

ASK VIOLET

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Winter 2012-2013
Caption (below)

I used to have people send up questions written on scraps of paper when I did large workshops. I have a very fat folder full of these questions. Here are brief answers to a few of those questions. Feel free to contact me if you would like me to say more:
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Question. When you are getting children to draw, what do you do? Do you draw too? Do you just sit there?

Answer: I generally ask the child if I can watch while they draw. I like to pay attention to the process: hurried, slow, lots of mind changing, etc. This process is often a clue to how they are in life. Sometimes we draw together, if that's the goal. If they don't want me to watch (rare), I busy myself with writing stuff on a pad of paper.

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Question. What adaptations can be made to work with children who have physical disabilities, especially blindness, CP, terminal illness or mental retardation?

Answer: All of these children have feelings and need a way to express them. A mentally retarded child may scribble something that makes him mad. Children with physical disabilities particularly respond to focusing on their disabilities. A boy who had to wear braces all the time made them with clay and enjoyed smashing them to bits and then we were able to look at how the braces were of service to him. Remember that all of these children have many interests besides their disabilities: friends, relationships with their parents and siblings, music, and so forth. Sensory experiences and games are good for everyone. There are also some wonderful children's books to use: Little Tree by Joyce Mills is about a tree that has lost part of its branches.

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Question. You once stated that you see the parents and child together at the first session. I have been leery to do this because the times I have done this the parents' comments were hurtful for the child to hear. I thought that it was more harmful to the child than helpful. Please comment.

Answer: I don't believe in "secrets". I feel secrets are divisive and harmful. The child already knows how the parents feel about him or her. If the child knows that I know that he is "bad" and I smile at him, he doesn't think, "If she knew what my parents think of me, she wouldn't smile." When everything is out in the open, it enhances our relationship. Sometimes I ask, "Do you agree with what your parents told me?" Other times I might say, "It must be so hard to hear those things." Of course there are always exceptions and sometimes I need to work with the parents about their hesitation to be truthful.

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Question. Will you say more about helping children own their projections?

Answer: When a child draws or tells a story or engages in some other projective, expressive technique, I often say, for example, "Is there anything you said about your rosebush that fits for you?"

One eight year-old girl who had drawn a rosebush answered this question, "Well, you know I'm adopted." "Yes," I answered (wondering what this had to do with her rosebush), and how does it fit for you?" "Well, my rosebush doesn't have any roots so it won't be hard to move it. And since I'm adopted I don't know where I'll be going after my parents get divorced." This belief turned out to be the cause of the symptoms that brought her into therapy. We explored this for a while and it turned out that since her parents emphasized how her adoption as an infant made them a wonderful family, she wasn't sure what would happen next. I asked her permission to talk to her parents about this, and since she was anxious about what would happen to her, she readily agreed. The parents were totally horrified to hear this! This incident taught me to bring up this issue with every family with adopted children. I found this to be a common belief.

Sometime when children cannot connect anything to themselves, I might offer a suggestion, such as to a 12 year old boy's sand scene story, "Well, this surfer felt responsible for the other one drowning since he didn't help him. I wonder if, in your life, you ever have felt responsible for anything bad?" The boy began to sob, saying over and over, "It's all my fault!"

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Question: Could you speak a little about how you decide when to let the child choose the play and when you are directive?

Answer: Therapy with children is like a dance: sometimes I lead and sometimes they lead. Most children don't come into the session saying, "I have to work on my relationship with my brother," or "I need to work on my abuse." I assess how much self-support a child has before I ask her/him to do something specific, such as "make your step-father out of clay." (This is something I said to a ten year-old child who had been severely abused by her stepfather for several years.) "Now what would you say to him, if he could hear anything you want to say? He's not here really, so you can say anything."

We had done some work to strengthen her sense of self, as well as aggressive energy work (an important prelude experience to expressing emotions, particularly anger. See Hidden Treasure for more information.) Previously, when I asked her about her step-father, or the abuse, she totally ignored me and sometimes drew rainbows, certainly telling me that she needed more support, that she was not ready to delve into these topics.