

A Child's Use of Transitional Objects in Art Therapy to Cope With Divorce

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Abstract

In this article, the author examines the use of transitional objects in a case study of a 12-year-old boy, documenting the role of art therapy in helping the boy cope with the trauma of his parents' recent separation and divorce. Transitional objects emerged spontaneously as the boy integrated the transition that the divorce of his parents created; these objects were elaborated through various art materials and their use eventually decreased as the boy achieved a more secure sense of self. The case illustrates the therapeutic value of transitional objects and transitional space in therapy.

Introduction

Children often react to divorce with decreased self-esteem and repressed feelings of anger and loss, which may be manifested as aggressive or withdrawn behavior. During periods of extreme stress, children may return to the use of transitional objects—more typically seen in the developmental period associated with an infant's separation from his or her mother—as a way of coping with circumstances over which they feel little control (Winnicott, 1971).

The subject of this case study is a 12-year-old boy who participated in an 8-month art therapy program conducted in the South Bronx, a neighborhood of New York City. Without any prompting from the therapist, the client introduced into the sessions personal objects brought from home, which he repeatedly used in his artistic expression. These objects, combined with the guidance of the therapist and with intermittent support from observing family members, allowed him to embark on a path toward a more secure, assertive, and creative state of well-being.

Transitional Objects

Winnicott's Theory of Transitional Objects

During normal development, an infant becomes attached to a soft object sometime between the ages of 4 and 12 months. Winnicott (1971) theorized that, as part of the separation-individuation process of psychological development, an infant discovers and takes ownership of this first “not me” possession, known as the “transitional

object.” The object functions as a comfort during the emotionally challenging process of an infant's psychological separation from his or her primary love object, while at the same time promotes autonomy. This inanimate but treasured possession may be a blanket, a teddy bear, or a piece of cloth. Most often the transitional object has a characteristic odor and feeling that is reminiscent of the mother.

The transitional object alleviates stress during separation-individuation, preserving the illusion of the comforting and soothing mother at a time when the mother is not always available. The transitional object is symbolic of the primary love object, but it does not take the place of the breast or the mother. Rather, it represents the breast, allowing the infant to accept difference and similarity simultaneously, and eventually to develop the capacity to symbolize (Winnicott, 1971).

Transitional objects promote autonomy: Unlike the infant's mother, the transitional object is completely controlled by the infant. To the infant, it has a reality of its own, never changing unless the infant decides to change it (Winnicott, 1971). Because it is under the infant's control, the infant will feel safety when projecting his or her feelings onto the transitional object. When the infant feels love, for example, he or she will cuddle the transitional object and when the infant feels hate, he or she can mutilate the object. Without being either forgotten or mourned, the transitional object is usually relinquished between the ages of two and four. During this time, the object gradually loses meaning because the symbolic functions of transitional phenomena are no longer associated solely with the infant's original transitional object. Instead these phenomena extend over a vast intermediate space between inner psychic reality and the external world, allowing the individual to take part in experiences such as play, artistic creation, and fantasizing (Winnicott, 1971).

Although transitional objects are seen primarily as coping devices for periods of separation in the mother-child dyad during infancy, it is important to note that reliance on such objects may reemerge during separation-individuation stages later in life, such as in adolescence, when a child begins to mourn the loss of his or her childhood and steps into adulthood's preparatory stages.

Beyond Winnicott: Transitional Objects Throughout Human Development

Winnicott's theories concerned the use of transitional objects during early childhood development, but they laid

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the foundation for other theories that have elaborated on the significance of transitional objects in everyday life beyond infancy. As tools for psychological and emotional development and the organization of the psyche, transitional objects may serve to reaffirm who we are and how we function as individuals. In addition, transitional objects may activate memories of others or aid in mourning those who have died.

Metcalfe and Spitz (1978) integrated Winnicott's (1971) ideas with ego development, showing the importance of recognition and evocative memory in achieving object constancy. Transitional objects become attached to the ego organizers of the psyche that soothe a child's anxieties. At bedtime, when a child is falling asleep and his or her mother is not present in the room, the transitional object relieves the child of anxiety because it reminds him or her of the constant or integrative emotional presence of the absent mother. By alleviating perceived threats to the child's ego control during this time, transitional phenomena provide a necessary and unique bridge between the inner and the outer worlds, and between reality and fantasy. The bridge also plays a connecting role that allows the maturational process of separation-individuation to proceed while maintaining ego control.

In the dynamic equilibrium between a relatively fluid self and reality, transitional objects are not limited to childhood but continue into adolescence and adulthood. Transitional objects chosen by an individual may represent that individual and aid in feelings of self-continuity and control. This "self-objectifying" process (Tabin, 1992) allows the person to regain confidence when self-continuity is threatened. A "lucky" sweater knitted by an aunt, worn on the day of a test, is an example of a transitional object. The sweater may represent a favorable component of a person's life, providing comfort and displaying individual style. The transitional object is treated as if it were the self and can be manipulated in a way that the body or image of the self cannot be. The ability to employ self-objectifying behaviors can help to reduce anxiety on a cognitive and emotional level.

In the symbolic environment of the household, people associate and choose cherished objects in response to the memories these objects embody, the social status they affirm, and the family relationships they represent. Objects such as photos or sports memorabilia that decorate a new office at work may function as adult transitional objects. These items not only ease in the transition of starting a new job, they also represent components of their owner to the rest of the staff. Throughout the life course of personal development, people may often change their reasons for becoming attached to inanimate possessions. Individuals use these objects not only in childhood but at various times in their lives as an extension of who they are and what they believe in. Even a simple ball can affirm a child's own existence in the world. When this ball performs in a way the child has intended, it confirms and strengthens the child's sense of self (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981).

In the course of a person's existence, the aggregate body of these self-identifying objects becomes massive.

Self-awareness is constantly changing and developing, informed by all the signs and objects that surround a person. Many tribes and cultures use personal objects in storytelling and in mourning rituals. Hoskins (1998) wrote:

Biographical objects provide an "anchor" for storytelling in Kodi [India], in which a reflection on the self is deflected through the medium of an object, a possession. A thing that stands for aspects of the person. The unity of the object may express a unity of the self that is not given or fully achieved in the narrative, but expresses a determined working toward the goal of personal and narrative coherence, a striving to "make sense" to others as well as to oneself. (p. 180)

These objects not only reflect who one is, they also remind one of relationships with others. As in the rituals of a child fearing sleep, familiar objects can aid in relieving anxieties for adults who are confronted with death, and can assist in the transitional period of mourning.

The Effects of Divorce on Children

Each year approximately 1 million children in the United States experience the divorce of their parents, creating a ratio of 3.6 per 1,000 people (Eldridge & Sutton, 2008). These figures, however, do not include common-law marriages, undocumented separations, and same-sex relationships.

The process of divorce can be overwhelming for an entire family. Even normally resilient children may have difficulty adapting to the transition that divorce creates, which is dependent to a great extent on how their parents themselves deal with the process of divorce. Children may experience impaired psychological, emotional, and/or cognitive functioning. Feelings of shame, decreased self-esteem, self-blame, depression, rage, anxiety, fear of abandonment, and poor academics are only some of the impacts a divorce may have on children (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2002).

Although for many the process of separation occurs relatively smoothly, with parents making every effort to minimize pain and anxiety, approximately one in every five divorces entails intense intervention in the form of family or civil litigation (Jaffe, Lemon, & Poisson, 2003). Often these cases are drawn out over years and require numerous court appearances. Parents may frequently argue and threaten one another, with the child often caught in between their disputes. Post-divorce parent-child relationships can at times become problematic as well. Financial instability and social stressors, as well as children's acting-out behavior in situations related to the divorce, can strain the parent-child relationship (Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2005). Amato and Booth (1996) observed that a poor quality relationship between the divorcing parents, coupled with a poor relationship between parent and child, is a circumstance that tends to translate into a parent's "low affection" for a child subsequent to the divorce.

Although family therapy seems to be an advantageous route to transitioning to post-divorce life, there are instances in which parents may not be psychologically prepared to work in alliance with their spouses or ex-spouses.

Many of these cases may involve civil litigation, custody battles, and domestic violence. Especially for children who are exposed to parents' constant conflicts, individual psychotherapy may be useful as a means for defusing any maladaptive behaviors that a child may be developing as a way of coping with his or her family's actual or impending separation. Working individually with a child, combined with working separately with one or both parents, is a necessary form of treatment when family therapy is unachievable (Hodges, 1986). In addition to family therapy and psychotherapy techniques, play therapy, art therapy, and grief therapy models have been incorporated into work with children of divorce. The self-concept of a child whose parents have divorced will often be lower than that of a child from an family that has not experienced a divorce. Therefore, indirect nonverbal approaches and the utilization of metaphors in treatment can effectively build self-esteem and promote empowerment. Assessments such as the Animal Kinetic Family Drawing, rather than the more common Kinetic Family Drawing, tend to produce a higher self-concept rating among children from divorced households because they involve less threatening revelations of unconscious material (Jones, 1985).

Quite often separation anxiety surfaces in children involved in divorce cases as a regression to an earlier age when object constancy or the ability to internalize love objects, such as a parent, had not yet been achieved. The child returns, as it were, to the time before their sense of separateness from this love object was fully developed. When constancy is disrupted, children may fear that their parents will not be able to attend to their needs and feelings. Owing to feelings of depression, fatigue, lack of interest, or a combination thereof, adults themselves often become fearful and withdrawn during a divorce (Teyber, 2001).

Divorce can create feelings of "ambiguous loss" that leave a child with myriad emotions that accompany a confusing period in which the absence or presence of a parental figure is not fully resolved. There are two types of ambiguous loss: The first is when an individual is perceived to be physically absent but psychologically present, whereas the second type is when an individual is perceived to be psychologically absent but physically present (Boss, 1999). The process of divorce falls into the category of the first type: the parent is physically absent yet occupies an on-going psychological presence in the child's life. This type of loss can leave the child traumatized and in a frozen state of grief, perpetuated by a lack of closure or by unknown and/or disrupted boundaries within the parent-child relationship.

The divorce itself represents a breach of trust (James, Friedman, & Matthews, 2001). Decreased self-esteem, rage at parents, anxiety, and fears of abandonment by the non-custodial parent are concerns that many children express during the divorce process (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2002). If not handled properly, children may not trust one or both parents or other authority figures. It is therefore especially important to build children's interpersonal relationship skills in both family and social settings during and after the divorce.

Case Study of Jay

Setting

This case study was part of a treatment program sponsored by a local community-based organization in a South Bronx neighborhood of New York City. The primary clients in the program are children and adolescents living in the community who participate in therapeutic group work and in individual and family counseling. Most of the art therapy sessions in the program are conducted in an outpatient facility that houses small rooms suitable for individual and family work. Adolescents and children seen in the outpatient portion of the program often attend therapeutic mentoring as well as recreational groups that are located throughout the neighborhood. All services are free of charge, and individual applicants are required to make a 3-month commitment to attend weekly 45-minute sessions.

Each child or teen entering the program begins with a psychosocial assessment to aid the therapists in receiving more information about his or her presenting problem, support networks, and family history. Once this process is complete, an art therapy program is devised, tailored to the individual needs of the client and encompassing open studio sessions, art directives, family work, and/or verbal therapy techniques.

Client History

Jay (pseudonym) was a 12-year-old boy who was referred to therapy by his legal representative after displaying possible signs of depression. Jay's grades in school had been suffering and he had become increasingly withdrawn from friends, family, and school activities. Jay also experienced nightmares that had him awakening during the night in tears.

When Jay started art therapy, his parents had been separated for 5 months and had recently started the legal process of divorce. Jay was living with his 46-year-old father, 26-year-old sister, and 19-year-old brother. Jay's mother was living with her boyfriend in another home and had not seen Jay since she and her husband had separated.

Jay's parents had been married for 20 years and had a history of domestic violence. Both parties had been physically and verbally abusive toward one another. The children had witnessed their parents' arguments and Jay's older sister had had both physical and verbal altercations with their mother. During the separation, Jay's father had taken out a restraining order against the mother. The family had minimal contact with her.

Jay attended weekly sessions over the course of 8 months of treatment. His father, brother Tom (pseudonym), and sister Sarah (pseudonym) sat in on sessions occasionally. I tried to involve Jay's mother in individual and dyad work with Jay, but was unsuccessful in my attempts. The majority of the therapeutic work was done with Jay alone.

Jay's therapy triggered the resurfacing of transitional objects for a boy on the verge of adolescence who had been



Figure 1

separated from his mother because of his parents' divorce. His ability to project internal feelings of anger onto these objects and later to begin to work through his feelings metaphorically in his artwork proved to be important in his healing process. As Jay grew more comfortable within the transitional space of therapy, his need for transitional objects diminished and he was able to engage in therapeutic play and the more direct expression of his own feelings.

Using Transitional Objects During Initial Stages of Treatment

At the beginning of Jay's treatment, without being encouraged to do so, Jay came to therapy with the first of several objects from home. These objects included videogame boxes and magazines, action figures, and a portable videogame player with a screen that could freeze to isolate an image on the monitor. I expressed curiosity regarding each object Jay brought in. I would ask Jay questions about the characters represented in these personal belongings—characters from games that were totally unfamiliar to me. Jay would tell me their names, their stories, and who their enemies and friends were. He created a somewhat standard procedure or ritual in which he would talk about the object, place it on the table, and then begin to draw, paint, or sculpt it. Each time he did this, I was present in the room bearing witness to his process; later, I became the audience for the stories he told about his artwork.

It appeared to me that Jay's personal objects served as transitional objects that bridged Jay's home and the emotionally restorative space of therapy. Jay's need for a transitional object may have surfaced in response to the absence of his mother during the tremendous changes his family was undergoing. On numerous occasions, Jay created characters from a *Mortal Kombat*® video game. One particular character was named Baraka. While sculpting this character out of clay (Figure 1), Jay explained that Baraka was the most powerful villain in the game. But unlike Jay's description, his clay Baraka was structurally fragile and Jay needed to create a base for the figure in order for it to be able to stand upright. Even with this base, Jay's Baraka was very delicate and seemed liable to fall apart at any moment. Perhaps Jay's



Figure 2



Figure 3

creation of a fragile Baraka stemmed, in part, from a fragile sense of himself at that moment and his need for transitional objects to help him cope with his everyday life.

Jay's reliance on transitional objects likely was due to anxieties related to his parents' separation and the grieving associated with his loss of family stability. He may have been anxious about forming a new relationship with me, the art therapist. Perhaps his objects were tools for soothing during this time of turmoil, providing Jay with a dimension over which he could exert control despite the fact that he had very little control over his circumstances. In one session, Jay used an image from a racing car game on the screen of his portable video-game player (Figure 2) in order to draw a road with a car passing by two buildings, and an adjacent motorway. During this session, Jay's sister Sarah was also present. She created a drawing of small flame-shaped red designs along the left edge of her paper. When she was finished, Jay picked up his sister's artwork and integrated it into his own image (Figure 3). Jay explained that his car needed to be extremely fast to win a race, so he incorporated the red flames his sister drew at the tailpipes, as if shooting out of them, fueled by the car's nitrous engine.

Over the course of therapy, Jay described his transitional objects and his artwork and a running theme of "fight or flight" could be detected in the narrative. The appearance of this stress response is not uncommon in individuals who have experienced a trauma. Miller (2001)

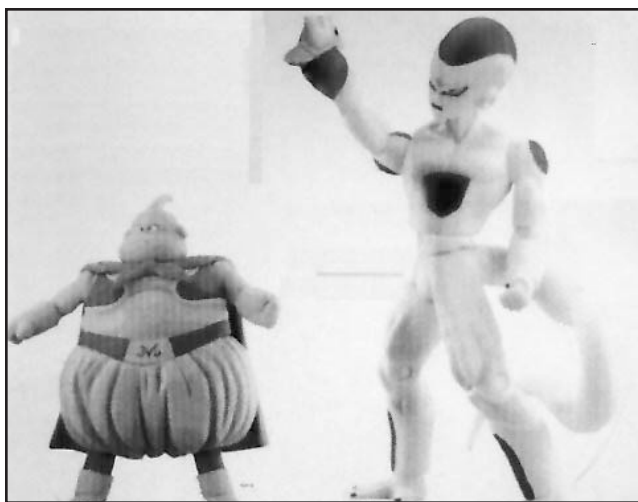


Figure 4

wrote that survivors of various kinds of trauma may become overwhelmed and overly sensitive during times of stress, and may react to painful situations with rage or withdrawal. The flight of his mother from the home and the withdrawal or emotional flight of his father from the trauma of divorce likely played a role in Jay's expression of this dynamic. Jay, too, may have wanted to escape a painful situation or avoid experiencing another loss.

Projection became another way for Jay to use his transitional objects. Levens (2001) described projection as an attempt to externalize libidinal and aggressive energy. Such projection may have allowed Jay to release the pain and anger that he had been internalizing. For example, during a discussion about his mother's boyfriend, Jay's sister and father expressed their feelings of hurt and anger, feeling that the boyfriend had taken Jay's mother away from them. While Sarah continued to verbalize her anger and abandonment, Jay removed from his pocket two action figures called Majin Buu and Frieza (from the popular cartoon and trading card game *Dragon Ball Z*[®]) and posed them on the table (Figure 4). Jay then asked me for a box of markers and took a sheet of paper from a pile on the table. Holding tightly to his pencil, he began to draw the two action figures in front of him (Figure 5).

Jay's paper had Majin Buu on the left-hand side, extending his arm to shoot a laser at Frieza, the smaller character, who was being killed for stealing a cookie that belonged to Majin Buu. The figure of Frieza is seen floating on the upper right-hand side of the page. In that upper-most corner, directly above the figure being shot with the laser, Jay drew another depiction of Frieza, in a box and apparently killed. Jay drew an outline around Frieza's body and in the center of his chest he placed a black square. When Jay was finished drawing, he put away all the art materials and then quietly placed his action figures back into the large coat pocket from which they had come.

Once again Jay expressed his rage through these figures and drawings. Jay was angry at a variety of people, including his mother and her boyfriend, as well as his father. The

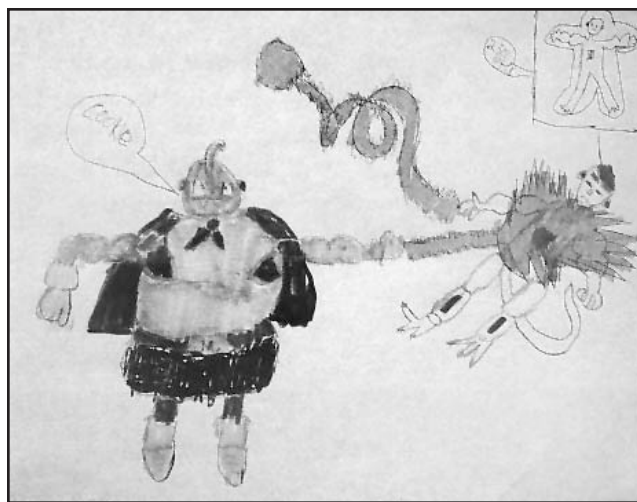


Figure 5

character Frieza could have represented any of these people or situations in Jay's life. Children recovering from a crisis often make aggressive use of metaphors when they begin to confront their feelings of anger, pain, and guilt, as well as rage toward a caregiver (Malchiodi, 1997). Jay's artwork afforded him the means for channeling his feelings of rage, whereby he could have the satisfaction of destroying his enemies in a safe, fantasy context.

Using Artwork as a Transitional Object

As therapy progressed, Jay's need to bring personal objects into the sessions gradually decreased. Perhaps Jay was beginning to experience consistency and emotional safety within our regularly scheduled art therapy sessions. After 4 months of treatment, a noteworthy transition occurred during one particular session with Jay and his sister. With the creation of Figure 6, Jay's process began to change when, for the first time, he was able to express his emotions in artwork that was directly connected to a fight between his mother and his sister.

Sarah described an incident in which she and her mother had engaged in a verbal and physical altercation. While Sarah explained what had happened, Jay grabbed a ball of red clay and began to create a figure similar to the ones he had made in previous sessions (Figure 6). But this time he found a box of craft sticks and began to break them in half with his fists on the edge of the table. Once the craft sticks were broken, Jay aggressively shoved them through the clay figure's body. He ripped off the arms and pushed the jagged-edged sticks into the clay where the arms had been as a way to affix the arms to the torso. The reattached limbs were long and thick and weighed the body down. Two yellow horns extended from the sides of the figure's head.

Jay tried to stand the figure up but it was in need of support. I passed him a sheet of cardboard. Jay placed it under the figure and shoved his last stick through the back of the cardboard until it pierced through to the outside of the figure's stomach. Jay reached for more clay and covered

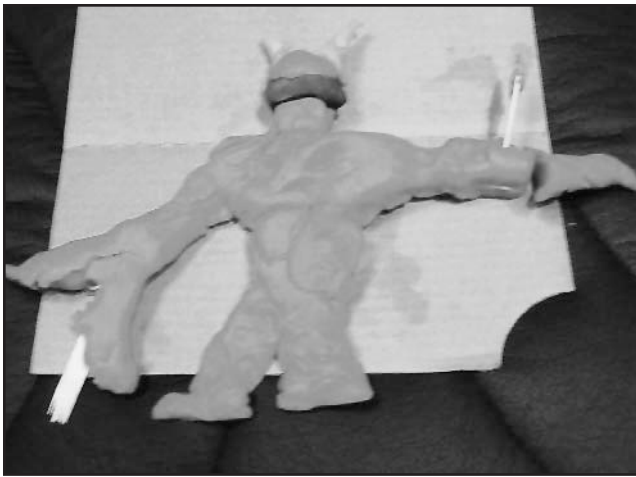


Figure 6

up the visible portion of the stick. Picking up the cardboard, Jay turned it upside down and was pleased to find that the figure remained intact. Delighted with his creation, he asked his sister for her camera phone. Jay was clearly proud of his work for the first time in our sessions together. He snapped a few photos of the figure and took the photos home that evening.

This was a pivotal moment in Jay's therapy. For the first time, Jay was able to represent himself without the aid of a transitional object to use as a model. His clay figure was full of hidden jagged pieces of wood, as if reflecting the sharp and painful experiences he had been internalizing. The process Jay chose for creating this figure, with its broken craft sticks, revealed to his art therapist and his family that he, too, felt pain inside. Though the object was fragile and needed stability, Jay was able to accept an offer of help from me in the form of a supporting piece of cardboard that helped his figure stand upright and remain intact.

Jay's family members and I were able to reflect Jay's reality back to him through encouragement and observation of his actions. By responding to Jay in an empathetic way, we could share with him the emotions, stories, and sense of pride of this "mirroring" moment, as Kohut (1971) put it. The family thus began to correctively recapitulate emotional responses to one another that may have been neglected in Jay's previous life experiences. As a result, Jay's sense of self was reinforced by his family members during the therapy session.

Relinquishing Transitional Objects and the Development of Therapeutic Play

Gradually, Jay transitioned from projecting his feelings onto preexisting personal objects to working through his emotions directly and without the aid of these objects. Lachman-Chapin (1987) described the process in this way:

I believe that the artwork itself can become a self-object for the client. He is helped to shift from considering the therapist a sole self-object, to the creation of a self-object of his own. This effects a step towards individuation, and the art

therapist is there to give the longed-for empathetic response. (p. 80)

Jay began to be more assertive in therapy by asking to take his artwork home. In one subsequent session, Jay refused to do any artwork at all, instead insisting that we play tic-tac-toe. This game led to a discussion about being trapped, a situation that likely resonated for Jay beyond the context of the game's strategy. The game of tic-tac-toe evoked feelings he was all too familiar with in his everyday life. Jay was able to tell me what being trapped felt like when he found himself trapped in the game.

Jay also asked to bring back a piece of art that had broken at home in order to rework it. Once again, Jay could describe how he felt when it broke and express that he hoped to be able to repair it in a future session. The metaphor of the broken artwork and its need for repair seemed to parallel many of Jay's emotions and experiences, revealing the difficulties of destruction as well as the hope for mending.

Conclusion

Divorce can be a traumatic experience for a child. It is a trauma that may adversely affect interpersonal relationships as well as the child's ability to express a variety of feelings connected to loss and separation anxiety. Jay's use of transitional objects during his parents' divorce and his separation from his mother was a reversion to the initial need for such objects earlier in his life. The transitional object became a coping mechanism during this divorce and provided Jay with the capacity to continue to develop autonomy past the trauma and eventually to move into the larger realms of play and symbolism.

I believe that Jay's personal objects served the purpose of metaphoric communication in our therapeutic relationship. They functioned as transitional objects that he transferred from his home to therapy; in time his artwork, too, became a transitional object from therapy to his home. Jay eventually began to lose interest in creating these representations of his personal possessions in art therapy, and instead began to make his own unique creations that were not modeled on existing icons or characters. Because trauma can disrupt transitional space of emotional constancy for a child, the trust built within the art therapy environment may allow a child to re-enter this transitional space, to deal with affect produced by their artwork, and gradually to begin to increase self-expression (Stronach-Buschel, 1990).

The role of artwork and personal objects as therapeutic tools for children of divorce cannot be generalized, of course, from a single case study. Each child experiences the divorce process in a very individualized way, and transitional phenomena may not emerge or ease all children through traumatic experiences in their lives. However, the observations drawn from an individual's therapeutic process sensitize us to multiple layers of potential meaning in a given clinical case and provide insight into what such grief and trauma must be like (Kapitan, 2007). Jay's narrative also makes a strong case for conducting more research

on the therapeutic use of transitional objects and communication through metaphors as coping mechanisms for children of divorce who, ideally, receive positive reinforcement from their family members.

The triadic relationship that developed between me, Jay, and Jay's artworks allowed Jay to express his stories as well as invite me into a world he created and knew very well. Art therapy appeared to empower Jay, in sharp contrast to the ego-threatening circumstances of his day-to-day life where adults seemed to be in control and in which, for the most part, he felt powerless. This newly empowered Jay could now begin to heal from the loss of his mother that the divorce precipitated. The art process also validated his feelings by providing him with opportunities for reflection and empathic understanding. In a society where divorce is prevalent, this opportunity to witness the effective intervention of art therapy and the use of transitional objects was very encouraging.

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