



# PLAY THERAPY

## RESPECT AND RELATIONSHIP FOR REPAIR & RESILIENCE

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### INTRODUCTION

The definition of spirituality and children's spirituality is not clear, nor easy, it engenders continuing debate. The basic dictionary definition, shows the original Latin root of the word Spiritual - "of or pertaining to the spirit or soul as distinguished from the physical nature" (*Macquarie Dictionary*, 1981, p. 1661). *In this sense spirituality is a deep part of being human. It is part of the unique human consciousness as in " a wellspring of love and wisdom" (Hart, 2003, 2) or "Awareness sensing . . . mystery sensing . . . value sensing" ( Nye, 1996, 146 ). The human spirit is aware of connection with nature with others and with transcendence. It shows "A desire for connectedness, which often expresses itself in an emotional relationship with an invisible sacred presence" (Tacey, 2000, 17).*

This short paper describes the use of Play Therapy in response to a community disaster. It recognises the importance of spiritual connection for children in a warm relationship of love and acceptance. Helping children in the face of trauma requires a relationship of professional awareness, care and nurture. Given the emotional vulnerability of children, therapy through play provides a gentle and safe space in which to process distress and make meaning.



*As a Christian the word for spirit relates to the Holy Spirit, the creative and sustaining wisdom and breath of God. Children's spiritual nature is related to the method of Play therapy. The therapist respects the spirit of the child, a spirit that is seeking wholeness and understanding, while struggling with anxiety and problems.*

### **CASE STUDY- EARLY INTERVENTION**

It has been suggested that as we move into greater global warming, extreme weather condition will escalate and greater general education in the community will be needed in order to care for the emotional needs of children (McDermott & Cobham, 2010). The following early intervention after the Victorian bushfires gives some idea of how Play Therapy can help.

"Terror, loss and acts of quiet courage have

marked Australia's worst natural disaster" (Rule, 2009) these were the words used in the lead story of The Age newspaper on 9th Feb 2009. Droughts, bushfires, and floods are part of life in Australia, but this fire led to devastation of life and property on a record-breaking scale. In the state of Victoria over 400,000 hectares have been burned 2029 properties have been destroyed, leaving thousands of people homeless. The fire affected 78 townships with as death toll of over 210.

The Australasia Pacific Play Therapy Association (APPTA) was one of the many groups who offered practical support after the bushfires. I was one of the Victorian members of APPTA who volunteered to work in a team with others coming from professions of counselling, education and social work.

The first two days of the program were

focused on skill development and team building of the volunteers so that the values and actions embedded in the Play Therapy approach of the APPTA would be followed. (Bratton 2002, 2006). Each of the volunteers had a small set of toys- domestic toys such as a tea set, a doll and feeding bottle, doll's house furniture and jewellery, a medical kit, transportation toys such as a plane, fire truck, cars and horses, toys that might be associated with aggression such as a sword, gun, night goggles and hand cuffs and finally art equipment of paper, modelling material, icy pole sticks, scissors, glue, pens and pastels.<sup>1</sup>

Our temporary "play rooms" were set up in halls, libraries, unused classrooms and store areas. Some effort was made to divide

<sup>1</sup> This selection was guided by discussions with Dr Brandy Shoumann regarding a similar intervention after 9/11 and supported by the writings of Landreth 2002; Webb, 2000.

spaces to give a sense of privacy but the conditions were rather cramped. We worked in 60 minute time blocks- 30 minutes with the child then 30 minutes for team discussion and report writings. During the five day period over 100 students were involved in play therapy . Teachers and parents selected the children to be involved as those exhibiting special needs. The children usually came to the play room individually, although in a few cases children came in pairs.

The experience of working in a hurriedly assembled team provided a positive model for response in a crisis situation. This could be compared with the recent work of therapy teams after hurricane Andrew in the USA or the post traumatic intervention in Sri Lanka after the Tsunami. (Shelby,1995; Webb, 2007). It also had some resonance with an older model formed in response to the urgent need to recruit and train nurses during the Second World War.

The Play Therapy model that we followed was a primary one of listening, attending and supporting with a "philosophy, a way of being with children rather than a way of doing something to or for children", this is an attitude of relational respect. (Landreth, 2002, 60)

While the child is in the therapy situation, neuro-science testing can detect changes in brain function.

***"When children lead the play and we follow well, they feel valued and powerful and their brains respond by releasing opioids, which are neurochemicals supporting well-being and connection. When these cascade through the brain, stress chemicals return to normal levels, and the tendency towards aggression recedes and the children are free to engage."* (Badenoch, 2002, 301).**

There are many experiences that could be told about the week: There was evidence of children drawing beautiful pictures of flowers and green grass which might be construed as expressions of hope, fantasy, or other more dissociative coping strategies. There was much strong expression of violent, energetic activity seen in the repeated stabbing, shooting, punching and strangling of the doll. Much use was also made of the cars, trucks and glider with crashing, explosions and destruction. Along with the play that seemed associated with the fire, there were enactments of previous situations of longstanding anger, stress and grief such as parental separation and perceived family favouritism. For nearly all children there were expressions of confusion. There was an unreal sense of "party" with the excitement of visiting celebrities that contrasted with recent traumatic memories of shooting the horses or the choice to leave a dog behind when evacuating. The parents and staff expressed appreciation for this initial Play Therapy intervention, it gave a sense of re-assurance and emotional support. From the initial group a small number of children were assessed as needing further counselling.

The therapists working with the children all reported a sense

of connection with the horror of the fire situation through this intervention. There was a strong emotional and spiritual awareness of some of the sadness and shock. Our own secondary experiences of trauma needed de-briefing within the relationship of the team.

The empathic relationship between the therapist and child was central during the intervention, but another interesting situation was observed in the relationship of peer support. Sammy and Emma<sup>2</sup> came into a session together, they were best friends in grade three, eight years old. Sammy had lost her home and all of her possessions while Emma's home was saved. Throughout the session, Sammy sat as an observer laughing at the frantic play of Emma who used all of the toys, crashing and racing, throwing things around and mistreating the doll in various ways. There were many sound effects and high activity, while Sammy seemed calm and kept laughing. It was difficult for me to give verbal reflections, tracking the play behaviour, as things kept moving so fast. I could only reflect on my feelings in the session, "This is hard, I can't understand what is going on", "It all seems so confusing", "I can't keep up with what is happening." Towards the end of the session I told the girls they only had five minutes to go. Again Sammy was passive but Emma quickly found the art material and made an elaborate and rather confused picture. She finally wrote a message on the paper "To Sammy with love from Emma." The colour of the picture was dramatic, black, white and red with many representation of her play activity. There were cars, fire engines, houses and signs of movement with sharp lines. In the centre was the representation of a person being attacked with blood spurting out. Part of this picture is reproduced below showing the strength of Emma feelings- a gift for her friend Sammy. Through Emma's creative play the connection of love and understanding was expressed to Sammy, a spiritual connection for healing.



Our understanding of children's spirituality, their innate giftedness

<sup>2</sup> Names have been changed for privacy

in terms of connection, is important in many ways. In education it leads the teacher to a child-centred approach with listening and following the child rather than just telling and demanding. In the field of psychotherapy the awareness of children's spirituality guides the therapeutic method of intervention. In awareness of our Christian tradition we have respect for the child who comes 'from the hand of God' (Rahner, 1977, 39), the child's place as part of the kingdom of God (Matt 18:3). This awareness becomes a central feature in the process of healing and repair. Play within the therapeutic relationship is a resource when counselling children. The therapist walks gently, listening, watching and prayerfully considering the varied ways in which children express their issues through play.

Bruce Perry concludes: "Humans are inescapably social beings ... Relationships are the agents of change and the most powerful therapy is human love" (Perry, 2006, 230). This is the heart of children's spirituality and Play Therapy.

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