

# How does the therapist effectively reach, engage and affirm Gen Y?

*Michelle Royal*

## Abstract

This paper defines Generation Y and presents some ideas to help the therapist use dance, movement, drama and expressive arts in a methodology relevant to this population's needs, values and expectations. While the characteristics of this generation are currently emerging and changing in response to their rapidly changing familial, social and global environments, a number of key traits stand out. This article introduces dmt work with two Generation Y populations, young mothers and their infants, and adolescents. Within the framework of a five-part dance movement therapy session, the components that, from my own experience, have effectively supported my endeavours to reach, engage and affirm Generation Y are summarised.

**Key words:** dance movement therapy, Generation Y, adolescent, five-part session.

I was caught out by Generation Y. More often than not the approach I was taking with generations either side of Gen Y did not work with it. A diverse mix of individuals, I found its group dynamic unpredictable and often unreadable. As a therapist, it is important to continuously engage in critical considerations about the client populations one works well with and thereby develop appropriate programs and methodologies that are relevant to their needs, values, interests and expectations.

Some populations, such as Generation Y are potentially more difficult to define than others. This is because the characteristics of this generation are currently emerging

and continuously changing in response to rapidly changing familial, social and global environments. While I found a significant amount of information on Generation Y in terms of consumer market forces, employment and education, there was comparatively little on health-related issues, particularly young parenthood. Consequently, I resolved to identify the cultural, aesthetic, historic and socio-economic contexts that had shaped and were affecting Gen Y's state of health and, in so doing, try to effectively reach, engage and affirm Gen Y. This paper contributes resultant practical and theoretical understandings together with the successful therapeutic approaches I have trialled.

## Who, what and when is Generation 'Who'? Defining Generation Y's age and health issues

*Gen Y, Ygen, Y-ers, Gyen, iGen, Generation Me, Millennials, Echo Boomers, Second Baby Boom, Baby Boomlets, Thumb Generation, Digital Natives, the next Hero Generation, Cynical Generation, Paradoxical Generation, The Dotcoms, Net Generation, Google Generation, Einstein Generation, MyPod Generation, The Internet Generation that is Digital, Social, and Always On...*

**Michelle Royal** has degrees in education and movement studies and the arts, and a Diploma in Dance Movement Therapy (IDTIA). She draws on her training and skills in these modalities to develop and deliver specific programs for targeted groups in a variety of settings (community, educational, artistic and clinical).  
mandm@planet.net.au

Defining Generation Y as a specific cohort of people born between specific periods of years is both difficult and controversial. Peter Sheehan (2007) a globally recognised expert on Generation Y advises that we are better to think of Gen Y as an emerging mindset. Although expert opinions differ, Australian educator and social commentator, Michael Gross (2005) elects the fifteen year period from 1976-1991 as the Y Generation era, making its members somewhere between 17 and 33 in 2009.

The Research and Social Policy Unit of Mission Australia's 2008 National Survey team consulted with more than 45,000 11-year old to 24-year olds to identify the top five issues for these young Australians. Because the data is divided into three age sub-sets it is possible to gather useful understandings about the current concerns of a significant sector of Generation Y. Body image was the major area of concern for the 20-24 year olds, with the percentage of female respondents identifying that just ahead of the males. Coping with stress and then depression were the next two areas of particular concern for this age-group and personal safety was rated as a new concern across all age groups and genders.

### **My client populations**

As a dance therapist I regularly facilitate programs, of six to eight weeks, for Gen Y mothers who are often coping with one or more of the top five issues identified by the National Survey. According to the survey, these Gen Y mums are generally unlikely to seek help from a counsellor, youth worker or doctor. After friends, parents and relative/family friends, all three age sub-sets reported that they turned to the internet for advice and support. Gen Y's who are parents are young compared to the previous generation. In fact a random

internet search linking 'Gen Y' plus 'parents' will yield results about the parents of Gen Y, not Gen Y as parents. My clients often have histories of neglect and abuse and have issues involving their own infants, such as holding and handling, averted gaze, failure to thrive, attachment and general insecurity about being a mother. They are often *disengaged*.

I also work with school-age adolescents in a variety of curricula and co-curricula programs. These participants are often *enraged*. Even in the most progressive educational settings, where teachers are facilitators, coaches and mentors in areas of personal interest to the learner, the enraged student just can't see any relevance and remains enraged. Why? Is it about a struggle for control over their life?

### **What is the Gen Y mindset?**

In a thought-provoking article, "Engage Me or Enrage Me – What Today's Learners Demand", Prensky (2005) defines three kinds of Gen Y personalities:

- those who are self-motivated, take initiative and extend themselves
- those who play the game in order to serve their own needs. They go through the motions of doing the bare minimum in order to pass
- those who tune out because school is totally boring and irrelevant

The last group, which Prensky states is quickly becoming the majority, is used to marketing specialists competing for their attention through musicians, TV celebrities, film-makers, and video game designers. Prensky, CEO of a game-based learning company says, 'when what is being offered isn't engaging, these students truly resent their time being wasted' (2005, p.60). Instead, they could be downloading music, checking emails, updating blogs, chatting

online, checking out ebay, learning on the internet, all at the same time with scores of windows open to flick between. As Prensky puts it, 'Life for today's kids may be a lot of things...but it's certainly not unengaging. Except in school. And there it is so boring that the kids, used to this other life, just can't stand it' (2005, p.62). This seemed to be the case with a student of mine, Jay\*, who could not stand school and went to any lengths to distract himself and others from present realities. Everything was, or had to be turned into, a game.

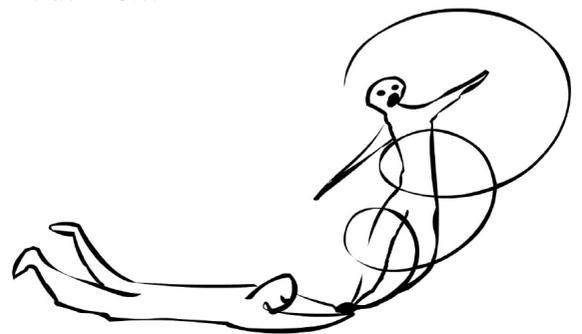
### Changing the game plan

Jay had been attending a private school since Prep and I met him when he was in Year 9. This vignette has an interesting twist since I was at the school as a teacher, not a therapist, and I was the one, not the student, who sought expert assistance from a registered therapist. I approached a professional dance therapist and engaged in supervised personal dance therapy and self psychology as a means of finding support to objectify transference/countertransference issues that had become game-like, of informing my practice as a teacher of Gen Y and of solving an impasse.

Typical of many Gen Y students, Jay found school boring and irrelevant, wanting instead to play computer games on his phone. Phones were not to be used in school time so during one class I asked him to bring his over to me. He immediately threw it, narrowly missing my head, but denied doing this when I referred him to his pastoral care mentor. Jay continued to break and wreck school property and put himself and others in serious danger. His repertoire of antics included covering his head and running at the walls, throwing chairs and generally derailing my class.



When he was not actively enraged, Jay remained on the floor groaning throughout a double lesson, complaining that he could not raise himself up due to extreme exhaustion. I tried to get him referred for counselling. None of my colleagues wanted to know about any of these concerns. I felt professionally isolated and helpless, the target of Jay's transference, fatalistically drawn into Jay's game, like a speck into a black hole.



Greenson (1965) describes transference as a replication of feelings and attitudes from the past that relate to significant people from early childhood, but are inappropriately directed towards a person in the present. In Jay's continuum of unresolved past events and present actions, I must have represented a parental figure, an opponent, a target or perhaps a witness. Yet without an effective referee, a convincing figure to set limits and boundaries, Jay's pattern of attention-seeking behaviour and denial continued until the day I walked into my room to find it completely trashed.

Jay was so proud of his handiwork that he boasted about it, knowing that he had won this round because there would be no repercussions from the school. And he was right, the school was a business with a public reputation to maintain and Jay was excused from having to take any responsibility for the enormous mess. Faced with the humiliating task of having to clean up for Jay on my own, I knew I needed to seek help from outside the school.

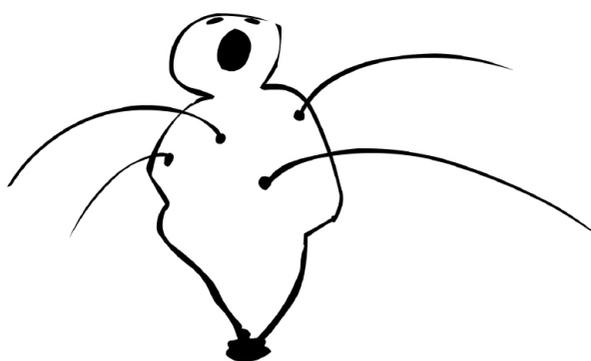
Sandel (1980) acknowledges that it is difficult for a dance therapist to work in isolation from colleagues and proposes that the therapist may experience the feelings which result from such stress in terms of personal or professional failure. She suggests that supervision, personal therapy and peer support are essential for the dance therapist's professional growth and self-esteem. I believe it is no different for a school teacher and that it is crucial to act early or, as Robbins (1999) suggests, we can find ourselves overwhelmed, feeling fiercely attacked, and when this happens, he says, 'we open ourselves up to defensively acting out in order to master the trauma. Metaphorically, the container-therapist springs leaks and spills out in any number of directions' (p.13).

was that I was feeling and experiencing in that school setting before exploring what it was that I needed in order to support and protect myself. When I felt strong enough, I was then guided through a Rogerian diagnostic technique of getting inside Jay's behaviour while maintaining my objective awareness as therapist.

Mimicking his actions, I lay on the floor and actively observed the room from this level. From a developmental perspective, I felt very young and as I continued to explore Jay's movements and it seemed appropriate to want to throw things and groan. Containment, surfaces and skin emerged as recurring themes. Feelings of anger and confusion came out of exploring these actions as well as limpness and being overwhelmed by a pressing heaviness with accompanying feelings of grief.

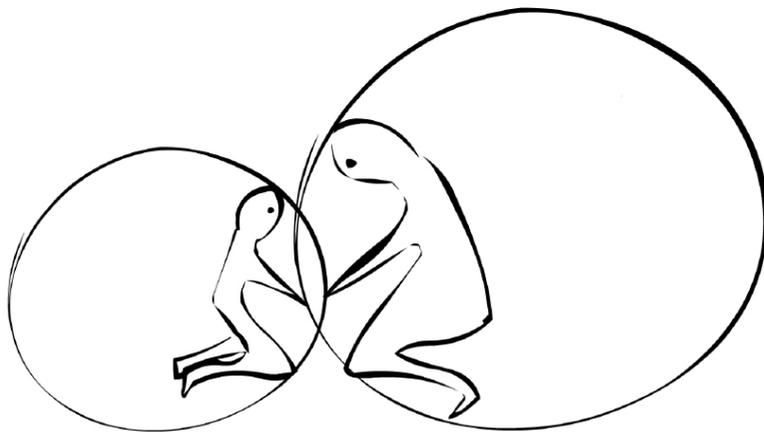


We then considered possible antidotes. What did Jay need to get him up from the floor? As we worked through this part of the process, I developed more empathy for Jay and felt more empowered to change the game we had been playing. My understanding was that Jay had a story to tell but his story seemed to have begun when he was pre-verbal, at a time when he was unable to use language to describe and debrief his experience.



Serendipity. An internationally recognised dance therapist was in Australia and was able to see me. Over several hours we used movement to define exactly what it

I decided that I would try story as a means of emotionally connecting with and imaginatively engaging Jay but it was important to hold and contain Jay so that he felt safe. The next time I taught him I placed a circle of chairs in the centre of the room to get him seated and contained before he either lay on the floor or roamed destructively around the room.



After a warm up, I invited each student to consider their skin as a canvas upon which the nicks and scars were beginnings to stories about themselves. Jay became suddenly agitated, imploring me to let him go first. I made him wait while I established this new game. After we had heard a few stories about football and skateboard injuries, it was Jay's turn. His story began when he was an infant on his way to hospital after he had a life threatening accident. The bell rang for end of the class and the other students left, but Jay needed to tell me more.

In a fit of chronic post-natal depression, his mother had injured him and he had almost died on the way to hospital. This was the first time he had spoken of the incident since he had been told about it. I later confirmed with his pastoral care mentor that the story was true but kept under wraps. No-one else knew about the weight



that Jay had been carrying all those childhood years and Jay had been left, without any counselling throughout that time, to simply get over it on his own. Jay's mother had another baby and, paradoxically, this little step-brother was now at the age at which Jay's accident had occurred.

Following that story circle, Jay described the enormous relief that had come from the opportunity to talk about the event. Obviously he had re-told the story he had been told, and this was not the same as accessing his own pre-verbal experience with a therapist, but I was there as a teacher and my objective, at that time in that place, was to understand this enraged Gen Y, to help him manage his impulsive behaviour and to re-mobilize myself as an effective educator.

It seems miraculous that, from that day, Jay's behaviour changed and he no longer went to the floor or threw things in class. The antidote was surprisingly simple. I can only offer my observation that the clear presence of congruence, empathy and unconditional positive regard in the student/teacher relationship, 'as a person to a person' (Rogers, 1965, p.22), together with an appropriately selected activity in a safe environment, opened an opportunity for Jay's emotional growth and healing. Though it is not yet possible to present this example in terms of rigorously tested evidence based practice, school had been, however briefly, relevant for Jay.

Australian clinical psychologist, Andrew Fuller, regularly posts online publications

that examine psycho-educational issues. What he says in 'Valuing Boys, Valuing Girls', rings very true with me and reflects my process of personal therapy:

*Much of the debate that rages around boys and girls education focuses on their minds and their respective achievements and rates of intellectual development. What is all too often ignored in this debate is the emotional development of these boys and girls as young people who are able to be compassionate, creative and caring. This doesn't start with loving-kindness towards others, it starts with directing these feelings to your self. This provides the emotional foundation for being able to care for others (2007, p.21).*

### **Who's really in control?**

The issue of control is important whether these generationists are controlling their emotions by denying them or else being controlled by their emotions and acting out. For the young mothers who attend my sessions, their sense of control is often threatened by the fact that they have a baby. These mums can no longer do what they want to when they want to, their lives suddenly slow down or speed up with the rhythms of their infant and the mothers frequently find themselves out of synch. Some react by continuously distracting their infants in inappropriate ways such as rough handling or by shaking toys in their faces while others will simply ignore the baby's cues for attention.

The therapist's objective might be to help the mothers shift their focus from their pre-occupation with how they can always be in control, to the idea of how they can become aware and attuned. Guided self-discovery, in which the mothers consider

simple questions put to them by the therapist as they interact with their infants, seems to be an effective approach.

Gen Y do not respond well to content-saturated instructions or blunt commands. Faust, Ginno, Laherty and Manuel (2001) examined Generation Y's mode of perceiving, thinking and investigating, finding that Y-Gens prefers participative, self-paced experiences over linear and prescriptive ones. Gen Y is used to choosing what it wants and using menus to select from.

Research collated by Sheahan (2007) suggests the average Australian Gen Y-er is in fact intensely engaged by five hours of shared TV, computer and game station screen time a day that converts to 2.5 months per year. Sheahan postulates that these users want to have control over their experiences, what they want to see and hear when they want it. Technology has played an important part in empowering this Generation but its ability to gratify instantly may have fostered impatience, an intolerance of the old ways, unrealistically high expectations and frustration. Babies, for example, can't be switched on and off at will.

### **Consumer-driven expectations**

Gen Y constituents are reputed to be the ultimate consumers and, as such, they have consumer-driven expectations. They expect products and services to help them in some way; to be more organised, integrate diverse demands in their daily lives or manage stress. They demand that goods and services have relevance, a relevance that they can identify for themselves rather than being told what's good for them. They like to be able to try before they buy with an inbuilt escape clause, in case they get a better offer. The young mums have no difficulty articulating what they

liked or didn't like so much about a session and this feeds in neatly to asking them to make observations about their babies, for example, 'Which colour, sound, rhythm, or activity do you think your baby liked best?' and 'How did they show this?'

### **Who cares? About what?**

Generation Y is public property. It is constantly in the public eye, caught on scanning and surveillance devices, cell phones and websites. It is the world's first generation to grow up thinking globally and it has a distinctively optimistic world view. Twenty years ago, the previous generation's young adults (X) feared nuclear annihilation, whereas Generation Y has actually witnessed significant world events that include the 9/11 terrorist attacks, anthrax scares, university shootings, SARS, avian and swine flu and the effects of global warming. Generation Y has been part of an enormous cultural shift, personified by the historic election of the world's first African-American president.

'Gen Yers grew up in an era of uncertainty and complexity, constantly changing technology and mobility. They have adapted to it quickly, capably and are technologically savvy' (Maulday, 2006, p. 204). But what happens when those who have been raised and educated on claims that technology is the key to solving problems are suddenly without work and facing emotional, financial and family stresses?

A recent study of an 18–24 year-old target group found that young Australians who were not engaged in full-time study and work were less satisfied with their lives than their employed peers (Long, 2006). They experienced more financial and personal stress and lower levels of social, recreational or cultural participation and integration with civil society than their

peers. Compounding their situation, it was found that, 'computer literacy and access to the internet has become fundamental to work and social life' (p. 5). For the unemployed, the repercussion of this is that 'skills required for employment in a wide range of occupations are not being created or updated' (Long, 2006, p.5). This, in turn, has the potential to perpetuate civil disengagement and promote more severe health issues.

The impact of financial and economic conditions should not be underestimated. As Huntley (2006) states, 'The most important change to have affected this generation has been economic...while the members of Generation Y enjoyed relatively comfortable childhoods, their transition to adulthood (as previous generations understand it) will be slow and difficult' (2006, p.13). Without the clear stages to adulthood available to them; work, marriage, children and buying a home, members of this generation may experience a dislocation of goals and direction.

### **My place in My space**

Belonging and acceptance are very important to Generation Y. They admire their parents, and strong parental involvement has provided them with strong feeling of security and a strong sense of entitlement and the belief that they can accomplish almost anything. The media message is that they can in fact have it all. 'Paradoxically, whilst this is a generation that values freedom, flexibility and choice, it is also...conformist...The desire to fit in, to be a part of the group, which has always been present in youth culture, is especially important to Generation Y' (Huntley, 2006, p.18).

After family, there are many real and virtual tribes to which members of Gen Y belong;

rappers, goths, jocks, stoners, skaters, gays, nerds, emos, populars to name a few. Social software in the form of emails, blogs, I-ming, video-games, etc, create more and more tribes through online identities. Using a Facebook profile, to post qualities they think will be popular rather than real, Gen Y can create virtual personas to establish social networks.

However, what they say about themselves and each other may be exaggerated or else untrue, thereby developing fake relationships with an inbuilt fear of being exposed, ridiculed or even cyber bullied.

Social networking like this bypasses the need to develop skills in reading the facial expression, gesture and body language of others, or in developing and understanding one's own. What gets published on the internet takes on an authority that is larger than life because it has a potentially limitless public domain. This is one of the reasons why cyber bullying has contributed to the causes of youth suicide.

Some personal themes are played out in virtual, rather than actual, global arenas. Describing the 'click and go generation' (2002, p.169) clinical psychologist Fuller presents the view that 'children with low self-esteem or psychological vulnerabilities may seek solace in computer games...a place where you can build cities, win wars and scores points to become the world champion is a pretty compelling thing to do' (2004, p.3). He warns, however, that some children not only become seduced by the sense of power some violent video games impart but over-value the usefulness of violence as a way of solving problems. Further, that this may lead to the taking of violent actions in the real world.

Gen Y is a connected group. Perhaps it is in fact over connected, with a constant

pressure to not only maintain countless friends but also multi-identities. These issues, as well as merged boundaries and personal space are all potential themes for dance movement therapy.

### **Five-part dance movement therapy session**

I will use the five-part session model (Leventhal, 1980) as a framework for setting out some of the ideas that have been trialled with the young Gen Y mothers/parents and with the adolescent groups. I wish to avoid a one size fits all approach, besides, there are endless activities that one can plan, so I have suggested a few that have worked well in bringing about desired outcomes, largely because they seemed well matched to the client population.

### **Basic principles/structures in the dmt program**

Clients must feel safe. The physical environment and emotional space should be non-threatening, welcoming and supportive.

There needs to be a

- sense of fun/play
- team/group work/social connection/belonging
- involvement, purpose, a role to play, something to contribute
- clear, complete but concise, cues or instructions
- individual choice, for example, participants choosing their own creative movement response to a given stimulus
- goals that are quickly achieved
- activities that move along with frequent developments rather than lots of activities with no development
- music to motivate and match activities

### 1. Warm Up

The general purpose of a warm-up is to prepare the body and mind for active involvement. The warm up is also an opportunity for therapists to gauge their clients' individual differences, preferences and moods and to begin to establish a therapeutic association. The warm up can be an ice-breaker to approach issues such as isolation/belonging, body image, disengagement and stress.

In the first week of a program, participants often expect that dance movement therapy will be the same as their experience of a social Movement to Music style of class and it is not unusual for either group (young mums or students) to ask for more free time to do their own thing. This is often another way of telling me that they want to chat amongst themselves or show me that they already know how to dance. While they won't necessarily understand or appreciate the importance of structure and sequential interventions, it is important to manage the session so that it progresses towards certain goals. Low thresholds for boredom or short attention spans may warrant a mini warm up between each part of a session rather than one longer one at the start.

An adolescent group will generally respond well if there is sufficient variety, new stimuli, challenge, positive experiences, incentives for success and a selection of contrasting elements in the session. They usually like to be given frequent opportunities to do things rather than have sit through instructions and demonstrations. They are more interested in experimentation than in carbon copying.

For adolescents, the dmt program can include

- rhythmic activities and multi-tasking, for example tossing a ball

on a beat while calling out a word

- basic circus skills; stretching and balancing, juggling balls, scarves
- kicking small beanbags or haki sacks in a circle
- a variety of movement/pathways and qualities, aided by props
- mirroring activities for validation and attunement

It is not unusual for young mothers to arrive quite late and quite stressed. Some will arrive needing to change and feed their babies or wanting to catch up with the other mums and pick up on half finished conversations from the last time they saw each other. Some will have physical limitations and all will have infants. The warm up is pitched at the dyadic union of mother and child. It's about helping the mother to arrive and tune into herself and her infant, in the present.

The set up of the room, the arrangement of props, the selection of music, etc, must all be inviting, accessible and user-friendly. I have to work very hard in the warm up; work to receive, greet, empathise, suggest, direct, bring together in a subtly structured way, adapt, demonstrate, lead, observe, connect, pause and breathe. A mother-infant group will normally respond well to simpler tasks that they can accomplish with a sense of satisfaction. They tend to need re-assurance, praise, and genuine recognition of their efforts. They need to be exposed to the modelling of appropriate techniques, to become aware of relationship possibilities, to find a way of bonding with their children, to gain confidence and a feeling of security, to be socially re-connected, to have fun and experience joyful moments, to be able to see and articulate change and success.

For young parents with babies, dmt activities can include

- rhythmic activities and multi-tasking, for example, beating a small drum while moving
- wink/peekaboo/ eye-contact games
- use of props as symbols to focus effort
- meeting and greeting dance in a circle; weaving, repeatedly coming together to connect and moving away into the space making each connection a little more energetic or focused.

## 2. Release

The release stage involves letting go, of breath, tension, negative feelings, anxiety and suspicion. Release is about disentanglement, shedding and casting off, but it is also accessing a new level of participation, a re-lease, a new negotiation of time and space or a new lease of energy.

Basic principles/structures

- physical, playful, movement-based activities
- not an open-ended experience that they can either get lost in or else caught up in the dynamics of contagion
- while group release may be popular with them, it may also in fact be a theme

For adolescents

- simple techniques such as releasing breath, then breath with sound and breath with movement

For young parents

- physical, playful, movement-based activities

## 3. Theme

GenYrational themes tend to fall into two categories;

personal such as identity, belonging, aspirations and self-actualisation, stability, engagement, isolation, body image, obesity, educational transitions, unemployment etc and global such as make poverty history, global warming, logging, whaling, etc. It is the former that dance movement therapists are more likely to be concerned with and the latter that aligns more with community arts programs.

Basic principles/structures

- clients must feel safe, in a non-threatening environment
- briefly chatting about something general and mundane may lead to a common theme
- start the exploration with familiar games or activities that help identify and unpack relevant metaphors
- themes may arise when participants share stories - which can then be role-played by other people in the group – with open-ended conclusions that can be explored kinaesthetically or through play
- support their ability to focus and be attentive to what is really going on.

For adolescents

- use multi-sensory strategies, for example, role-play in gibberish, using space and movement, without sound; speed up, slow motion, change story order of events, explore different beginnings, middles and endings and the differences such changes made.
- divert from aggressive acts by freeze-framing and going straight to a drawing activity that captures the emotional energy on paper. Be prepared with options and choices.

For young parents and babies

- Follow the Leader provides an opportunity to express/observe them, rotating the person leading the movement and pathway. Each participant leads in the way they need to (using Space, Weight, Time and Flow). Followers support by mirroring the efforts.

Theme is essentially the dominant subject matter or pre-occupation along the continuum of past, present, or future. The theme is usually never far away from the client. Sometimes it will literally walk in through the door as the client arrives. But a theme is not always overt or as large as life. It may be covertly concentrated in a shadow movement, repetitive gestures and persistent thoughts. There will be personal themes and group themes, past and present and future themes. Many will be confronting, even frightening.

First sessions are normally a bit hard for all of us. For the mothers it's often about comfort zones and/or expectations about how their baby will perform, or about me and what I might be asking them to do. Transference issues often surface and these are more often than not themes.

#### **4. Centreing**

Following the resolution of thematic exploration, Centreing is an opportunity to encapsulate thematic movement experience in a single gesture, movement phrase, picture or statement. Experiences can be crystallised, shared, witnessed.

Basic principles/structures

- a 'systems check'
- controlled breathing
- visualization

Activities for adolescents

- create drawings or contemplate pictures

For young parents and babies

- time out for the mothers to rest, breathe, and think about their experiences while the infants can be engaged by bubbles, quiet music, floating cloth overhead.

#### **5. Closure**

Closure concludes the session by restoring neutrality in the space. Individual journeys are brought together and participants share their thoughts with a degree of objectivity.

Basic principles

- make a circle to hold participants
- distillation of process into a gesture, phrase, word, dance.

For adolescents

- don't ask them to hold hands in the circle. Use props if you want to link them physically. They are not a touchy feely generation.

For young parents and babies

- resonate with and share significant experiences, even if these are shared during a feed or a nappy change.

#### **Conclusion**

I continue to work with Generation Y in school, community and clinical settings and develop my expertise and understandings by attending professional development seminars and workshops from internationally recognised presenters in the fields of dance therapy, education, psychology, play therapy and community welfare. The deeper I have gone with my inquiry, the greater my ability to gain perspective and see what I couldn't see before and the easier it has become to empathise with my client group. Fast tracking them into the creative process is not the solution, but neither is going too

broadly or slowly. Generation Y is curious, articulate and cognizant. Depth is a key dimension and depth of understanding is something they can't get instantly online.

**Illustrations:** Lisa Roberts

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