APPLICATION OF PSYCHOSYNTHESIS TECHNIQUES TO CHILD PSYCHOTHERAPY

SUMMER TREATMENT PROGRAM

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A SYNOPSIS

by

THOMAS D. SCHEIDLER

THE COUNSELING CENTER

Dover-Foxcroft, Maine 04426

207-564-8176

This program was conducted at a lake near Dover-Foxcroft, Maine, on six consecutive Thursdays during the summer of 1973. The attempt during this program was to translate or concretize psychosynthesis exercises and techniques into play language for use in child psychotherapy. Certain psychosynthesis techniques have been applied by this therapist before, primarily guided fantasy techniques.[1],[2]

For this more comprehensive program we had a maximum number of eight clients and two therapists. Assisting the writer was one of his former adult patients who had benefitted greatly from psychosynthesis exercises and understood them well.

The children in this program were referred by schools for acting-out problems, or because they were unable to form adequate peer associations. When they arrived for the summer program the children were, for the most part, very withdrawn and had a very difficult time getting involved.

In order to describe how we dealt with them, we will divide the presentation into two parts, because the summer program broke down that way. The first part describes the various exercises as practiced during the initial four weeks of the program. The second section deals with how the exercises were applied to the problems of the children during the final two weeks. Each of the described exercises were performed during each session. The remainder of the day was spent swimming and other recreation.

This brief presentation outlines the application of the exercises. A more detailed presentation, utilizing more examples and with more complete explanation, is in preparation.

PART I   PSYCHOSYNTHESIS EXERCISES IN CHILD PSYCHOTHERAPY

1. Exercises in Disidentification: We began the exercise by having the children first recognize, and then disidentify from various aspects of themselves. We would ask who they were. When they answered with their name, we pointed out that other people had the same first name. The children quickly caught on that their name was not who they really were.

We then disidentified from various discrete parts of the body, being careful to keep each disidentification very distinct instead of focusing on the body as a whole. For example, we had children disidentify from a toe or from a hand, and from their hair, and gradually led them up to disidentify from cerebral parts of themselves. It was at this point on the first day that we stopped disidentification from the actual body and personal part of the self, and began disidentifying from things which people called them, mostly of a pejorative nature. For instance, most of the children in the project had been called "disobedient," or "uncooperative" or "bad." Through this

1. Scheidler, Thomas, Use of Fantasy as a Therapeutic Agent in Latency-Age Groups; Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice, Volume 9 #4, Winter 1973, p. 299-302.
2. Scheidler, Thomas, The use of the Desoille and other mental imagery techniques with school children, Psychosynthesis Seminars, 1972-73 Series

exercise the children came to see that these names were only labels for their self-defeating behavior, and had nothing whatsoever to do with their true selves.

We did not, in the first exercise, attempt to disidentify them from emotional or intellectual aspects of themselves, but saved this for a later session. We also talked about finding out who we really are, after we had discovered all the things we were not, but did not try to answer this question, only pointing out that the solution was the goal. This exercise worked very well the first time, and in the first session led to a good discussion of the dynamics of teasing. Two of the boys had been teased quite a bit, and they were able to disidentify from the things they were being called while they were being teased.

During the next several weeks, the children were able to remember from week to week what they had learned previously, and rather quickly were able to say what things they were not. Consequently we were able to proceed to more advanced parts of disidentification, but once we got beyond the body it was a bit more difficult for the children to disidentify. We tried to have them remember how they felt the first day they arrived at the program and contrast that with how they felt at the present time. Doing this, we were able to get them to see they were not the shy or troubled feelings that they felt in the beginning, because they felt differently now. The girls in the project seemed to become especially enthusiastic about this exercise and were able to tune into disidentification from the emotional aspects of themselves by being aware of some real feelings that they had shared with the therapist during the actual time that they were together.

During the course of the day, as the opportunity presented itself, we reminded the children about disidentification, so that in as much as possible we would try to integrate it with the other exercises.

2. Animal Identification: The rationale for animal identification was to allow certain behavior strengths and positive aspects which were ordinarily covered up by personal identification to be expressed via an animal nature. Consequently, we had the children identify themselves as various animals. In the initial week the obvious problem was for the children to get together and make friends. They were too shy to do this, so we were able to get them, as goats and dogs, to make friends more easily. They wished to make plans together and to conduct stratagems to break out of their pen in which the farmer (the therapist) had corralled them. After this exercise the children seemed to develop more eye contact with each other, and to be on a more friendl basis. They also seemed more open to the therapist during this time, and seemed to be able to relate to him on a different level when they were animals than when they were people. I feel now that if we were going to do the project again, the animal identification would be the first exercise that we would do because it seems to initiate the children into the program very well.

When we had a rainy day, we did our animal identification by story telling in which the children assumed animal roles and the therapist put them in problem situations. Then the therapist wrote down what the children said in

story form. This was successful to a certain extent, but lacked the flexibility of an outdoor environment, where the children could act out some of the animal feelings. As I said before, the purpose of animal identification is to allow new facets of the personality, which are ordinarily covered by role identification models, to present themselves and be tried out. The children were very enthusiastic about this exercise, and found out that they enjoyed this freedom of expression which they feel they are denied sometimes in their personality aspects. Certainly the dovetail or the analogy of the fairy tales and the nursery rhymes where animals sometimes play predominant roles is very apparent here.

3. Guided Fantasy: The guided fantasies have been a part of this therapy work with children for several years, and we also integrated this into the summer program. The ordinary fantasies of climbing a mountain and going under water were performed by the children. Then we progressed to allow them to be more free in terms of choosing their own symbols and reacting with them. Their abilities to get involved in guided fantasies and to carry them through to closure varied, of course, and some children were unable to do it at all. It was very gratifying to see some of the children who could not form images at all in the beginning of the summer, become able to fantasize really well toward the end. The freedom of expression that we allowed the children in the guided fantasies worked out very well. For example, on one day, when we were doing the guided fantasies in the lake, we talked about being different things that were floating around in the water. Some of the children were having a difficult time with this, but one child in particular who has many physical coordination problems, was able to fantasy herself as a stick with the bark all loose around it. During the course of the fantasy she was able to tighten the bark and feel a lot better about her stick. Both therapists had the distinct impression that this stick with the loose bark was a very good representation of this client, and that she was able to carry through to closure in terms of solving this problem about her body image, was a good use of guided fantasy.

4. Sand Castles: We used sand castles during the first part of the summer program to work with the sub-personalities. Each sub-personality had a place within the sand castle where it could express itself, and the children were encouraged to build rooms that would house each one of their sub-personalities. In the middle of the castle, we made a very large room, where we would live when we found out who we really were; in this way we were able to tie in the exercise in sub-personalities with disidentification. The first week the therapist had to suggest practically all the rooms, and the children built them, but the second and third weeks the children were able to suggest rooms for themselves which they then built within the castle. For instance, we had a place within the castle for the happy self, a place for the sad self, a place for the self who worries, and a place to go with somebody special, etc. On rainy days we did the same sand castle sub-personality exercise with blocks, which seemed to work out fairly well. The children were enthusiastic about building castles, and even the children who ordinarily did not participate very well seemed to get involved in this exercise.

5. Ideal Models: Quite often the children would choose their friends for ideal models, children who were more popular than they were, or children who did not have the same problems as they did. When they chose friends, they would tend to talk more about the ideal models, and how they reacted, and in

a sense were sometimes able to identify with them but this was usually on a rather pedestrian level when it happened. One time, two boys in the project identified with Tarzan and after we talked a bit about how Tarzan would react, we then acted out some of the things that Tarzan would do, playing on the rocks near the water, and jumping off rocks. This was good for these boys, because they were both very much afraid of going out into the water where it was very deep and they were also afraid of entering the water very fast, but in this ideal model role they were able to overcome this fear.

6. Trust: We started out trust in a very slow way because the children did not tend to trust each other very much. The first exercise in trust was to have them each in turn, lie down in the sand and have the therapist and the others completely cover them up to their heads. Throughout this process they were constantly reminded that they were trusting us not to cover their heads, and we reinforced this trust throughout the exercise. All the children were able to enter into this successfully.

During the remaining part of the summer, we went on blind walks, having one child lead another child who was blindfolded. These walks met with limited success, but trust did seem to grow during the course of the summer. During the first blind walk, the children were pulling the blindfold off quite frequently. as soon as anything a bit unusual occurred. Finally, toward the end of the summer they were keeping the blindfold on all the time, and even though an accident occurred once, it did not seem to affect the trust that they felt for each other. However, the level of responsibility of the leader varied very much, and some leaders were very reticent and led more by tugging than talking, which made it rather difficult for the person who was blindfolded at the time. The children liked the blindfold walk, and one time, at the end of the day, they requested to do it again if there was time.

7. Exercises for Development of the Will: We had some doubt about doing this exercise with children, but decided to try it anyway. We started it separately and then gradually began integrating it with other exercises. As we were going from one place to another we would have the child say, "I am going to walk from here to the lake," and then they would walk. In the beginning we would have discrete exercises, like taking a certain number of steps, or skips, and have the child make his commitment, and then carry it out

Even the most active children were able to succeed in this exercise, and carry through their commitments on slowing down.

8. Centers of Safety: We tried to have the children find centers within themselves where they felt secure and safe, and each one would search until he found a center in a certain part of his body where he felt secure. Each child was able to do this exercise but we were unable to get any real elaboration on how the center felt, or what could be done to achieve it again. The children were reminded that they could go to the center whenever they wished, but in general we did not think that this had much of an impact on them.

PART II   APPLICATION OF PSYCHOSYNTHESIS EXERCISES TO PRESENTING PROBLEMS
           OF THE CHILDREN

After four weeks of working with the exercises themselves, we began
applying them to the presenting problems of the children. It was only
after four weeks that we felt that the children were very familiar with the
exercises, and understood them well enough to apply them to their own prob-
lems. This type of application proved very fruitful because there seemed to be
increased interest in the exercises when they were related to the actual
problems that the children presented.

When we worked the therapeutic day in this way, we began the day by
having the children state why they were there and give examples of their
problem behaviors. Sometimes they required help in doing this, because although
they had received much criticism and much negative feeling from adults, the
actual reason for referral had never been concretised until they entered treat-
ment. Even after it had been concretised it seemed to escape them rather quick-
ly, so we always made sure that the children knew what we were trying to deal
with in the exercises.

After we identified the problems, then we did an exercise in disidentifi-
cation so that the children would recognize that they really not were the
problem that caused them to be brought to the summer program. Having had some
experience in disidentification already they were able to do this quite readily
and to relate to time factors and the general principles of disidentification
to become aware that they really were not the problem of shyness with adults
or uncooperativeness, or belligerance towards teachers, or hyperactivity.

Animal Identification: We used animal identification in a problem oriented
way to have the child identify with an animal who had their problem and see
how the animal coped with the problem and to solve it in this way. For instance
we had one of the children who is very belligerant and uncooperative with
teachers, become a bear, and while he was a bear he had a difficult time with
other people. He would steal things, and even though he would say "I feel like
I should give them something to pay for it," or "I shouldn't try to scare
people," he was unable to do this. After much work with him in this animal
role, he was able to finally give adequate trade to the people or put on a
show for the food that he got, etc. In this way he had solved his problem
of belligerance and the need to meet hostility from people within the confines
of the fantasy.

Guided Fantasy: Guided fantasy proceeded in a similar way when we adapted
it to the problem oriented approach. For example, one of the girls whose
presenting problem was hyperactivity fantasized as a pony who always wanted to
go too fast. When the rider tried to pull back on the reins and force it to
go more slowly the pony simply wanted to go faster and the rider was unable to
control it at all. However, if the rider said "whoa" very gently, and per-
sisted in a more gentle approach, then the pony was able to respond and go
more slowly. This spontaneously occurred within the fantasy, indicating that
the child did have the controls necessary for slowing down her behavior and
that she did possess the resources to use them.

Sand Castles   (Transformation of Energy): Using our sand castles in a problem oriented approach, we had the child build two castles. The castles, then, were used for transformation of energy exercises. One castle was where the problem lived, whether it be shyness, or belligerance, or hyperactivity; another castle was built next door to it which was the opposite of this problem. The two boys, after they had built both castles, spontaneously wanted to tear down the castle with the problem. However, we suggested that they take the material from the castle with the problem and transfer it to the good castle in order to make it even more beautiful. However, the material would have to be transformed in some way from bad to good before it could be part of the good castle. The other children accepted this readily, and then also suggested that they have the moats from the good castle flow into the moat from the bad castle, in order to make that water more happy also. We were able to do this, and then after that they suggested that they build another castle that was even better than the ones before. This seemed to be a very deep realization of the transformation of energy which occurred, and reminded the therapist of the main idea of Assegioli's paper on the balancing and synthesis of opposites.

Ideal Models: Ideal models in this exercise were not significantly different from ideal models in the previous part of the summer program. Will exercises and the center in which they were safe were also very similar in that the applications were simply to a specific problem rather than to being safe or to exercising a certain part of their will in general.

This report on the application of some psychosynthesis exercises and techniques to child psychotherapy is mainly a report on what we did and how the children behaved. Because the program only ended last week, I am unable to give any kind of follow-up studies on the effect that the program had on the children. However, it was apparent to the therapist that several of the children did enter very strongly into the exercises during the course of the summer, and grew from week to week in their ability to fantasize and to see their problem, to disidentify from it, and to engage in the other exercises in a more appropriate manner. Consequently, our feeling is that this approach does reach the children on some levels, and we will only have to wait and see how it affects them later.