

# Using Drawings in Play Therapy: A Jungian Approach

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## Abstract

Counselors working with children employ a variety of therapeutic techniques and tools from various theoretical models. One of these tools, drawing, is increasingly being implemented into play therapy. The purpose of this paper is to briefly review Jungian theoretical approaches as they pertain to drawing techniques within the counseling session.

## Using Drawings in Play Therapy

Play is how children explore the external world and discover their own skills and abilities. Play allows children to communicate complex ideas and messages that would otherwise be impossible due to their lack of verbal skills (Association for Play Therapy, 2000). Additionally, play enables children to make sense of their internal and external worlds and seek ways to connect the two world views (Reyes & Asbrand, 2005).

Counselors working with children use a multitude of play techniques in order to assess and meet specific counseling goals with their clients. Counseling techniques are derived from theoretical approaches and certain beliefs regarding human interaction and change. Axline (1989), an early founder of child-centered play therapy, stated counselors must accept the child and allow the child to lead the session, provide an atmosphere where the

child feels free to express feelings, reflect feelings back to the child and respect the child's ability to solve his or her own problems.

According to Gil (1991), a play and art therapist, "efforts must be made to invite and promote self-expression" when working with children (p.66). Drawing can be one such outlet that encourages self-direction and self-evaluation (Lan-dreth, 1991). In the 1800s, drawings became significant to psychoanalysis in order to reveal the unconscious mind (Gil, 1994). In 1905, Freud reported on drawings of Little Hans as a means to "surface unconscious material through images"(Malchiodi, 2003, p. 42). Naumburg (1966) became popular for using spontaneous drawings within psychoanalysis. Since that time, the use of creative techniques has seen an increase in the use of art, visualization, and metaphorical imagery in children's counseling (Allan, 1988). As art within child therapy strengthened, the use of drawings became popular to study the intelligence level and psychological state of the child. Projective drawing tests emerged to study the perceptions, attitudes, and personality of children (Malchiodi, 2003).

Today, art has become a recognized modality in play therapy and is integrated into the play session. Art therapy uses the

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creative process of art to improve and enhance the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of children. "The creative process involved in artistic self-expression helps people to resolve conflicts and problems, develop interpersonal skills, manage behavior, reduce stress, increase self-esteem and self-awareness, and achieve insight" (American Art Therapy Association, 2006).

#### *Drawings*

Therapists use drawings as a means of communication when working with children. Drawings broaden the individual's experience of expression by allowing the safe expression of feelings and attitudes in ways that words cannot (Hagood, 2000; Landreth, 1991; Oster & Gould, 1987). A white sheet of paper becomes a "safe place" for the child to express himself or herself in a non-threatening manner, (Allan, 1988). Drawing can "create internal perceptions about self and the world" (Malchiodi, 2003, p. 155). These graphic representations "bring issues to the surface, thus accelerating the helping professional's ability to intervene and assist troubled children" (Malchiodi, 2001, p. 21).

"Although child-centered play therapy is the most widely employed play therapy technique," rooting itself in the humanistic approach, many play therapists prefer techniques derived from Jung's Analytical Psychology (Peery, 2002, p. 408). The specific counseling styles of play therapy influence the counselor's approach to drawing assessments. While child-centered play therapy is characterized as being nondirective, Jungian therapists offer varying degrees of direction in the counseling session. This de-

bate concerning the degree of direction a play therapist employs is also applicable to art therapy and drawings. While some counselors choose a directive role when utilizing drawing techniques, others prefer to be non directive in their method. Professionals find both directive and nondirective methods reach into the individual's unconscious. Therefore, children's art expressions within therapy are viewed from diverse perspectives and interests depending on the therapist. Drawings are used not only as an assessment or diagnostic tool, but counselors use drawings as a therapeutic intervention in counseling (Malchiodi, 2003).

#### *Jungian Drawing*

Jung (1934) contended the goal of counseling is "to make unconscious content accessible and so to bring it closer to the patient's understanding" (p.182). According to Jung, in order for clients to achieve meaning and wholeness, there must be a balance between the unconscious and conscious. Rather than specific techniques, the counselor's understanding of the "nature of the psyche, the meaning of play, and the goal of the therapy influence on the play therapy process" is important in this theory (de Domenico, 1994, p. 453). Jungian therapists encourage the individual to embrace uniqueness within his or herself.

Play is a primary means to self-realization (Jung, 1961). Lack of psychological coping skills, family psychopathology, trauma, and ways of education, raising, and socializing children promote ego disturbances. The counseling role is to observe, attempt to understand, integrate, and communicate

the meaning of play. The child works through internal and unconscious conflicts as the therapist provides freedom in the playroom, verbally affirms the child, provides a deep level of empathic understanding, and offers warmth and caring (Hagood, 2000). The counselor's goal for the client is to value themselves and gain a sense of empowerment. These characteristics provide a catalyst for therapeutic change.

Similar to Freud's psychoanalytic approach of free association, spontaneous art expression gains access to the inner realm in order to promote healing. "Pictures are direct communication from the unconscious" (Furth, 2002, p. 4). Jung studied archetypes within art and discovered that the symbols produced in drawings represent the psyche's attempt to grow and heal (Allan, 1988). When unconscious content appears in drawings and is deciphered, the unconscious content provides valuable therapeutic insight into the child's world (Furth, 2002).

Spontaneous drawing, a Jungian semi-directive structured technique, provides clients with the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings in on-threatening and safe ways (Allan, 1988). The client chooses the content of the drawing, exhibiting self-control and mastery (Allan & Bertoia, 1992). A spontaneous drawing externalizes the emotions that talking may not accomplish (Green, 2004). Impromptu drawings are created by asking the client to draw whatever he/she would like to draw. Many view this spontaneity as central to the art therapy process (Furth, 2002; Malchiodi, 1998, 2001, 2003).

### *Serial Drawings*

Serial drawing is implemented over a period of time in order to provide "a more complete view of the child's inner world" (Green & Herbert, 2006, p. 22). These drawings include little or no direction from the counselor. The client may draw anything each week. "When a child draws in the presence of the therapist on a regular basis, then the healing potential is activated, conflicts expressed and resolved, and the therapist can gain a clearer and more accurate view of the unconscious at work" (Allan, 1988, p. 21).

Common questions from the counselor could include several questions. I wonder what it would feel like for you to be in this drawing? Tell me a story that goes with the picture? Give me a moral to go with this picture and/or story? Give me three feeling words for this picture. Tell what happened before this picture(s). Tell what is going to happen after this picture or this last picture.

Through the stages of therapy, serial drawings move from reflecting the child's inner world, to struggling emotions, to finally a sense of mastery and worth. This drawing intervention or assessment may be presented in a directive, semi-directive, or non directive manner, depending on the needs of the child.

### *The Rosebush Drawing*

The Rosebush (Allan, 1988), guided imagery activity, asks the child to picture a rose bush in their mind. Once the child says that they have a clear picture of the rose bush in their mind, then the counselor asks them to draw the rose bush as best they can as they remember seeing it in their mind. The counselor looks for

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specific details in the drawing. A child that needs defenses may draw a fence surrounding the rosebush. A child that needs more security and stability in their life may emphasize the roots and root structure of the bush. A child who can both draw the thorns and the full blooming roses may have a better concept of reality and have a more mature understanding of taking the good in life with the less desirable. The fullness of the blossoms and leaves on the bush indicate the fullness of the child's life, as the child perceives it. A child who draws a rose bush with only rose buds may be on the verge of great changes in their lives from the child's perspective. Of course, dead rosebushes, broken limbs, or other indications of a lack of vitality in the rosebush are indications of the child's emotional state of depression, hopeless or despair. However, before making any lasting interpretation, ask the child what season of the year it is, as a rosebush in winter has no leaves or blossoms. A child who is very literal or concrete can just be drawing what they have seen at home in their own flower gardens (Allan, 1988).

Other parts of the post-drawing interview include asking the child what the weather is like for the rosebush, which may give the counselor an indication of how the child perceives the environment as warm, cool, or cold. The following author fictionalized case excerpt will give an example of a rosebush post-drawing interview by a child from an emotionally impoverished family situation:

*Jamie drew a bare rosebush devoid of greenery or blossoms. A huge tornado was drawn in the background approaching the much smaller rosebush. The rose-*

*bush had no protection of any kind from the coming storm. When asked about the rosebush, Jamie replied. "The tornado will blow it away. It doesn't have any roots to hold it. It is too young. It was just planted last year."*

*Jamie had moved to a new school after the death of her father. The mother had to live with the grandparents. The grandparents had very different ideas about parenting from Jamie's parents. Both the mother and Jamie discussed how the family had been thrown into chaos by the unexpected death of the father and the many changes that were taking place in their family. Jamie had been referred to the counselor because of what the mother considered to be unresolved grief and childhood depression.*

*As the counselor looks at the drawing and listens to the tone of Jamie's voice, she can hear the despair and grief the child is experiencing. As the rosebush is a metaphor for Jamie's current situation, the counselor talks to Jamie through this metaphor by asking these guiding questions: What does the Rosebush need to be protected from the tornado? Who can take care of the Rosebush and be sure that it survives the storm? What will it take for the Rosebush to bloom in the Spring? How do you think it will look next year or even five years from now?*

Jungians often speak to the unconscious through the metaphor of the drawings, directing the thought processes by guiding questions. Unlike a more directive approach, the Jungian therapist trusts the unconscious to make meaning of the metaphor and does not explain it to the child. To illustrate talking through the

metaphor, the counselor might respond to Jamie by saying the rosebush looks like it is stronger than it looks and if the rosebush moves with the wind rather than tries to resist the wind it will stay rooted. If the rosebush does become uprooted, the gardener will come by to check on all the bushes after the storm and will help the rosebush to be replanted.

### ***Journal Drawing***

Another approach used by Allan and Bertoia (1992) is journal drawing or the creation of picture journals. The child draws a picture or a series of pictures much like other journal entries are made. The child may choose to add written comments to the pictures he or she has drawn.

The counselor does not ask the child to draw anything in particular. The child just draws what they feel like drawing for each entry. Usually the child brings the drawings into the counselor to review. The counselor guides the child through questions to reflect about feelings, meanings, or experiences that are reflected in the pictures. These questions may take the following format: Tell me what you were feeling when you drew this picture? What had happened just before this picture? What is going to happen next? Tell me what you like about this picture? Tell me how you would change this picture? Give me a moral or special title for this picture?

Several of the pictures may be grouped together and the counselor may ask the child to tell a story with a beginning, middle and end for the story. If the pictures are very abstract, the counselor may ask the child to tell label each color with a feeling word. Sometimes the counselor may want to just share an impression that he or she gets from the picture and see

if that impression is the one that the child intended to convey. According to Allen and Bertoia (1992) the time spent reflecting in a picture journal can “set in motion the inner drive of growth and development” (p. 30).

### **Conclusion**

Drawings can provide a vehicle for children to explore their external world and to discover their coping skills and abilities. Through the use of drawings, children can communicate complex ideas and messages that would otherwise be impossible due to lack of vocabulary. Through the concrete production of creative expressions, children can share their internal world of experience with the counselor in the external world of the counseling session. Presented in this article are some launching points or drawing experiences for the counselor interested in pursuing Jungian art expression as a tool in counseling sessions with children.

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