

Working with Blocks

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CLIENTS FOR WHOM THE TECHNIQUE IS APPROPRIATE

This technique is often helpful in the beginning of a family therapy for many issues, but certainly for loss and grief. In a playful way the therapists create a space for a multitude of themes in the family, and particularly for the place the deceased holds for each family member. Family dynamics around and after the death are given a space in the many differences in how the blocks are placed, and how families work together in this. However, it is less suitable for adolescents who might feel that “child’s play” threatens their sense of growing maturity.

DESCRIPTION

In using blocks as one of many expressive arts media in grief therapy (Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014), therapists offer a wooden board slightly larger than a piece of printer paper and a bag with various wooden cubes¹, which vaguely resemble human figures. They offer this bag with the words, *"I would like to meet your family. Can you show me, making use of these cubes and this board, what your family looks like?"* The instruction is given to the family, not to one specific person.

PICTURE 1 HERE

Therapists then sit back and observe what happens. Children are often very curious and want to see what is in the bag. They often get started very enthusiastically.

¹ Different kinds of blocks can be used for this. We bought these blocks at Praxis-Konkret in Germany (<http://www.pk-ch.de/>)

Some parents are more hesitant. Most important is that the therapists observe what happens, and try to notice what is important in the here-and-now interactions of the family, with the goal to talk about important themes later during the session.

Specifically in working with grief this technique gives the opportunity to examine how a family relates to the deceased. Sometimes the deceased gets a special place. Sometimes he or she gets no place. Sometimes there is discussion about the place the deceased occupies. It is then up to the therapists to make room for a conversation about the place of the deceased in the family, through the medium of the cubes.

CASE ILLUSTRATION

Stefan contacted the clinic because he was worried about his older daughter Laura, age 10. He told us that his wife died of breast cancer a year and a half ago. Since her death, Laura had cried a lot and had difficulties falling asleep. His younger daughter Brit, who was 8 years, seemed to cope more easily with the loss of her mother. Stefan wanted to make an appointment together with Laura. Laura indicated that she preferred to come without her little sister. After Stefan and Laura arrived in the therapy room, and everyone had chosen a chair, the therapist immediately proposed, "I would like to start to get to know you, and I would like to do that with a practical exercise. I would like you to show me, together, here, what your family looks like." The therapist took out a bag with cubes and a board and put them in the middle of the table. "Here are all the cubes you can use to represent people. Let me see what your family looks like."

Stefan and Laura smiled at each other and immediately opened the bag together. Dad said to Laura, "Let's have a look first at what is inside." He got the cubes out and put them on the table in front of Laura. He then went on, "Do you see one for you?"

Which one would be you?" Laura took one from the pile, and laughingly said, "Look what a weird head!" Stefan chuckled and asked, "Will we grab one for Brit as well?" Laura said yes and indicated the block that she just took out. "Oh okay," Dad said, "And which one are you then?" Laura took a block that was a bit bigger and put it next to the first block. "Oh, is that you?" he asked and Laura replied, "I don't know." She smiled and looked at the cube very closely. "And who am I?" her father asked. Laura picked up a cube that was even larger that was already on the table. "This one," she said, and laughed out loud when looking at the three cubes.

"Okay," Stefan said. "Put it on the table. Where are you going to put them?" Laura took the cubes and put them on the board. She went and sat on the floor on her knees at a low table with the board and the cubes on it. She put the three cubes close together on the board and looked at dad. "Like this?" Dad asked. "Yes? Very good." They both then looked at the therapist.

The therapist came closer to the table and looked at the board with the blocks. He asked, "Can you explain what your family looks like?" Laura immediately started explaining, touching a cube, and saying, "Uh, that's Brit, my sister. She's 8 years old. And that is my dad." She touched another cube that fell by accident, and her dad added laughingly, "And you just fell!" Laura smiled and continued, "And this is me."

The therapist looked to the board in silence. Then he continued. "Okay. Are we missing something, or someone?" Laura looked at her father and suddenly became very quiet. "Yes," her father said, and they look at each other. The therapist continued, "Most children have a mommy, right? Where is mom?" Laura started to cry, and her father stroked her hair in silence. "Do we need to put her in the picture, or is that too sad if we

put her in it, Laura?” the therapist asked gently. Laura looked to the floor and cried. “Maybe you need have a look in the bag if there is a cube that can represent mom.” Stefan looked to his daughter in a caring way and said, “Are we going to do that? He took the bag and laid some of the cubes out one by one on the table. Immediately Laura started to help, as her father asked if she saw one that was suitable. Laura did not say anything, as her father slowly continued to empty the bag. When all the blocks were on the table, the therapist asked, “Is there a cube that could represent your mommy?” Laura stared in front of her, to the blocks. Her father asked her, “Which one are we going to take?” Laura hesitantly selected a large cube. “This one,” she said quietly. “This one?” asked her father, “And where are we going to put it?” Laura put the cube close to the others, as her father asked her, “Close to us?” Laura nodded and they both looked again to the therapist.

PICTURE 2 HERE

The therapist looked at the cubes and said, “Your mommy is standing close to you. Is that the place of mommy, close to you?” Laura nodded yes. “Closer than the others?” he asked. Laura looked confused. “Maybe,” the therapist suggested, “you can think about it together? What is the place of mommy at this moment? Is this the way it was before? Or is this as it is now?” Stefan looked lovingly at Laura and waited, eventually asking her, “Do you think this is a difficult question?” Laura nodded yes and father offered to help and stroked her hair. The therapist added. “That’s good. I think it is very good that daddies help their children with such difficult things.” He added, “I have heard from An (the co-therapist) that mommy passed away recently, and that is something that is so sad. And that you come here to talk about that and to find out how to

deal with that. I would like to see, Laura, and maybe you can help me with that, how your family looked before mommy passed away. Can you show me that?" After they searched together through the blocks for a while, the therapist added, "Some of the kids who have been here and who had lost their mommies too, and they say, 'Yes, a lot has changed, but mom is still there, but she is just a little bit further away. But she is still here, and she is still very important'. And then they put mommy sometimes further away, for example, here (indicates edge of the board), or they put her at this place (indicating a place just beyond the edge) and then they say, 'Look, this is our family with everyone who is alive, and that is our Mommy, who is very important, and we put her next to us. She is still there, but we put her in another place.'" Stefan and Laura continued to search, using the cubes, for the place of mommy now, and the place of mommy when she was still alive. At the request of the therapist they also considered how the sister would place the cubes. Stefan said that he thought Brit would put mommy next to the board, and showed it with the cubes.

PICTURE 3 HERE

All parties took a moment to look at the family configuration depicted on the board. The therapist asked, "How does that feel for you Laura? Is this how you think about it too or would you do it differently? Laura immediately said no, while daddy asked if mother's placement was too far away for her. Laura tearfully replied that it was too far, as mommy was still in her memories. The therapist took the box with the tissues and put them on the table. For the remainder of the session, the therapists left the cubes on the table and talked about memories of mom and the way that Laura could still be close to her.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As the case of Stefan and Laura illustrates, the work with cubes in family therapy is not so much a diagnostic tool, as a way to make space for a dialogue about the family, about the deceased and the grieving process of all family members. What happened in this session could be divided into three parts. In the first part the cubes were used so that the family could represent themselves in a playful way. In this way, young children immediately are given a role in the family conversation. In the second part the therapists quickly created space to talk about the deceased, asking "Are we missing somebody?" This question was an emotionally evocative one for both for the therapist and the family members, as it emphasized that the sadness, however big it might be, was to be acknowledged and given a place without fears of talking about it. In this the therapist has to be brave enough to talk about the loss and the sadness, and also sensitive to the hesitation of the members of the family to speak about it. The therapist can express this sensitivity through reflecting, in an empathic way, how difficult or painful it is to speak about. In the third part, the blocks are used as a pretext to talk about a multitude of things, such as any differences between family members in their way of grieving, or maintaining a connection with the deceased. Woven into the therapeutic interaction in a fluid way that encourages interactions between family members, block work can set the stage for exploring and restoring family bonds that have been stressed or severed by death.

REFERENCE

Thompson, B. E. & Neimeyer, R. A. (Eds.) (2014). *Grief and the expressive arts: Practices for creating meaning*. New York: Routledge.

Figure XX.1. Blocks used by Stefan and Laura to depict their family system, and the position of the deceased mother.



Opening the bag of blocks.



Positioning the blocks representing family members on the board.



The final position, with the block representing mother still near the family.