



# Therapeutic Applications of Metaphorical Storytelling

Advancing School Mental Health  
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# Workshop Goals

- Discuss two approaches to the use of metaphorical storytelling in clinical work with children
- Review examples of both storytelling techniques, then try both based on case vignettes in small groups
- If you already use storytelling, hopefully you will find a couple new ideas to add to your tool kit
- If you don't, the central goal is for you to gain the knowledge and confidence to give this technique a try

# Why do most practice models use Play in clinical work with Children?

- Play is how children rehearse and learn how to be adults
- Play is the language of childhood, it is how children: process experiences, express feelings, seek understanding, gain mastery
- Play processes can be *metaphors*

# Metaphors

- Definition: “Something used to represent or symbolize something else”
- From Latin “metaphora” - *to transfer, carry over; change, alter*
- Through French “metaphore” – a word, phrase, or image used as a *symbol to represent* something else
- Metaphors have been used in clinical work for many years in different forms
- “A zipped folder with words....”

# Metaphorical Storytelling: Play with Words

- Universal: Metaphorical Stories have been used to teach and influence children across cultures and time: Greek Mythology, Fables, Holy Books, Shamans
- Speaks their language and engages children in a multidimensional way: emotionally, cognitively, creatively
- Ugly Duckling; Boy Who Cried Wolf; Tortoise and Hare; Ant & Grasshopper

# Why Metaphorical Storytelling?

- Developmental Fit
  - Taps into the same processing and communication capacities of play
  - Metaphorical play is how children express, process, and gain mastery
- Works around verbal and cognitive processing limitations
- Messages the social worker sends are much more likely to be “heard”
- Portable and Adaptable: Don’t need toys or a play room



# The Brain and Processing Metaphors

- Right Brain ↔ Left Brain
- Right brain develops first
- Children can process experiences, emotions, trauma, struggles, and conflicts metaphorically more effectively and sooner than they can process them verbally
- Metaphorical storytelling process: The structure of the metaphorical story connects to
  - the reality structure it represents, then
  - the messages you embed in the metaphor get connected to the child's life experiences and reactions...

# Why does this work?

- Avoids triggering: child anxiety, fear, shame, embarrassment, family dynamics around secrets and boundaries...  
“resistance”
- Sidesteps defenses built up about adults correcting, punishing, confronting, shaming
- Child does not have to admit, divulge, reveal, share, confess, disclose, concede
- It can be Fun and engaging – SWCI – for the child and for us

# What can Storytelling Do?

- Communicate empathy
- Affirm feelings or thoughts
- Reframe problem
- Provide information
- Capitalize on strengths
- Create alternatives
- ◆ Teach coping skills
- ◆ Facilitate insight
- ◆ Normalize feelings or thoughts
- ◆ Offer healthier responses or behaviors
- ◆ Suggest more mature coping or adaptation

# When and with Whom?

- ✓ Children 4 to 12
- ✓ Children, Adolescents, Classrooms, Families
- ✓ Clients who will not talk, or “resistant” youth
- ✓ Cognitively delayed clients of any age
- ✓ Any setting and most situations
- ✓ Cautions: Thought D/O, Autism Spectrum D/O

# Preparing to use Storytelling

1. Get to know the child: struggle(s) and life situation
2. Identify a struggle, problem, or situation you want to address metaphorically (in your *first* story)
3. Identify a message you want to send with the metaphorical story: empathy, affirmation, you “get it”, interventions, insights
4. Typically, tell the story at the end of the session

# Designing Therapeutic Stories

- Chose the characters
  - The main character is the child
    - Animals: choose a main character that reflect the child's interests and/or has metaphorical meaning
    - Consider Humans for older children/teens
  - What other characters do you need?
  - Consider personifying trauma, conflict, struggles as characters
- Chose a setting:
  - That will appeal to and be engaging to the child
  - The setting can also serve a role in the metaphor
  - “Once upon a time, in a place, far, far away....” “deep in a beautiful forest...” “in a pond in the middle of a huge meadow....”

# Telling Therapeutic Stories

1. Set a stage: describe the broad setting, a little acting helps here...
2. Introduce the main character
3. Add characters to represent important people in the child's life in relation to the situation or issues being addressed
4. Consider personifying critical processes as characters

# Telling Therapeutic Stories

5. Establish the metaphorical representation of the problem, struggle, issue, or conflict in the child's life that will be the focus of the story
6. Develop the action among the characters as the metaphorical conflict, struggle, or dilemma unfolds
7. Consider creating a crisis or dilemma for the main character

# Constructing Therapeutic Stories

8. Communicate your message in the story
9. Have the story come to a stopping point
  - a. Do not try to fix it all in one story
  - b. Assume this is the first of a series of stories
  - c. One message at a time
10. Consider offering a title or theme for the story  
(or ask the child about what that might be)



Storytelling Example:

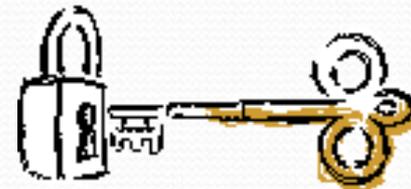
*Running Away*



# Group Exercise

# Mutual Storytelling Technique

- 1) Set up situation where you get the child to tell you a story she or he makes up
- 2) Analyze the story the child tells
- 3) Construct and tell the child a story back that starts with the Child's metaphors then you add a therapeutic message



# Getting the Child's Story

- 1) Introduce as a storytelling show game
- 2) Show child the microphone/recorder and ask if child wants to play
- 3) (note: get informed consent from parents and assent from child to audio record)
- 4) If "OK" start recorder and begin the "Storytelling Show"
- 5) Intro yourself as the Host, the Show, the Child, and overall process

6) Detail the rules for the stories

- a. The “story has to be one the guest made up”, not one from “TV, a book, movie, or a video game”
- b. Good if story has: “beginning, middle and an end”
- c. It is also good if the story has a theme, title, or lesson

10) “And now let me introduce our special guest....” –  
(hold the microphone for the child)

11) Help child start if they struggle to get started,  
“Once upon a time....” hold mic to Child

12) Prompt “and then” “wow, what happens next”  
“what do they do now”

13) Prompt child until she/he asserts they are done or  
story seems complete

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14. When story is over, ask for title, lesson, theme, etc.
  15. Analyze child's story
  16. Offer to listen to child's story
  17. Construct your story
  18. Tell child your story
  19. Record your story as well
  20. Offer to listen to whole recording again, leave it up to the child

# Analyzing the Child's Story

- Think about what you know about the child and family, and presenting struggle(s)
- Family-school dynamics
- Who or what do the other characters represent? (child, family, teachers, friends, you, etc.)
- What is the overall feel or affect?
- What is the major conflict or struggle?
- Separate atypical or unique to the child from derivative
- Factor in child's theme or lesson

# Construct a Therapeutic Story

- 1) Use the child's characters, setting, situation, and story beginning
- 2) Decide what your intervention goal will be
  - a) Communicate empathy that you "get it"
  - b) Reflect affect of characters: pain, fear, anxiety, anger, rage
  - c) Provide information, reframe, or help the child understand the situation
  - d) Suggest a healthier, more adaptive, developmentally appropriate response or strategy

# Construct Therapeutic Story

- 3) Do you need to add characters?
- 4) When will you deviate from the child's story?
- 5) What will be the new ending?
- 6) Use your theme, title or lesson to emphasize your message

## After you tell your story...

- Offer to listen to recording again, from the beginning.
- If child says “I am the bear aren’t I?” respond with interest, curiosity about what the child is saying, uncertainty and/or surprise.
- However, avoid interpreting the child’s or your story, let the child own the metaphor and the interpretation of the metaphor



## Mutual Storytelling Example:

*The Guys in the Creepy Dark  
Weird Place*



# Group Exercise



Discussion

Questions?

Comments?

## Resources

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