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# GROUPS FOR CHILDREN OF SEPARATION/DIVORCE: A METAPHORICAL APPROACH

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## ABSTRACT

The use of a metaphorical approach in a time limited group for children whose parents are separating/divorcing is explored. Drawing, "naming the group", and structured exercises are used metaphorically to help the children tell their own "story", not their parents version. The metaphorical processing of the media is what counts not the media itself. Every way of using media tells a story and moves children from story telling to story experiencing. When children are able to share feelings, they have taken a step forward.

## INTRODUCTION

The separation/divorce of parents is a traumatic event in the lives of children. What to many of them was a safe environment now becomes fraught with hostility and unknowns. Even if prior to the separation/divorce their parents were not getting along, there still was some degree of stability in having both parents available. With separation/divorce comes drastic change and upheaval. At this point in time parents are trying to pick up the pieces of their own lives and may not be in a position to truly help their children.

The group under discussion is one answer to this problem. It was formed as part of the Groups for Creative Change program of the Marriage Guidance Council of New South Wales. It provides some time out for parents at a point when they most need it. A breathing space.

And it provides an immediate resource to children at a time when they need some stability. It gives them something special, not to fill the void but perhaps to redefine the situation. It is important not to label these children as chronically disturbed, but to recognize them only as children who are going through an unsettling experience, a situational crisis.

Because the group is time limited (six weeks) it is viewed more as giving transitional assistance to children and perhaps providing some stabilization at a difficult point in their

lives. It is not viewed as making drastic changes. They may of course eventually need ongoing therapeutic assistance, but that is not the aim of this group.

## Group

The group reported on in this paper consisted of twelve children, aged seven to twelve - seven boys and five girls. Their parents had all separated/divorced in the past three years. Prior to the separation/divorce the children were not displaying any major behaviour problems. With the separation/divorce, patterns of crying, withdrawal, tantrums, anger and other behavioural disturbances became apparent. Realising these were the children's ways of handling the separation/divorce, they were viewed as responses to a specific situation, not as ingrained behaviour patterns.

The group was led by co-leaders\*, one woman and one man. This was for role model purposes. Leaders were constantly on the alert not to take on the role of the non custodial parent. The group was viewed by the leaders as preventative, with a combination of therapeutic and educational aspects.

## Overview of Metaphorical Approach.

Metaphor is defined as: A figure of speech in which one object is likened to another by speaking of it as if it were that other (Collins English Dictionary, 1979).

Children have difficulty with the use of metaphors per se in that their sophistication with language and their socialization to this style of speaking has not fully developed. They use metaphors, but don't entirely appreciate them for what they are and the depth of information they convey.

Children function from metaphors. They may know intuitively what is happening, but have difficulty expressing their ideas verbally.

However, they have little difficulty with media being used metaphorically, which is the approach to be developed in this paper. Drawing, "naming the group", and structured exercises are media that can be used metaphorically and have a great appeal to children. This paper will look at how each of these was used, and the group context as a way of producing change.

The process of a group of children of parents who are separated/divorced only begins to really flow when the children have told their

story, i.e. shared with the rest of the group their experience of their parents separation. Often it is the first time that they have actually told their stories, even to themselves. It seems as if they are very familiar with their parents "story", not so their own. Every way of using media tells "their story". They can describe what happened, what it means to them, but the use of media metaphorically helps them to move past description and into feelings. It gives them permission to experience how it felt.

Edward DeBono calls experts those in the deepest ruts worn by repeatedly experiencing the same issues over and over again. He points out that once such "habits" form it requires an incredible amount of energy to struggle out of them. Children without the ruts of expertise use metaphoric strategies interchangeably. They do not have the labels created by experience, so they invent solutions rather than rehearsing old solutions (Edward DeBono quoted in Samples, 1976:83).

Because children function from an intuitive level, they don't worry as much about following a particular pattern and they can expand in any number of directions.

It is the processing of the media that counts, not the use of the media itself. The processing needs to support the children's stories, for it is their own story that needs to be told. It also links to normalization and the universality of the experience.

It was important to recognize that the children are in the group because their parents want them to be in it, and not necessarily because they want to be there. There is likely to be resistance in the initial session. The metaphorical approach seems to move children beyond the resistance. They begin to realize that maybe the group will not be all hard work. They do not associate the media as work/school.

## Leader's Roles

In the beginning of the group it was necessary to set limits. The move from being 'taught' by a school teacher, i.e. rational thinking or a rational type of approach, was gradually changed to a metaphoric approach in the group. The children needed some containment at this beginning stage. The aim was initially to build trust and cohesion in order to use the metaphorical approach. Slowly and sensitively the children were introduced to the use of this approach.

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it was as if they were deciding which direction to take, left or right, metaphoric or rational. The experience of hurt, anger, confusion and the inability to stop their parents separating had initially prevented this natural intuitive side emerging.

#### Use of Drawing Metaphorically

Drawing was a helpful way of developing the trust process, a safe way of engaging. It was used during the latter part of the first session, after the children spent time getting to know each other. In asking children to draw, one needs to be aware that they are quite accustomed to drawing something fixed, but when faced with something free and freerhand it is quite often difficult.

They were asked to draw either 'the way you are today' or 'the way you feel today' or 'what's happening for you today.'

Occasionally there was resistance. In one case where the child was resistant to draw, the leaders worked with the resistance, and encouraged the child to draw 'not being able to draw'. Although some children had difficulty getting started, in this group all the children were able to draw a drawing. Even deciding not to draw can be used metaphorically. A blank sheet of paper makes a very clear statement.

It is through processing these drawings that the metaphoric approach becomes more obvious. Often not many words were actually needed. Body language tells a lot in connection with their metaphors. The children expressively owned or disowned their drawings indicating how they felt about their parents separation very clearly.

It is not surprising that they drew their current situation. Relationships with their parents are very focal to their lives and were causing them much worry and distress. Drawing is a way of helping them to tell their own personal story. It is a separate story from their parents, but includes the same characters.

The children were comfortable in expressing themselves through drawings. The uncertainty in their lives was drawn in various ways, e.g. as a yo-yo, as a door going in and out, Mum back and forth and Dad as two circles, 'All ways in all ways out.' although each child had his or her own story to tell, there were similarities among the children. The media allowed the children to tell their story as it was, not to please the leaders. This is an important point, as many of the children try to tell their parents what they think they want to hear.

Towards the middle of the group, drawing was used again. This time the children were asked to draw some of their feelings. The drawings indicated a fairly stereotyped attempt at expressing sadness and happiness but nevertheless feelings were there for them to see for themselves. They started to tell their own

story from the feelings they were currently experiencing. They had moved from story telling to story experiencing. The media helped them to make the transition. It provided a safe way of expressing feelings, in that they could still choose what they wanted to share.

Near the end of the group the leaders asked them to draw their two homes and how they felt about them. This time there was little reaction to the request. They happily complied, took much longer and were more willing to share. How did it feel to have two homes? Often they felt split. Split wide open, it seemed.

They seemed to be able to say "I have a story to tell about my two homes - not mum's or dad's version, but my version". this story included the sadness of not having one home, and the feeling of being uprooted.

The trust which had developed in the group provided a safe environment for the children to share their sadness openly, stay with it, and truly experience it. They were given permission to feel their own personal sadness - not their parents' sadness - and that it was OK to be sad.

Metaphor is a matter of teaching an old word new tricks - of applying an old label in a new way (Goodman, 1976: 69). The precise meaning that a child attaches to a metaphor is drawn from the child's own memories, fears, hopes and their general view of "their world" as seen from a different window, a metaphor.

#### Naming the Group as a Metaphor

The use of media metaphorically helped the children to express themselves more openly. As a result of this they decided to name the group. This was interesting to observe.

Every story has a title - this was the children's attempt to bring all their stories together. It was looking for a commonality, but recognising differences. This was a story to which they all contributed, a self initiated search for a new identity. As they were coming to grips with their parents separation/divorce there seemed to be a need for this new identity, an identity they shared in common. They did not want to be alone. The group name became the metaphor for the group story, it combined the children's past experiences outside the group with their present experiences within the group. The meshing of these created a new story containing part of both the past and the present. What is recalled from the past is dictated by present needs. The new story that evolved had a meaning that did not exist prior to the act of naming the group.

The children had moved from expressing themselves through drawings in an indirect manner, to expressing themselves verbally in a direct manner.

Collective metaphorical thinking cannot be fully

understood as either an emotional or an intellectual process. It is a process of knowing, which begins with neutral and undefined sensations and culminates in a dramatic structure which expresses ideas about the group and articulates the emotional quality of those ideas (Morocco, 1979:21).

The session on naming the group finished with the children holding hands and jumping together yelling their new group name, a metaphorical way of cementing their new identity.

At this point in the group the children seemed able to tell a different story to themselves. In other words they perceived themselves changed because of the group experience. They also seemed not to need the media as much. They could be more direct and come straight to the point.

Collective metaphors may be a particularly useful focus when we are trying to study or work with individuals and groups undergoing some kind of transition (Morocco, 1979:26).

It is important to recognize that these children were going through a transitional period. They were moving from what was once a stable family situation into an area of unknowns. The collectivity of the group helped them to realize they are not the only ones going through this transition. The group helped to begin the process of normalization.

#### Use of Structured Exercises Metaphorically

The development of a series of lists was used as structured exercise. The lists were used to help the members to confront their negative feelings and recognize that there are positives and negatives in every situation. How they developed their own future story dependent on letting go of their negative feelings about the past and the present, and moving on to the future.

The members were asked what they wished would happen in the future. Their first response, of course, was that they wished their parents would get back together. They were then asked to come up with their own 'I wish' list. It was stressed that what was wanted was their wishes, not their parents wishes.

Media was now being used metaphorically to look to the future. The members were asked to express their wishes as in a fairy tale. This provided safety. It meant they could express their wishes, yet retain the right to say the wishes did not really matter. Although appreciating their desire for parents to get together again, it was stressed that they needed to look at other aspects. Their wishes all seemed to be stated as the removal of something not as addition.

This exercise was toward helping them to 'off-

load' some of their negative feelings. The leaders talked about their wishes and how sometimes one needs to accept things one can not change and move on, and also, that fairy tales need to be changed into real life stories. Another listing, was used as a way of giving the children a further opportunity to safely vent their negative thoughts and feelings. They were asked to list what made them miserable, or sad, or upset. They were able to articulate their grievances quite clearly. Their drawings were often referred back to as a way of checking out their clarity of thoughts and feelings.

To end on a positive note they were asked to make a list of the good things. they decided themselves to divide into two subgroups. Even within these subgroups their new found collectivity was apparent. They preferred to call this list 'advantages'. This list gave them the opportunity to see that not everything was bad, and in fact there were some positives in the situation.

The issue of 'Two Houses' was also dealt with as a structured exercise. Each child had 'Two Houses' - one house which the child lived in with the custodial parent and one house where the other, non-custodial, parent lived. Although the children had 'Two Houses' they did not define themselves as having 'Two Homes'. The use of metaphorical thinking was useful in helping them to redefine the concept of home.

In the traditional approach, knowledge is separated into categories and each subject presents itself as something entirely new to be learned. Metaphorical teaching explains connections - how the subject is like something already understood (Williams, 1983:59).

For the children, home represents how the 'Two Houses' could be alike. They have similar functions, each has a parent, each provides security. The children's understanding of the concept of home comes from their past experience and can be applied to their new houses. If they have remained in their original family home they probably still identify it as home. Thus the work remains in making the transition of the second house into a home.

Dalley (1984:22) states that, typically, metaphorical illusion is a running together of the familiar with the unfamiliar, which establishes a kinship between them so that the latter is classified in the light of the former. What is clarified is usually an indetermined set of relationships and this accomplished informing the 'foreign' realm, the target of the metaphor, with known and established relationships from the 'native' realm, the source of the metaphor.

All the children lived with their mother, in the family home. The leaders drew two houses on the board and the children came up and filled in their initials to indicate how much time they spent at each house.

Each child was asked how they viewed these two houses. The front of the houses seemed forbidding, but the backs seemed to offer entry. The phrase 'coming through the safe backdoor' became a collective metaphor. It helped the members to also recognize the group as a safe back door. With 'Two Houses' there are now two safe back doors, one at mum's and one at dad's. The use of media metaphorically provided a safe backdoor to all group interactions. The safe back door inside the child is the safe feeling that comes from knowing they are loved and accepted. This can occur at either house and also in the group.

#### Conclusion

The use of media metaphorically enabled these children to move very quickly into a new mode of learning and experiencing. Working with their own metaphors, they often seemed to find their own solutions.

These children had an obvious need to see the leaders as safe, permanent and trustworthy. The leaders were checked out very carefully. Having experienced the separation/divorce of their parents it was very hard to trust adults. The use of metaphors helped establish a new way of looking at their situation.

The high cohesion which developed in the group, the normalizing effect, and the improvement in relationships between members was greatly enhanced by the children's ability to tell their own stories. The metaphors provided them distance, yet allowed for movement in either direction. Thus, the decision to move ahead or retreat was left up to each child. Everyone could save face.

A feeling of unity and comfort was achieved with this group of children whose lives had been disrupted by their parents' separation/divorce. Changes in the appearance and behaviour of each member and in their interactions were apparent. Changes related to appearance included most children gradually moving away from school uniform to 'street clothes,' boys casual in jeans, etc, and girls with different hair from 'school' hair.

The behaviour of each child was noticed to be freer, more spontaneous, less checking with the leader to see if it was all right. There was less raising of hands, more lying on the floor. Cushions were used for the whole group. Body language also changed as the weeks progressed. Faces were happier, less stressful, more outgoing.

Abraham Maslow pointed out that one who has a hammer treats the world as if it were a nail. children may take the same hammer and dig with, sculpt with it, weigh down papers between which they press leaves, and/or use it to knock apples from a tree. Children thus possess the ability to invent but not to conform (Maslow quoted in Samples, 1976:84)

After separation/divorce, parents may view the world in terms of black and white. In a way they become colour blind. They are so busy viewing from this perspective they can not see or feel the real world. Because of their own pain parents may also view the world of their children in the same manner. Children seem to view the world differently. Even in times of distress they see it through a rainbow and therefore have a palette of colours from which to choose, reinterpret their situation and invent new solutions. Unfortunately, children have difficulty in conveying their view of the world to mum and dad. The use of media metaphorically is a starting point for conveying this information.

Some final comments about time limited groups for children. It is recognized that six group sessions are not enough to make drastic changes in a child's life. The surface has been barely touched.

However, it is thought that an impact was made by giving them a new way of looking at their world. They can take away this metaphorical approach and return it to even when they are away from the group.

The media helped to bring feelings to the surface and provided an opportunity to deal with them. This was only possible because it was recognized that the children in the group were going through a transitional period. The children were also clear why they were in the group. They all had parents who were separated/divorced.

Each child had an opportunity to view their own life through media used metaphorically or metaphors. Each child could move at his/her own pace. Because the metaphorical approach provided safety, they could always back away. Each life story was special.

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