

Describe one specialist area of work with young people and evaluate the use of a variety of creative interventions in your working practice.

INTRODUCTION

For the purpose of this essay I have chosen to focus on the specialist area of divorce. I will describe the principle issues arising for young people affected by divorce and I will also consider the impact on them, bearing in mind their developmental stage and cognitive ability. I will talk about Worden's Grief Model, discussing this process and the tasks involved to complete this "mourning". The grief model is a useful way of looking at divorce as it offers an opportunity to view the effects on children as a normal part of the grieving process. I will mention Bowlby's theory on Attachment and how understanding this further aids our ability to understand grief.

According to the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (2004), over one third of cohabiting couple families in Scotland have dependent children living with them and it found that cohabiting couples were more likely to have had a previous relationship that ended compared to their married counterparts. In a quarter of marriages in Scotland in 2004, one or both parties

were divorced at the time of marriage. Children and young people are therefore more likely to experience multiple parental separations and divorce.

Finally, I will look at two of the creative interventions which I have used, exploring the advantages and disadvantages of working with them. I will discuss whether working with creative interventions is indeed an effective way to counsel young people and mentions some contra-indications. Interwoven within this assignment will be several case studies to support my discussion.

DIVORCE

The emotional repercussions of parents divorcing has a significant effect on the future of children especially, not just psychologically but also on their social and intellectual functioning. When parents separate, upheaval and major life changes occur, resulting in many children suffering feelings of guilt, anger, abandonment and deep seated pain with no outlet, possibly leading directly to depression and anxiety. Wendy, aged 10, came for counselling after her parents separated. She was highly anxious and was increasingly, finding it harder to maintain friendships with her peers. It is also clear that children's distress can actually begin years before the divorce or separation, when they

watch their parents relationship go through the process of breaking down, as mentioned by Palmer (2006).

Marital conflict has been associated with an array of adjustment problems for the children, for instance; poor peer interaction, conduct problems, ill health, depression and anxiety, low self esteem, eating disorders, substance misuse and poor attachment (Cummings E, 1994). This was indeed the case for Wendy. Throughout her life she had witnessed high levels of conflict between her parents, but had never witnessed the process of them sorting their difficulties out. She struggled to cope with disagreements within her own peer group. As a result of this, she had a succession of "best friends". This in turn affected her self esteem and confidence and caused her great anxiety.

Marital conflict that is "intense, frequent and child related" (Fainsilber L, 2002), causes children to have fears, distress and a desire to intervene in the conflict. Lack of resolution can be associated with "negative affected responses" such as anger, sadness and distress (Fainsilber L, 2002). Children tend to display negative effect and non-compliance with peers, they also have higher levels of "acting out" behaviours within the family itself. Steven, aged 9,

was referred for counselling, as a result of his attitude in class. He was disrespectful to both his teachers and peers and would always create a situation in class so as to draw attention to himself. His parents had separated rather suddenly. Although his father did have regular access he was now consistently abusive to Steven's mother in front of Steven. Steven had seemingly been protected from this behaviour between his parents and so now witnessing this was highly distressing.

Unfortunately these emotions are increasingly misinterpreted and signs of psychological distress can be translated as "bad" and "out of control" behaviour. The prevalence of emotional and conduct disorders are found to be 10% of children and 20% of adolescents (Camelot Foundation, 2005). Bullying and self harm are on the increase, both are measures of children's lack of ability to cope with distress and psychological pain (Camelot Foundation, 2005).

Of course, there are also the parents who manage to separate amicably and make contact arrangements that are satisfactory for both parents. However Elizabeth Marquardt's research (Marquardt E, 2005) indicates that such

children, even those with a best case scenario separation, often experience significant levels of inner conflict which dominate their childhood and continue into adulthood. Marquardt states that they feel pushed to the side of their parent's lives as the latter struggle to re-order their own lives after separation. Inner conflict arises in children when they struggle to make sense of the differing value systems which their parents found impossible to reconcile, and which may have contributed to the breakdown in the first place. Many reported a sense that they had grown up too soon and that their childhood was characterised by loneliness.

Elizabeth's parents had had a very agreeable separation when she was 6. She was now 17. She had remained in the family home and some years later both her parents re-married. Elizabeth accepted this and had a good relationship with both step-parents. Her own relationship had recently broken down as a result of her own depression. But she did not understand why she was depressed. Throughout our sessions we were able to revisit her suppressed feelings regarding her own parents divorce and how her inability to express how she had felt as a child had created an inability to feel or explore how she felt now as an adolescent.

These more subtle effects of divorce, which produce no clinical symptoms, have been termed "sleeper effects" (Blakeslee S, 1989), which become more evident when the children leave home and try to form lasting relationships themselves. Marquardt does not argue that no one should get divorced nor that divorced people are morally reprehensible. Neither does she deny the "resilience perspective", and that most children from divorce do develop into well adjusted, successful adults. Her contention is that the debate has been dominated by the adult perspective and despite the necessary concern that we must show for parents themselves, this should not prevent us from looking unflinchingly at the experiences of children of divorce.

Worden (1991) identifies some of the distinguishing features between losses through divorce as opposed to through death. This grief model is a useful method comprehending the complexities of the divorce process. He conceptualises the process of grief as a series of four "tasks" that need to be completed before "mourning" is over.

- To accept the reality of the loss
- To experience and work through the pain and grief
- To adjust to an environment in which the absent parent is no longer present

- To emotionally move on with your life

“Mourning is a process, not a state of mind, and as in any process, work is done so that the process can proceed to successful finalisation” (Worden, 1991).

Clearly though, although the grief process between divorce and death is similar, divorce is different from death, in that, with death there is finality. With divorce, the grieving process could be completed yet there may be ongoing triggers such as birthdays, holidays, when a parent introduces a new partner or even gets re-married. The aftermath of divorce can continue to affect the whole family.

“Mourning for a childhood loss can be revived at many points in life, especially when important life events re-activate loss” (Worden, 1996).

No one has contributed more to our understanding of attachment, separation and loss in young people than Bowlby (1969). Throughout human

development, continual attachments to others are formed. According to Bowlby (1969), attachments develop from needs for security and safety which are acquired through life. These are usually directed towards a few specific individuals (Worden, 1991). The goal of attachment behaviour is to form and maintain affectionate bonds, throughout childhood and adulthood.

Children usually lose some degree of contact with one of their attachment figures when a divorce occurs. It is a confusing and stressful time for children, regardless of whether the divorce was amicable or not. Booth, et al., (2000) refer to various national studies when stating that poor school performance, low self esteem, behavioural problems, distress and adjustments difficulties are associated with divorce. In adolescents from divorced families they noted more instances of delinquent behaviour, early sexual activity and ongoing academic issues.

In contrast, there have also been comparable studies that detect no unusual behaviour or emotional distress occurring from divorce (Armistead et al., 1998). But there are many factors that may play into how children's attachments are altered after a divorce, one such being age and

developmental stage. The behavioural reaction of a child to divorce has been shown to correlate with the age group when the divorce occurred. Blakeslee (1989) states that most children have the same initial feelings;

“When their family breaks up, children feel vulnerable, for they fear that their lifeline is in danger of being cut. Little children often have difficulty falling asleep at bedtime or sleeping through the night. Older children may have trouble concentrating at school. Adolescents often act out and get into trouble”

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES

Pre-school (3-5): these children are likely to exhibit a regression of the most recent developmental milestone achieved. Additionally, sleep disturbances and an exacerbated fear of separation from the custodial parent is common. (Wallerstein, 1989).

Early Latency (6-8): these children will often openly grieve for the departed parent. There is a noted pre-occupation with fantasies that distinguish the reactions of this group. Fantasies of parents reuniting can continue for these

children. They will have difficulty with the concept of the permanence of the divorce. (Wallerstein, 1989).

Late Latency (8-11): Anger and a feeling of powerlessness are the predominate responses here. There is a greater tendency to label a "good" parent and a "bad" parent and these children can be very susceptible to attempting to take care of a parent at the expense of their own needs. (Wallerstein, 1989).

Adolescence (12-18): Adolescents are prone to responding to their parents' divorce with acute depression, suicidal idealisation, and sometimes violent acting out episodes. They often tend to focus on the moral issues surrounding divorce and will often judge their parents' decisions and actions. Many become anxious and fearful about their own future love and marital relationships. However, this age group has the capability to perceive integrity in post-divorce relationship of their parents and to show compassion for their parents' without neglecting their own needs. (Wallerstein, 1989).

Bowlby (1969) proposes that grief responses are biologically general responses to separation and loss. Throughout the course of evolution instinct develops around the premise that attachment losses are retrievable. Similarly,

behavioural losses making up the grieving process are pro-survival mechanisms geared towards restoring lost bonds (Worden, 1991).

Jewett (1982) talks of three basic "phases": early grief, acute grief and subsiding grief. She proposes that no matter how trivial or great the loss, the same process must be completed each time even if the length and intensity differ.

"Though there may be overlapping, skipping around, or returns to previous stages, each phase has a number of components that follow in a somewhat predictable order" (Jewett, 1982).

CREATIVE INTERVENTIONS

Straightforward counselling may not be suitable for young children who may only be able to express themselves in a limited way. Creative interventions are a helpful alternative or addition to talking. They can be a useful way of enabling children to express their feelings of loss or anger, abandonment or hurt. All part of the healing process, but played out in a creative way.

Worden (1996) mentions that interventions can enhance the process of recovery, enable children to see things from a different perspective, help them release repressed feelings and underlying issues, identify feelings and thoughts which children may not have been aware of before, and therefore restore some sense of control.

Creative interventions are very powerful metaphors which work at an unconscious level and it is imperative that the clients feel safe secure and supported and that the intervention will not re-traumatise the client. The counsellor must not interrogate, but instead invites the child to disclose what they wish (Geldard, D 2008).

SAND TRAY

Sand is a marvellous medium for working with children of every age. Lownfield (1967) states that sand and water lend themselves to the demonstration of a large variety of fantasies, as for example, tunnel making, burying or drowning, land and seascapes.

“Sand tray work is powerful because it provides a visual structure in the form of a sand tray picture and together with feedback from the counsellor the child

is able to gain an understanding of their world by directly viewing the scene they have created" (Geldard, D 2008).

George, aged 9, was referred to counselling by his mother. His parents had separated several years ago and his contact with his father was intermittent. His father continually let him down by arranging to call him and wouldn't, or by making a plan to take him out for the day and just not turn up. There was a huge amount of hostility between his parents, very often George witnessed arguing between them. His mother had recently introduced James to her new partner and this was not going well. George usually was well mannered but had over the previous months become very angry and badly behaved.

The sand feels wonderful to the fingers and hands, creating an ideal tactile and kinetic experience. The child can create their own world in the sand. They can say a great deal through this medium without needing to talk. George took to this intervention. He was drawn to the sensory experience of the sand running through his fingers, this appeared to soothe him and calm him down.

Violet Oaklander (2007) describes how she will ask a child to build a scene in the sand. Over the few weeks that I saw George, he spent increasingly longer periods playing in the sand tray, creating his "scene". I witnessed him creating, what we later learnt, were all the people who were now in his family. How he placed them in the sand, was fascinating and as I reflected on what I saw he was able to explore his feelings of anger, his feelings of abandonment and where he felt he now fitted amongst all the new members of his family.

In working this way, George was able to explore specific events in his life, he was able to explore themes and issues relating to these events, he was able to act out what was not acceptable to him, he was able to gain a cognitive understanding of these events and thus gain insight into them, he was able to experience a sense of power through experiencing physical expression, he was able to think what might happen next and he was able to find some resolution to his issues through the development of his own insight.

CLAY

Clay is an invaluable intervention used in therapy work with children. The easy malleability of the dough and its transformational properties facilitates a

child's ability to actually play with and give a form to some significant issues whilst maintaining "control" over the material. The process of working with the dough as it changes form may serve as a metaphor for change. Clay helps the child to be creative. During creative activities emotions within the child are likely to be stimulated and may be expressed through the play. Because clay stimulates tactile and kinaesthetic senses, it helps those children who have shut down or blocked their emotions to get in touch with them again. The techniques may facilitate therapist goals in areas of relationship building, mastery over trauma, loss, understanding life changes as well as enhancing self-esteem and increasing verbalisations (Oaklander, V. 2007).

Paula, (10), had difficulty in maintaining friendships in school and clearly had very low self esteem. She presented as highly agitated and anxious at the beginning of our early counselling sessions. She was always confused and frustrated with her freedom, her ability to choose what she could do in the therapy room. At the onset of our sessions I didn't have any background information regarding Paula's home life. I could see the confusion that was apparent within her and this actually mirrored my confusion as to what was going on within our sessions. A meeting with her father, regarding her family tree, gave me some insight. Her parents had divorced when Paula was 3. Paula

had told me that she had “two dads”, “one who made me and one who brings me up”. She didn’t know which dad was which, although had contact with both. She had always lived with this confusion.

At some point in every session Paula would work with clay. She wanted to make “her internal world”. Each week this world grew. There were many different family members. Her confusion grew over who was who and her inability to work out where she fitted in and how she felt as a result of this. But, as her “clay family” continued to grow, week by week, she began to place all the characters where she felt they needed to be, and indeed herself, where she wanted to be. Towards the end of our work her confusion and anxiety seemed to lessen and this facilitated dialogue between herself and one of her dad’s. Paula was able to ask the direct questions she wanted to and as a result she moved away from working with clay in our sessions. In my opinion, working with clay and allowing Paula to process her confusion, using this medium, allowed introspective private processing of her own issues (Geldard, D. 2008).

Whilst these interventions did bring about some internal processing for Steven and Paula there are some instances where working with both sand and clay would not be beneficial. Group work is one example. Group work is an ideal setting where children can practise contact skills, but in sand tray work and perhaps to a lesser extent when working with clay, children do not interact with others. Some children are put off by the messiness of clay and may be fearful of what the wet "messy" mass represents to them. This in itself would tell the therapist a great deal about the child and could be a useful direction to pursue at some point. Certainly there would be a direct link between their cleanliness compulsion and their emotional problems which may not be as obvious whilst working with any other materials. Violet Oaklander (2007) mentions that because children find sand so appealing it sometimes lends itself to freer expression. Which, she says, instils her belief of the importance of paying attention to what feelings and body sensations are going on inside the counsellor and working with them.

CONCLUSION

As a result of divorce children are likely to be in a state of shock and denial. Some may fantasise that their parents will reunite. They may feel unloved and abandoned, they may feel angry, hurt, anxious and confused as to how to cope with all these feelings. Their lives may be in turmoil. They may have to contemplate moving home, leaving their friends, leaving the world that they know. They may experience conflicts of loyalty. They may regress to an earlier developmental stage.

Acknowledging their losses and allowing them to express their feelings and grieve. To give them the space to re-adjust is what we, as counsellors, must do. Creative interventions allow the child to tell his story either directly or indirectly through play. Straightforward counselling can sometimes be sufficient to allow young people to explore their feelings, but it does rely heavily on their ability to articulate their feelings. This would depend on their cognitive ability. Play also is seen as a language for children. A symbolism that substitutes for words. Playing, using creative interventions such as clay and sand, is how the child tries out his world, learns about his world. However it is important to be aware of the appropriateness of any intervention used in

relation to the child's cognitive ability, goals of the counselling and also the child's willingness to use specific interventions.

This assignment provides a solid, yet inconclusive basis for understanding how divorce affects children. I have discussed attachment theory and the process of grieving, this has uncovered an understanding how children deal with loss and their feelings of abandonment and insecurity. There were many common reactions to divorce that were observed including sadness, anger and insecurity which can lead to depression, behavioural issues, or unrealistic relationship views.

Divorce and its ensuing ramifications can have a significant and life altering impact on the well being and subsequent development of children and adolescents. The consequences of divorce can impact all aspects of a child's life, including emotions and behaviour, psychological behaviour and coping skills.

Regardless of these findings many children of divorce eventually learn to accept the past and look towards their futures in a positive way.

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