opportunity to look objectively at whatever it is that they find unsettling. In this way it helps resolve the conflict within them.

Art and Mastery

Landgarten (1987) often uses art for mastery. When children can manipulate paper, paint, crayons, and moulding materials, they are experiencing a sense of intrinsic or innate power. Many children come to therapy because their power has been taken away from them. They have been used and abused and need to relearn that they have a right to exercise their own power: When talking about hospitalised children, Landgarten says,

It is therapeutic for a child patient to be given the opportunity to be in control. In the art, the child can create situations where he or she gives the shots, performs the surgery, and injects the pain (often gleefully) (Landgarten, 1987: 127).

Axline says that when emotional relaxation has been achieved, the child begins to think for him/herself, to make his/her own decisions, to become psychologically more mature, and, by so doing, to realise selfhood (Axline, 1975: 16).

Art and Sublimation

Sublimation is a coping mechanism identified by Freud (Freud, 1991: 129). Through sublimation, the instinctual drives are controlled by the ego and its energies are used in more socially acceptable, but satisfying, ways (Kramer,

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1987). McNiff would say that the expressive sublimation of aggressive and potentially harmful instincts is one of the most valuable and widely acknowledged features of the psychotherapeutic use of the arts (McNiff, 1981: 46).

Art and Awareness

Art develops and increases a child's awareness: of self, of others and of the environment. Oaklander's (1988) goal in therapy is always awareness. Woods agrees: "Thinking in pictures" lies at the root of awareness' (Woods, 1992: 65). Awareness, according to Oaklander, is essential for a strong sense of self or self-esteem. If children, and adults, for that matter, are fully aware of the situations in which they live, and fully aware of themselves, they are in a better position for making choices that work well for them. Fritz Perls' view is:

Through this awareness they gain self-understanding and the knowledge that they can change. Hence they learn that they are responsible for what they are thinking, feeling and doing (Corey, 1991: 232).

Constructivist Therapy

A Constructivist Therapy is one which reconstructs, through language, a client's perception of her/his life experiences. It is a therapy that focuses on solutions, not problems, and builds on a person's strengths rather than examining weaknesses. Hoyt puts a number of therapies under this heading: solution-oriented, solution-focused, possibility, narrative, postmodern, cooperative, competency-based, constructivist. He says they have three important commonalities, a respectful partnership between therapist and client, an emphasis on strengths and resources, and a hopeful eye toward the future (Hoyt, 1994).

Constructivists do not believe in a fixed reality. What we perceive as our reality is our own interpretation of what happens, our 'fiction'. People come to therapy because they are stuck in their perceptions of what is happening in their lives. If we help people change how they think about a situation or experience, they can change their behaviour accordingly. Putting a new interpretation on life's experiences is called a reframe. For O'Hanlon and Weiner-Davis, the purpose of therapy involves 'deliberate attempts to produce a change in viewpoint and/or action leading to solutions' (O'Hanlon and Weiner-Davis, 1989: 10).

Techniques used in the constructivist therapies are many. De Shazer suggests constructing a complaint, searching for exceptions, miracle questions, scaling questions, goal setting and homework tasks (de Shazer, 1988; Berg and de Shazer, 1993), while others stress negotiation, reframes and metaphor (Cade and O'Hanlon, 1993). Michael White seems to stress externalisation through telling the story of the problem and describing the relationship between the problem and the various players in the story (White and Epston, 1990).

No matter what the technique, the purpose is always to produce change, to help the person to find a way of thinking or perceiving that allows him/her to behave in

ways that produce a solution. This is most certainly what teachers and school principals want. They want a child whose behaviour is problematic to behave in more appropriate ways. Since the goals of a constructivist therapy and the goals of teachers are the same, it would seem that this style of therapy could be appropriately implemented in the school environment.

The Integration of Art and Constructivist Therapies

Constructivist therapies require a certain amount of facility with language. Young children do not possess this facility. Certainly young children, in my experience, often lose their ability to effectively communicate in words when they are traumatised or under stress. The linguistic system, however, is not necessarily the only system through which meanings can change (Coale, 1992). Instead of relying on language for communication, the therapist and the child can work through art.

In his article, 'Narrative Child Family Therapy', Lerner states that,

Play and art are natural ways for children to construct coherence and meaning, which is the purpose of a narrative. They provide a medium for children to 'talk' about their psychological experience, and the possibility of nonverbal and symbolic expression enhances the verbal in a child-focussed 'dialogic' space (Lerner, 1996: 428).

Lerner sees the child individually, then, with the child's permission, he shares the child's pictures with the parent(s), who help with the interpretation. He will also have some family sessions. He says, 'The child's symbolic play as narrative is joined to the family story as social text in therapeutic conversation' (Lerner, 1996: 437). Lerner believes that training in child psychoanalysis enriches a narrative therapist's understanding of therapy and that narrative therapists need not abandon knowledge and expertise but rather share or exchange it in a mutual dialogue of understanding.

Freeman and Lobovits have also explored using non-verbal means of communication in combination with narrative therapy, concluding that 'the particulars of a person's problematic lifestyle or a unique outcome, choice or alternative story can be expressed visually, dramatically or kinetically' (Freeman and Lobovits, 1993: 190). They see the integration of expressive arts with narrative therapy as enabling externalisation, thus freeing the person 'to take a lighter, more effective, and less stressed approach to "deadly serious" problems' (White, 1989, cited in Freeman and Lobovits, 1993). Similarly Eliana Gil (1994) uses puppets, art and story telling in the ongoing treatment of families with young children, believing that play has the potential to engage all family members (including children) in meaningful therapeutic exchanges.

So Narrative therapists and the Narrative Family therapists have incorporated children's art and play into their therapy. Let us see how the school counsellor applies brief therapy to the school situation.

THE SCHOOL COUNSELLING CONTEXT

Solution-Focused Brief therapy is finding its way into the school system. Linda Metcalf believes that solution-focused therapy is a new way of thinking for parent, teachers and counsellors, one where more energy is focused on solutions than problems (Metcalf, 1995). Bonnington (1993) states that combining the brief therapy approach with relationship skills can create new opportunities for (school) counsellors to be helpful. Mary Alice Bruce suggests that the brief counselling model fits with the school counsellor's mission to help students help themselves (Bruce, 1995). In a study which compared results of brief counselling with traditional counselling in the school setting, Bruce and Hopper concluded that a Brief Counselling Model, based on four specific components of effective counselling practices as well as on concepts drawn from the strategic family therapies, could be used successfully in elementary and middle schools for individual counselling sessions (Bruce and Hopper, 1997). The four therapeutic components emphasised were 1) Strong working alliance, 2) Acknowledgment and use of students' strengths and resources as identified during the session, 3) Active involvement and connection between counsellor and student, and 4) Identification of clear, concrete goals. Bruce also suggests that this model is most suitable for schools because the effect of improved behaviour in one system can overflow into another system, e.g. the family (Bruce and Hopper, 1997).

Art And The Constructivist Therapies: An Integration

The survey above has indicated some of the ways that art therapy can be integrated with constructivist approaches, and also shows how the latter are gaining ground in the school counselling context. What I'm suggesting now is a particular integration of art therapy techniques with brief therapy. Art will be the medium for the conversation, allowing the young child to engage in something that is pleasurable while focusing on solutions. Art will not be used for interpretations either by client or therapist, but rather, art will concretise reframes, externalise problems, enhance the exceptions, visualise metaphors and make solutions real. It will provide an enjoyable experience for the young child and utilise a medium with which the young child is very familiar. Art will also provide an avenue for the cathartic expression of strong feelings. It will be noted also that the art in this technique is both directive and non-directive. The client is directed towards the subject of his drawing but is given freedom with regards to how to do the drawing, how to present the topic.

CASE EXAMPLE

The following is a case study of a boy, Sam, whose parents were going through the divorce process and who at the age of nine attended eight counselling sessions with another boy his age. Two years later I saw Sam again

by himself. His family circumstances had once again changed and he was very distressed. As I describe the processes used I will not expand on the other boy's issues but concentrate on Sam.

The First Sessions

Session One

After the two boys were settled and they had had some time to get to know me I asked them to sit back, relax and visualise how they felt when they thought of their parents' divorce. I gave them drawing materials and asked them to draw it when they were ready. Sam drew a picture of his head with a hammer in the middle and his brains on each side. The hammer swung from side to side hitting his brains. 'Thinking about it gives me a headache,' said Sam. We chatted about Sam's headache for a while and what he could do to make it a bit better. 'Even when very sad things happen it's OK to have some fun,' I said. So the boys went away to have some fun.

Session Two

The boys returned full of enthusiasm. After chatting about their week, I asked them to list as many feeling words as they could. I gave them a large piece of paper and some coloured pens. Together we listed: angry, happy, sad, surprised, excited, bad, shocked, unhappy, disappointed, upset, mad, rejected, left out, lonely, unwanted, peaceful, loved, unloved, guilty, confused, jealous, and hurt. I asked them to circle the feelings they felt when they thought of their parents' divorce and said: 'You can choose as many feelings as you like, even opposite feelings'. As we talked about the feelings, I stressed that *all feelings are ok. Some feelings make us feel bad but that doesn't mean that we are bad.* The boys were then asked to pick a feeling they would like to draw. I gave them time to sit, relax and visualise. When they had drawn the feeling, I asked the boys to scale it. Next I asked them to draw a picture of what their sadness would look like if it was just a bit smaller. Sam reduced his sadness to seven out of ten. His second picture was not only smaller overall, but contained only fourteen 'tears' as opposed to nearly 50 in the first picture. I asked the boys what would they be able to do if their sadness was as small as their second picture. Sam said that he would be able to play with his friends more, have more fun, and concentrate on his schoolwork.

Session Three

Both boys were eager for the session. On my inquiring how they were both said, 'Good!' (Australian idiom for 'well!') 'How do you know that you are good?' I asked. They described how they had been having more fun. I gave them a sheet, which I had adapted from the Rainbows Program (Marta and Laz, 1985: 8), and asked them to read what other children had said about divorce, to normalise their sadness. However, when I use this exercise I am also looking for opportunities for reframing. I asked them to write their own words about divorce. Sam wrote, 'Divorce is sad'. I asked them to draw that. Sam drew himself saying good-bye to his Dad. We talked

very sad



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Sam's Feeling

about their pictures and I acknowledged their feelings and thoughts and gave a reframe: 'Yes divorce is sad and it is a saying good-bye but it is also saying hello, saying hello and getting used to Dad who lives in a different house and who has a girlfriend'. Sam drew that too.

Session Four

I always find it important to allow children to express their anger with regard to divorce. Often I find that the person who has to deal with the anger is the mother. Although I let mothers know that they do not have to put up with bad behaviour I do want to acknowledge children's anger and give them ways of expressing it safely and well. One simple solution is the angry scribble.

When the boys came in for their fourth session I asked them to choose 'an angry colour' from the box of thick crayons. 'Now you can pretend that you are three years old. You know how a three-year-old scribbles? I want you to think about your anger with regards to your parents' divorce, and when I say "Go!" I want you to scribble as hard as you can.' I find that it works better when I make this activity into a game, in which I participate. After the activity, we talked about how we could be angry in this way without hurting anybody at all and we talked about other ways of expressing anger that they found helpful. I always stress that it's OK to be angry but it is not OK to hurt others, yourself or property.

Session Five

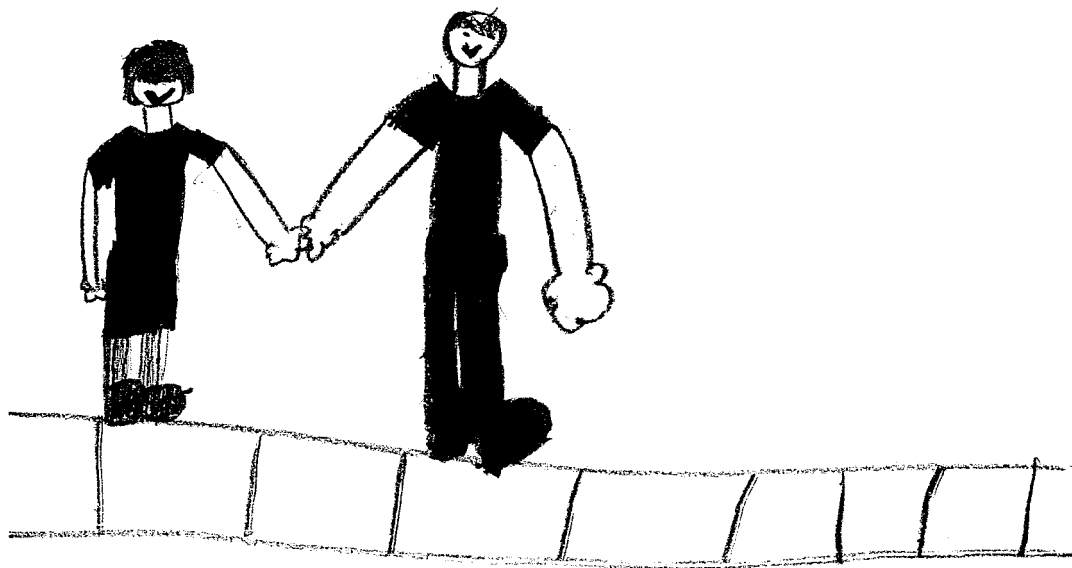
Children often feel very hurt when their parents separate and sometimes they hang on to their hurt, angry and

sad feelings. The little picture book, *The Hurt* by Teddi Doleski is very helpful here. It's a story of a boy who is hurt by his friend. The hurt is depicted by a balloon shaped character which gets bigger and bigger as the boy holds all his hurts inside himself. Eventually he learns from his father that he will have to let the hurt go.

After talking about hurt with the two boys, I read them *The Hurt*. They related to it very well. I asked the boys to tell me about their favourite page, and we talked about letting go. I asked them to draw themselves and their hurt. Sam painted himself in a tree house looking out the window as his hurt floated away.

Session Six

When the boys arrived for this session and after they told me they were good and how they knew they were good, I introduced the subject of changes. We talked about the changes they knew, how the weather changes, how they have grown and how they like different things now. Even families change. I then asked the boys to list the changes they liked and didn't like about their parents' separation. Both boys could think of three to four things that were happening that they liked and both indicated that not having Dad around was something they disliked. As we discussed the things that they liked, I gave the boys a thought that would help them to carry on, 'There is life after divorce'. In order to emphasise this I asked them to write it down. Sam included in his list of changes a drawing of himself and his parents. He is saying to his parents, 'Stop fighting!' He had been too fearful to say this to his



*Divorce is saying hello
to Dad living a different
life.*

Sam's reframe

parents. Because of Sam's picture, we talked about how the boys were not responsible for the fighting and how they did not have to stay around to listen. I encouraged them to remove themselves from the scene and to find something to do that they enjoyed and let Mum and Dad worry about the fighting. Some of the suggestions the boys gave me were that they could go to their room and play their favourite music, or play with their dog out in the backyard or ride their bike around the block.

Session Seven

The two boys were continuing to come in for their session looking happier and telling me that they were having some fun even though their parents were getting divorced. I asked the boys who they blamed for the divorce? Sam talked about how he blamed Dad because he was the one who went away. Often children feel in some way that they are to blame, and Sam was wondering about that too. My goal here is to make sure that blame directed either at themselves or another person is not getting in the way of healing. We talked about how divorce is an adult problem. I told them I had a book about some animals that were having a problem with blame and so I read them *Who Sank the Boat?* by Pamela Allen. In the story, five farm animals decide to go for a row down the River. As each animal gets in, the boat gets lower in the water; lastly the mouse gets in the boat, and it sinks. The question is who sank the boat? I manoeuvred the discussion so that it went round and round in circles until the boys finally concluded that it's either everyone's fault

or no one's fault. Blame could not be pinned on anyone in particular. Next I asked the boys to draw the divorce boat and put in it anyone associated with the divorce story. They had great fun putting Mum and Dad, the solicitors and the girlfriends in the boat. It was good to note that they did not draw themselves in the boat. Sam blamed the sharks, which he drew, with prominent teeth, surrounding the boat.

The Last Session

We had previously planned what we wanted to do to give our session closure and I had bought some lollies and cordial for the boys to enjoy. They had planned to bring something, but of course they forgot. Before we began our little party I asked the boys to draw a picture that illustrated that good things do happen after divorce. Sam was seeing his father regularly and so he decided to draw a good time he had had with his dad. The boys agreed that good things do happen after divorce.

Two Years Later

Two years later, Sam's grade six teacher asked me to see him. She did not know that I had previously seen him in grade four. Her reasons for referral were: difficulty expressing his needs both at school and at home, low self-esteem affecting his work and some aspects of his relationships, and his reluctance to take full responsibility for his learning or other difficult areas of his life. I met with Sam's mother and she told me that Sam was very an-

gry at home, shouting a lot at her and being very lethargic. His father had left for overseas without telling them, or letting them know if he was returning. She believed that this was the source of Sam's anger.

First Session

Sam was timid, shy, uncertain and withdrawn. We began with the 'drawing the feeling' activity described previously. The feelings which described how he felt about his father's leaving were: upset, happy, angry, confused and disappointed. When I asked him to draw his strongest feeling, he chose CONFUSED. He called his drawing a square-disgusting thing. It was simply a blue square. We talked about what it would look like if it was a bit smaller and what he would be able to do. He said he would be able to be nice to people, he wouldn't get angry with people and he wouldn't punch or kick.

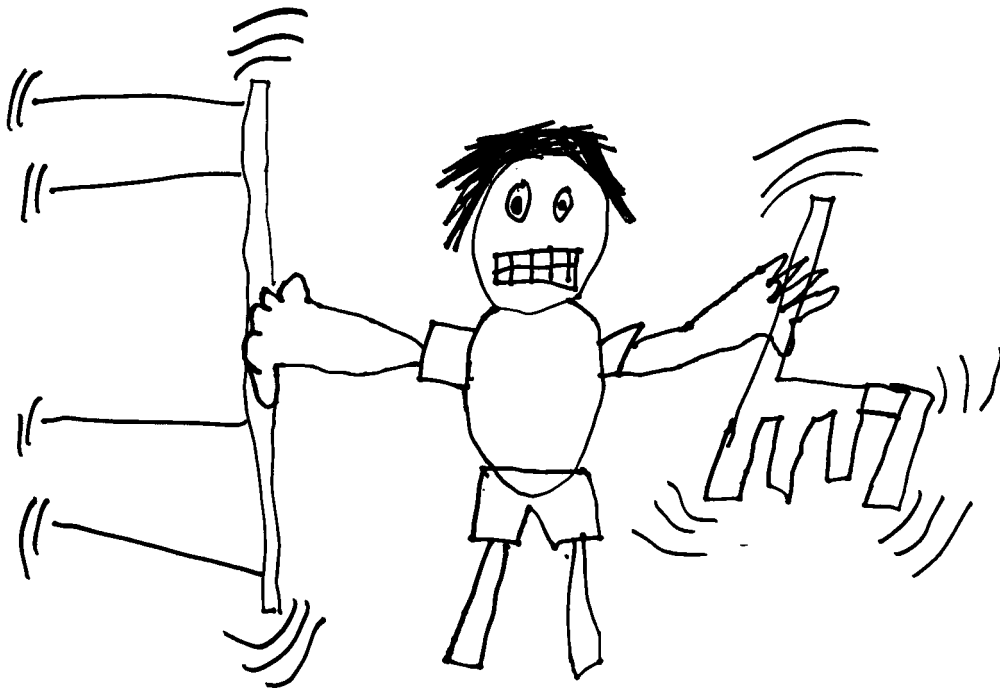
Second Session

Because Sam was rather hesitant about counselling, I contracted with him to have five more fortnightly sessions at his preferred time of eleven o'clock. I then referred to the activity used on the first session and asked him to think about his anger and draw a picture of it. Sam drew himself with teeth bared, holding up a table and a chair and shaking them. It was a very angry picture indeed. I congratulated him on his wonderful picture and told him how well he depicted his anger. We talked about what a big anger it was and how difficult it must be for him to manage. I asked him where he was directing his anger,

and when he said to his Dad, I asked him to draw his Dad. He did this and then decided to express his anger towards his Dad by ripping it up. He got great enjoyment out of this.

Third Session

Although still very quiet, Sam was more willing to answer questions. He said that most of the time now, when he thought of his Dad, he felt OK, whereas in the past when he thought of his Dad, he felt angry. I asked what proportion of his time did he spend thinking of Dad and he said about five out of ten. When I asked him how he was feeling during that time, he didn't know. I drew some faces portraying feelings (sad, happy, angry, disappointed, ok). He said he felt disappointed. I then started to wonder what would help Sam feel less disappointed and happier. Sam didn't know and again I made some suggestions: get on with Mum better, get on with brothers better, make more friends at school, do better at schoolwork and make more model planes. Sam thought that it would help him if he got on better with Mum, made more friends at school and made more model planes. We talked about model planes for a bit, and then I gave him paint and paper so that he could use his hands. He painted a snake in the grass which he called the red belly black snake. I asked him whom this snake reminded him of, and, he said his father. I responded with, 'Yes, Dad was sneaky going off telling no one'. Sam agreed. I was rather impressed with his ability to express himself in art when he was so inarticulate. To further the experience I gave



Sam's Anger



Red Belly Black Snake

him some clay and said that he could make the snake out of clay if he liked. He was very keen.

Fourth Session

I asked Sam about his goal of making more friends. Was he finding friends to play with and having some fun? He said that he was doing better at that. I also asked him how he was getting on with his mother. He thought he was fighting with mum less. I congratulated him on his achievements and asked him to continue playing more with friends and getting on better with mum. I then gave him his clay model, which had dried out and asked him if he wanted to paint it. He spent quite some time painting and repainting.

Fifth Session

I had contacted Sam's mother on the phone before the session and she was complaining about her three boys arguing and fighting with her. We spoke about that for a while and about her rights to be treated respectfully. However, it was obvious that Sam still needed opportunities to express his anger in appropriate ways.

After the usual introductions, I gave Sam some paper and asked him to draw another angry picture. He did this very willingly and once again I was impressed with how well Sam could express himself in drawing. After talking about it, I asked Sam what he wanted to do with the picture. Since he didn't know, I suggested that he could leave it with me, take it home, or throw it in the bin. He decided to rip it up and throw it in the bin. This,

I believe, was a physical expression of his anger. It could also indicate a desire to be rid of his anger. I talked about how when parents get divorced the children get very angry because they are powerless. They are like the meat in the hamburger, stuck in the middle and unable to fix the situation. Sam agreed with me and said that that made him sad. We talked about how in some situations he was powerless, like when parents divorce or leave the country, but that he was not powerless all the time. We talked about how he had power when he made model planes, and when he played handball at lunch times. I asked him what else he could do to help him be more powerful and have more fun. He said that at home he could ride his bike, watch television, and play Game Boy; at school, he could play handball, soccer and cricket. His homework was to do more of those things and have more fun.

Sixth Session

This was our final session. As usual, Sam said he was 'good'. I asked him how he knew he was good and he said he was good because he was feeling OK, not fighting with mum so much and having some fun at school. I asked him to draw a time at home when Mum and he were getting along. He drew himself doing his homework while mum was cooking the tea. It was interesting to note how immature the picture was. Sam is in grade six and not small for his age, but in this picture he is quite a little boy. He just reaches the table and his feet do not touch the floor, actually he has no feet and neither does

Mum. I did not, however, offer any interpretation, instead we talked about how this was a happy time for Mum and himself and about how he managed to keep his temper at this time.

According to our contract this was the last session. I told Sam that we had completed the five sessions we had contracted to do and that I would not be sending for him in a fortnight, but that I would like to see him for a quick hello after the holidays in about four weeks' time. I asked him if that would be OK. He agreed.

I rang his mother to say that the five sessions were over and asked how things were at home. She reported that the arguing had lessened. His teacher reported that he was fitting into the classroom better and not so withdrawn. Both she and his teacher wanted him to put more effort into his schoolwork.

I saw Sam for two more sessions well spaced apart and did some quick solution-focused activities about trying hard. Using a number line for scaling I asked him how hard he was working, and how hard did he think he could work for the next week. We also talked about how it would benefit him if he worked a bit harder. His teacher subsequently reported that he had become much more responsible for his own needs in class. He was working harder and doing better in his end of the year examinations. He had also developed a nice sense of humour that the class enjoyed. This indicated to me that his self-confidence and self-esteem had returned.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown how the accepted techniques for a constructivist therapy can be enhanced through the use of art, and that this integration of the two methods can be used effectively in the school environment. The case of Sam has demonstrated how, through art activities, a child can articulate his feelings and access his strengths and resources. Drawing can help reframe a problem, and concretise metaphors and make solutions more real. Art becomes in effect an alternative medium for therapeutic conversation to continue.

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