

Healing Children, Adolescents and Families Nature-ly

Darline Hunter, Ed. D.

Assistant Professor

Coordinator of Counseling Practicum & Internship

University of Houston Clear Lake

Hunter@cl.uh.edu

Dr. Hunter specializes in the use of innovative counseling techniques with special populations in her private practice, consultation with community mental health agencies and hospitals. She teaches a graduate class on the use of creative techniques in counseling and has presented at Cambridge University in England on the use of Nature in Counseling.

The healing power of nature has long been attested to by poets and prophets, but it is more currently being reviewed in the literature of counseling under the various nomenclatures of animal facilitated therapy, ecopsychology, horticulture therapy and natural environment therapy (Kaplan, 1992; Moore, 1989; Nebbe, 1995; Roszak, T, Gomes, M. E. & Kanner, A. D., 1995). Religious and cultural studies indicate that humans and nature have always had a natural relationship, which provides for the spiritual and practical needs of people (Berry, 1988; Fox, 1988). Contemporary writers assert that mental health may be directly affected by this relationship (Shapiro, 1995; Cahalan, 1995). "Ecopsychology brings together the sensitivity of therapists, the expertise of ecologists, and the ethical energy of environmental activists (Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, 1995, p. xvi). Just as our society has become increasingly urban, crowded, and devoid of contact with nature, so has the physical and mental health declined of the inhabitants of the cities. The further our society has moved away from contact with nature, the more distant we have become from meaningful interactions within the family, schools, and each other. Profound positive effects have been observed on participants in environmental education, school

camping, and wilderness camping experiences. Increased self-esteem, self-confidence, self-concept and pride are among some of the effects of interactions with nature, as well as increased levels of responsibility and development of physical skills. “This proposition suggests that human identity and personal fulfillment somehow depend on our relationship to nature. The human need for nature is linked not just to the material exploitation of the environment but also to the influence of the natural world on our emotional, cognitive, aesthetic, and even spiritual development...” (Kellert & Wilson, 1993, p. 42-43). Linda Lloyd Nebbe (Nebbe, 1995) expands on the use of Nature Therapy in the areas of instrumental therapy, relationship therapy, passive therapy, cognitive therapy and spiritual therapy which can be used in the counseling of children, adolescents and families who are suffering from a sense of disconnection.

Therapeutic use of Nature in the counseling experience can be a powerful source of healing for the alienation that keeps youth and families on the edge of society. Doors closed by language, discrimination, or disability can be opened by teaching youth and families that they are naturally an important part of the interconnection of all beings. Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (1990) proposed that when the four basic needs of all humans (belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity) are not met by the family or community, youth become alienated and act out their sense of disconnectedness. They proposed that the unmet needs of belonging can be corrected through relationships of trust and intimacy. The unmet needs of mastery can be healed through opportunities for meaningful achievement. The unmet needs of independence can be addressed with development of leadership and self-discipline skills. The unmet needs of generosity can be provided through experiencing the joy of helping others. These experiences can be provided through Nature Therapy. It is through the experience of nature and the philosophy of interconnectedness, that youth and families can develop a sense of connection with society and experience an integration of themselves.

Nature has long been acknowledged as a source of healing, whether by the great spiritual traditions or by modern day psychiatric and medical facilities. Useful with all children, regardless of race or ethnicity, it emphasizes the universal characteristics of the need to feel a sense of belonging, mastery, independence and generosity. The focus of this paper builds upon the satisfaction of those basic needs through interaction with Nature in the therapeutic setting.

Destructive relationships with self, within families, and society can be transformed into cooperative, respectful, trusting and sympathetic relationships when the counselor assists in the development of

positive attachments and a sense of belonging through the use of individual and group activities which incorporate Nature. When the importance of harmony in interrelationships with one another and with the natural world is emphasized in these activities, respect for and acceptance of self and others develops.

Melson (1990, p. 15) stated “Experiences of interconnectedness with animals and with nature may be an important context within which more nurturing children may grow to be more nurturing adults.”

Interacting with animals gives children and adolescents the opportunity to learn to give and receive affection while pets substitute for human attachment by reducing loneliness, and providing love. Taking care of animals within the counseling setting provides opportunities for youth to consider the needs of the animals and to feel the inner satisfaction of giving of themselves as they provide for the needs of the animals. The youth can project their own feelings on to the animals, which facilitates expression of feelings. The unconditional acceptance and love of the animals promotes a strong sense of connection and belonging.

Youth develop a sense of mastery through opportunities for developing competence through the use of nature-based activities such as Container Gardens. Gardening can be used to produce vegetables and flowers which then can be shared. Both the skill of gardening and the internal reward of sharing the products of gardening are sources of pride for the student. Being able to recognize and knowing the names of local birds is a cognitive skill, which can be shared with others and bring self-esteem. The development of a child’s confidence in his or her ability to interact competently with nature allows our modern students to acquire the mastery, which their more agrarian ancestors were more able to achieve naturally.

Encouraging youth to make decisions, solve problems, and be responsible, can transform discouraged, acting out children into children who feel respected and powerful. Youth who feel strong and independent have no need to disobey in order to demonstrate independence or to bully others for respect or to attain power. Counselors can provide for this need for independence by teaching self-management skills in relation to Nature. The *Music of Nature Circle* can be used to teach the blending of independence and belonging. The youth take a nature walk to find instruments from Nature to be brought back into the group room. Those instruments may be two sticks to click together, two rocks to clunk together, seedpods or a branch of leaves to shake and rattle. The group participants then follow the leader who establishes a rhythm allowing the children to improvise a song. The concepts of cooperation and

harmony can be discussed along with how important each person and each part of Nature is to the creation of the whole song of life. *The Kangaroo Pouch* activity is another vehicle for teaching the concept of each child having a “special gift from Mother Earth”. The child makes and decorates a cloth bag into which he or she places symbols of Nature, which make him or her feel safe. The youth are told that these natural reminders have a calming effect when they feel afraid or anxious. Reaching into the bag and touching the objects, or just the memory of the objects in the safety of the pouch, can be used as a calming influence in times of stress.

Our once agrarian societies had natural opportunities for youth and families to develop generosity because community support was necessary for survival; but today’s families are often isolated, producing children and adolescents who are unaware of the sense of joy, which can come from the practice of generosity. The counselor can provide Nature opportunities to build altruism, empathy and caring. The *My Thanks to You* exercise can be used as a group activity to encourage children to honor others for their assistance and achievements and to promote the sharing of materials and self. The youth are encouraged to use natural objects to make a token of their appreciation to another group member and to give it away as a demonstration that his or her efforts have been appreciated. Sharing flowers or vegetables from the garden the child has planted and tended through the experience of Nature Therapy gives the gardener the opportunity to feel the internal benefits of being generous and to be verbally praised for sharing. Nature can provide the opportunity for projects involving volunteering. The collection and pressing of leaves and flowers can provide supplies for crafts to be made to share with others. Note cards, stationery, book covers and book marks made with the pressed flowers make gifts to be presented to parents, teachers, peers and the elderly. The generosity and stewardship of nature can be emphasized as the group members interact with nature and others who are in need.

The wisdom of our agrarian ancestors can be used as a vehicle for the modern-day counselor to assist in the healing of our youth and families who feel disconnected from society, themselves, and nature. The harmony inherent in the interconnectedness of Nature can be a counseling vehicle to help heal the disconnectedness that the youth of today feel and are acting out. This interrelatedness has the potential to assist them in reconnecting to society and to aid in the reconnection of their fragmented selves. The use of nature-based activities makes concrete the agrarian wisdom of our pioneer communities, which taught the interconnected condition of all beings.

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