

Article 4

Creativity A-Z: Beyond the Walls of Conventional Counseling

Judith M. Ziffer and Joy B. Penney-Wietor

For more than 100 years, therapy has been provided in an office, on couches or chairs (Pressly & Heesacker, 2001), removed from the real challenges of life and “far from the madding crowd.” Except for some intervention strategies used in systematic desensitization, therapy is traditionally conducted in an office setting, limiting creative therapeutic interventions, impeding client opportunity to practice novel ways of behaving, and constricting the enhancement of the client’s own resourcefulness through creativity. To address these limitations, therapy without walls was developed and continues to evolve, fostering creativity in both therapist and client.

To enhance the playful and creative spirit in families, therapeutic family fun nites were born. Feeding the body, nurturing the spirit, and cultivating the mind are integral goals of these multi-family gatherings. The pace and the demands of family life have altered the frequency and opportunities for playful cooperative experiences. Desires for the latest in technology have placed computers, electronic games, televisions, DVDs, and /or VCRs in most homes. In this electronic age, play tends to be solitary or parallel in nature, not cooperative. To foster cooperative play, opportunities to learn to play together and to practice this skill are primary objectives of family fun nites. Activities are designed to strengthen families through therapeutic play. One example is the creating of the family song. The tune can be borrowed or created by the family. Lyrics are created by each family member with a contribution from the youngest member with a “la, la, la” to the oldest member of the family with an “I remember when.” When the song is ready, families are invited to sing their song for the others in attendance. This links the families in the community, building supportive relationships.

For positive and lasting change to occur, like any new skill, practice, practice, practice is required. All too frequently, lasting change does not occur in traditional therapy because the therapeutic experience itself is delivered in 50- to 90-minute office sessions weekly or biweekly providing little time for the therapist to facilitate the client’s practice of more constructive and positive ways of communicating and interrelating.

Habits, especially destructive patterns of interacting, are a challenge to change. Offering therapeutic encounters that occur outside the walls of a traditional office and that extend beyond the traditional therapeutic hour foster the opportunity to practice healthy relating in real life experiences. Out of this philosophy, the therapeutic family day camp was born and named Camp Connections. Unlike conventional day camp experiences, both parents and their child(ren) are participants. The camp meets 8 hours a day for 1 week, and Camp Connection activities are designed specifically to address the therapeutic goals of the families participating. The children spend part of the day engaged in creative, developmentally appropriate activities that affirm a positive view of self in the family, the community, and the world. Parents form a support group addressing the challenges they currently are facing, and the therapists teach parenting strategies utilizing Active Parenting curriculum (Popkin, 2002). Surveys from family participants credit the camp experiences with positive change in self and others with a stronger sense of family as a result of this creative, playful, yet therapeutic experience.

Creating another day camp, named Horsing Around, demonstrated creativity in therapists and clients at its best. Based on the same therapeutic systemic philosophy of Camp Connections, this horse camp was created to meet the needs of children and their families who were searching for new ways to support and connect to each other. Borrowing from the idea of a traditional day camp while blending therapeutic horse and farm animal activities into experiences for urban and suburban families, this camp offers a series of unique participant experiences. The farm setting provides a therapeutic camp experience in which each camper is assigned a horse for a week to groom, clean up after, and ride. Daily activities incorporate the horses in unique ways to foster new ways of communicating and connecting. During the week, participants create a tangible legacy for the farm and future participants. An example is the horse jump built and painted by the participating families. Other camp activities include the necklaces each family member creates, which symbolize shared family values, and the shirts the

campers design, dye, and decorate, which they give to other family members. Each day incorporates the roles of caretakers of other creatures, each other, and the environment.

Another therapeutic camp activity is borrowed from the Native American tradition of painting their horses with symbols of strength, swiftness, or power. The campers are given nontoxic paints and ribbons to create their own symbols and designs for their horse. After readying their horse, each camper leads their horse around the show ring, explains to the group what they painted, and relate what the meaning of the painting is for that camper. The use of this living canvas provides extra zest to their paintings, and each camper creates and shares his or her creation in a playful way. From this experience a young girl and her mother, struggling with the difficulties of the mother being terminally ill, were able to ask for and receive support and encouragement from the other participating families. This support continues beyond the death of her mother. Some 3 years later, participating families from this horse camp continue to provide the young girl with invitations to their homes, meals, friendship, and transportation to and from school and to extracurricular activities. Through therapeutic creativity, beyond the walls of an office, positive change and meaningful positive relatedness and connectedness grow.

Finding new ways to bring counseling out of the traditional office and into the real-time lives of clients involves blending different approaches in creative new ways. Bringing a box of sand, assorted toys, and miniatures into client homes can create change within the family system by providing a very different way for family members to relate and communicate with each other. Further, the counselors join with the family through a different medium. The family is invited to select toys/miniatures to represent themselves and other members of the family. They place these items into the sand box creating a family picture. This activity is captivating for the therapists to watch and for the family to experience as well. Working creatively with miniatures and sand allows family members to discuss points of view and relationships in a novel way that is playful and less openly confrontational than more conventional office talk sessions. The therapists working with the family with sand report more playfulness and humor between family members than is typically observed in talk therapy. This symbolic play allows the family to see their family with a different perspective, and the family members are thus better able to process emotionally charged issues in a more constructive way, laying the groundwork for healthier communication and interaction. In fact, with one family, when the counselors returned to the family's house for

follow-up without the sand, the family expressed disappointment and resisted the return to talk-therapy. A clear shift was observed in how the members of this family related to each other before and after the sand box experience. Playing together allowed the family to have fun with each other in a way they had not experienced in a long time and created a renewed sense of hope for the family.

The sand box or tray play allows children to communicate with their parents in much the same way that "a picture is worth a thousand words" (Dalley, 1984). One family that had covered the same issue over and over and was therapeutically stuck made a dramatic shift after just one sand box experience. The mother and her son had participated in conventional counseling together for several months with very little change, but committed to counseling, they continued to keep each appointment. The son wanted his mother's undivided attention. The mother despite verbal pleas from her son in sessions continued to divide her energies by taking in and caring for others in their home. Then, the two were invited to create a sand box story together. The boy, who spoke little, and the mother, who talked much in conventional therapy, became coauthors in the creation of their story. The son took the lead in the sand. He created a story about a boy and his mom who were trying to cross a difficult bridge to the land of love where they would live happily ever after. Helping them cross the bridge to this happy land were some astronauts who represented the counselors, working with the family. After the sand picture was done and the objects carefully placed, there was moment in which the mother finally saw the boy's needs clearly. After that point, she made deliberate life changes, prioritizing the needs of her son above others, even having the extra people she had taken into their home move out. She set aside time each day to go with her son to the park, or for a special treat. In response to her changes, the boy showed marked improvement in his school behaviors and academics, all growing out of their story in the sand.

The Boomerang Bunch is a parent and child therapeutic group for divorcing families. The group experience incorporates art activities, games, and puzzles. Parents are placed in parent groups, and children are placed in groups assigned based on the child's developmental stage (e.g., preschool, K-2, 3-5). The sessions take place in the community school creating an ideal space (Boyd-Franklin & Bry, 2000) with a common area for shared multi-family group experiences and separate classrooms for small group work. Activities are designed to address specific issues. In one session the participants create a problem solution bag to take home. Items are made available and symbolic meaning attached, such as feathers (remember

to lighten up), rubber bands (try to be flexible), or erasers (some things are better left unsaid). From the more than dozen items, each participant chooses the ones that are personally relevant. This activity provides the client with a visual reminder of his or her repertoire of positive coping skills.

A family play night is another therapeutic strategy in which families rotate through different stations: at one station, each participant makes a family necklace to wear; at another, they solve a puzzle as a family; and at another, the families play a game with another family. This play night provides an opportunity for the parents and siblings to interact in playful ways both within and between families.

When the parents meet in the parent group, they create a parenting mask. Too often, parents reflect on the negative issues of their childhood without acknowledging the positive. This experience provides an opportunity for each parent to identify the positive parenting messages they learned from their own parents. On the parent mask, the facial features are used as prompts. The ears are for positive parental messages they heard as children, the eyes for positive parental actions they saw as children, the mouth for the positive messages they want to say to their own child(ren), and the nose for the positive things they appreciate about their parent and they want to make sure their parent knows. These creative and playful experiences focus positively on what has worked in life and provides a constructive reframing of the challenges they face currently. While improving communication skills, offering support for each other, discovering new strengths in their family, and emerging with a new definition of their own family, the participants, the parents and the children, find that there are others experiencing a similar challenge.

The meta-analysis of Neill (2003) supports moving beyond the walls of conventional office therapy. Therapy without walls stimulates creativity in the therapist and the client. Rooted in solution-focused theory, therapy is taken into the real world in which clients live. The interventions are bound only by ethics and the law, allowing the creative human spirit a deeper breath of new life. Therapy without walls evolves.

References

- Boyd-Franklin, N., & Bry, B. H. (2000). *Reaching out in family therapy: Home-based, school, and community interventions*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Dalley, T. (1984). Introduction. In T. Dalley (Ed.), *Art as therapy: An introduction to the use of art as a therapeutic technique* (pp. xi-xxviii). New York: Tavistock.
- Neill, J. T. (2003). Reviewing and benchmarking adventure therapy outcomes: Applications of meta-analysis. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 25(3), 316-328.
- Popkin, M. H. (2002). *Active parenting now: A parent's guide*. Kennesaw, GA: Active Parenting.
- Pressly, P. K., & Heesacker, M. (2001). The physical environment and counseling: A review of theory and research. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 79, 148-160.