

ASK VIOLET



Do you pay attention to children's dreams in your work? What's your theory of dreams in general?

Answer:

I chose this question from a large pile of questions I have because I think this is a neglected subject. The dreams of children give us many opportunities to delve into the inner life of the child. As a Gestalt therapist, I avoid making interpretations but hope that the child can make statements about his/her life and self as we work on the dream. I believe that the dream is a projection of the child's view of the world hidden often in symbolic and exaggerated pictures and language. It is like deciphering a puzzle; it is fun! And interesting to make sense of it. To own the message of the dream enhances and strengthens the sense of self.

Here are some examples of dream work:

I was seeing a four-year-old due to his many symptoms of anxiety. He had improved greatly and we were coming to the end of our sessions. At the very last session his Mother urged him to tell me about the scary dream he had the night before. He told me that in the dream he lived in a house with both parents. [Jason's (not his real name) parents had never married and had lived separately all his life. They had joint custody and were very devoted to him. He spent one week with Mom and one week with Dad.] In the dream, he was sleeping in his room and both parents came in, woke him up, and threw him out of the house. It was raining hard. A big bird then came and picked him up with its beak and flew away. He woke up very frightened and ran to his mother's room. "I didn't like that dream," he said.

I suggested that we make the dream out of clay. I used a large lump of clay for the house (with Jason's permission) and indentations for his parents' room and his room. We both made little figures to represent his parents and himself and placed them in their rooms.

"O.K.," I said, "both your parents come into your room." I picked up the clay parents and marched them into Jason's room. "If they could talk, what do they say?" (In the dream they didn't speak.)

Jason said, "they say "we're gonna throw you out!"

"What do you say, if you could talk?: I said.

He shouted, : "No no!!" The clay figures pick him up and toss him outside the clay house. "It's raining," he said.

"Then what happened ?" I asked.

"You have to make a big bird, so I quickly fashioned a bird.

"He picks me up and flies away with me! Then I woke up. I didn't like that dream," He repeated.

I said, "Let's change the dream!!" Jason thought that was a good idea. Again everyone was back in their rooms and I walked the parent figures to Jason's room, saying, "We're gonna throw you out!"

" Jason, what could you say now that would be different?"

Jason thought for a moment. "Go back to bed!" he shouted, and the parents obediently went back to their room.

I said, "What about the bird?"

"We have to kill the bird," he answered. He picked up a rubber mallet (always available with the clay) and vehemently smashed the bird. His smile was wide and he said, "OK that's enough. Can we play something before I have to go home?"

As I got out the game he pointed to, I casually said, "Jason, I bet that when you go from your Mom's house and your Dad's house, back and forth, back and forth, you sometimes don't feel ready maybe, and it feels like your being thrown out!"

“Yeah!!” he agreed with much energy.

“And it makes you mad, I think.”

“Yeah!!” he said again. “It makes me feel like killing that clay bird!”

We went into the waiting room and Jason told his mother the whole story. She reacted quite appropriately and that was that.

I believe that we often have an intense dream when we are close to working through something in our lives.

I worked with a group of children all of whom had fathers in an alcoholic treatment program on a military base. They had all lived through much trauma. One twelve-year-old boy described a dream where he was driving with his Dad down a windy, steep road toward a lake. He told how he was very frightened since his Dad just sped toward the lake, but he woke up just in time. A nine-year-old in the group said, “I have a road just like that in my life.”

A 13-year-old girl in that group told about a dream where she was in a coffin and no one knew she was not dead. The mourners were crying and she was about to be buried alive, when she woke up.

I suggested that we act out the dream. I told her to lie down on the floor and pretend she was in the coffin. The rest of us would be the mourners. The other children and I cried and talked about what a wonderful girl she had been.

I directed her to talk if she wanted to (though she didn't in the dream), and she yelled loudly, “I'm not dead! I'm alive! Listen to me! Can't you see me!” When we stopped, she said, “That is just like my life. No one hears me. No one sees me for who I am.”

It is essential in our work for the client to become aware of what is happening for them in life in order to begin to make changes. This is not the same as complaining, but a clear statement. This child, in order to keep the peace, had never told her family how invisible she felt. I was not able, in this situation, to work with parents, so we focused in this group, on how to cope and take care of ourselves. (I learned a lot from these children.)

A twelve-year-old boy had witnessed his mother's murder when he was seven. He had blocked out all memory of the incident and about his mother. He had been diagnosed as ADHD and had many behavioral and family problems which brought him into therapy. I often gave children small notebooks for writing their dreams. After 3 or 4 months of weekly therapy, he brought in a slip of paper in which he had written a dream. He lost the notebook.) He dreamt that he was lying on a cot in the kitchen watching his mother iron. A bare light bulb shined on them, and then suddenly the bulb blew out and everything went black.

I asked Jim (not his real name) to draw the dream and he made a rough sketch of the scene. I said, “Jimmy, if you could talk in the dream, what would you say? Just say what's happening”

He said, “I'm lying here and watching my mother iron.” (This was the first time he mentioned his mother in five years.)

“How is that for you?” I asked him.

He responded, “It's nice.”

I directed, “Say that to her.”

“I like being here with you and watching you iron,” he responded.

“What does your mother say?”

“She says, ‘I like being here with you too.’ “

“Now, Jimmy,” I said. “Be the light bulb. Just say, ‘I am a light bulb’.”

So Jimmy repeated that, and I began a dialogue with the bulb. “So what happened?”

“Well,” Jimmy said as the light bulb. “I was shining down on Jimmy and his Mom and I suddenly blew out. So everything went black.”

Jimmy said, with no prompting from me, “That's what happened to me! When my mother was killed, my brain went black and I couldn't remember anything.” Jimmy's memory came pouring back after that and as we explored his memories, and dealt with his grief and anger, his behavior totally changed.

I have found that children love working with dreams. In these examples we used clay, enactment, and drawings. Try it with the sand tray, puppets, storytelling and music!