



Aren't you encouraging children to be violent and angry with some of the "aggressive energy" activities you use?

Most children who are emotionally disturbed in some way have no idea how to express their angry feelings appropriately. These feelings are scary for them so they hold them in, or aren't even aware they might be angry. The organism, in its quest for health, tries to get rid of these held in feelings, and the child acts out in often harmful ways. Most of the symptoms that bring children into therapy have as their root unexpressed anger, or the unexpressed self. Further they restrict and inhibit aspects of the self. Even children who act angry and aggressive are not expressing their innermost feelings, and find no relief. In order to feel more integrated and whole, children need to experience all the aspects of the self. Aggressive energy activities (not to be confused with aggression) involves helping children find their inner strength and self support. They are then able to express their authentic feelings such as anger or sadness. There are important rules for doing this kind of therapeutic work: There must be contact with the therapist. The child must feel she or he is safe. The activity is exaggerated. There is a spirit of playfulness and fun. There are clear limits—the therapist is always in control. Content is not necessary. It is the experience that counts.

Are there some mediums you would refrain from using with certain children?

I would try everything. Some therapists believe that it is not wise to use "aggressive energy" activities with children who may have witnessed domestic violence. I disagree. These children especially need these experiences since they often are fearful and restrict and inhibit themselves. They are closing off parts of themselves. If the child rejects such play, it can be introduced very gradually in a non-threatening way, following the above rules. I read some time ago in a book by a renowned child expert that he would advise not to use finger painting with disturbed hyperactive children. When I worked in the schools with severely hyperactive and disturbed children, I often used finger paints. At one time I had a class of about 12 extremely disturbed boys, ages 11 to 14. I would push the desks together to make a long table. The boys would stand around this structure each with a cafeteria tray before them and jars of red, yellow and blue finger paints in the center. I demonstrated how they could take some colors, move the paint around, and make designs with their fingers. When they were done I placed a paper over the design, pressed down, and voila! A beautiful block print was the result. While doing this activity the boys talked to each other in ways they rarely did. They were calm and focused. Of course they had to follow the rules: no flicking paint, no hitting, etc. They loved the activity so much that they never (or hardly ever) broke the rules. They were totally delighted to discover that blue and yellow made green, red and blue made purple, yellow and red made orange and most of all, that all three colors made brown! Another activity that was kept from these boys all their lives, was working with tools and wood. This activity provided amazing experiences for them. They were allowed to make anything they wanted to except guns (my own bias). They made boxes, bird houses, all kinds of things, out of scraps of wood. They needed to share the limited tools and saw-horses we had and did this without conflict. They measured and problem solved and cut and nailed. If they swung a hammer or saw, they could not continue that day. Needless to say, they loved woodworking so much, I had no problems. At one point a professor from the local university came to observe his student who was placed with me. He came one morning while the class was "building," as they children called this time. "This looks like a regular group, not a special education class!" He then admonished me for offering this activity in the morning, rather than as a reward later in the day after their academic work was completed. I told him that the social and academic learning with this activity was enormous, and it was important that it be done early in the day while they were most alert. We saw a side of each child that was usually hidden from their parents, teachers, other children as well as themselves. I am feeling tearful as I write this.