

Arthur's Journey

A case study of integrated therapy process

(The names and some materials in this article have been changed in order to protect the identity of the child and the family.)

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Background Information

Arthur was referred for therapy at age 7. He came into the care of the Children's Aid Society when he was 3 years of age, together with his sister who is one year older, due to chronic neglect, abuse, domestic violence, and parental substance abuse. Three years later, the court decided that the siblings are Crown wards with no access to their biological parents.

Arthur and his sister were cared for by the same foster family initially. However, due to the high needs of the children, Arthur was moved into his current foster family. The two foster families wished to adopt the two children separately. However, this process was delayed due to the legal complications.

When Arthur entered therapy, he struggled with the dilemma related to his unknown future. He imagined that he would be happy if the judge decided to return him to his birth father's care, but then he would miss his current foster parents who he had called "Mom" and "Dad" for the past three years. If the judge decided that Arthur be adopted by his current foster parents, Arthur would be happy, as this was his wish. Arthur would, however, miss his birth father, and also be afraid that his birth father would be angry with this decision.

Arthur presents as a charming young boy who enjoys the consistent love and care from his foster parents. He depends and seeks comfort from them, especially from his mom Kathy. However, he also changes his mood quickly, at which time he would have severe temper tantrums and become physically aggressive towards his mom. Routinely, Arthur would plummet into a deep sorrow and shame state after each incident. He struggles between wanting to control the situations and anxiously trying to please others.

Therapy Goals

1. Help the foster parents understand the underlying reasons and messages of Arthur's behaviours and volatile emotions; coach and support the foster parents to attune to Arthur's true needs and respond with the PLACE attitude.
2. Help Arthur understand the intention and meaning of his foster parents' love and care; learn and practice to accept the love and care from them through repeated attuned interactions.
3. Help Arthur understand the truth about his biological parents' limitations and responsibilities; reduce trauma symptoms; support him in his grieving process.
4. Help Arthur develop acceptance and empathy toward himself and others; practice to repair relationships; reduce shame; build a healthy self.
5. Help Arthur learn and practice coping strategies to regulate his emotions and actions.

Therapy Process

Arthur and his foster mom Kathy participated in 28 sessions over a period of 18 months. His foster dad was only able to join in several sessions due to his work schedule. The sessions were more frequent at the beginning, ranging from weekly to biweekly.

An integrated therapy approach was used, combining Theraplay, DDP, Play Therapy, Sandtray-Worldplay, and EMDR. Some therapy methods were used in more sessions than others. Some were combined to be used in the same session. The decision to choose one or more therapy methods for one or more sessions depended on the presenting issues with long term goals in mind. The PLACE attitude (Playful, Loving, Acceptance, Curious, and Empathetic) was used throughout the entire therapy process.

Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy is a model of treatment and parenting for children with problems secondary to abuse, neglect, and multiple placements, developed by Dr. Daniel A. Hughes. This model is based on the premise that the development of children and youth is dependent upon and highly influenced by the nature of the parent-child relationship. The treatment is family based and focused on facilitating the child's ability to establish a secure attachment with his/her caregivers, thus resolving his/her past trauma and developing a positive and integrated sense of self. The therapeutic attitudes of Playfulness, Love, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy are actively communicated and modeled throughout the treatment sessions.

Play Therapy and Sandtray-Worldplay give the child an opportunity to externalize his inner world to the parent and the therapist, thus allowing us to work through using the child's language. EMDR aims to desensitize and integrate the trauma experience.

Doing makes the integration of therapeutic experience and cognitive insights happen. Theraplay gives the child and parent the "doing" opportunities to experience this integration of body and mind.

Format of Sessions

First stage: check-in. Most sessions begin at checking in with both Arthur and his mom sitting comfortably on the couch, and with me sitting across from them, at the same level of height. The check-in focuses on recent routine events, and gradually leading to the positive progress Arthur feels and Kathy notices.

Second stage: working through. I explicitly ask Arthur and his mom what issue or issues they would like to look at today. Most of the issues are centered on difficulties they are experiencing. The therapy method was decided based on the presenting issue, again with the long term goals in mind.

Third Stage: calming down. This is the stage of focusing on helping Arthur and his mom to use various methods to calm their overall system and to relax, thus integrating the body and mind. Theraplay activities are often introduced at this stage. Both Arthur and Mom usually leave with a relaxed mood and are well connected to each other.

The following are samples of sessions using this integrated approach:

Session Sample One:

Arthur and his mom came in one session, both worried. The presenting issue was Arthur's sleeping difficulties including fear at night and recurring nightmares. Arthur chose to make a sand world to show his fear. He then described fearing that "bad people" may come into his room at night; and he often dreamed that "someone" was holding a knife trying to hurt him and then he would wake up fearing that his foster parents would get into a fight with the intruder. Despite his parents' repeated reassurance about how they would protect him, Arthur remains unconvinced, fearful and anxious.

Noticing Kathy's anxiety in wanting to decrease Arthur's fear and making him feeling safe by repeatedly suggesting how they would protect Arthur, I gently reminded mom to remain accepting and empathic. With the curious attitude both of us now have, Arthur was able to open up about his true fear: his foster parents would get into a big fight with his birth dad, and everyone gets hurt including himself, and then police would arrest his dad, and once more it is all his fault.

It was such a revelation of what exactly is on his mind when we gave him a safe space to communicate by keeping our therapeutic attitude. He wanted his foster parents to know that even though he wanted to believe that they have the ability to keep him safe, their plan would actually make him feel equally anxious based on his own imagination of what would happen. He now had the opportunity to do that, and also to give us insight on how he enters his shame state.

With that knowledge, we were then able to do the following:

- Bilateral stimulation based on EMDR protocols to reduce his arousal related to his early experience of witnessing domestic violence.
- With a calmer body and mind, Arthur was able to hear the safe plan, including the remote possibility of his birth father entering his home, and the non-confrontational strategy his foster parents have and would use.
- Then we discussed together what would work to help Arthur feel safe. He identified being close to mom and dad, especially in the evenings; knowing that mom and dad will not get into a fight with his birth father; and having safe reminders in his room, are the components to feel safe. We made a plan to move his bed in his bedroom to the wall that is closer to his parents' bedroom, placing a

tape on the floor connecting his room with his parents' room, borrowing mom's pillow or dad's PJ, and increasing night snuggle time.

- With mom's help, Arthur made a worry box, so he can keep his worry away.
- Taking note that there is not enough time to process his confusion and shame related to his birth father's arrest, it was planned for the next session.
- In order to increase Arthur's sense of trust in his parents, four Theraplay activities that focus on nurturing and structure were introduced at the last segment of the session: lotioning hurts, bean bag drop on signal, hand stack, and feeding. Sitting close to mom on the couch, Arthur enjoyed being taken care of by his mom, and was pretty proud that he could drop the monkey bean bag into mom's hands on the right cue words. The sense of trust offered by Kathy and received by Arthur was apparent during our play time. They were calm and connected when they left the session.

Session Sample Two:

The presenting issue was Arthur's confusion about different people in his life. Therefore, we began by making a family genogram including his birth family, his previous foster family, and his current foster family. After that, Arthur picked an animal for each person to represent them. He was then invited to chat about each animal relating to each person in his life. Kathy was so amazed at how much information Arthur shared including the aspect of how he sees his relationship with each person. With the PLACE attitude available to Arthur, he was able to share his grief and sorrow of being abandoned first by his birth parents and then by his previous foster parents. Arthur was quite convinced that his previous foster parents did not like him, and that was why they got rid of him but kept his sister.

Arthur's sadness was accepted and empathized during the session through verbal and non-verbal communication. Then we did a role play activity together, for Arthur to say good bye to each person. We separated the people into two groups; one group included the people he would not likely see again. Another group included the people he will say goodbye to many times but will see them again. In addition, Arthur was encouraged to add more people he thinks he will meet in the future, and he will again say hi and goodbye to them. This process has given Arthur an opportunity to develop insight into human relationships, and a positive outlook on his future.

In order to integrate Arthur's experience of loss that we have processed in the session, and to strengthen his relationship with his current caregivers, I chose the Theraplay activities that focus on all four dimensions for the later part of the session, including checking Arthur's growth and changes, taking care of hurts by mom, cotton ball touch and guess, feeling face guess, passing a bean bag to show ways to relax, bean bag drop on eye signal and rocking and feeding. Arthur, quite used to the routine of the

Theraplay activities by now, followed the directions easily and was immersed in the love and fun with his mom.

Session Sample Three:

Arthur has accumulated shame from various sources. One of them is his belief that he was so bad for his previous foster parents, they had to get rid of him; and they loved and liked his sister, but not him. Arthur enjoyed visiting his sister and other children at his previous foster home, but each time, he carried his shame and anxiety along with him. He either sabotaged the fun, or tried too hard to please his sister.

In order to reduce Arthur's shame, and improve his relationship with his sister and his previous foster parents, we planned to have his previous foster mom join the session today. Prior to today's session, I had a meeting with her discussing how the session would look, and prepared her to keep the PLACE attitude in the session.

Arthur was sitting in between his two foster moms and looking anxious. The session began with a memory game. The previous foster mom recalled five things that she enjoyed when Arthur lived with her. Then Arthur was encouraged to recall five things that he enjoyed while living with his previous foster family. They both began to relax while chatting about the fun and funny things they did together.

The hard part was when we moved into the reasons why Arthur left the previous foster home. With Kathy's help and support, Arthur was able to express his sorrow and shame to his previous foster mom. This was accepted with a great deal of empathy. Then the previous foster mom said to Arthur with a clear voice and love, how hurt Arthur was when he first came to her, and how much love and care he needed but they were not able to give him enough, and how she believed that Arthur needs and deserves to have his own mom and dad who can be more available to him. She also expressed how happy she felt for Arthur, seeing how well he has grown and developed with the love and care his current mom and dad have given him. Arthur intensely listened while leaning into Kathy's arms. Arthur's previous foster mom also apologized to Arthur for not seeing the fact that Arthur was taking a lot of blame for his sister. Arthur was visibly moved by this apology. Both Arthur and his previous foster mom appeared to be relieved.

The next activity was a Play Therapy activity – "Love cup". It showed Arthur how many people, from both families, love him and his sister. Then it was followed by counting his fingers and toes by both moms. The session ended by planning a sleep over at the previous foster home for that weekend.

Even though we did not have a full segment of Therapy in this session, the activities focusing on nurturing were interwoven into the parent-child interaction.

It was reported that Arthur was more relaxed interacting with his previous foster family after that session. The previous foster mom also expressed her gratitude for having this opportunity to reconnect with Arthur.

Session Sample Four:

This session was in the later stage of the therapy process. Arthur came into the session with his mom who was limping and her face was visibly bruised. Both were smiling and telling me about the routine activities. Naturally I asked what happened to mom. Mom told me that she tripped and fell when they were walking their dogs a few days ago. I invited Arthur to tell some of the details. He described some facts including Dad was walking ahead of them, and Mom and he were walking together when mom fell. Then suddenly, he got up, went over to the areas where the sand figures and toys are. With my experience knowing Arthur now, I sensed his anxiety, rather than seeing this as simple inattention. We playfully invited him to come back, and tried to guess how he felt when mom fell. During the playful interaction, he said: "I'm so scarred, that mom is going to die." He let out a nervous laugh. I asked intensely, "what did you do?" Arthur answered "I screamed for Dad." He then showed me how he screamed. Now he was ready to bolt again. I was prepared, so both Kathy and I quickly put our arms around him, with playful insistence. Attuning to his anxiety, but also wanting to take his experience deeper, I made a few small plays with his fingers and feet, joking about his wet socks. That made him giggle and breathe deeply. I then curiously repeated the accident, and wondered loudly how come Arthur would be so scared. Kathy was a great team member chatting about what Arthur was like and what he did that day. After awhile, Arthur said with his big eyes staring at me "It means I love mom?"

We spent the next few minutes talking about his fear of losing mom, and the meaning of that, his connection with mom, and how much he cares about his mom, and the healthy dependency on his mom and dad. With tears in both Kathy's and my eyes, Arthur gave out a big sigh. The discussion of healthy fear and fear induced by trauma was introduced in the following session, including happy and sad tears.

We spent the next half of the session making a new memory box and clay figures to keep fun and positive memories of his new family. In early sessions, we made a memory box to keep his positive memories about his birth family.

Again, for integrating and reinforcing this newly developed insight of his relationship with his mom, the following six Theraplay activities were chosen: blow on hurts; read word on hand; mommy may I; word guessing on back; mirroring; and writing a message. Arthur enjoyed the Theraplay activities so much, especially the "Mommy May I" game, at which time he could hardly wait to get into his mother's arms. Each time, Kathy embraced him with open arms and held him as long as he wanted.

SUMMARY:

The above only shows a glimpse of Arthur's journey. Arthur used lots of puppet play and storytelling to integrate his relationship with his sister. With Arthur's fear of police, we also invited a police officer to join us in one session which had an amazingly positive result. The entire therapy process can be viewed as a school of fish journeying through a river. The river flows on uneven ground, sometimes goes up for a stretch, then flows smoothly for a stretch, and may go down for some distance as well. There are different scenes along the way. The schools of fish swim at various speeds, sometimes slowing down to take a break. There may be other fish joining the journey for awhile, but then they go their separate ways. One thing that never changes is the abundant water in the river.

Arthur and his parents are like the school of fish. Different scenes are like the therapeutic methods we have used. We invited different people to join some of our sessions for specific reasons, just like the fish that join the journey for awhile. We have ups and downs in our therapeutic progress just like the river. One thing that never changes is the abundance of love and PLACE attitude the parents have for Arthur, just like the water.

Lessons and Recommendations for future cases:

- PLACE attitude is the key component throughout the entire therapy process. Everyone involved needs to learn and practice carrying this attitude.
- It is important to prepare the parents, so they can work with you as a team, giving the child enough support to process the trauma.
- It is important to be flexible during the session, including what therapy method to use, how many to use, how much to modify. Be aware of your intention. Practice and experience helps to smooth the interweaving of different therapy methods.
- Focus on one or two issues per session. The pace and rhythm of the session is important. Always plan nurturing, organizing and calming activities at the end. Supporting the child in developing the ability to self regulate is equally important. Some issues and topics reappear from session to session; treat them as a growing plant, needing ongoing care and pruning, to achieve its full potential.
- Never overlook or underestimate the power of the small event in a child's life. Often an accident gives the best opportunity to help the child develop insight into his life, and understanding of himself and his relationship with others.
- Do not be greedy, even though it may look like you can open up another topic in the same session. Restrain yourself. The child will withdraw if the session is too heavy, and it may not show until the next session. Having fun is like fueling a car.

In conclusion, as I write this article, Arthur and his sister are officially adopted by their respective families who they have been living with for the past several years.

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