



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

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- 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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Storytelling Vignette: George

George is a 10 year old Native American boy who suffers from learning disabilities and recently escalating behavior problems at school. George was also recently diagnosed by a child psychiatrist as suffering from FAE (Fetal Alcohol Effects), the symptoms of which include his learning problems, delay in development of social skills, and emotional/behavioral struggles. Since the start of this school year (4th grade) he has displayed oppositional outbursts that have increasingly led to flight (runs off) and in this most recent episode he became physically aggressive when special education school staff tried to stop him from leaving the school grounds. There was a meeting where his continuance at the school was questioned, a FBA PBIP process was initiated and you are brought in to see if you can work with him individually to reduce his behavior problems. You are told by his teachers that he is very active, laughs a lot, likes to have fun, but becomes oppositional when he does not want to do what he is told or expected to do.

You meet with George's parents who are quiet, appear sad, and seem to be at a loss of what to do with George. They are very distressed especially since being told he may not be able to stay at the school if his behavior continues as it is.

At first George refuses to meet with you. Then he tells you his previous counselor played basketball with him and he will meet if you will play basketball with him. You agree and take him to the gym, and he is off, all over the place, not sharing the basketball, and laughing and running around. You decide to be acceptant and patient and so sit down behind one of the goals and let him run around and you wait. Eventually he comes over and shoots baskets in front of you, you wait. A little while later he asks if you want to shoot with him, you say "I guess so" and get up slowly. You shoot some baskets with him, he shares the ball. Toward the end of your session you ask if he would like to hear a story before you go back to the unit, and he says "Yes" enthusiastically.

Assume this is the first, but not the last story you will tell George.

What is one of the first issues you want to address?

What is the message you want to communicate to George?

Write a story.

Storytelling Vignette: Maria

Maria is an 8 year old Mexican American second grader whose mother brought her in after being urged to seek help for her by her teacher. Jimena (mother) explains (in front of Maria) the teacher says that Maria has several imaginary friends who seem to occupy all her time and attention and keep her from getting her school work done. She also prefers the company of her imaginary friends to the company of real children at school, so spends most of her time to herself. She talks to these imaginary friends out loud at school and the other kids are not sure what to think of Maria. She is a nice kid but all the other kids have basically given up on interacting with her, despite the teacher's efforts to get them to do so. Jimena shares that Maria does the imaginary friend stuff at home and she understands why the teacher is concerned.

Jimena explains that Maria has met all developmental milestones, been a good student since Kindergarten, and teachers have always told Jimena that Maria is very bright. However, you also learn that Maria's Father died last year in a car accident and Jimena and Maria moved during the summer for a job opportunity for Jimena. This fall Maria started a new school in a new town. You also learn Jimena moved here from Mexico with her family when she was a toddler, and Maria was born and raised in the small town they recently moved from, which is also where both sets of grandparents and other extended family live. Jimena seems to have a sad affect and is clearly worried about her daughter. Maria stays mostly quiet while meeting with her and her mother, despite your attempts to get her to talk. Jimena gives you permission to meet with Maria one-to-one and tells you she hopes you can help.

Maria is polite and well behaved with you, however, Maria will almost only talk to or about her imaginary friends despite your attempts otherwise. When you comment that you cannot see the kids she is talking to, she says "Of course not, they are *imaginary*; they are only in my imagination." She seems bright and creative and not out of touch with reality. You offer a deal, "If you will stop talking to your imaginary friends we can play a game of Candyland," she accepts and follows through on her promise throughout the game. You realize she can stop the imaginary friend preoccupation when she chooses. At the end of this first meeting you offer to tell her a story. She responds positively to the suggestion.

Start by identifying the issues you want to address with Maria.

Then, which issue would you address first?

What message would you want to communicate to Maria?

Set up a story, characters, situation, plot, conflict, response, etc.

Write a story to tell to Maria.

Mutual Storytelling Vignette: Billy

Billy is a 12 year old European American boy whose mother, Barb, has requested “counseling” for her son, who is in SPED for a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), because the boy’s doctor suggested he needed to see someone. The family has very limited financial resources, Billy’s Dad has left the family and Barb works for minimum wage. Billy was in an accident six months ago, when he was hit by a car on his skateboard out on the street at night. Billy’s traumatic brain injury resulted in: some memory loss, motor and gait problems, speech problems, and learning problems. After several months at a special treatment facility where he had to learn to walk and talk again, Billy recently returned home and he continues to improve. Mom also tells you on the phone he is “different,” which you interpret as personality changes along with the other neurological struggles. He has just started going back to school and has had problems interacting with his friends, started having outbursts of anger, is easily frustrated, and has periods of sadness and social withdrawal.

You start by meeting with Billy and his Mom. Barb tells you in a caring and sympathetic way what has been concerning her about Billy, Billy is rather quiet while his Mom is in the room. You ask Billy if he feels OK about meeting with you alone and he quickly says “Yes.”

Billy seems eager to meet with you, even excited, but is mostly superficial in his conversation, telling you about skateboarding. You decide to try Mutual Storytelling toward the end of the time you have. You invite Barb back and ask them both if it is OK to audio tape record with Billy. You explain why, and what you will do with the tapes in the short and long run, and answer any questions they both have. Billy gives assent (says OK), Barb gives informed consent (signs a consent form).

You use the Story Telling Show procedure and this is the story Billy tells:

“There’s this cool guy who is wandering around in a foggy dark creepy weird place. He does not know where he is or what he is doing or where he is going. After a while he runs into this other guy and tells him that he is lost and asks for help, but that guy is lost also. They wonder around in the foggy dark together and cannot find their way.”

That is the end of the story, you try to get more but that is all Billy can/will do.

You ask for the moral, theme, lesson, or title, and he cannot tell you one.

He is eager to listen to himself, and seems somewhat distressed by facial expression when listening to the tape.

While you listen to the tape together, you construct the story you will tell him.

Who is the first guy?

Who is the second guy?

What is the conflict or problem represented by being lost in the dark?

What issues might you want to address in the story, and what initial message might you want to communicate to Billy?

Set up your story back to Billy. How and when will your story deviate from his to send the message you have decided to give?

Mutual Storytelling Vignette

Allyssa

Allyssa is a 10-year-old African American fourth grader referred by her teacher for being increasingly withdrawn and starting to not to get her work done—which is not like her. The teacher also says that her father apparently died last school year. You call and talk to her mother, Chloe, who is a nurse assistant, and very open with you and concerned about Chloe. She asks to come to school the next day to meet with you as she is off work. Chloe tells you Allyssa is sad at home a lot and that her father, Anthony, who was a police officer, was killed in a crash on a motorcycle at work while in a high-speed chase. She further says Allyssa seems very preoccupied by the fact that her father's arm was reportedly torn off in the accident, which Chloe reports is what she was told, but she is not sure how Allyssa knows this, and she is not sure what to say to her daughter about that.

You then meet with the both of them and Chloe talks about how Allyssa has been doing since her father died, how it has been very hard on both of them, and her little brother, Michael. Allyssa is very quiet, speaks only when spoken to, seems like she does not want to be there, gives brief responses and avoids any questions about her father. You ask them both and they agree it is OK for you to meet with Allyssa one-on-one, you suggest a board game, she selects connect four and you play a few quiet games. You ask her a few get-to-know her questions like what she likes about school, favorite TV show, and three wishes, she talks a little more than before but still quiet. You ask her if she wants to play a game you call The Storytelling Show and tell her a little about it. She agrees, you get out you microphone and turn on the recorder (you got signed consent to record from Mom in your one-on-one with her earlier) and start the STS. When you get to the part where you introduce the day's special guest, Allyssa, you ask if she is ready to tell a story she made up all in her head by herself and hold the mic near her she takes the mic and tells you this story. (While she tells the story, she takes a piece of blank paper and starts drawing.)

There was a little girl who is walking in a very pretty park with flowers and trees and birds and swans and she meets her father and they walk around together holding hands. Then a magical rainbow road suddenly appears going up in the sky disappearing into the clouds and the little girl and her father start walking up the rainbow road into the sky walking and walking and walking until they come to a door. They can hear beautiful music from behind the door but when they try to open the door is locked, the music is very beautiful and they want to go in so they try again but cannot open the door.

You wonder out loud what happens next and she says: *That is the end of the story.*

You ask her if there is a Title or Lesson to be learned from the story, she says: *No.*

The drawing she made while telling the story is a little girl and a man hand-in-hand walking on a rainbow road in the clouds and both of them only have one arm.

What are the metaphorical meanings of the Park? Rainbow Road? Door? Music? Holding Hands? Missing arms in the drawing?

What do you want to communicate to Allyssa? Construct a story to tell back to Allyssa

Mutual Storytelling Vignette: Sandra

Sandra is a 9-year-old African American girl who has juvenile onset insulin dependent diabetes. She has been hospitalized a couple times in the recent past year as the result of non-compliance with her diet and her diabetic care that has resulted in repeated medical crises. This behavior can eventually lead to serious problems such as blindness, kidney failure, and limb amputations. Her medical problems have resulted in considerable missed days at school and the student assistance team has requested you work with Sandra and her family.

You meet with the parents first, and they are quite eager for help. The parents are very worried and seem overwhelmed at what to do to change Sandra's behavior. They tell you Sandra gets very good grades, and has many friends. The problems started about 6 or 8 months ago and have been getting worse and occur when she is at school or at friend's houses when she eats stuff she knows she should not. They are talking about home schooling her and not letting her go to other people's houses, and that is very upsetting to Sandra and there is currently an escalating frequency and intensity to the family conflicts about this.

You decide to meet with the family to address the escalating conflicts and with Sandra in individual sessions. When you meet with Sandra she is cooperative and she tells you about her school, friends, and stuff she likes to do. She avoids talking about her diabetes or anything to do with that despite your multiple efforts. You realize a metaphorical indirect approach is a good strategy here and you bring up the Storytelling Game and ask if she would like to play, she tentatively agrees.

She tells you this story:

"There once was this Unicorn who was magical and could fly. Her name was Emily and she was pink and beautiful. She would fly around with her friends and play and laugh. But her mother would yell at her she couldn't do this or couldn't do that, stuff her friends could do, which made her mad so she would fly away. Sometimes she would fly away to be with her friends, sometimes she would fly away to be alone. That is the end of the story."

When you ask Sandra if there is a lesson to her story, she says: "Parents should leave kids alone."

Key Questions:

Who is the Unicorn?

What is the metaphorical conflict or issue in the story?

What is Sandra's meaning making of the problem?

What is the message you want to send back in your story?

Write a story.

Mutual Story Telling Vignette: Stacy

You are a Child Protective Service Worker taking the calls this morning and 2 school staff call and report that Stacy, a 7 year-old European American first grader, has come to school and has welts from having been beaten with a belt rather severely.

Stacy and her family are an ongoing CPS case but the assigned caseworker is not there today, so you start by pulling the family's file. You look through the file and the abuse was apparently a single incident by the Father, which occurred a year ago. Since then, Stacy's mother and father have been cooperative with the plan to keep Stacy at home, and things seemed to be going well.

You and another CPS worker go to the school and interview Stacy. She is quiet and slow to open up but does tell you her Dad beat her with a belt. She shows you the marks, which are quite severe. You take Stacy out of school to the Emergency Room to have her wounds treated and documented. You call the Mother and explain what is going on and ask her to come to the office, she starts crying and agrees to come. The Father is not home.

Mom admits the Father did "spank Stacy because she was not minding." Upon further questioning she tells you the Father did use a belt on Stacy and had been drinking, but he is not like that when he is sober. She also says she does not know where he is, but also implies she is afraid of how he will react about all this. You explain your concerns about Stacy's safety and offer plans for her and Stacy to be together and safe including the Battered Women's Shelter, a restraining order, but she is hesitant to make any plans to be away from the Father. You finally explain that Stacy cannot go home if a plan cannot be made to keep the Father away from Stacy. She becomes angry but no more willing to make a safe plan.

You and your coworker take Stacy into protective care, find a foster placement, explain the plan to Stacy and are driving Stacy there. Your coworker is driving and you are in the back seat with Stacy. She has a stuffed rabbit with her and you ask her if she is hungry and wants to get something to eat on the way to the place she will stay and she says "my rabbit is hungry." You realize she may be communicating her feelings and needs through the rabbit, so you ask "What does the rabbit want to eat?" "A cheeseburger and fries" says the rabbit. "Ok, we can do that." "I was also wondering if the rabbit might be scared or confused" you ask. "Yes" says the rabbit. You turn to Stacy and say "This is a very interesting rabbit I wonder if you could tell me a story about this rabbit, about why the rabbit is scared and confused?" Stacy tells you this story.

"Rhonda the Rabbit is a pretty rabbit. She likes to run and play with the other rabbits, and she likes candy and recess time. She likes school except when she gets taken away and does not know where she is going. She misses her Mommy Rabbit, and is hungry and cold. She just wants to go home.

"Then what happens" you ask. "I don't know" says Stacy.

"Is there a moral or lesson to be learned from your story?" you ask.

"A cheeseburger is better than nothing" says Stacy.

"That was a great story, can I tell you a story now?"

"OK" says Stacy.

Take Stacy's basic characters, plot, and theme and write a story.

What is your interpretation of this story; what is Stacy telling you?

What do you want to communicate to Stacy?

How can you add that to her story?

Metaphorical Meaning of Animals

Alligator/Crocodile	dangerous, aggressive, frightening,
Antelope	swift, keen vision
Bear	power, strength, masculine, wanderer, loner, fearless, intimidating
Beaver	hard worker, stable, persistent, eager, organized
Buffalo	strong, powerful, protector
Bull	strong, mean, territorial, masculine, angry, unpredictable
Butterfly	beauty, freedom, transformation, renewal
Cat	gentle, independent, curious, agile, warm
Cheetah	fast, agile
Cow	gentle, calm, mother, food, nurturance
Dolphin	intelligent, rescuer, friendly
Deer	graceful, gentle, vulnerable, feminine
Dinosaurs	death, power, extinction, survival, fear
Dog	loyal, protector
Dragon	power, mysterious, rage, unknown, fighter
Duck	friendly, social, goofy
Eagle	noble, freedom, hunter, fearless
Elk	noble, majestic
Elephant	slow, powerful, gentle, helpful
Fish	vulnerable, slippery, fast, easygoing
Fox	cunning, manipulative, alert, sneaky, elusive
Gorilla	masculine, protector, power, strength
Giraffe	gentle, naive, shy
Guinea Pig	cute, cuddly, docile, trusting, victim
Horse	speed, beauty, companion
Kitten	vulnerable, cuddly, playful
Lion	protector, noble, power, danger, control
Mouse	fearful, shy, secretive, meek, quiet
Monkey	mischievous, silly, playful, happy
Monster	fear, danger, mean
Owl	wise, calm, knowing, helpful
Parrot	imitation, conformity, beautiful
Pig	earthy, dirty, lazy, smart
Rabbit	vulnerable, alert, vigilant, quick, cuddly, warm
Rat	sneaky, dirty, calculating, untrustworthy
Rhinoceros	tough, strong, powerful, loner, protector
Shark	fear, aggressive, sneaky, unpredictable, violent
Sheep	docile, gentle, friendly, vulnerable, conformist
Snake	sneaky, untrustworthy, evil, aloof, dangerous
Squirrel	quick, agile, thrifty, hard working
Swan	beauty, elegant, graceful, late bloomer
Tiger	fast, powerful, dangerous, prowler
Turtle	shy, slow, persistent, well defended
Unicorn	magical, beauty, vulnerable, rare
Vulture	death, scavenger, evil
Wolf	aggressive, dangerous, untrustworthy