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Superheroes and the Family Shield: An Experiential Technique for Families

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Abstract

Inclusion of children in family therapy sessions can be a daunting task without the use of experiential techniques. The use of the Superheroes and Family Shield technique assists families in better understanding their issues, helps to pinpoint individual and family strengths, and works toward cohesive goal setting and provision of support. This technique is adaptable to varying theoretical orientations and multicultural issues.

Marriage and Family Therapists (MFTs) are well positioned to work with all members of a family system, providing therapeutic support, guidance, and avenues toward growth. During the course of therapy, however, many MFTs can feel at a loss when looking to use techniques that target the issues in an engaging way while also being inclusive of even the youngest members of a family (Bowen, 1966; Haslam & Harris, 2011). Including young children in sessions can be daunting as they do not possess the same level of verbal acuity and generalizable life experience as adults and pre-teens/teens (Landreth, 2012) and, therefore, often can not engage in the therapeutic process as deeply as their older family members. Inclusion of young children in sessions, however, is crucial to the overall healing of all family members individually and the family as a system (Gil, Sobol, & Bailey, 2005). It is important that MFTs incorporate techniques and interventions that are well suited for all family members regardless of age.

Traditional therapies rely on the verbal acuity of clients, while experiential techniques allow for freedom of expression (Wolfe & Collins-Wolfe, 1983). Issues on a spectrum from everyday concerns to severe family trauma can raise levels of anxiety and tension in the family system, affecting all members regardless of age. While traditional therapeutic modalities focus more on talk therapy and provide relief for older family members, these modalities are frequently not sufficient to provide therapeutic support or guidance to the youngest family members. Modalities that reach children developmentally provide therapeutic support for the family system as a whole.

Technique Background

Individual Superheroes and the Family Shield is an experiential technique for use with families dealing with myriad difficulties. The idea of using superheroes in family counseling sessions was adapted from Rubin and Livesay (2006), who noted that the allure of the superhero fantasy “offers the child, in very concrete terms, a sense of power in an adult-dominated world that continually wrestles with abstractions such as good-evil, right-wrong, strong-weak” (p. 120). Children can then imbue superheroes with powerful characteristics like honesty, strength, courage, determination, and hope (Fingerroth, 2004; Rubin & Livesay, 2006). However, it is not just children who are drawn to superheroes; teens and adults are also often captivated by the superhero fantasy.

Rubin and Livesay (2006) introduced superheroes to clients as a medium for assisting children in working through issues and abuses suffered while also creating new pathways for growth, healing, and identity formation. The authors encouraged clients to choose the superheroes they felt drawn to and create stories and play fantasies. Rubin and Livesay, through exploratory questioning, were then able to help children relate their stories back to their own life experiences and hopes for the future. The backstories, personal characteristics, hidden identities, and powers of the superheroes contributed to client identification with the hero and subsequently an embodiment of attributes that help clients transcend their difficulties.

This transcendence is not only sought by child clients but also by all people engaged in a therapeutic process. The use of superheroes in client catharsis and healing can be applied to work with families as well as individual clients. Through engagement with the superhero story, identity, values, characteristics, and powers, families may gain new awareness of both the identity of the family system (current and future) and of each family member individually. Superhero fantasy play can be introduced in family sessions to create positive change for the greater good (the family unit) through conflict resolution, ownership of strengths and weaknesses, and confrontation with either personal or family system nemeses. This can help to counteract feelings of powerlessness, anxiety, helplessness, and isolation. Each family member can create a new vision of himself, which may then serve to strengthen the collective family system.

The Technique

The technique begins with an individual superhero project and ends with a collective sharing of powers to create the family shield. Each family member is asked to identify a favorite existing superhero and will then be asked to create a personal superhero. Family members are asked to draw a picture of their superhero and list the superpower(s), important resources, and strengths/skills. Very young children can be aided by the therapist in creating their list and can be asked to draw their figure while the therapist takes notes. Through exploratory questioning, the therapist leads a discussion with each person regarding his/her chosen superhero, powers, strengths, weaknesses, alter ego, and how he/she relates to that figure. The family, while listening, is encouraged to interject the strengths and qualities they see that are similar between the person and the chosen superhero. All family members are then asked to create their own personal superhero and can borrow traits from their chosen hero. The personal superhero activity

is a chance for each person to identify his/her skills, strengths, and positive characteristics while also receiving validation from the family. The therapist again facilitates a discussion between family members now focused on the positive attributes of each member as well as the personal struggle of each member. This discussion can incorporate the role each person plays in not only the positive growth of the family but also in the issues being seen within the system needing change. Family members will likely be dealing with personal life issues and perceptions of the family's concerns, lending itself nicely to the creation of a picture of their own personal nemesis. The youngest members of the family may need assistance in making this abstract idea more concrete (e.g., a child who tantrums frequently can be asked what the tantrum looks like or what their anger looks like). Following the creation of the personal superhero, family members are then asked to return to the previous conversation about their favorite superhero. The therapist leads a discussion about the idea that each superhero has a nemesis. The nemesis is explained as a character who challenges, defies, battles, and antagonizes the superhero, often thwarting the superhero's attempts to both serve and protect and live a normal life (i.e., Batman/Joker, Superman/Lex Luthor, Spiderman/Green Goblin, Wonder Woman/Cheetah). The therapist then prompts family members to think about a nemesis associated with their personal superhero. Creating a personal nemesis can help both the individual and family members better understand the struggle of each person and how it may contribute to the issues within the family system. For this reason, family members are asked to relate their nemesis to their own personal issue (e.g., anxiety, anger, depression, self-esteem) as the part of their life that challenges and antagonizes them.

Once each family member has shared his/her personal superhero characteristics and nemesis, the family is asked to create a family shield forged from the combined strengths and skills of each family member. The shield (created from a large piece of paper or cardboard and prepared ahead of time by the therapist) is a visual representation of the family's ability to work as a unit. The family should work to visually represent their strengths on the shield itself in some way. The strengths used should be those specific to the family member as identified during earlier conversation with the therapist; however, they can be borrowed from the actual superhero character if needed. Family members are then engaged in a conversation about each member's nemesis and how the superhero within them can fight against the issue. The family is encouraged to lend their superpowers as resources to each member's personal struggle, again as a show of unified support for each member of the family. The idea behind this technique is to begin the conversation about goals, strengths, resources, and support in a manner that is experiential, fun, and inclusive of younger members of the family due to the playful nature of the technique. Consequently, the therapist is always working to bring the metaphoric ideas down to specific goals and resources. For example, one pre-teen family member may have a nemesis filled with anxiety due to discomfort with changes and shyness. The pre-teen will identify his/her own skills and strengths in fighting the issue (including techniques provided in therapy), while family members may join the fight by offering other resources such as keeping a schedule of upcoming events, forewarning of changes, opportunities to meet new people on the child's terms, etc. A father may choose negotiation as his superpower, which can then be used as a support for other family members when in crisis. Resources are chosen to achieve each goal and each family member knows his/her particular role in providing support. The resources or support lent

by a family member should be noted and made specific, similar to goal setting. This is an attempt to further define each member's role in supporting the family system as well as how and when he or she will provide support.

Case Study

The Parsons (Jim, father, 39; Sarah, mother, 37; Steven, son, 13; Chris, adopted son, 5; real names not used) came to therapy looking for support with several family transition issues. During the intake and initial three sessions, the family and therapist explored several issues including changes in lifestyle due to Jim losing his job, the resultant stress on the relationship between Jim and Sarah, the adoption of Chris 2 years prior and the attachment behaviors he was now displaying, and Steven's difficulty with his role as older brother. During the initial sessions, the family was engaged in experiential techniques and seemed to enjoy this method for telling their story both individually and as a group. The expressive techniques helped to clarify the underlying story and emotions experienced by each family member.

The superhero and family shield technique was introduced to help the family clearly address their needs and goals. All family members drew and discussed their favorite superhero, providing information about superpowers, hidden identity, and nemesis. The therapist guided the family members to comment on and give feedback about positive superhero attributes mentioned. The therapist modeled identifying similarities between the person and the chosen hero (e.g., Sarah chose Wonder Woman because she appreciates her use of the truth lasso, and her fair treatment of others). The children were able to provide examples of how Mom listens to all sides before providing consequences and does not stay angry over an issue once a consequence is given. Jim related Sarah's ability to speak honestly and her expectation of others being honest to help work openly through issues. These affirming comments, feeling as though her elevated stress and frustration levels had led her to be short tempered and controlling, surprised Sarah. This process of identifying similarities was repeated for each family member with encouragement and affirmation from the therapist and family.

Following this activity, each member of the family was asked to draw and detail his/her nemesis. The family was instructed to think of their nemesis as the biggest personal issue they have. For example, Jim chose "incompetence man" due to his job loss and feelings of frustration in not being able to provide for his family. Sarah chose "the home wrecker" due to her recent feelings of anger toward Jim and his work situation combined with anxiety about her perceived inability to keep the family functioning. Steven chose "the green jealousy swamp monster" to depict his reaction to having to share his parents and belongings as well as his jealousy over the attention he perceives his younger brother to be receiving. The youngest, Chris, chose "the fear-breather dragon" illustrating his fears of abandonment and the behaviors he displays in an attempt to both assure Mom's presence and express anger. They were then asked to talk about the behaviors and tricks the nemesis uses against them. Each family member was given time to talk or play through his/her personal fight with his/her nemesis which helped the rest of the family better understand his/her perceptions and emotions. Couching this conversation in the use of experiential techniques helped to provide some therapeutic distance for each family member, allowing him/her to talk about the nemesis rather than

him/herself. The family then created their family shield visually depicting their individual strengths that can combine to build a strong family unit. Each family member was also asked to think about how his or her particular strengths can help fight each nemesis. This conversation lead directly into goal setting as well as some further work around each of the areas of struggle for further sessions. For example, Jim's angry behavior, stemming largely from feelings of being incompetent in his ability to provide for his family following the layoff, led to goals focused on new skills training, relaxation techniques, and rich discussion with Sarah regarding male/female roles. He worked through his irrational beliefs about being responsible for his job situation and was able to begin a conversation about finding employment and job skills. Jim and Sarah were able to gain a better sense of each other's beliefs about gender roles. Both parents gained a better sense of the moody, non-compliant behaviors Steven displayed when his feelings of jealousy toward Chris were recognized and validated. They were able to provide a plan for supportive attention at home. Chris displayed insecure attachment patterns based in fear of being moved to a new family, which even Steven began to understand through the story of the "fear-breather dragon." This prompted the therapist to teach some filial play therapy techniques, and the family instituted some new family-oriented routines to help with bonding of all members.

Conclusion

The personal superhero and family shield technique is an experiential and adaptable technique for families with young children designed to pinpoint and focus on family member's strengths and growth. This technique applies to any number of issues a family may be experiencing by assisting in goal setting and providing reminders of the need to support each family member outside therapy. Additionally, although therapists can adapt this technique to their particular theoretical orientation, the technique is also multiculturally sensitive as the therapist changes the superhero component to the prominent figures found in varying cultures and belief systems. One beneficial area of future research would be an exploration of which cultures, if any, might struggle to engage in this specific activity and how adaptations would be made to accommodate cultural concerns. This exploration would assist therapists in locating resources for identifying the cultural icons or prominent figures important to varying cultures, thereby strengthening their ability to support and engage clients and their families.

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