

THE DEVELOPMENT AND OPTIMIZATION OF BEHAVIOURAL FEATURES THROUGH THERAPEUTIC STORIES

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Abstract. *This article is presenting a very important aspect of nowadays education. Teachers had always been concerned in using proper teaching- learning strategies and instruments so they can get where they should: the child. Therapeutic stories are used in a modern education especially to develop and optimize interested features. These stories help children to face real life problems but not by confronting with them directly. They offer positive circumstance for a better development of their behavior. This is also a great means for teachers to create closer relationship with children through these stories. In this article there is also a study case presented, on how the therapeutic story help improving the behavior of an aggressive child. The result shows that there are indeed improvements in the behavior of children and this should be a great example together with others of how to use this method in kindergartens and also in primary schools.*

Key words: *education,behaviour, stories, development, therapy*

1. Introduction

The world of stories is a world in which the characters are big or small, good or evil, friends or enemies, a world where everything is possible. This land of fairy tales is high in richness but also has a healing force. A story represents conflicts and their possible solutions focusing on emotions. It conveys through the narrative a life experience, a problematic situation, a layout, each of them competing to find a solution through the involvement of the author with his entire personality. It tries to maintain the unity and harmony between as many elements as possible. The story appeals to intuition and fantasy not reason or logic. Through the therapeutic message the most bitter life lessons are affectively sweetened.

2. Theoretical foundation

Stories hide a world full of mysteries, they transmit values from generation to generation, they carry you in a world where no other vehicle could take you, and they are a guide on an unsecure road. Through stories important lessons were transmitted. There are many kinds of stories and an important category of stories is the one of **therapeutic stories**. Yes, any story could be transformed but some were written especially for this purpose: healing, helping, developing abilities, solving problems and helping the ones who listen to make decisions. If art, music and games are involved, they become even more efficient. Can stories really “heal”? Do they have these miraculous powers? Remember the childhood stories told by our parents or grandparents in front of the fireplace. What were they like? Do you remember how they used to calm you, fill your mind with ideas, hopes and dreams? The stories used to work even during the night and dreaming, and in the morning you woke up happier. Stories always had a healing role; maybe that is the reason they were so endeared by the children and adults too. Because, consciously or unconsciously, in the end we all felt better and less burdened. Through a story we can have more confidence, we can solve many of our children’s fears or we can even defuse a conflict. The stories can be either written by famous authors or we can even create them ourselves.

Therapeutic stories are not only stories. They always transmit a well defined message and have a precise purpose. A therapeutic story must be well chosen, depending on the problem that should be solved by the therapist, story teller or the parent. The therapeutic story has as its characters people, animals or even objects. For example, it does not matter for a child if the character is a person or an object; he will identify himself with that character because he “sees” himself in the same situation. Such stories, used in therapy, can get to the center of the problem easier than any other therapeutic techniques and they reach a deep level. The child does not feel as he is evaluated, he does not feel broken. The world of tales is a magical one especially for children and this world is filled with imagination, color and beautiful events. (Cotici, M., *Dezvoltarea-optimizarea eoțională și comportamentală la preșcolari prin intermediul poveștilor terapeutice*). The child will know exactly what he needs to take out from the therapeutic story. The role of the therapeutic stories is to put the child in touch with his needs, wishes and problems. In the moment when this happens, the child identifies himself with the character in the story and finds possible solutions to his problems. Of course, this doesn’t happen at the first contact of the child with the story, but after he reflects on it and processes the information. The therapeutic story represents gaining an experience for the children, because they learn through experiences. The therapeutic story can also be called healing story. This is because its final purpose is to bring healing to the child

regardless of his problem. It does not criticize him, does not force him to change but opens the way for the child to identify with some of the characters and the transposition of the solution in the story to his own situation. However, this type of story cannot be explained, it does not give solutions, or verdicts but it lets itself understood by the one who understands it. The therapeutic stories have various subjects. They focus, generally, on negative aspects such as aggressiveness, fury, sadness, death, separation, loss, but also have subjects and beautiful events from the life of the child, but ones that can create anxiety: adoption, beginning of school, the birth of a sibling. Not any story is therapeutic. First of all, these stories are chosen depending on the situation of the child in the respective moment. It is the story that fits the problem of the listener, but uses other characters to tell it. This way, the child does not feel directly involved, does not feel the need to resist because "it is not about him". Also the child can realize that he is not alone in having negative experiences and that there are others who also go through similar situations and find solutions to their problems. It is necessary to give a special attention to choosing these stories. It is difficult to identify therapeutic stories that can be read to a group of children. It is possible that one story affect negatively a child, while the rest of the group understands it positively. Stories give a sense of security to children. They offer the possibility of a projection, a fantasy where the child feels protected, and this differing from the reality he lives in. therapeutic stories comfort the child more effectively than rational motivations. The reasons of the stories are experienced by the child as being wonderful; his deepest fears, needs and wishes are reflected as a response. (Goicea, D., *De ce povestea terapeutică*). Stories answer eternal questions: "How is the world in reality? How can I live in it? How can I find my real self? What will I become? What is the purpose of life?" The answers of the stories are not direct. They say important things about the world and the human nature, but it depends on the child's imagination and needs to understand what is said. It depends on the child what he chooses to apply to his own situation. The therapeutic story has three functions. The first function is the "mirror" function, projected by the emotional needs of the subject. This activates a richness of images making possible the shaping of the message according to the subject's structure and this is the first favorable reaction of the therapeutic process. The second favorable step is due to the fact that the image in the mirror separates the subject from his life experience. The second function is the function of "models". It reveals the possible solutions leaving space for the personal options. The third function is the "mediator" function. The hero is the subject and not the actual patient. It is very important and necessary the creative ability of the therapist towards every story which he should change according to each subject's needs.

3. Directions and causes of the problem

In the case of therapeutic stories, the domains in which the problems appear have no importance. Regardless if it is about the social, the professional or the familial domain, the therapeutic stories have the same role: the identification of the solutions or the change of perspective. The possible causes for appealing to this type of stories are when we realize that a child has moments of sadness or anxiety and we don't identify their cause, or when the child fears darkness, when he doesn't want to eat a certain type of food, to convince the child to relax and fall asleep, to identify the cause of a certain aggressive behavior. These are just a few examples of situations that lead to the appearance of the therapeutic stories. The therapeutic stories for children are apparently simple, with humans or animals as characters that live common, everyday life events. The therapeutic stories for adults, on the other hand are filled with metaphors and the language used is more loaded. These stories are the ones through which a person understands or defines his own situation and finds his solution. By telling someone about your experience or personal situation you can find the solution or you can ease the emotional load and this is the immediate therapeutic effect. Children talk even more through stories. The characters of the stories and the events help the very much to understand and clarify their own dilemmas and kneading. The transposition in story does not change the exterior situation in reality but the child's perception and his ability to cope with a situation is clarified and improved. Sometimes, sharing the story with the parent even helps to change the real situation.

The stories created by children also have therapeutic roles beyond imagination, creativity, logic and language. The word has a magical power, it can heal if is said when, where and by who is needed. It acts like a force. The therapeutic story is told and not read. It has to be the connection between body and soul, thought and gesture, living and expression. It cannot be told by anyone, anywhere and anyhow. Starting from a real or fantastical case, this story acts like a mediator of pain and sufferance, bringing the suffering one closer to a world where he can defeat fear, insecurities, loneliness and where he can discover hope and chance. This is when the therapeutic story reaches its goal.

4. Recent perspectives

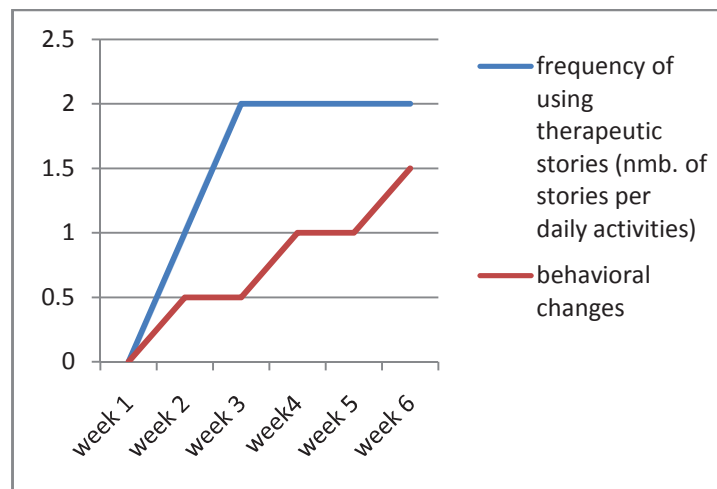
Recent perspectives on therapeutic stories include creating our own stories or allowing the children to create them. This way are created new ideas and examples on how can we deal with challenges. There are stories that use the child as character or stories where the characters are other children, animals or objects. When creating a therapeutic story we should try

to deal with only one main problem, the character that faces the problem should be similar to the child who has a certain issue. The story should offer the solution to the problem and end positively, with the character managing to deal with the problem. We should be creative and illustrate the character with the help of the children. Another feature concerns the fact that we should make it funny but also responsibly and tactfully. While telling the story, which is interactive, we should adapt because the involvement of the child is the most important in order to reach the aim of the therapeutic story.

5. Study case

For example, in the case of the preschooler T.T. who is 5 years old, he does not accept anyone around him; he is marginalized and aggressive towards the other children in his group whether it is during activities or playing. He is a single child, he lives in an apartment and the relations between the subject and his parents are ones of love, care and protection. At preschool he was violent from the first time he was introduced to the group and tried to gain everyone's attention by any means. He has a hard time concentrating on certain activities but he also distracts the other children's attention by inappropriate attitudes. The other children avoid him continuously accusing the fact that he is abusive. His behavior was due firstly to his parents who by the time he was 4, gave him everything in return for nothing and did not ask him to obey any rule. After talking to his parents he was put under observation because of his behavior hoping that with the help of therapeutic stories positive changes will be made in his behavior making him conscious of the impact that he has on others when he is aggressive but also the consequences of such a behavior.

The program in which he was included started with the observation of his behavior for several days in different moments of a day. The research process started from the **hypothesis** that if therapeutic stories were introduced in his daily activity, there will be positive progress in his behavior. There were 2 **variables** included. First, the independent one, which was the use of therapeutic stories, but only ones that were similar to the issues he was confronting. There were used different stories, based on images also. At the end, there was a time to ask questions or to make comments on the listened story. The second one, was the dependent variable, the changes in his behavior. The main **instrument** used to gradually check the results was the observation. There is also a chart that presents the gradual improvement of the stage in which changes were made in the behavior of the subject but also the range in which the use of therapeutic stories made improvements on the behavior of the subject.



6. Intervention

The first step of the methodology of intervention is the approach of the study, by analyzing the actual situation of the subject, his abilities, his behavior, his strengths and faults. Another step is referring to the psychological observations. He is intelligent, his language is rich, has a logical memory, rich imagination, little focusing, egocentric, external motivation, lack of balance in affectivity. Regarding the social relations and his sociability the relation between his parents is in harmony, based on love, respect, trust and mutual support. The father is very permissive, letting the subject to do whatever he wants. He has an important role in the education of the subject; he takes him to preschool and any other extracurricular activities. The mother's parenting style is a democratic one; she is balanced affectively and does not overwhelm the subject with protection. His friends are all older than him and in his group he has only two children whom he has sympathy for. The relations with the children who are his age are tensed, everyone avoiding him because of his aggressive and boring behavior. The pedagogical data show us that he used to be moved from one preschool to another until the age of 4. His learning style is visual, he learns rapidly everything he sees, and likes to touch and observe the materials he comes in connection with. His favorite activities are the ones belonging to the scientific area especially the ones concerning nature and mathematics. He does not like languages and communication and neither aesthetic nor creative activities. He likes competitions, but most of the time he is not honest, he cheats and when he is eliminated from the game he cries and becomes aggressive. He does not accomplish his duties during activities, he gets bored easily. He does not cooperate; he either wants to solve it by himself or does not solve anything at all. The next step is the elaboration of strategies of action. At personal level: stimulation of motivation for cooperation and

helping; modification of the attitude of the child through group work; the modification of his attitude towards the group and the relations in the group. At the level of the group: the creation of more situations in which they should work in groups, a higher level of solicitations in the group, making the child responsible during activities, especially group activities. The level of all factors concerns the parents, colleagues and friends.

The last step is taking the decision of improving the behavior. This step includes elaborating a personalized intervention plan by using specific strategies and therapeutic stories. (Burns, W. G., *101 Healing stories for kids and teens*). Its aim is to intensify the relations and the involvement in every kind of activities and to favor sociability. The subject's problem is that his relation to those who are his age is problematic but with the help of this plan it is aimed to intensify his attitude towards other children's problems, the optimization of his focusing abilities and minimization of negative behavior as well as sharing duties with those who are in his group. The observations and the experiment took place in the course room, periodically, based on certain criteria. The objectives of the experiment are: the identification of the role of therapeutic stories in the children's behavior, the level of communication, level of involvement in activities and the relations between the children; the analysis of the relation between socio metric indicators and the level of communication of preschoolers; the analysis of the relation between socio metric indicators and the level of communication between children.

7. Analyses of the results

The results after the intervention include a progress regarding his involvement in didactic activities as well as modification of his attitude towards his colleagues through creating relations in the group. With the help of therapeutic stories and the organization of activities in a manner of cooperation, a progress is noticed. After the therapeutic stories being read during activities, the subject is capable at the end of the experiment to argument any choice or decision made. If at the beginning of the experiment he only talked to others when strictly necessary, at the end of the experiment he improved his negative behaviors and often communicated with others even initiating discussions. It is not a problem for him anymore if the colleagues do not offer him their help. During the experiment, it was noticed a high level of independence and assuming responsibility. We can conclude that the therapeutic stories did not have an immediate effect on the subject, the progress being obvious only after a while. When there is a blocking in expressing the feelings and emotions of a child the therapeutic story can determine him to reevaluate the situation, determining him to open his soul, offering him a state of wealth both physically and emotionally. The

therapeutic story determines the violent child to reflect over his behavior, to correct it when necessary and offer him behavioral models that can be followed. The one who is introvert, quiet and lonely can find a gate towards word, towards communication. Lack of self confidence makes a child who is always a spectator, never an actor.

8. Discussion

The therapeutic story offers variants; problems and emotions can be described. At the end of the story it is useful and necessary to have a period of questions because they have the goal of identifying problems, obstacles, but also solutions. After this it is advised to ask the children to embody, if they want, the fact that had a special impact on them by drawing, painting this leading to a better interpretation on the teacher's behalf of what changes did the therapeutic story bring in their lives. Parents or teachers have surely noticed at least once the reaction of a sad child when a sad story is read to him. He enters that world and lives, finds himself, makes comparisons with the real world, he wants to interact with the characters of the story. This is the task of every story but especially of the therapeutic one. The characters can be from the world of the child. He can "make" it they way he wants it. He can either modify it or accept the listened one. The children's reactions after the story reading are extraordinary. They go from sadness to exuberance, from tears to shouts of joy, from quietness to the continuous wish of communicating impressions and even from physical violence to the wish for protection. Through the stories the children can meet different situations: emotional, familial and social ones. These are about themes from the reality, using a known and simple language; it helps them to live different events in a secure circumstance, supporting them in their development both physically and emotionally. The plus of fantasy in this kind of stories and intuition allows the revealing and finding a solution to conflicts due to the fact that the story which has a therapeutic message is a proper vehicle for behavioral models and ethical values. The therapeutic message is absorbed by the subject and incorporated to his own thoughts while the knowledge is fed by the verbal image and the narration itself. The message is not imposed by a final ethic conclusion but it ends up by being identified by the subject. The therapeutic story brings totally unexpected solutions with a positive emotional effect. It can be used in any combination with any techniques and at any level of the therapeutic process. Beside the attractive images, art, role play and dramatizations this story has a positive impact on children and leads to a balanced development both emotionally and on the level of the behavior. The stories don't have side effects unless they are used without a precise goal. As it was said before some stories may not be proper for every child in a group. The therapist should cooperate with the parent in using the

therapeutic stories. It is advisable to create the stories together with the parent, stories that concern the existing problem, stories that can be read by parents before bedtime or in quiet family moments. It is recommended to use these stories when the child faces minor problems. For greater problems it is necessary to consult a professional therapist. We notice especially the fact that the utility of the therapeutic stories is indicated to all categories of subjects regardless of age or level of education. Even if some might see the psychotherapy with the help of stories as a way of manipulation, at a better look they can notice the contrary, due to the fact that the subconscious has its own way of protecting itself and it does not let itself easily manipulated as some might think. In this context, the action of the stories is manifested through a constructive reaction of knowledge at the level of personal beliefs and not through a simple manipulation.

9. Conclusions

The story, common or not, included in a book or not, can become a starting point in approaching the child when he doesn't feel like talking about his feelings and emotions. The child looks for nothing else in the story than himself, trying to find his ego, this way the therapeutic story must be a source of energy and joy, offering the child a warm, luminous and pleasant perspective over the events in his life. Through the power of the word the world of the suffering one moves differently, giving uniqueness to every moment. Every one of us have our own story, some of us a happy one, some a sad one...and some a personal one. Some of us are willing to make our story known by others and some of us choose silence. It is the same for children. It is very important that when we choose a story to know the difficulties encountered by the children but also the types of stories, their characteristics and the therapeutic function they can have.

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