

## **Using Therapy Stories and Metaphor in Child and Family Treatment**

Pat Pernicano

Children and their families benefit from integrative therapies (play-based, experiential, interpersonal, and cognitive-behavioral) that teach coping skills, improve the capacity for attachment and interpersonal relationships and calm physiological arousal by altering neurological pathways (Pernicano, 2014).

Metaphor and stories may be used within any theoretical orientation, including client-centered, cognitive-behavioral, Adlerian, narrative, family, Gestalt, Jungian, psychoanalytic, object relations and psychodynamic; and the clinician's theoretical underpinnings guide the manner in which the material is utilized. Depending on the therapist's theoretical orientation, metaphor and stories are used to discover, change or create meaning, teach or model concepts, see change, alter schemas, change behavior, induce hypnotic trance, strengthen parent-child relationships, change or construct a personal narrative, trigger an aha moment, or reduce defensive and resistance (Pernicano, 2014).

Solution oriented treatments, hypnotherapy, filial therapy, narrative therapies, mindfulness approaches, cognitive-behavior therapy CBT, and a variety of play therapies all utilize stories or metaphors. Through metaphor, storytelling, and play therapy techniques, a therapist can access the inner world of a child, help the child make sense of that world, connect to others, and discover solutions to problems. (Pernicano, 2015). "Through metaphorical communication, children reveal their concerns, demonstrate their desires, express their emotions, gain a clearer understanding of their experiences, and create solutions to problems" (Snow, Ouzts, Martin, & Helm, 2005, p.63).

Metaphorical stories “springboard” children and families into discussing, with less avoidance, personal and family experiences and how they have been affected by them. Stories and subsequent interventions linked to the stories, help children and their parents make meaning of life events, reduce arousal, increase self-efficacy, and bolster trust & attachment (Pernicano, 2010, 2014, 2015).

There are many publications that describe the use of metaphor in therapy (Blenkiron, 2010; Burns, 2005, 2007; Cattanach, 2009; Drewes, 2009, 2010; Erickson, 2011a, 2011b; Gil, 1994, 2013; Greenwald, 2009, 2014; Kopp, 1995; Kottman, & Ashby, 2002; Markell & Markell, 2008; Oldford, 2011; and Pernicano, 2010, 2014, 2015). In *101 Healing Stories for Kids and Teens*, Burns describes how stories inform, educate, teach values, build experience, facilitate problem-solving, and propel change or heal; and in *Healing with Stories*, he provides a fascinating set of case studies contributed by well-known therapists that illustrate use of metaphor in treatment.

The themes of play are coherent metaphors in and of themselves: triumph/conquering, fearlessness/courage, power/control, dependence/independence, abandonment/separation, safety/security/protection, chaos/instability, grief/loss/hopelessness, forgiveness/vengeance, and mastery/competence (Drewes, 2010; Erickson, 2011b). Children, in their transparency, identify with story characters; reveal confusion, painful memories and feelings; and seek solutions to their problems. Stories *set the stage for* and *move* the client toward change.

In *Using Trauma-Focused Metaphor and Stories* Pernicano (2014, p. 20) states, *The impact of therapy stories is both cognitive and emotional, some metaphors hypnotically going in the back door to tap into right-brain emotional and sensory processes. It is often during the reading of a story or in the weeks following this that a*

*family, child, or caregiver experiences a breakthrough, gains and acts on new insight, or experiences emotional growth. Attachment (sensed safety, love, and felt security) develops in the right-brain limbic areas, particular in the amygdala, and therapy stories seem to have the power to emotionally trigger interpersonal awareness and relational change.*

Milton Erickson was the first to advocate using stories and metaphors in child and adult therapy (Carlson, 2001). He, unlike Freud, believed that the unconscious was a positive energy source, malleable and affected by experience. He posited that a therapist could influence a client's unconscious experience by providing new information, arousing feelings, and creating new experiences through stories. Stories move the listener to a vulnerable, receptive state of readiness; for children this is a readiness to play. Young children, with their propensity for magical thinking, suspend reality and respond to non-logical aspects of metaphorical stories as if they are real (Pernicano, 2015).

Ultimately, a child's play reflects neurodevelopment, including the capacity for emotional regulation, cognitive functioning, and interpersonal competency (Pernicano, 2014). A shared narrative often emerges within the therapeutic relationship that helps the child with emotional regulation, self-awareness, attunement, reduced fear, and attachment development (Cozolino, 2014). Gabbard writes, in the preface of *The Metaphor of Play* (Meares, 2005), "Despite the hard wiring of neural networks, new networks can be formed" in therapy, and play therapy is a set of activities that facilitate brain integration. Pernicano discusses ways that stories can bypass conscious, logical thought processes and connect with less "verbal" parts of the brain.

*As we continue to learn more about neurobiological pathways and right-brain contributions to trauma and attachment, we better understand the ways in which stories*

*have the capacity to open up right-brain processes, activate sensory memories, trigger strong unresolved emotions, and stimulate the “aha” of insight that propels behavior change (Pernicano, 2014, p. 19).*

In *Family Play Therapy* Gil (2013) points out that the right hemisphere uses symbols, metaphors, fantasy and play to process information. Early in treatment, it is helpful to stay in the right hemisphere activities as long as possible, as this amplifies the impact of metaphor and leads to reflection. Left brain cognitive evaluation is useful once the right brain work is done.

Therapists can use metaphor and stories in play therapy, using the following guide (Pernicano, 2014, pp. 26-7):

- Select or create a story that parallels or pulls for client’s problem, client characteristics (attitudes, beliefs, feelings, or behaviors), goal or purpose of the treatment session and/or phase of treatment.
- The story should allow the character to resolve the conflict and achieve a desired outcome (Gil, 2013).
- Match the story to the child’s developmental level, so that the material is within the child’s zone of proximal development i.e. contains skills that the child has not yet mastered which are attainable with the therapist’s help (Carlson, 2001).
- Tell or read the story with the child and/or caregiver. If the child is able to read, take turns reading. Shorten or paraphrase the story for younger child or child with short attention span.
- After reading, see what comes up spontaneously before offering observation or interpretation. If the opportunity arises, help the child link the story to his or her life experience, perceptions or feelings.

- Show curiosity: accentuate the metaphor, theme, story process and outcome. Ask questions to clarify the child and/or caregiver's perceptions: "Why do you think this happened?", "What advice do you have for the character?", or "What do you think led to this?"
- Move into planned or client directed play therapy activity that follows from the story or client's response to the story; and addresses a theme, schema, or feeling state in the story.

Therapeutic stories can be pre-selected; or developed and told spontaneously as metaphorical themes emerge. Pernicano (2014, p. 21) describes ways in which therapists may develop their own stories and use them in child and family treatment. With regard to character development,

*If the main character will be an animal, it must have characteristics that fit the presenting issue and create a helpful response set in the child. The character's problem has to be significant so that there is a strong need for problem solving. For example, an eagle should not be afraid of flying, and an obsessive compulsive frog would soon starve if he could not eat flies without washing them. A peacock can easily be seen as a show-off, and there is a perceived aggressive energy to dragons, lions, and alligators. The child character can be a victim or the person in charge that offers wise advice. Either approach can be helpful when the client perceives him or herself as a victim and needs to develop self-efficacy. A perpetrator character has one or more of the characteristics of someone that hurt the child: dangerous behavior, untrustworthiness, selfishness, arrogance, self-centeredness, cruelty, or disregard for others. The action of the story will remind the child of something he or she experienced.*

Stories are good tools within family play therapy, as parents hear and accept things from story characters that they would not accept from a therapist; and families disclose things in play that they would otherwise guard against. In *Play in Family Therapy* (1994), Gil spells out creative ways to involve families in storytelling, art, and puppet play.

Pernicano (2015) discusses the pragmatics of story development in Schaefer & O'Connor's *Handbook of Play Therapy, Second Edition* (in press). To use storytelling, a therapist needs to have basic understanding of child development and some training in play therapy. The therapist needs to be able to evaluate play skills, attention span, language ability, cognitive development, and emotional understanding; as story and play intervention must be matched to the child's development. It is important that the story fit the age and functioning of the client. With younger children (pre-verbal, pre-school and those with limited language ability), it is best to tell a short and simple story. The therapist actively engages the child while telling the story, asking questions about the characters, the action of the story ("guess what happens next?") and the outcome ("I wonder why he is doing that?" or "What can we do to help him/her?") Older children and families will generally participate in the reading of the story.

Translating a metaphor or story into a play therapy technique requires flexibility, spontaneity, and creativity. The play activity may be non-directive (especially when the therapist is assessing the child's process and issues) or individualized and therapist led. The therapist must observe the child's play; and listen carefully to the client's language in order to pick up on emotional or thematic material connected to the child's background and history.

Stories are not "one size fits all" and therapists need to match the story and delivery to the client (Pernicano, 2015). Certainly it is contraindicated to use a story that arouses painful emotion too early in treatment, before there is a therapeutic alliance and the child has coping

skills to manage arousal. This can re-traumatize a child and result in premature termination, increased symptom intensity, decompensation or even dissociation.

### **Summary**

Metaphors and stories may be utilized with clients of all ages regardless of therapist orientation or preferred treatment modality. When carefully utilized during treatment, they drive change through non-cognitive, sensory, and emotional processing. These tools invite identification with characters and story themes; and springboard clients toward a better understanding of self and others, cognitive restructuring and behavioral change (Pernicano, 2015).

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## STORY: THE HUNGRY HEART

### TARGETED AUDIENCE(S):

- Abused and neglected children and their foster parents / parents / guardians
- Children with insecure attachment / attachment deficits

### USES:

- To improve parental empathy and attunement
- Re-framing child behaviors / symptoms
- Psycho-education about the impact of trauma

This story is an excellent lead-in for child or family play therapy with abused or neglected children and their parents / foster parents / guardians. It is especially useful for educating parents about the *nurture needs* of children who may be placed out-of-home and engaging in obsessive compulsive rituals, stealing, hoarding, or rejecting care. For the child who is isolated, withdrawn or attachment disrupted, the story *reframes* behaviors that can lead to shame and low self-efficacy. This is a great story to help overly critical parents understand the roots of child trauma responses and to increase attunement with and empathy for the child.

### The Hungry Heart

Pat Pernicano

“What are you *doing?*” said Owl to Sammy Squirrel. “Your nest is overflowing with nuts and you are trying to stuff more nuts in there?”

It was true. Sammy’s nest, a large hole in a comfortable oak tree, was overflowing with nuts. They were crammed in there tight, like sardines in a sardine can.

Owl added, “In fact, there are so many nuts in your nest that there is no room for *you.*”

“Yes,” said Sammy, “that’s true. I sleep outside under the tree.”

“It’s not safe to sleep outside under the tree,” said Owl. “There are dangerous animals that might hurt you, not to mention thunderstorms and hunters!”

Owl continued, “There are enough nuts in there for TEN squirrels, and you are only feeding yourself.”

Sammy looked at Owl with a slight smile and rolled his eyes as if to say, “Silly Owl, you don’t know what you’re talking about”. He insisted, “I *need* them when I get hungry and I am hungry all the time. I need them to survive the winter. And I need them just in case.”

“Just in case what?” asked Owl.

“Just in case someone steals the ones I have collected. Just in case I run out. And just in case my mom comes back.”

Ah... There was more to squirrel's story. Owl prompted, "In case your mom comes back?"

Sammy had not really meant to say that, but it was on his mind and just popped out. He looked down and was very quiet for a moment. He did not like to think or talk about his mom. It made him really sad.

But Owl was his friend and Sammy trusted him, so he decided to tell Owl about his mom. "When I was a really little squirrel, before I knew how to take care of myself, my mom went away. I don't know where she went. But she never came back."

Sammy went on. "Sometimes I dream about her. In one dream I see her playing with a handsome squirrel and running across a telephone wire. In my favorite dream she cuddles with me in the nest, and I fall asleep with her warm fur wrapped around me."

"Maybe that's not a dream," said Owl. "Maybe that's a happy memory of your mom loving you."

"It could be a memory," said Squirrel. "That is a nice thought."

He looked down. "In my bad dreams a hunter shoots her or she gets hit by a car. Maybe I'll never know." There was a long pause.

"How did you survive without your mom?" asked Owl.

"It was really hard that first winter," said Squirrel. "I was very lonely and cried a lot. I ran out of nuts and nearly starved. But somehow I survived. When spring came, I learned how to collect nuts by watching other squirrels."

Squirrel looked up at Owl, "I know it's silly but I sometimes dream about her coming back. In that dream I never run out of nuts and I am safe and happy again."

Owl gently wrapped one large wing around Sammy's shoulders and gave him a big hug. "It's not silly at all," he said. Sammy rested his head on Owl and sighed.

"Sammy," said Owl. "That is a very hard story to tell. Thank you for trusting me with your heart."

Owl asked, "I wonder if you could tell me where you got all these nuts. Surely they did not all come from this tree?"

Squirrel said, "I can't tell you - I'll get in trouble."

Owl commented, "Telling the truth is usually the best thing."

Sammy had a guilty look on his face. "I know it's wrong, but at night when everyone is sleeping, I go out and gather nuts under the largest trees where plenty of nuts fall. I doubt the other squirrels even miss them."

Owl replied, "Yes, those nuts do belong to other squirrels, even if you think they won't miss them."

"I know," said Sammy, "It is a bad habit and I can't seem to stop myself. I worry about going hungry or think about my mom, and I just HAVE to go out. 'Just in case,' you know."

“You know,” said Owl, “You do not have a hungry tummy. It might feel like that, but you have a different type of hunger. You have a *HUNGRY HEART*. Your heart is *lonely for love and comfort*.”

Sammy had a sudden “aha” at what Owl said - his tail flipped up in excitement.

Sammy exclaimed. “Why didn’t I see it before? I have plenty of food in my nest, but it never seems to be enough. That is because I have a hungry heart! My heart *is* hungry for love and comfort.”

It made so much sense. At a very young age, Sammy had to take care of himself and survive in a sometimes dangerous world. He did not need more food. He needed more love and comfort.

“Sammy,” said Owl, “Let’s return the extra nuts to where they belong. We will keep enough nuts to get you through the winter and leave some space in your nest for you to sleep. And if you ever get low on nuts, tell me and I’ll be sure you never go hungry.”

Sammy agreed with Owl, and that night, while everyone else was sleeping, they returned the nuts to the other squirrels’ trees. Then they returned to Sammy’s nest.

At the foot of the tree was a great pile of things: there was a stuffed toy that looked and squeaked just like a squirrel, a nightlight, a chew toy, a machine that made a sound like the ocean when you pushed a button, and a large very soft, fuzzy blanket.

“Where did those things come from?” asked Sammy.

Owl replied with a smile, “Those are for your hungry heart. The other squirrels in the neighborhood didn’t know you were living here alone, and they wanted to help. The sound machine can block out the scary nighttime noises. The nightlight helps when you are scared of the dark. The toy is to cuddle, and the blanket is from me.”

“Also,” said Owl, “There is a grandmother squirrel down the street who just lost her husband. She is feeling sad and lonely. She did not like the thought of you being alone in your nest, especially at bedtime. She has offered to come tuck you in. She can cuddle with you until you fall asleep.”

Sammy agreed to let the grandmother come tuck him in. After all, she was going through a sad and lonely time, and Sammy understood what *that* felt like.

Sammy’s adopted grandmother, as well as neighbors and friends like Owl helped him fill the spaces in his hungry heart. He found out that a hungry heart is a lot like a broken heart. You have to be patient, because healing takes time.

The urge to take nuts did not go away – it came back now and then, as every bad habit does, but Sammy resisted it by seeing the nuts in his nest and knowing he had enough. Sammy learned he would never *go hungry* as long as he paid close attention to the needs of his heart.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Feed your hungry heart with love and comfort!

#### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

- 1) How are you like Sammy Squirrel?
- 2) Who in your life reminds you of the Owl?
- 3) What is your heart hungry for?

- 4) What can Sammy do when he feels like taking nuts from others?
- 5) Describe a time in your life when your heart was hungry.