

Co-creating change within a child protection system: integrating art therapy with family therapy practice

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This paper considers family art therapy intervention using a partnership developed between an art therapist and a family therapist within a child protection system. The aim of this co-working relationship is to bring together skills that can amplify the child's voice within the family, using art as a means of extending the family story. The use of metaphor adds to the repertoire of skills available when working with families, and offers a particular form of communication in which children can more easily engage. By co-working, we also bring together our personal and professional stories, creating multiple ideas and ways of seeing and taking account of differences in the life experiences of individual families.

Introduction

We will begin by describing the role art therapy has played in working with families in crisis. The incentive to form a therapeutic partnership has developed from a wish to explore other possible means of communication when words might not be enough.

The use of art as a therapeutic tool offers families further possibilities for spontaneous creativity. It is through the use of nonverbal symbolic communication that thoughts and feelings can surface, offering an alternative route for stories to be told. These stories might well relate to problems which brought the family to therapy in the first place, or focus on strengths that the family might have forgotten in their crisis. In using alternative means of communication, families can begin to engage in a different way, adding an element of surprise to a potentially difficult endeavour.

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Setting

Within the team it is stressed that the child's needs are paramount. We maintain an attitude of curiosity so that the families will hopefully not feel judged or criticized but will be able to engage in the work offered. They are invited to explore what they believe are the social worker's concerns, and also to reflect on what their strengths might be, as well as areas of their own concern. We also invite families to consider, if the work is successful, what they would see themselves doing differently.

This can often be the first step along the journey of change. It enables the family to take a self-reflexive position and offers us insight into their perceived strengths and belief systems. This exploration takes place in a planning meeting, with the referring social worker, the family, the allocated worker and a chairperson from our team. However, the concerns may stay at a level of denial and it is our role to bring to the fore issues that need to be addressed.

Art therapy

Art therapists are informed by their own experience and knowledge of aesthetic processes. They are cognizant of cultural and symbolic communication that is underpinned by psychodynamic principles, such as counter-transference and projection. In the creation of visual artwork the image does not necessarily become fixed but has possibilities for multiple meaning. These meanings arise from the artwork at the client's pace, offering the client an observer position that can also be viewed by others and responded to. Having an array of multimedia materials to hand, such as drawing equipment and toys, a sand tray or doll's house, offers further opportunity for clients to add to the repertoire of communication channels through which individuals can express themselves and tell their story.

The creative act helps to minimize conflict, whereby powerful feelings that might be unconscious can emerge and be transformed into pictures, working at a metaphoric level through a process of sublimation. The image may be used in many ways; it can stay at a metaphoric level even when discussed, the image might be disposed of acting as a metaphor for what might want to be left behind, or the use of art might be used as a goal-oriented approach, where future objectives can be visualized. These images may then be referred back to at a future date, acting as a prompt for new ideas, breaking with old

familiar patterns. Once these ideas become available to view, then other avenues can be opened up.

Naumberg states that 'the process of Art Therapy is based on the recognition, that man's most fundamental thoughts and feelings, derived from the unconscious, reach expression in images rather than words' (Naumberg, 1958, p. 511).

This can be a useful means of engaging in therapy, especially when there is a family crisis. The ability to access our creativity at such times stimulates an innate means of managing difficulty as our ability to find solutions becomes heightened at such times. It is important that before artwork is engaged in there is a willingness on the part of the family to do so. Not all families may wish to partake in this way of working. It is my experience that some families may feel intimidated by this approach, especially where there might be feelings of inadequacy in using materials, or where there are beliefs in the power of art to be able to speak louder than words.

Systemic family therapy

Systemic family therapy places value on viewing the family and the system in terms of patterns of interaction. Systemic therapists will observe both verbal and nonverbal communication that takes place in the room, for example, paying attention to how a child responds when a parent is talking, and may consider how the interaction connects to what is being said. The use of toys such as puppets, doll's houses and so on has been seen as useful where there are young children, and adolescents who often like to draw as a way of eliciting such interactions (cf. Wilson, 1998). Therapists aim to maintain a neutral (Palazzoli *et al.*, 1980) or irreverent position (Cecchin, 1993) in order for everyone's voice to be heard.

Communication theorists Cronen and Pearce (1985) and Pearce (1994) have proposed a framework 'Communication and Management of Meaning' (CMM) to explore patterns of communication which suggests that meaning is co-created by people in relationships. Exploring these ideas with a family and inviting individuals to take an observer position can lead to meaning-changing, and new understandings being developed.

Family art therapy

The literature relating to family art therapy comes mainly from America. Kwiatkowska (1978) was the first to write of her experience

of using artwork with psychiatric clients and their families in the mid-1950s as a means of helping patients integrate back into their families. Landgarten (1987) suggests that the aim of taking a dual approach is to help families interact through play, thereby bringing greater intimacy to a disengaged family. Riley (1994) familiarized herself with different models in family therapy, and relies mainly on systemic and structural theories. She uses Hoffman's (1990) ideas relating to 'lenses' that are seen as bifocal, thereby incorporating alternative meanings such as silent information in visual form and so gaining a different view of a client's story. Riley also relates the ideas of Minuchin and Fishman (1981) that help therapists to use their role as observers so that patterns can be seen to emerge within families that relate to hierarchy and boundaries.

This is particularly useful with regard to the power issues between children and parents and how these become manifest, especially where there is violence done by an adult to a child. The aim is not to change the individual in the family, but to change structure and transactions, resulting in new and more effective communication with others.

Guttman (1975) makes the point that children may well find it difficult to talk about how they see their family when asked directly. Through making images, their views can be more openly considered and acknowledged. Guttman goes on to say that although therapists might ask the family to draw, they do not always integrate the artwork back into the session. It is the attention that the art therapist gives to the art that supports what is made.

Donnelly (1989), a British art therapist, further developed Guttman's (1975) ideas about the integration of art in an unthreatening way so that the child's voice comes through. He sees the benefits of imagery as being a means of identifying themes that come up in the artwork produced. As common themes emerge through the image-making, families with children can be supported to identify the area they want to change. These themes explore family patterns through such exercises as 'looking forward to the future'. Donnelly (1989) has integrated family therapy techniques into his practice with families and explains how combining the techniques can provide:

a means whereby all family members can take part relatively equally. It creates circumstances where a family's own resources can be mobilized, particularly its creative resources and its healing and therapeutic potential. (Donnelly, 1989, p.133)

The artwork produced is explored with the family and summarized by the art therapist, the aim being to provide a forum for understanding and improving communication.

Another British art therapist, Deco (1990), working at a family centre, described a programme where families with children under age 5 attend for the day so that family functioning may be observed. Deco found that she needed to adapt the use of art therapy in these sessions. She asked families to use the art materials spontaneously as and when it seemed appropriate; for instance, when at a certain point words were not enough to describe what they wanted to say. Deco focused more on 'process' than on 'content' as a means of understanding the sequence of events. She does not focus on the symbolic communication or necessarily discuss the finished work. She does, however, observe the creation of the artwork and the interaction of the various family members.

We identified with the work of Guttman (1975), Donnelly (1992) and Deco (1990) in that what they addressed was the risk-taking element when something new such as image-making is introduced to a family where playful interaction might not be evident. Both Donnelly and Deco were able to adapt their methods to consider how the voice of the child could be heard.

Bridging our approach and working together

Co-working across disciplines provides a multi-verse (Maturana and Varela, 1988) of ideas, adding to the hypotheses available for families as they experience working with more than one therapeutic intervention. In using a dual approach, co-working may go some way in enabling them to open up communication.

It is important that the identity of each therapist is established so that a clear model may be used and the client does not experience confusion or opposition. For example, when acknowledging our differences, we explored our own feelings of inadequacy when working with the other's model. Some potential conflicts of our different theoretical positions could have included:

- cutting across the client when he or she was creating an image;
- not considering the artwork;
- not setting any boundaries around the use of the art materials;
- paying more attention to the content of the artwork, rather than considering the patterns of interaction;

- making interpretations about the artwork rather than asking questions and being curious.

We confronted our own need to take risks that put us in touch with how the families might feel when exploring new ways of being. Thompson (1994) explains that it is important that a relationship exists where theory and practice is recognized by the other profession.

We were able to unite our views and support new ways of understanding a given situation by using images as both a verbal and visual form of communication. This was especially useful when emotional language was not easy.

Penn (1999) suggests that using metaphors can lead to patterns of behaviour and beliefs being challenged, and new ways of communicating being developed. Pearce and Pearce (1998, p.171) describe patterns of communication as stories lived and told. In the LUUUTT model¹ they suggest that participants may have unknown stories which the participant is not (currently) capable of telling. This seemed to connect with the idea of unconscious processes, which the image-making combined with family therapy techniques may bring forth.

Greenhalgh (1994) offers three reasons why metaphor in images may be helpful. First, it is a means of expression where a child may not have use of language to express himself; second, it invites the child to use a personal form of expression through his art that may feel less threatening. Third, through image-making, feelings can be expressed at a deeper level. Hillman (1979) explains that where language delay may occur, especially where children have been emotionally deprived, their imagination may well have become stuck/frozen.

We have used this approach with other families referred who have different issues to the family in our case study. When working with families where there are child protection concerns, we may take a more direct approach such as asking them to make an image of something to connect with the issues highlighted by the network.

However, with families where the concerns may be about trauma, or where members have learning difficulties or mental health

¹ LUUUTT is an acronym for (1) stories Lived; (2) Unknown stories; (3) Untold stories; (4) Unheard stories; (5) stories Told; and (6) story-Telling.

problems, we have used a less directive approach and focused more on the process of making the image, as the concerns of the network can be explored in a different way.

When working with large families we have found that exploring the patterns of communication and the artwork provides all the family members with a voice. Often we leave space at the end of the session to focus specifically on each of the images.

Accessing creativity through art invites the child to give form to unconscious or unknown stories, thus enabling access to these stories in a way that is heard by their family or professionals. This process may be seen as analogous to the use of circular questions, which, as Boscolo and Bertrando (1993) suggest, are important, since instead of speaking each member of the family is spoken about. Consequently the individual discovers opinions that others have about himself and thus may come to know family members better.

We now want to introduce the context of our work and the family we worked with.

Referral for therapeutic work

The Knight family² was a white, middle-class family with three children. The middle girl, Laura, aged 5 years, had been referred for individual art therapy by a district social worker, following an episode ten months previously of physical abuse by her father, Chris, at a time of stress due to unemployment. This had resulted in Chris leaving the home for the family's safety. At the planning meeting it became apparent that Laura was distressed. This manifested itself in nightmares, and an inability to function to her full capacity at school. She was struggling to keep up basic reading and writing skills and there was language delay. Netta, the mother, was able to observe that all the children had difficulties, and acknowledged that she herself had an issue with being very obese. The eldest boy Richard, aged 10 years, had become withdrawn, and Alf, the youngest who was 4 years old, was displaying challenging behaviour that was not being managed to the point that he used his temper tantrums as a way of ruling the family. Netta was struggling with her own sense of loss at having to be the sole carer and boundary-setter for her children, where previously this had been shared. Having made our assessment we offered them family art therapy that they agreed to readily.

² Names and details have been changed to protect confidentiality. Consent was given by the family for publication.

Vignettes

Following the second session circumstances had changed, as Netta and Chris wished to be reconciled.

By the third week the focus of the work now shifted to accommodate Chris' return to the family home. Chris and Netta were pleased to be reunited, but they voiced concern over the different roles in which they now found themselves. Netta did not want to give up her new-found authority, yet conceded that Chris did need to take back some of the parenting role. Chris felt redundant and struggled with how he was going to do this, realizing that it would take time.

We invited everyone in the family to make an image of how they saw their family. Richard made a picture of a house that depicted all the family together (Figure 1). Laura made a picture that included the whole family, with her father as first in line. Alf was busy playing with a 'carousel' toy, which had all the characters falling out as he set it in motion. Netta helped Alf with the figures as they fell out, putting them back in their seats. Chris also involved himself in making figures for Laura and Alf, while we explored the images made by using

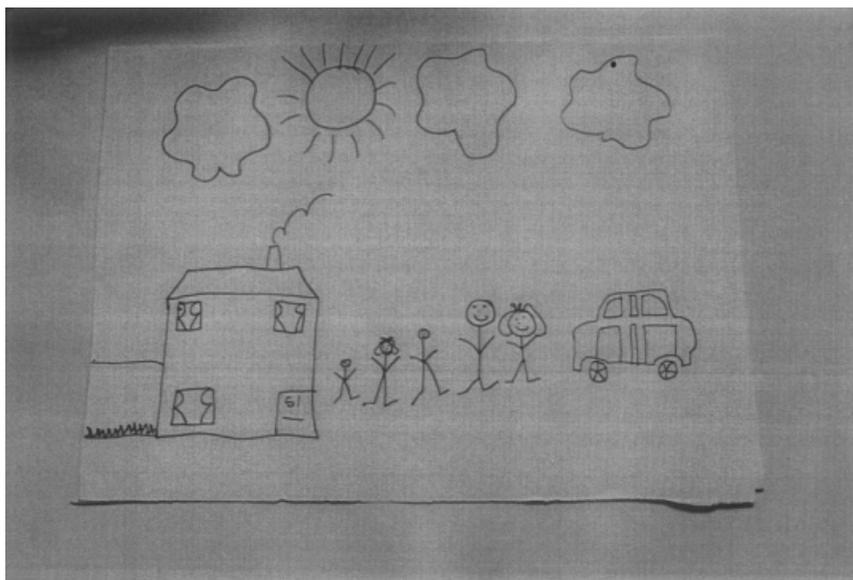


Figure 1. Richard's picture of a house depicting all the family together

circular questioning, asking each family member what they thought of each other's drawings.

The images clearly showed Chris back in the family. This was what each of them wished for but the underlying concern of trust was evident: how could they trust Chris not to resort to violence again?

This was difficult for Chris to hear. He said he had changed, and explained how important his family was to him. At this stage Chris had to manage his family's fears. He realized that he needed to demonstrate that he could do things differently, not by words but by actions.

Using the artwork and play materials we focused on Netta and Chris' negotiation in managing the children. Their main concern was that Netta continued to have the sole parental control since Chris had left the home. Netta explained her belief that she had to give some of this back to Chris, yet they were both cautious. Chris recognized that while the children listened to Netta, his attempts at setting boundaries were unsuccessful. This created tension for both of them. Chris said he was frightened of disciplining the children. Chris wanted to be more authoritative with the children but he also felt that Netta needed to support him in this.

We invited them to reflect on how they might do this. Netta said that she would try over the next few weeks not to intervene, allowing Chris the opportunity of doing so on his own. It was important that we witnessed this change so that we could recommend deregistration. In the next vignette the whole family was present. Richard spontaneously made a picture of an elephant, as he knew his mum liked them (Figure 2). At this point Netta was undertaking an activity with Alf, and Richard asked her to make a picture of a dog for him.

Family therapist: What I notice is that you are doing something with Alf and you say 'Hang on a minute I need to listen to Richard', and then you go back to Alf, and you say, 'OK it's Alf's turn again now'.

Art therapist: Netta you really try to be fair. Is that something you are aware of?

Netta: I think a lot of it stems from when I was younger. You see my brother used to get all the attention and one thing I've always said is that the children should all have equal attention.

This prompted us to ask Netta to make a picture of herself within her family. Her picture illustrated that she felt pulled in all directions (Figure 3). Netta was able to reflect with Chris that in the past she had put the children first, without thinking about their relationship as a

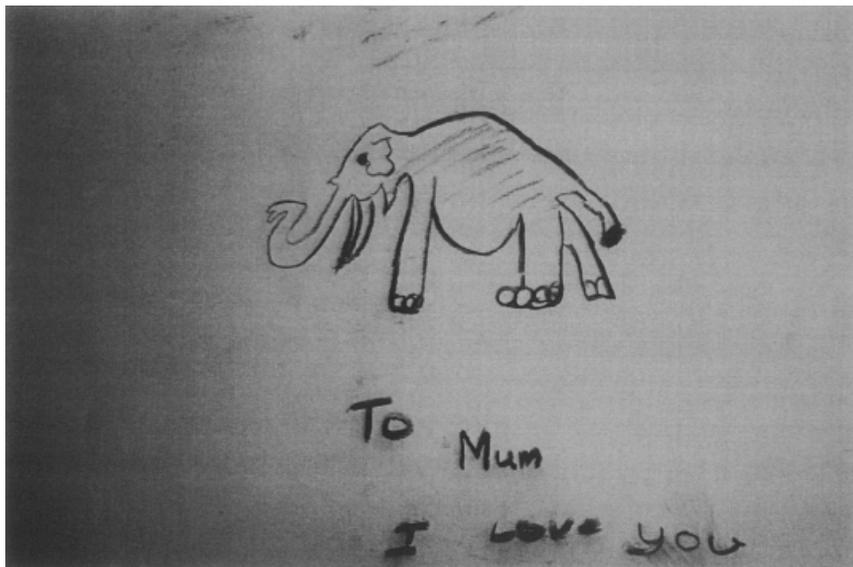


Figure 2. Richard's picture of an elephant

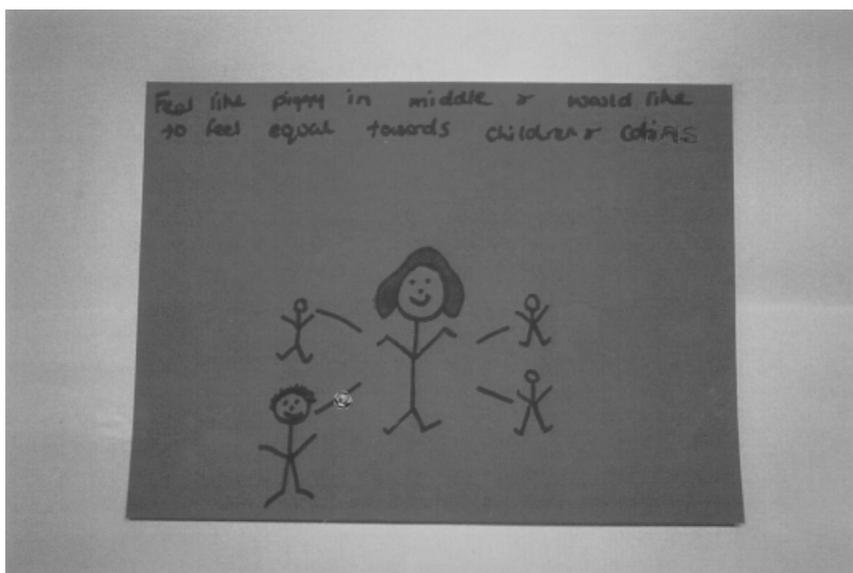


Figure 3. Netta's picture showing herself being pulled in all directions

couple. This was perhaps an example of how the unknown stories were beginning to unfold.

Another issue that was highlighted in this session was Richard's view of his mother, in relation to the way in which Netta gave to her children but not to herself. We had invited them to share three wishes. Richard said he would like his mum to buy things for herself as she always put them first and so went without nice clothes.

The artwork had led to Netta reflecting on her own family stories. She had not felt considered as a child and her needs had never been prioritized.

Netta began to realize how these stories had influenced her as a mother and a wife; she could give to her children as she was able to identify with their needs, but she was unable to hold the adult role for herself as a woman and wife to Chris. Netta believed that she could not prioritize her relationship both with her husband and her children as this would diminish her ability to meet the needs of her children. It was also not so easy to accept material things for herself, or to receive positive feedback from her family.

Netta's story regarding her lack of material need seemed to connect with Pearce's (1989) and Boscolo and Bertrando's (1993) ideas about meaning and action, which are about how history or preceding events (i.e. Netta's childhood experiences) influenced the way she responded to a given situation.

We provided feedback to Netta and Chris on what our observations were, but then invited them to take an observer position about themselves and reflect on what they were doing. Netta wanted to be a different mother for her children than her own had been. This led to her being very generous materially, but over-cautious in a protective way. Both Netta and Chris were able to discuss this openly with the idea that this would be an area that they would need to consider as the children were growing up and wanting more independence.

Explanations of interactions between therapy sessions

Netta had been ill, and the children were able to say how concerned they were for their mum. Chris had stepped in and done all the cooking and childcare, but he had found the children testing and had resorted to shouting.

This had caused some tension within the home. Exasperated, Netta said that she would not put up with it. Chris responded by saying that Netta had been very clear with him, and he understood that if this was

to continue she would leave him. There was some discussion about what Chris could do rather than shout. He realized he needed to remove himself from the situation that would give him some time to calm down rather than over-reacting. During this conversation, the children had been very active with their artwork, showing signs of tension by arguing. We invited the family to notice what was happening, to reflect on what this might connect to. This demonstrated the possibility that they could take a step back and think about the consequences of their actions.

The next few sessions focused more on the children's actions. A situation arose that caused Netta to be firm with Alf. Alf was having a tantrum because he wanted a toy that Richard had been playing with. Normally Netta would have asked Richard to give Alf the toy to stop the tantrum, but in this instance Netta diverted Alf's attention rather than give in to him. This seemed to lessen Alf's tantrums and in turn Richard appeared happier. He became more relaxed and able to immerse himself in his own play.

Netta's sickness was caused by a pregnancy that had been unplanned. During this time Laura's behaviour had deteriorated, she had become moody and had begun to shout. Through talking to Laura, Netta was able to discover that Laura was upset because the baby was to be a boy. Laura did not want another brother but a sister with whom she could play.

These actions demonstrated the shift in the family's ability to think about the links to behaviour. Netta noticed that as a family they were talking and responding differently so that possible conflictual situations did not seem to get out of hand. What also helped was that Chris was now in full-time employment and was beginning to share in the responsibility at home. Another noticeable change was that Netta had begun to take care of her appearance, and despite being pregnant had lost a considerable amount of weight. She and Chris had also begun to prioritize time together as a couple. With the new baby on the way, Chris and Netta felt that symbolically this represented a fresh start.

Discussion

In this brief description of family art therapy the image-making combined with the questions had prompted Netta and Chris to reflect on their role as parents. These links related to their own experience of being parented. Chris had responded to demands made by the

children to help them create images. Having time to interact with their children had resulted in them being more responsive themselves. They realized that they could talk with their children and that their views could be heard.

Netta's experience as a single parent of ten months had been an important step in finding her own strength where she could hold the boundaries and be 'heard'. When Chris returned to the family home, his role had shifted to accommodate his wife's new authority. He realized his role could be shared, relieving him of the pressure, as he did not need to have sole responsibility.

Chris linked the influence of his role as a father to his early upbringing, and the fact that his own father had been distant and controlling and had never played with him. He had had no other role model and grieved this loss of a father who he realized had not been available for him. He wanted to change the way he was for his children. Gender roles had been adhered to rigidly and had resulted in restrictive functioning that denied the strengths each of them as parents could bring to the relationship. They had married young as adolescents to get away from parents who had failed them.

In working together as a family, Chris was able to show his more gentle and loving side, and Netta was able to be boundaried with both Chris and the children in stating what was acceptable and what was not.

The use of art therapy approaches within the sessions gave the family an experience of being creative as parents, which may have helped them to be in touch with their children's needs from an emotional viewpoint, something which they had not experienced as children from their parents.

The benefits of combining art and family therapy in the sessions

- The art process provides an alternative channel for communication which might otherwise not be accessed, as the image allows for unconscious feelings or unknown stories to surface and be worked with at the client's pace.
- The importance given to the creative process recognizes the contribution children can make to the family where images of a certain event, feeling, future or wishes can become manifest, thereby offering their views. Images can work at a symbolic level and do not necessarily need verbal explanation, especially where

emotions are filled with tension. Awareness and means of verbal expression can be accessed at a later point when consciousness has come into being. Images are products that can be worked with directly. They act as points of reference that can be returned to and a new meaning or reason given. They hold no fixed position but can hold multiple meanings not just for the creator but also for the viewer.

- The use of art can address areas which the referrer might want the therapist to work with but where the client cannot engage, perhaps because of denial. This allows for an interim stage of therapy to operate and may be used as a first step before words are spoken. The use of art themes can be especially useful when clients do not have language skills. Where the child/adult have concerns about expressing their thoughts, the artwork combined with systemic techniques became more easily accessible and safer – perhaps because the family does not feel so criticized because language was not being used as the emphasis of the work.
- Art is a creative and therefore a playful process that gives containment to feelings and emotions. Being curious and exploring the family's resourcefulness gave members of this family the feeling that they were the experts. This reinforced their belief in their strength as a family.
- We both acknowledged the importance of the narrative in response to their artwork as a useful means of communication. Making a point of listening to the responses of all the family and attending to the images placed value on the artwork as well as the language used.

Conclusion

The case study presented here shows a family under considerable pressure where police intervention had been required and child protection procedures were in operation. The referral, which had singled out an individual child of 5 years old, had not considered the context and needs of the whole family.

To work only with Laura in individual art therapy would have been to miss the importance of seeing a child in relation to her whole family. What we hope has been evident in this joint therapeutic intervention is the benefit to be gained from a co-working relationship across disciplines. The emphasis of this work has been to

encourage the family to find a new and creative means of being together. The techniques of art therapy played a vital role in keeping the work alive and family members engaged as they began to make changes for themselves. The artwork acted as a leveller for dissipating tension, which in turn alleviated the child protection concerns. Staying curious as therapists by exploring the family's own resourcefulness gave these family members the belief that they were the experts. This influenced their confidence and beliefs in their own strength as a family.

It is important to clarify our joint therapeutic approach. We both recognized the importance of metaphor as a useful means of communication, and we wanted to draw out the children's voices by highlighting these as another contribution to the family story. Making a point of listening to the response of all the family and attending to the images placed value on the artwork as well as the language used.

In our first joint therapeutic venture Hilary had joined me in running a siblings art therapy group (Boronska, 2000). We have consequently progressed and developed our work together, gaining in confidence with the use of each other's techniques. We have become cognizant of how both our respective models can work, without loss to our identity as practitioners. By reflecting continually on the circularity of our relationship with each other and the families we work with, our repertoire of skills has developed and strengthened.

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