

WHAT IS GESTALT THERAPY

Violet Oaklander, Ph.D.

Basically, Gestalt therapy is a process-oriented mode of therapy that focuses attention on the healthy, integrated functioning of the total organism comprised of the senses, the body, the emotions and the intellect. It was originally developed by Frederick (Fritz) and Laura Perls in the 1940's and has at its base principles from psychoanalytic theory, Gestalt psychology, various humanistic theories, as well as aspects of phenomenology, existentialism and Reichian body therapy. From these sources, and others, a large body of theoretical concepts and principles have evolved underlying the practice of Gestalt therapy.

A major focus is to help clients become aware of what they are doing, how they are doing it, and how they can change themselves, and at the same time, to learn to accept and value themselves. It focuses more on process than content (though content may be used as examples of one's process.) What is directly perceived, felt and experienced is considered more relevant than explanations and interpretations.

A famous misconception is that Gestalt therapy is the empty chair technique. It is not uncommon to hear someone say, "I use Gestalt therapy all the time," referring to this technique. It would seem ludicrous to think that I, for example, trained to be a Gestalt therapist for more than three years at the Los Angeles Gestalt Therapy Institute to learn this technique and nothing else. Moreover, there exist at this time scores of books and articles discussing the principles and concepts of Gestalt therapy. Because of the extensive, comprehensive nature of this therapy, a short summary as this could not describe the basic concepts involved. Paradoxically, however, these concepts are actually so organic that they exist and are part of our every day life. It sometimes takes a genius, like Einstein, to focus on the obvious.

Gestalt Therapy With Children

Because of the organic nature of Gestalt Therapy, I found that its use with children was natural, even though very little of the Gestalt literature focused on its use with children. The developmental process of infants and children is amazingly akin to the principles of Gestalt Therapy. Many of the salient principles are pertinent in work with young people. Some of these include (not in any particular order):

- 1. The I/Thou Relationship**
- 2. The issues of Contact and Resistance**
- 3. Awareness and Experience**
- 4. The use of the Senses and Body**
- 5. The Sense of Self**
- 6. Contact/Boundary Disturbances (behaviors and symptoms that bring children into therapy)**
- 7. Organismic Self-Regulation—the search for equilibrium**
- 8.. Emotional Expression, particularly anger**
- 9. Introjection, Confluence, Deflection, Retroflection**
- 10. The Paradoxical Theory of Change and the role of Self-Acceptance and Self-Nurturing**
- 11. The Use of Polarities**
- 12. Unfinished Business**

and much, much, much more.

I have developed a process of therapy that is based on the principles of Gestalt Therapy in order to help therapists have some kind of guide in their work. Because we, who work with children, use many creative, expressive, playful techniques, the work is often misunderstood and seen as “just playing.” These techniques are the very essence of our work and are often bridges to the child’s inner self and afford powerful expression.

This work is applicable to all ages, including adolescents (and adults), and can be used in a variety of settings. The old adage of “meeting the client where he or she is” is of great importance in this work, and is what makes it so effective. The only pre-requisite is the relationship—if it’s not there, this, then, becomes the focus of the therapy.

References:

Buber, M. (1958). *I and Thou*. New York: Scribner

Latner, J. (1986), *The Gestalt Therapy Book*. New York: The Gestalt Journal Press.

Oaklander, V. (1988) *Windows To Our Children*. New York: The Gestalt Journal Press

Oaklander, V. ((1997) “The Therapeutic Process With Children and Adolescents.” *The Gestalt Review, Vol. 1(4)*, 1997, New York: The Analytic Press.

Perls, F. (1969). *Ego, Hunger and Aggression*. New York: Vintage Books

Perls F., Hefferline, R. & Goodman, P. (1994), *Gestalt Therapy*. New York: The Gestalt Journal Press.

Polster, E. & Polster, M. (1973), *Gestalt Therapy Integrated*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

Yontef, G. (1993). *Awareness, Dialogue & Process*. New York: The Gestalt Journal Press