

SOME DIFFERENCES IN CHILD AND ADULT WORK

By Dr. Violet Oaklander

1. Work with children is in small segments. They may make one statement, as “yes, I get mad like that tiger sometimes,” and then close down.
2. Resistance in children must be honored. When they close down it means they don’t have the support they need to go further. Adults can handle much more than children. I might say to an adult, “Stay with that resistance—what’s happening?” or “What are you afraid of?” I would never push a child.
3. Sometimes a child does not understand what you mean. If I say, “Does anything you said in your story fit for you?” the child might appear to close own, break contact, appear resistant. If I say, “the tiger in your story is mad. Do you feel that way sometimes?” the child lights up and continues.
4. Children need prompting sometimes when asked to imagine things for a fantasy exercise. So if I say, “Imagine you are a rose bush” I need to say things like, “You can be tall or small, do you have thorns?” etc. Children who are anxious need help to open up the imagination. (Even adults need this kind of prompting sometimes.)
5. Children don’t come into sessions saying, “I need to work on my step-father who abused me.” I need to say, when I feel the child has enough self-support, “make your step-father out of clay.” Etc.
6. Therapy with children is like a dance: sometimes I lead and sometimes they lead.
7. I hardly ever say to a child, “What are you feeling?” The response will be “fine” no matter what, or “I don’t know.” But if I say “What are you thinking about right now?” she will often say a feeling, sometimes an intense one.
8. Paying attention to the self is so important with children. They don’t have the self-support that most adults have to do emotional work. So we work on the self which consists of giving them experiences with their senses and body, mastery, self-statements to identify the self, choices, a feeling of power and control, and so forth. (See chapter on Enhancing the Sense of Self in Hidden Treasure.)
9. With adults we work for awareness of what they do and how they do it. With children we emphasize experience.
10. Adults may respond to questions; but children often feel on the spot when asked questions. Questions should be asked casually, quietly. Or with young children, say, “I bet you were mad when you father didn’t show up to pick you up.”
11. If a child cries, especially older children, do not focus on the tears. With an adult I might say, “Stay with the feeling.” With a child I might say, “That’s hard” if I say anything at all. Just keep talking with the child. Older children hate to cry in front of you.
12. Can you think of other differences?