

Dance Therapy for the Socially Disadvantaged Parent and Child

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The paper discusses the development of the dance therapy program at Canterbury Family Centre, where there has been a shift from a creative dance focus with children and caregivers to dance/movement therapy with children and parents. A creative model using music, objects and design is underpinned by an Object Relations Theory framework, particularly D.W. Winnicott's concepts of imaginative living, the area between internal and external reality and the use of transitional objects.

The introduction of 'Dance' to Canterbury Family Centre began in 1989 when I approached the Agency with the idea of introducing creative dance to socially disadvantaged children and their caregivers in order to enrich their personal experience.

When the Child and Family Development Program evolved from a Day Care facility for children of 18 months to 5 years into an integrated, family-oriented, multi-disciplinary service (Waller, 1992), my focus changed from working with the child to working with the parent and child. At about the same time I began the dance therapy training with IDTIA.

Dance therapy with the parent and child is an effective intervention particularly when families have difficulty using traditional counselling services, for example, where child or parent has poor verbal skills because of developmental delay, intellectual or psychiatric disorders. The target groups are often socially isolated families who have difficulties accessing services and are referred through early intervention programs like the maternal and child health nurses or doctors. These families frequently demonstrate poor attachment and bonding.

Case managers within the Children's Family Development Program refer the families. They

are informed of the progress of the family through formal and informal discussions, write-ups and use of video. Dance therapy sessions are one hour long and run according to school terms, that is approximately nine or ten sessions at the very least.



Whilst working with the parent and child, the parent starts to develop a greater awareness of the child. The opportunity arises for the parent to see the child in a new way, with the emphasis not being on words. This emerges from a state of 'relaxed awareness' which enhances receptivity to verbal and non-verbal messages. Participants learn to listen with the body and follow each other's rhythm until a dialogue ensues. Confidence, playfulness, spontaneity, expression and imagination develops. Body-image and self-esteem improves.

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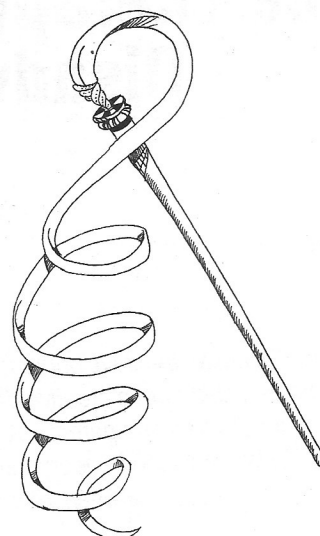
Through the use of music, objects and design, the senses expand. Music binds the session, drawing the participants into the moment. Music is experienced in the body, it is felt with the body and feeling is put into form. Sometimes the music is present merely to support the session. Participants are introduced to a wide range of music which offers them a variety of ways to move depending on the musical qualities. They learn to feel the mood or tone. It opens the door to moving the body. Music elicits certain emotional responses, for example, flamenco connects to the fire and earth centres expressing strength, clarity and anger. Slow movements of Classical and Baroque relax muscular tension making it easier to yield with the body. Objects which act as transitional objects provide sensory stimulation and allow for the possibilities of exploration and development of thinking. The objects are symbols. Through them there is entry into the realm of affect in a safe way. Combined with imagery, creative play of movement expression is experienced.

Metaphor and imagery through the third ingredient 'design' connects the experience of body and psyche. Parent and child have the opportunity to relate to each other physically and expressively. The sharing of the experience creates closeness and encourages awareness and sensitivity. All participants become attuned to both the positive and negative ways of relating, and it is through the movement that options are explored for coping with problems. Insight is gained into patterns of behaviour and the movement range broadens.

Experience takes place "in the overlap of the two play areas of that of the client and the therapist" (Winnicott 1974: 63).

The integrated model of the use of music, objects and design within a supportive safe space sits comfortably in Object Relations theory. The dance/movement experience which resembles D.W. Winnicott's notion of play is the symbolic enactment or the "life experiences" (1974: 118) of the interaction between parent and child and what the child symbolizes to that parent.

The overlap is another level of existence. Neither is it the real world nor is it one's personal reality. Within this other world there takes place a symbolic enactment between parent, child and dance therapist, and allows for the development of a sense of self. The dance therapist moves in and out of the interaction at times supporting the parent, at times the child, also the dyadic union, to a point where they function independently.



The therapist bodily and verbally makes the link for the mother and the child separately or together of their experience. The dance experience makes conscious what the other is doing and experiencing. Development of a sense of self not only has to do with understanding but also learning to value the self in order to bridge the sense of isolation towards acceptance.

The work continues to evolve. Although many changes have taken place within the structure of the organization in 1997-98 creating major upheavals, the Agency's commitment to dance therapy has continued. The nature of the referrals remain the same but I am no longer working with groups of parents and children and instead concentrate on the individual child and parent. This is deeply satisfying as time can be taken to observe, absorb and respond.

References

- Waller, S. (1992), *Early intervention and family support: An integrated approach*. Conference Paper prepared for Australian Early Intervention Association (Victorian Charter).
- Winnicott, D. (1974). *Playing and Reality*, Pelican Books, Australia and England.