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# ENGAGING RESISTANT CHILDREN IN THERAPY

Projective Drawing & Storytelling Techniques



THE "WHAT-IF" WALRUS  
MICHAEL EWALD McDONOUGH

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Techniques**

**David A. Crenshaw, Ph.D.,  
ABPP, RPT-S**

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Not only did the children allow me to use their drawings and stories, but they also made many suggestions of ways to improve the stories and drawing directives. Their imaginative and creative works are my favorite part of this endeavor.

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## DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Dr. Ray A.  
Craddick.

Once in a while someone passes  
through our lives that is so special  
that we are forever changed.

Ray Craddick was a teacher beyond  
compare, a mentor who guided many,  
including me, through the maze of  
graduate school with compassion,  
warmth and an unfailing sense of  
humor.

Ray's unwavering faith in me has been  
a continuous source of  
encouragement and support  
throughout my career.

*He will remain in my heart forever.*

# **PART I: BUILDING A BRIDGE TO THE INNER-WORLD OF CHILDREN**

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## Introduction

As a child and family therapist, I wrote this guidebook for other child and family therapists. Its purpose is to offer practical ideas to help therapists engage children who are highly anxious, aggressive, defiant, oppositional, and resistant in the therapeutic process. Verbal skills are rarely the strong suit of anxious and/or impulsive, action-oriented kids, yet these children can express their feelings, thoughts, and fantasies when given the proper tools to do so.

In my 35-plus years of treating children and supervising others to do so, I have learned that many children need considerable structure in order for them to make constructive use of therapeutic sessions. Often what therapists consider as “resistance” is actually the therapists failure to provide the proper structure, within an appropriate context, that facilitates communication leading to meaningful dialogue—and it is “dialogue” that is critical for healing.

Over the years, I have significantly increased my use of projective drawings and stories, especially with children between the ages of seven and twelve. The "projective drawing series," described in previous publications (Crenshaw & Foreacre, 2001; Crenshaw & Mordock, 2005a), is one of my favorite clinical tools with this age group. These children often feel self-conscious about playing with puppets or dollhouses, but display little reluctance to drawing or creating stories. I have found considerable clinical pay-off in these activities, which can elicit fantasy material, reveal inner-conflicts, and expose strong affects that children have difficulty describing verbally. The *Boat in Storm* drawing developed by Violet Oaklander (1988) is one of my favorites, as is her *Your Place* drawing. I also include Kevin O'Connors (1983) *Color-Your-Life* drawing in this series (see Crenshaw & Mordock, 2005a).

This first volume in *The Child and Family Therapy Guidebook Series* presents ten major story-telling techniques that contribute to dialog between children and therapists. The techniques



consist of brief original stories that the therapist reads or tells to the child, which lay the groundwork for the child to express thoughts or feelings, first through a drawing about the story, followed by a story they tell on their own. The child's drawings and stories then help the therapist to gain access to the internal world of the child by giving the child the tools to share their inner-life. Aggressive and anxious children, often distrustful of others, are usually reluctant to share their private thoughts, feelings, and fantasies. Often they lack the skills to identify and label the sometimes frightening inhabitants of their inner-world. Others may be in touch with the thoughts and feelings that trouble them, but are unable to find the words to express them. In addition, they often feel their inner-world is too scary to share with another, even a trusted person.

It is my hope that these techniques and strategies will serve as a model for the kind of creative drawing and storytelling activities that build bridges to a child's inner-life, and will

stimulate therapists to develop their own strategies to connect with these “disconnected” children.

## Analyzing Drawings

One especially useful guide to the analysis of client drawings is Greg Furth's (2002) book, *The Secret World of Drawings, A Jungian Approach to Healing through Art*. Furth cautions against early attempts to interpret a client's drawings, especially when the attempts are generated from single drawings rather than from a series of drawings made over a period of time. By studying a series of drawings, far more data can be integrated; therapists often discard their early hypotheses in favor of those consistently supported by the child's unfolding story. Similarly, John Allan, a Jungian therapist who utilizes serial drawings in his analytic work with children, defined serial drawing as drawings done consecutively *over time* in the presence of the therapist (Allan, 1988). Both Furth and Allan were influenced by Jung (1959), who, in spite of his work on universal symbols, repeatedly emphasized the importance of analyzing drawings over time rather than making "wild" interpretations

from a few drawings made at single points in time. For example, a child's drawing of a storm may reflect current fears, fears of an upcoming event or even fears of an actual thunderstorm. But when drawings of storms are repeated over time, they might represent hidden or repressed fears. I have proposed some questions to consider following the children's drawings, but I urge the reader to study the detailed guidelines offered in Furth's book (Furth, 1998) in Chapter 4, "Focal Points to Understanding Drawings: Diagnostic and Therapeutic Aids" (pp. 32-100) and in Chapter 5, "Advice and Precautions" (pp. 101-112).

Spontaneous drawings are therapeutic tools that allow therapists to gather data and formulate tentative hypotheses about children's inner-lives, thoughts, conflicts, fears, anger, dreams, and hopes (Crenshaw & Mordock, 2005a). The approach that my colleague John Mordock and I take in understanding and interpreting drawings is consistent with the guidelines proposed by Klorer (2000) for understanding spontaneous artwork, and Bonime (1962, 1989) for understanding dreams.

We adhere to a collaborative approach, with the assumption that the meaning of a specific symbol should be explored with each child. We reject a cookbook approach, or the assumption that universal meanings for symbols apply to individual children (Crenshaw & Mordock, 2005a). For example, when a child draws a very small figure when asked to "draw a person," the standard cookbook interpretation of such a drawing has been that the child feels small and insecure. Yet, when one child was asked why she made such a small figure in the upper right hand corner of her paper, she replied, "To make room for the rest of the world." Further evaluation revealed that the child was gifted.

John Allan emphasized that children's drawings, like the themes revealed in spontaneous fantasy play, also have direct relevance to inner-struggles. But Allen also urged therapists to respect the pace set by the child, one that the child can safely sustain. In spite of managed care's emphasis on brief treatment, successful treatment of most troubled children is not quick, a point re-

emphasized in my recent writings (Crenshaw & Mordock, 2004,2005a, 2005b, Crenshaw & Hardy, in press). The pace of therapy should be determined by the child's ego strengths, the nature of the conflict and struggle, and any trauma to which the child has been exposed (Allan, 1988). *The Play Therapy Decision Grid* (Crenshaw & Mordock, 2005a) is offered to guide treatment decision-making. With most seriously troubled children, therapy requires ongoing assessment of an ever-changing process and constant therapeutic adjustment. Sometimes adjustments in approach must be made in a single treatment session. The Decision Grid allows for this flexibility and encourages therapists to 'downshift' when required by the child's changing needs.

The stories and drawing techniques described in this guidebook, if used judiciously, provide a springboard to dialogue between child and therapist, enabling and empowering the troubled child to discover and share feelings more easily with an adult they have gradually learned to trust. It should be emphasized, however, that without



trust, all the tools and techniques imaginable are of little help to the child or to the therapist. The ten stories I've presented here have proven effective for most children between the ages of seven and twelve.

## Analyzing Stories

Eliana Gil (1991), noting that therapeutic stories are an effective tool in child therapy, emphasized that, "Because children's imagination and ability to identify is so powerful, they can easily enter a story, making unconscious connections to heroes, conflicts, and resolutions" (p. 65). Similarly, Beverly James (1989) noted, "Stories capture the child's imagination and are easily remembered; since they do not obviously and directly relate to the child's issues, the youngster does not actively defend against the presented ideas" (p. 212). As is the case when analyzing drawings, humility when analyzing stories is a decided therapeutic virtue.

I approach the understanding and treatment of children from an integrative theoretical framework. Much can be learned from a wide range of theoretical and practical approaches to therapy. My mentor, the late Walter Bonime, M.D., a senior training psychoanalyst, was well known for his book on the *Clinical Use of Dreams* (1962). Bonime, like

Greg Furth, in his approach to interpreting drawings, never utilized a cookbook or simplistic approach to understanding symbols in dreams. He made hypotheses and checked their value in dialogues with the client, either confirming or discarding them as therapy progressed. This approach is suggested in this guidebook, modified by the expectation that children are less capable of collaboration than adults. Nevertheless, therapists should never underestimate the ability of children to offer their own hypotheses about the meaning of symbols, whether in their artwork or play, and some children display an amazing ability to associate to facets of stories that yield rich insights into their hidden inner-life. Most of the time, however, the hunches of the therapist will need to be tested against the reality of the child's story as it unfolds over time.

Both Furth and Bonime also considered story content to be important and symbols to have unique meanings. As is the case in dreams and in drawings, the meaning of each story, as well as the symbols embedded within it, is idiosyncratic, rather

than universal, and needs exploration in each case. We do not devalue the study of the cultural meaning of symbols, or the exploration of symbols used in art, literature, and mythology, but the position taken here is that one should not assume a traditional, cultural, or mythological meaning for a symbol, but rather should pursue the meaning by utilizing other sources of data, including the child's own associative responses. Freud was quick to point out that "A good cigar can be simply a good cigar."

Rorschach specialists are aware that certain ink blots pull for certain perceptions, but they are also aware that different clients can project different meanings into the same inkblot. A card often seen as depicting maternal figures can elicit responses relating to troubles with such figures, but the same card can just as easily represent something else to others and pull for problems totally unrelated to this topic.

## Ericksonian Storytelling

I have found Joyce Mills and Richard Crowley's (1986) approach to storytelling to be of enormous clinical value. I have made use of Joyce Mills' story of *The Three-Legged Dog* when treating children and families who have suffered overwhelming loss and associated grief. In contrast to Richard Gardner's *Mutual Storytelling Technique* (1970), in which the therapist, in response to a child's story, tells a similar story, but with a more adaptive solution, the Ericksonian approach assumes that the power of the story speaks for itself. The story itself activates the deep healing resources of the unconscious, a chief tenet of Ericksonian theory in which it is postulated that no interpretation or direct work with the story is needed. I have found this view supported when I have used the story of *The Three-Legged Dog*.

In working with intensely grieving children and families, I sometimes open a session by reading the story of *The Three-Legged Dog*. I will simply say, "I

would like to read you a story—if that is okay?” No one has ever objected. I then read the story of *The Three-Legged Dog* and when finished, I pause briefly and then say, “I just wanted to share that story with you.” I then continue with the issue presented by the family and direct no further attention to the story. The power of this story to create hope and to activate healthy resources is validated by the frequent requests I receive from families at the beginning of later sessions: “Could you please read us again the story of *The Three-Legged Dog*?” Another example of Joyce Mills’ creative gifts is her story of “*A Work of Art*,” told to an eleven-year-old girl caught in the middle of a custody battle. Mills told the little girl about a beautiful work of art, a real masterpiece that was put up for auction. The masterpiece was described in great detail in terms of its uniqueness and beauty. The bidding activity was introduced as a metaphor for the custody and visitation battle the child was witnessing. To emphasize the reality of the love each parent had for the girl, even as they fought over her, the child was told, “Even though



each person upped the bid in order to own this work of art, they each loved this masterpiece and felt they had a right to have it in their home” (Mills & Crowley, 1986, p.80). In some of the storytelling vignettes presented in this guidebook, read or told to the child to lay the groundwork for the child’s own drawing and storytelling activities, you will notice embedded suggestions. In most cases, I do not call attention to these embedded suggestions in the sample follow-up questions to the story, but let them stand on their own.

## The Projective Drawing Series

This guidebook was developed after considerable experience treating anxious, angry, defiant, oppositional, and impulse-ridden children who fair poorly in highly verbal therapies. Over the years, I have significantly increased my use, especially with children between the ages of seven through twelve, of projective drawings and stories. The “projective drawing series,” described in previous publications (Crenshaw & Foreacre, 2001; Crenshaw & Mordock, 2005a), is one of my favorite clinical tools with this age group. Children age seven and above often feel self-conscious about playing with puppets or dollhouses, but display little reluctance to draw or create stories. I have found considerable clinical pay-off in these activities, which elicit fantasy material, inner conflicts, and strong affects that children have difficulty describing verbally. The Boat in Storm drawing developed by Violet Oaklander (1988) is one of my favorites, as is her Your Place drawing. I also include Kevin O’Connor’s

(1983) Color-Your-Life drawing in this series (see Crenshaw & Mordock, 2005a).

### **The Magic Key**

In *The Magic Key* (Crenshaw & Mordock, 2005a), the therapist gives the following instructions to the child:

Imagine that you have been given a magic key that opens one room in a huge castle. There are four floors in the castle and since the castle is huge there are many rooms on each floor, but your magic key only opens one of the many, many rooms in the castle. So pretend you go from room to room, and from floor to floor, trying your magic key in each door until you finally come to the door that your key opens. You turn the key and the lock opens. Because this is a magic key that only opens this door, what you see is the one thing that has always been missing from your life—the one thing you always believed would make you happy. Pretend that you are looking into the room. What is it that you see? What is that one thing that has been missing that you always believed would make

you happy? When you have a clear picture, please draw it as best you can.

Not surprising in this highly consumer-oriented culture, children often draw a big-screen television. Some children, however, draw the missing or deceased parent, the safe home they never experienced, or the family where the parents don't argue. They draw the home they always longed for, one which is sadly missing in their lives.

### **Party Hats on Monsters**

Another drawing technique I developed specifically to address multiple fears, phobias, frightening dreams, nightmares, and PTSD symptoms is *Party Hats on Monsters* (Crenshaw, 2001). The technique was also included in the journal article "Fifteen Effective Play Therapy Techniques" (Hall, Kaduson, & Schaefer, 2002). This strategy utilizes the learning theory principle of gradual and titrated exposure to feared stimuli and desensitization, as well as the embedded message work of Milton Erickson; work applied to children by Joyce Mills and Richard Crowley (1986).

It also draws on the basic tenets of *Problem-Solving Therapy* as developed by Jay Haley (1978).

In order for children to eliminate symptomatic behaviors—involuntary behaviors that developed as an effort to cope with trauma—they must learn to respond to troubling experiences voluntarily, under their conscious control. When this shift occurs, the frightening images in their dreaming or waking minds no longer operate in the same manner. The very act of trying to reproduce on paper the frightening image produces a desirable result. The children discover that no matter how hard they work, they are unable to make it as scary as the image in their mind; they discover the power of defusing the fear by putting it out on paper. In addition, the therapist can make the direct suggestion:

It is very interesting what children discover when they put the scary monster out here on paper. They find it very hard to make it as scary as the picture in their head, and they realize this monster is not as scary as they thought when they

look at it in the light of the day. Also, when they change the monster, shrink him, or put a party hat on him, he is no longer scary at all. The most amazing thing that many children discover is that when they change the image out here on paper, they can also change the scary image in their head. Then it is no longer scary to them. Isn't that incredible!

This procedure is helpful with a wide range of anxiety-related problems, ranging from simple phobias to multiple fears and associated PTSD symptoms. This technique is quite useful when faced with aggressive behavior, which often results from anxiety that overwhelms limited coping resources. When children feel threatened, challenged or undermined, they often become aggressive because they lack more mature coping strategies.

Common themes emerged from the symbolic play and artwork of children that I have treated, or that have been treated under my supervision, as Clinical Director in two different residential



treatment centers for severely aggressive children. Some of the strategies have been developed out of actual play-therapy scenarios that, over time, proved to be especially meaningful to these troubled children.

I have found projective drawing and storytelling techniques to be particularly rewarding when working with latency and pre-adolescent children, but they are inadequate as stand-alone interventions. Intensive clinical work and alliances with families are crucial and other approaches such as cognitive-behavioral, psychodynamic, or client-centered interventions, are useful, especially those that take place within a family systems model. Many of the techniques described in this guidebook can be keyed to the targeted interventions in the *Handbook of Play Therapy with Aggressive Children* (Crenshaw & Mordock, 2005a), such as stories facilitating empathy (*Behind the Closed Door; The Animal that Nobody Wants to Hug*), teaching the language of feelings (all the strategies involve identification, labeling and expression of affect), creating a future orientation (*The Little Pig that*

*Didn't Fit*), and pursuing meaning (*All the Animals Listen When The Wise Ole Owl Speaks*).

## **The Three-Step Storytelling and Drawing Strategy**

This series of techniques is designed to enable even the most inhibited, guarded, or uncooperative child to find a face-saving way to meaningfully participate in therapy. The strategy was developed from extensive clinical experience with children in the seven-to-twelve age range, who often find the experience of therapy to be intimidating. To many children, therapy is similar to being brought to the principal's office after being threatened by the well-meaning, but desperate adults—adults who have warned, “straighten out, or we will send you to someone who will straighten you out.” From the onset, many children equate therapy with punishment. This sense is heightened when schools, social services, or courts have pressured parents to take children to therapists.

Perhaps the most important intervention a therapist can make is to change the adversarial orientation of the child toward the therapist to a

collaborative one. For example, my own patients were actively involved in the development and evolution of this guidebook. They made many suggestions regarding the original stories, and their own stories and drawings inform and enrich the originals. For some children, some of the stories might be too long. I recommend stopping at a point when the children display eagerness to draw because they have probably absorbed all they can from the story. They should be permitted to go ahead with the drawing. Before giving the child the storytelling directive, summarize for them the part that was not read to them. I encourage all therapists to titrate the strategy according to the needs of the individual child. I also have treated children who seemed spellbound by the stories and listened intently to every word. Flexibility is not only helpful, but it is essential for achieving maximal therapeutic gain from these strategies.

### **Step One: The Story**

The purpose of the story is to provide structure, foment interest, and motivate the child to produce

a drawing. The drawing serves to initiate dialogue between the therapist and the child. Suggested follow-up questions and considerations are offered for use after the child has completed a drawing. The child's therapist may invent more specific questions, especially for a child whose history is well known.

### **Step Two: The Child's Drawing**

While some child therapists may use drawings produced for other purposes, such as generating psychodynamic hypotheses or as diagnostic clues, the primary purpose of the drawing is to meaningfully further therapist-child dialogue. When the therapist asks the child, "What title would you give your picture?" or "Does your picture remind you of anyone?", he or she is looking for an exchange that will further discussion, as well as an opportunity to get to know the child in ways that are not possible when playing board games. Children will often prefer board games because they wish to evade verbal therapeutic exploration due to the anxiety it creates.

### **Step Three: The Child's Storytelling**

The third step of this therapeutic strategy requires each child to tell his or her own story. Each story read or told to the child sets a specific stage upon which the child must act. Some require the child to focus on finding missing pieces for the proper understanding of the central character (e.g., *The Misunderstood Mouse*; *The Animal that Nobody Wants to Hug*; *The Bee that Couldn't Stop Stinging*). Others require the child to involve the central character in a critical decision making process (e.g., *The Pig that Didn't Fit*; *Blow-Up Bernie*). Still others involve retelling a projective story that is open-ended and ambiguous (e.g., *The Tree on Top of the Hill*). *The Ballistic Stallion* requires children to create a story about a time when they prevailed against the odds and showed the same fighting spirit as the story's characters. *Behind The Closed Door* requires children to look at the redeeming qualities of a child who is often in trouble, and to tell a story that advocates on behalf of the chronic troublemaker.

*The "What-if" Walrus* reveals the child's level of optimism and hopes about change. *The Wise Ole Owl* challenges children to grapple with the important lessons of life before they create their own story through the animal that they pick. Each element of the child's story can be a springboard for discussion and clarification, ultimately leading both the child and therapist to a more thorough understanding of the child's inner-world.

The projective drawing and storytelling series can be used in both family and group therapy, as well as individual therapy. In a family session, the family may collaborate on the drawing and story or they may do the drawings separately and then collaborate on the story. In group therapy, it is essential to establish trust and cohesion so that each child's revelations can be made in a "safe place." Havens (1989) has insisted that the work of psychological healing can only begin in this safe place. If a group therapist is in doubt, I urge erring on the side of caution and waiting until certain that a trusting and supportive atmosphere has been established. It is essential that all the children in

the group meet the criteria for the Invitational Track of Child Therapy (Crenshaw & Mordock, 2005). Decision-making is more complicated for the group therapist because the needs and level of ego functioning of multiple group members have to be evaluated, but careful consideration can help make the therapy safe.



## A Word of Caution

This book is *not* meant to be a substitute for training and supervised experience. Even when a therapist meets appropriate standards for credentialing and licensure, they can benefit from continuing supervision and/or frequent consultation with experienced and qualified colleagues. No one should attempt to be a “lone ranger” in this work. It is vital to continually refresh one’s knowledge base by attending professional conferences and workshops. Rapid developments are occurring in knowledge about the impact of trauma on children, including findings from neuroscience, some of which I review elsewhere (Crenshaw & Mordock, 2005b). Such developments require clinicians to frequently update their skills and understanding.

The mark of a skilled child therapist is the ability to engage in an ever-changing dynamic process, a process dictated by an accurate reading of the child’s needs. I must emphasize that entering the inner-world of troubled children—a world filled with

emotionally-laden, often traumatic, material—should be undertaken only by licensed and credentialed therapists. The Association For Play Therapy, for example, has defined the appropriate standards to be designated as a “Registered Play Therapist.” Additional standards of experience, training, and supervision are required to become a “Registered Play Therapist-Supervisor.” *Only fully qualified child therapists should use this guidebook.*

## **PART II: THE STORIES**

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The Misunderstood Mouse

The “What-If” Walrus

All the Animals Listen When the Wise Ole Owl  
Speaks

Blow-Up Bernie

The Tree at the Top of the Hill

Ballistic Stallion

Behind the Closed Door

The Bumble Bee Who Couldn’t Stop Stinging

The Animal That No One Wants to Hug

The Little Pig That Didn’t Fit



### Child Drawing # 1: The Misunderstood Mouse

Notice the lack of feet and the addition of a "stinger" for added protection. This added protection is a theme in the drawings of children who have been taunted or bullied or exposed to other forms of aggression or violence.

Michael's Story (age 9): "I had seven brothers and two sisters. My brothers and sisters were always picking on me every single day. I was the youngest of ten mice. My oldest brother named Pat was the meanest of all. He always picked on me and I would whine and pout, and complain loudly and my mom always blamed it on me. Pat knew mouse craft and he said if I ever stopped whining and complaining it would break the spell. But the spell was to make me always whine and complain and so it was very hard to break. After he told his story he was able to break the spell and the mice feel better about him."

## **STORY ONE: THE MISUNDERSTOOD MOUSE**

### **The Story (Ages 7-12)**

A long time ago in the outskirts of Bristol, England there lived a mouse known as the Misunderstood Mouse. He was always pouting and sulking about one thing or another. His biggest complaint was that no one understood him. He often said, "My life would be so much better if only other mice could understand me." One day the other mice decided they were fed up with his whining, complaining, sulking and pouting. They circled around the Misunderstood Mouse and said to him, "Okay, tell us your story. Why do you feel we don't understand you? What is it that you wish us to understand that would make your life better? We are eager to hear your story, so tell us."

### **Drawing Directives**

Before the Misunderstood Mouse tells his story, please close your eyes, if you are comfortable doing so, and try to go to a calm place in your mind. Imagine what the Misunderstood Mouse looks

like: Is he big or small? Is he alone or, if not, who is there with him? Does he look happy? Sad? Mad? Confused? When you have that picture clearly in mind, please draw him as best you can. You may include the other mice and their surroundings if you wish. It is your picture and you can do it anyway you choose. Take your time and draw the Misunderstood Mouse as best you can.

### **Follow-Up to the Drawing**

Ask the child to tell you about his drawing. Ask the child if it is okay if you write down what he says. Notice that many of the directives include an embedded choice for the child to make. This choice empowers the child and helps create a sense of safety and personal control, factors especially important for children who have experienced abuse, trauma, violence, or parental substance abuse. If the child includes other mice in the drawing, you may further the dialogue about the drawing by asking the following relational questions:

1. Of all the mice that circled around the Misunderstood Mouse which one of them was the most upset? Why do you think that mouse was more upset than the other mice?
2. What upset that mouse the most about the Misunderstood Mouse complaining?
3. Of all the mice, which one was most worried and concerned about the Misunderstood Mouse? Why did that mouse take a special interest in the Misunderstood Mouse?
4. Who do you think the Misunderstood Mouse would turn to if he were really in trouble?
5. What title would you like to give to your drawing?

Remember that the key objective is to use these stories and drawings to better understand the inner-world of the child as projected onto these drawings and stories and to stimulate dialogue that contributes to healing. The suggested questions are only starting points. Therapists will need to develop questions that offer the greatest therapeutic payoff and discard those that do not. Relational questions are helpful because they frame the problem as contextual rather than located solely in the child.

## Storytelling Directives

Now pretend the mice have gathered around the Misunderstood Mouse and they are quite annoyed with him because he has been complaining for a long time, but perhaps there is something important about the Misunderstood Mouses life story that they do not know and that he now is ready to tell them. They are very still now as the Misunderstood Mouse gathers up the courage and begins his story: "My mouse brothers and sisters, there is something you don't know about me, and I want to tell you my story. It all began quite a long time ago...

The child takes it from this point. If further prompting is needed, the therapist can ask questions to help set the scene. Some children will be unable to create stories even with support and encouragement from the therapist. The struggles of the Misunderstood Mouse may be too close to their own issues or remind them of some event that is very upsetting. In that case, after gentle encouragement and support have failed, it is best to ask the child if he would prefer to choose



another play or fantasy activity, to honor his choice, and at the same time making clear that “we will come back to the drawings and stories at a time that is more comfortable for you.” By respecting and honoring the defenses the child relies on and by acknowledging the adaptive value they serve in protecting the child, the therapist makes the treatment setting a safer place. Creating a safe place is especially important for children who have experienced trauma events. Paradoxically, when a child therapist sensitively acknowledges and accepts the natural pacing of the child, the therapy moves more quickly because the child feels safer in revealing painful material. Because the child’s defenses are honored and respected, they are needed less, can be employed more flexibly, and the child exercises more conscious choice. These considerations apply to all the strategies in this guidebook.

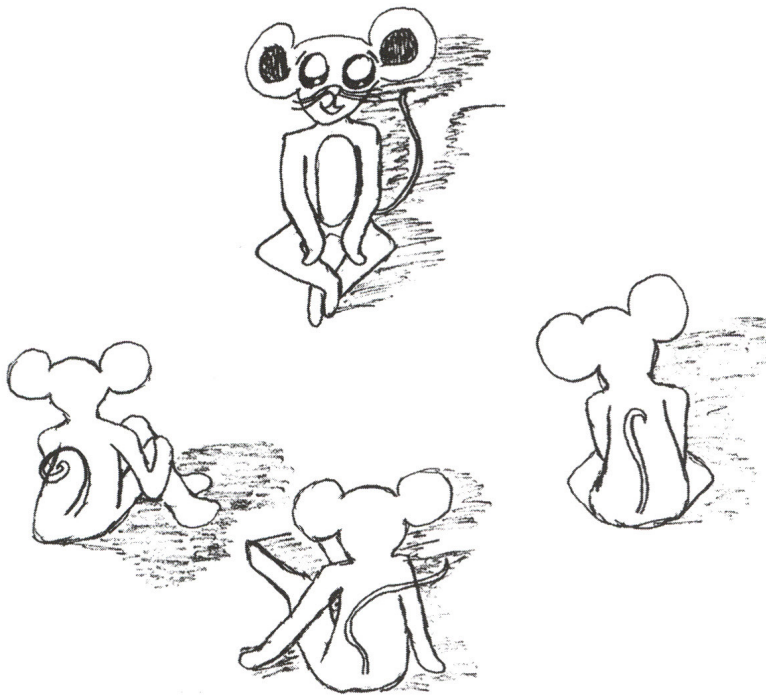
### **Follow-Up to the Story**

Some of the following questions may be useful to elicit the meaning of the child’s story:

1. What would be a good title for your story?
2. What lessons can be learned from your story?
3. Can you think of any other endings to your story besides the one you gave?
4. Does the story remind you of anything that has ever happened to you or anyone you know?
5. Looking back on your story would there be anything you would like to change or do you like it just the way it is?

This story pulls for one of the more potent themes revealed in the spontaneous symbolic play and artwork of children suffering from insecure attachments. Research has demonstrated that secure attachments early in life can buffer children from the impact of stress in their lives. Conversely, insecure attachments place them at greater risk for unfavorable outcomes when faced with adversity in later life. A child suffering from insecure attachments will be made anxious by and very reactive to, separation and loss issues. This story targets the greatest fear, the worst nightmare of a child, whether real or imagined that she is the child in her family that doesn't fit and/or the child in her

social group that doesn't belong. These fears are magnified in children suffering from profound losses or frequent disruptions of early attachment relationships. Such fears are typical in many children in the foster care system.



### Child Drawing # 2: The Misunderstood Mouse Telling Her Story

Ricky's Story (age 11): The Misunderstood Mouse said, "You mice have never before taken the time to listen to me, and you don't understand what it is like never to be liked. I have always hated you but I think you hate me more. You have no idea what it is like to feel that nobody likes you no matter what you do or how hard you try"

Ricky's life story has been dominated by a series of profound losses, multiple foster home placements, and exposure to violence, abuse, and trauma. His story expresses a strong identification with the Misunderstood Mouse. Both have been in a life-long quest to feel understood and accepted. He poignantly expresses the feeling that nothing he tries seems to work. His therapy includes validating his sense of despair and hopelessness, without becoming engulfed in it. Gradually, he is able to see how his anger limits his ability to acknowledge his own part in social rejection. This opens up new possibilities, as seen in the following dialogue that remains initially within the metaphor:

Dr. C: The Misunderstood Mouse doesn't feel that anyone has ever listened to him until now. It is no wonder that he is so angry. He also sounds very hurt. He doesn't believe anyone could understand how much this has hurt him. What would it take to change the Misunderstood Mouse's mind? What would show him that people do care and want to understand how he feels?

Ricky: His mind is made up. Nothing will change his mind.

Dr. C: What if someone made a very determined effort to understand how he feels, really listen to him,

would that make any difference?

Ricky: It is too late.

Dr. C: I wonder since the Misunderstood Mouse has made up his mind that it is too late whether he would even recognize that other people care about him.

Sometimes it is possible to challenge entrenched ideas of despair, pessimistic thought patterns along with associated anger and sometimes rage by putting something out on the table that the therapist doesn't expect a response to. In fact, it may be more helpful if the child doesn't respond overtly but rather sit with the idea for a while and let it take hold. Immediate responses on the part of children can be a way of discarding the idea as quickly as possible without really having to examine it in any depth. At times I will make this explicit and say to the child I don't want you to respond to this but rather just think about it for a while. The child may or may not bring the matter up again later in therapy. If not and the timing and context is appropriate and the child is working within the Invitational Track the therapist can follow it up in later session by stating:

Dr. C: Ricky I have been thinking about your story about the Misunderstood Mouse. I have thought about it a lot and what I am wondering is whether the Mouse would even know, would he be able to see or hear that people are trying to understand him. Maybe when he made up his mind that no one cares, no one listens, no one could ever understand him, perhaps he stopped caring, stop listening and stopped trying to understand others. If that were true, how would he know if someone cared and really wanted to understand him? Maybe he feels safer isolating himself from others and doesn't want to risk being hurt again.

Ricky: I guess you could be right?

Dr. C: Ricky, I could be way off the mark here, but I wonder if you have some of those same feelings as the Misunderstood Mouse. Have you decided that no one will listen to you or understand you?

Ricky: Well, it's true.

Dr. C: If you decide it's true will you be able to notice if someone really wants to understand and listen to you? Will you notice if someone cares about you?

Ricky: It won't happen.

Dr. C: How will you know, what signs would you look for just in case somebody does?

The objective in the above dialogue was to avoid being pulled into a futile debate over the validity or

lack of validity of Ricky's perceptions that no one could care about him and to shift the focus to how he would know if someone did. This is a subtle way of creating a broader range of possibilities than the narrow and rigid beliefs that Ricky presently holds. Although Ricky was not ready to embrace such other interpretations of his interpersonal experience these alternative views of reality were introduced in the dialogue.



### Child Drawing # 3: The Misunderstood Mouse

Catherine's Story (age 11): The mouse is scared and making her way hack home. She is afraid her father will be disappointed in her because she has chosen a job as a newscaster on "Channel Cheese News" and he wanted her to be a baker. She encounters a bad rain storm (anxiety?) on the way home and discovers that she is at the entrance to her home and hesitates before going in: "Should I or Shouldn't I?"

The theme expressed in Catherine's story is very common to resistant children. Their so-called "resistance" is often related to feeling misunderstood and fearful of once again disappointing the important people in their life or conversely being let down or disappointed by the adults in their lives.

"Resistance" in therapy is most likely to occur when our child and family clients feel that the agenda of the therapist conflicts with what the child and family consider being important.



## STORY TWO: THE "WHAT IF" WALRUS

### The Story (Ages 7-12)

I am going to tell you a story. If you wish you can close your eyes, hut take a deep breath, relax, and make yourself as comfortable as you can. Walruses live in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans with most living in the Pacific Ocean, This story is about the "What-if" Walrus who a long time ago lived in the Atlantic Ocean off the northeastern coast of Canada. Walruses spend most of their lives in the water. They leave the water to bear their young and to rest. The "What-if" Walrus constantly annoyed nearly all the other Walruses in the vicinity. He regularly would complain, "What if the water temperature rises too much and the ice packs and ice floes melt?" The "What-if" Walrus, would ask all the Walruses in the surrounding water, "What if the temperature rises and we have to keep moving?" The "What-if" Walrus was particularly nervous about big moves or changes. He also kept everyone in a state of high anxiety by

asking, "When are the hunters coming back?" "Has anyone seen the hunters?" "What if they kill us all?" "What if they just kill the mature walruses, what will happen to our young?" The "What-if" Walrus kept himself, and any walrus willing to listen to him, in a state of constant worry so that neither he nor they could enjoy the present moment, a moment that included no hunters, plenty of ice packs and ice floes, comfortable temperatures, and healthy young walruses playing joyfully around him.

Eventually, no walrus wanted to swim close to the "What-if" Walrus because they wanted to enjoy today and not be subjected anymore to "What if this?" and "What if that?" Finally, another Walrus, who just couldn't take it anymore, said to the "What-if" Walrus, "What if you took your whole pack of "what-if worries" and rode them down to the bottom of the sea?" And don't be in a big hurry to come back up!" The "What-if" Walrus was shocked and began to think, "What if all my worries dragged me to the bottom of the sea?" "What if I was unable to see the young walruses romping in

the sea?" "What if I just enjoyed today, being here in the sea, and not worry about all the things that could go wrong?" "What If I changed the way I looked at things?"

## **Drawing Directives**

Now if you wish, you may gently close your eyes and think about the "What-if" Walrus. Try to get a picture of him in your "mind's eye." When you are ready please draw the "What-if" Walrus as best you can. Don't worry about making mistakes, just have fun with it and do the best you can.

After the child has drawn her version of the "What-if" Walrus, tell the child that although the "What-if" Walrus is good at coming up with "what-ifs" there are probably some that he didn't think of. See if you can come up with some other "what-if worries." Ask the child if it is okay to write these worries down. Most children grant permission. The child can also be asked if she prefers to do the writing or whether she wishes the therapist to write. This part of the strategy creates a window into some of the secret worries of the child

expressed in either literal or symbolic form—Worries that the child may be able to share in this playful form by projecting them onto the "What-if" Walrus. If the child has a hard time getting started, the therapist can suggest, in a humorous and playful way, some absurd "What-ifs," such as "What if the ocean runs dry? What if there are no more fish in the ocean?" This usually relaxes children and they will begin to share some "what-ifs" of their own. As noted in the Introduction, children who act-out aggressively or become oppositional often are responding to anxiety.

### **Storytelling Directives**

Now the "What-if" Walrus reached a point that no one wanted to come near him and he finally realized that his worries were dragging him down like a heavy weight to the bottom of the sea and he wasn't able to enjoy anything that was going on around him. The story ended with "What if I changed?" If you wish you may close your eyes but either way, take a deep breath, make yourself comfortable, and try to imagine what life would be

like for the “What-if” Walrus if he changed. Then make up a story about the changed “What-if” Walrus. When you are ready you can write it on another sheet of paper or if you prefer I will write down your story.

This part of the strategy taps into the child’s inner-resources and ability to imagine and picture changes. It also serves as a barometer of the child’s degree of hope and optimism about change.

### **Follow-Up to the Story**

In reviewing the child’s story, the therapist must consider the degree of change expressed and whether the change comes gradually with effort or occurs instantly and magically? How stuck is the “What-if” Walrus? Does he rely on his own resources or does he tap the capabilities of others to make changes? How do these changes influence others around him? Is he happier after making these changes or not? Are others happier? Does anyone help him or does he have to struggle alone in this effort to change his life?

Anxiety is a part of nearly everyone's life. For example, children who grow up in violent neighborhoods where gunshots ring out in the night and youth die in the streets on their way to school live every day in a state of anxiety. It has been widely reported that inner-city teens are planning their funerals in minute detail because they realistically do not expect to live to adulthood (Skarlew, Krupnick, Ward-Zimmer, et al., 2002). The "what-if" worse-case scenarios are not a matter of overactive imaginations, but a reflection of the reality they face daily.

However, we should never assume trauma; if we expect to see it we surely will. As Eliana Gil (1991) reminds us, when we work with potential traumatic events we should suspend all judgments, preconceived notions, and assumptions. Only the child can tell us, and they will only tell if they perceive us as being capable of listening fully, without pre-judgment.



#### Child Drawing # 4: The What-if Walrus Reflecting on Still More “ What-ifs”

Willy’s Story (age 9): His life was a lot better but he had to concentrate on not saying “What-if’ He made good progress, but after 3 years he slipped and said “What-if” He felt very disappointed and upset with himself but the other Walruses said, ‘It is okay, as long as you don’t say it more than once a month! The “What-if” Walrus was very relieved. He realized he didn’t have to be perfect as long as he didn’t say it all the time, the other walruses wouldn’t be upset with him and he worked very hard and was able to do it and he wasn’t known any longer as the “What-if Walrus.”

Willie has largely mastered the anxiety problems that interfered with his life in the preschool and early school years. His story is very hopeful and yet it is more realistic than the magical and fantasized resolutions that children sometimes gravitate towards. It implies that perfection is not required

and this is important in counterbalancing the all-or-none thinking that typifies many children who are struggling to resolve psychological conflicts. A crucial task of the child therapist is to help troubled children to be more flexible in evaluating their progress. Due to their tendency towards either/or dichotomous thinking patterns they tend not to see the incremental steps they take or the small improvements that can add up to major change over time. Another feature of Willies story that reflects a healthy appreciation of the struggle to change is the fact that after three years the "What-if " Walrus was still suffering occasional setbacks. This is indication that Willie understands and accepts that he will need to keep working with himself long after therapy ends but also that he believes he will be successful.



## STORY THREE: ALL THE ANIMALS LISTEN WHEN THE WISE OLE OWL SPEAKS

### The Story (Ages 9-12)

It was known far and wide among all the animals of the land that one very wise owl liked to perch in the old oak tree near Lake Insight. The word would pass quickly among the animals when the Wise Ole Owl was spotted in the tall and strong oak tree. The animals of the land, in whatever language they spoke—pig, cow, horse, rabbit, squirrel, skunk and so on—were often overheard saying, "I wish I could think like the Wise Ole Owl," or "I wish I could make choices and decisions like the Wise Ole Owl," or "I wish I was as understanding as the Wise Ole Owl." A goat was overheard saying, "My life would be so different if I had the knowledge and wisdom of the Wise Ole Owl." The skunk said, "Me too!"

One summer night when the moon was full, word was passed first from the chipmunks to the squirrels, from the squirrels to the rabbits, from the

rabbits to the goats, from the goats to the cows, from the cows to the horses, and so on, that the Wise Ole Owl was perched in the old oak tree near Lake Insight. The animals moved as quickly as they could toward the lake. The rabbits and squirrels were well out in front, the horses in the middle, and the much slower animals, like the pigs and cows, brought up the rear. The Wise Ole Owl knew that each animal would have to reach Lake Insight at the pace that was right for him or her. He was patient and urged the others to be patient, too, because those who arrived first were getting restless and frustrated. They had been there for some time, but there was still no sign of the pigs and cows.

The Wise Ole Owl kept reminding them that each animal has to move according to the speed that is just right for him or her. Finally, all the animals arrived, but in spite of the understanding and compassion expressed by the Wise Ole Owl, some of the animals made dirty faces at the pigs and cows. There was some mumbling and one of the horses said to the pigs, "What took you so

long? Did you stop and have a picnic along the way?" All the animals laughed, except the pigs and cows. The Wise Ole Owl said those who arrived first should show understanding and compassion toward those who arrived last.

The Wise Ole Owl explained, "Being the one to arrive first is not always the most important thing. Suppose the pigs and cows did stop to have a picnic along the way, after all it is a beautiful night. Basking in the light of the full moon, a picnic would taste very good after a long journey. Maybe the pigs and cows discovered something that the rest of you have yet to learn!' The other animals began to think about what the Wise Ole Owl said and they noticed they were hungry too, but hadn't even considered stopping along the way. They suddenly realized that if they had not rushed so hard to get here, they might not be so exhausted. The animals turned around and began to see the pigs and cows in a new and more positive way. It may take them longer, but they still arrived at the same place, and they had a more comfortable journey.

The eager animals could wait no longer, and finally the Stallion blurted out, in horse language, the question to which all were seeking an answer. He asked the Wise Ole Owl, "How do we find wisdom and understanding?" All the animals were suddenly very quiet. There was a very peaceful stillness around the lake and under the tall and strong oak tree. The Wise Ole Owl paused briefly and then, in a calm but strong voice, said, "The answer will be found deep within each of you and it will be different for each and every one of you!" The animals couldn't believe what the Wise Ole Owl had said. They shook their heads and looked at each other confused and puzzled. The Wise Ole Owl continued, "Each of you have a story to tell about the life you have lived. In that story are all the lessons that you need to learn. If you learn them well, you too will be wise and understanding. I want each of you to go home. When you have learned your lessons well, I want you to come back here one at a time and tell me your story!"

### **Drawing Directives to the Child:**

"I want you to pick one of the animals and draw a picture of that animal beneath the old oak tree ready to tell his story to the Wise Ole Owl."

After the child finishes, ask the child to tell you about the drawing.

### **Follow-up to the Drawing**

Why did you pick that animal over the rest? What did they do to prepare for telling their story to the Wise Ole Owl?"

### **Storytelling Directives**

Each child is instructed to pick one of the animals to come back to Lake Insight and tell the story of the lessons they have learned from their life.

Now the Wise Ole Owl sees that the (*chosen animal*) has arrived to tell their story. The Wise Ole Owl says, "I am happy for you that you have learned the lessons of your life and that you are ready to tell me your life story. You may start now and I will be listening very carefully"

The child begins ...

### **Follow-Up to the Story**

Not all children are able to formulate a complete or well-integrated story of how the animal learns the lessons of life and arrives at self-understanding, wisdom, and compassion. Nevertheless, therapists should reinforce any steps, no matter how small, taken by the child toward this goal. If the child draws a blank at storytelling, go back to the drawing and use it to stimulate dialogue. If the child chooses a rabbit, for example, you could ask relational questions such as:

Did the rabbit figure things out all alone or did he ask the other animals to help? How did the rabbit know that he was ready to tell his story? Did the rabbit tell his story to anyone else before going to the Wise Ole Owl?

The Wise Ole Owl puppet has been a pivotal character in the puppet play of the resistant and guarded children I have treated. I often suggest to children that because the Wise Ole Owl has been

around a long time, and because he is very wise, he may be able to offer some helpful advice. He can represent the voice of reason, the child's better judgment, or the child's conscience or super-ego. Many impulsive, action-oriented children never learn from their mistakes nor do they respond to punishment. They have not learned to reflect, to consult their conscience, or to appeal to their better judgment. This storytelling strategy requires them to think, reflect, and consider their own life experience.

If children are stumped because the task seems too abstract to them, I may say, "Sometimes we learn lessons in life the hard way. We can listen to the wise, experienced adults in our lives, our parents, our teachers, and our grandparents who try to guide us and keep us from making painful mistakes. Even though they mean well, we sometimes don't listen and we learn lessons the hard way, sometimes in a very painful way. Think of some lessons you have learned the hard way and tell me about them when you are ready."

Jennifer's Story (age 10): The pig said to the Wise Ole Owl, "I have learned many lessons but none as important that if you don't learn to share you will live a very lonely and sad life. I learned this lesson the hard way. I used to live up to my name and I would push other pigs out of the way to eat the food in the trough. I ate and ate and then I ate some more. After a while food didn't taste good to me and I was so fat I could hardly move. And then I realized the other pigs were very mad at me and wanted nothing to do with me. It was then that I realized I was a very foolish pig, fat, selfish, lonely and no friends. I don't push my way into the line anymore and sometimes I let other pigs go first and I found out that I still get plenty to eat. I get more exercise now because the other pigs want to play with me. Learning to share has made my life better in every way."

Jennifer's story is interesting because she was unwilling to share her mother's attention with her little brother. Ever since he was born she had been tyrannical and angry. Her mother, a single parent, no longer worries about Jennifer seriously hurting her 5-year-old brother, but this was a real concern until quite recently. Her mother had her hands full between raising two demanding children and making ends met. She did the best she could, but when supplies were limited the rivalry over her attention was fierce. Since Jennifer felt she could never compete with her cute little brother, she frequently forced negative attention from her mother by acting-out in multiple ways, behavior



designed to punish both her mother, who she saw as depriving, and her little brother, who she viewed as maliciously pushing her into the background. Like the pig in her story, her inability to share had made a big mess of her family life.



#### Child Drawing #5: The Pig Tells His Story to the Wise Ole Owl

Brandon' Story (age 9): The pig said to the Wise Ole Owl, "One important lesson I learned is to love my little brother. When he was born I hated him. I used to be so mad at him because he always got what he wanted and I never got what I wanted. I looked for chances to get even with him. I would not let him play with my toys and when mom wasn't watching I would push him down. I now love my brother and I think he is kind of cool."

It is fascinating that both Jenny and Brandon's stories suggest that their intense sibling rivalry has

been resolved when, in fact, both children are still in considerable conflict over this issue. Both children have stopped their violence toward their younger sibling, and that is considered a major breakthrough, but they still harbor intense resentment. By portraying the issue as resolved, they suggest a degree of hopefulness—that they can achieve a solution and have a mental map of what that solution entails.

Also intriguing is that both of these youngsters, kids with unusually intense rivalry issues with their younger sibling, picked "the pig" as their animal to identify with and with which to tell their story. This may suggest some awareness of their self-centeredness and corresponding guilt. This, too, is regarded as a healthy and positive sign. Research by Tangney and Dearing (2002) reveals that guilt is largely a healthy and constructive emotion that involves condemnation of specific action(s). Shame, on the other hand, is a destructive emotion and involves condemnation of self. More exploration with both Jenny and Brandon would be needed to determine if they are experiencing appropriate guilt

or if their feelings cross the line into shame. If shame-based, then the therapist can help them to take responsibility for the specific actions for which they should rightly feel guilt, but dispute vigorously their shamed-based views of self. This can be partially accomplished by helping them solve the problem of their maltreatment of their little brother, but the therapist must also focus on their strengths, positive actions and qualities, and validate what they have to give (Crenshaw and Hardy, in press). As Kenneth Hardy (2003), Director of the Eikenberg Institute for Relationships, states, "When we validate what children have to give, we elevate their spirit; if they feel they have nothing to give, nothing to contribute, it punctures their spirit." Parents should especially communicate their recognition of the positive contributions of their child, since it will mean far more coming from the parents than from the therapist.

When a child is engaged in intense sibling rivalry, I have found it helpful to ask the question, at least in my mind, "What is it that this child has

that is just his or her own?" A powerful antidote is to encourage each parent to spend some undivided, one-on-one time with each child at least once a week. The results can be magical. Parents may argue that finding an hour of time each week is unrealistic, but if they consider the time spent intervening in acrimonious battles between siblings, they may see this commitment as an attractive trade-off and well-worth the investment.

Rivalry issues intensify when the supplies are limited, especially when today's economic pressures require that both parents be employed outside the home. At the end of the day, the family members return home seeking healing and repair from the bruises they sustained. At the other end of the spectrum, they are anxious to share the day's highlights and successes. Parents often are exhausted at the end of their long and busy work day and may struggle to find the energy to listen in an attentive way to either the stories of bruises or successes in the child's day. It is also not uncommon that parents have precious little time to listen to each other. We need to multiply by a

significant factor these pressures for a single parent struggling to make things work economically and also meet the myriad emotional needs of her children. It is my experience that the majority of parents do the very best that they can to meet these multiple and complex and sometimes conflicting needs of their families, and they have my utmost and profound respect.

## STORY FOUR: BLOW-UP BERNIE

### The Story (Ages 7-12)

Blow-Up Bernie caused a stir wherever he went because no one knew when he was going to blow his top. Other kids tried to stay away from him when he was on edge but they could never tell if he was about to lose it. When his temper got the best of him it was not a pretty sight. One by one, he lost his friends. One day he was sitting under a tree all by himself, sad and lonely. He remembered a dream he once had that told him how different his life could be if he learned the secret of controlling his temper instead of his temper controlling him. The dream also contained a warning that some of the things that he would have to change he would not like and the changes that would be needed might be too hard for him. Or if he made the changes, even though his life would be different and better in many ways, he might want to go back to the life he had before. Blow-Up Bernie was quite puzzled by this part of the dream. If his life could

change for the better, if he could gain control of his temper, if he could make and keep friends why would he want to go back to the life he had before?

### **Drawing Directives**

If you feel comfortable, close your eyes, or if not just simply relax, and notice your breathing as you breathe in and breathe out. Now try to get a picture in your mind of Blow-Up Bernie. Is he short or tall? Is he thin or overweight? What is he wearing? Where is he in your picture? Is he at home? At school? In the park? Is he alone or is he with others? If with others, who are the other people? Is he happy, sad, angry or feeling lonely or some other feeling? When you have a picture of Blow-Up Bernie, please open your eyes, if they are closed, and draw as best you can your picture of Blow-Up Bernie.

### **Follow-Up to the Drawing**

Now tell me about your picture of Blow-Up Bernie. If the child is unable to elaborate on the drawing, facilitate dialogue by asking questions about the details of the drawing. If others are

included in the picture, ask relational questions such as, Of the people there who do you think would stick up for him? Are there people no longer around that Bernie wishes were still there? What mood do you think Bernie is in most of the time? What title would you give your picture?

### **Storytelling Directives**

Now make up a story about how Blow-Up Bernie's life turned out. In the story tell whether he learned to get control of his temper or his temper stayed in control of him. Did the part of the dream that was so upsetting to him come true? Did he make changes and then find some things so hard about those changes, even though his life was better, that he wanted to go back to the way his life used to be? Be sure to give the story an ending. How did it all turn out for Bernie in the long run?

### **Follow-Up to the Story**

Children are not the only ones made anxious by thoughts of change. Change is equally hard for adults. The struggle depicted in Blow-Up Bernie's dream is a universal struggle. Human beings tend



to cling to misery because misery is familiar; change brings uncertainty confusion, and anxiety. The psychoanalyst, Walter Bonime, M.D., told me in consultation sessions that, "There is no place like home and home is our pathology." To change engenders anxiety because the subjective sense of "me" is threatened; it feels like "not-me" (Bonime, 1989). Olga Silverstein (1987), now retired, but formerly on the faculty of the Ackerman Institute of the Family, described the delicate balance of change versus stability. She maintained that some negative consequences always follow change, although most children and families, and some therapists, don't recognize or acknowledge the possibility of negative consequences, while they can easily articulate the positive consequences.

Blow-Up Bernie was deeply shaken by his dream, especially the part that told him he might want to return to the way things were because change would be too hard for him. Bernie could not figure out why he would want to return to his former life, especially if he could find a way to tame his temper, but the disquieting feeling persisted

that there was truth to this notion and he could not shake the idea. Even though children and families are not likely to articulate the negative consequences of change, the therapist should not be fooled because the negative consequences, although outside of awareness, are real, and can present significant barriers to change.

This concept can be approached through the metaphors of drawing and storytelling. The therapist can respond to the child's story with:

Suppose Blow-Up Bernie didn't blow up anymore. Let's picture him now with friends; kids now invite him to birthday parties, and he does better at school. His life is different and better in many ways, but is there anything he doesn't like about his new life. Can you think of anything that is different in Bernie's life now that might make him want to go back to his old life, or something that he misses about the way things were before?

If the child draws a blank, the therapist can respond:

Suppose one thing he misses about his old life is a sense of power. In the past the other kids feared him. Now the kids no longer fear him. In fact, other kids sometimes pick him on. Do you think he might want to go back to his old life so he could feel powerful again? What else might he miss about the way his life was before?

Therapists should make every effort to pursue the negative consequences of change. The child and family are usually baffled by such inquiries and yet these forces, largely outside of awareness, can stop the change process in its tracks. It can be helpful to share an experience of your own or of others that involved the struggle to change and the discovery, upon succeeding, of its unwelcome aspects. For example, a young lady loses a dramatic amount of weight and finds boys, all of a sudden, interested in her. Their sexual interest in her creates anxiety that she never experienced in the overweight condition. A child who is a low academic achiever makes a dramatic turn around only to discover that parents and teachers now place higher expectations upon him. Don't be

fooled; although not always apparent, the negative consequences of change lurk in the background and can block the change process.

Many children easily identify with Blow-Up Bernie. Impulsive-reactive aggression is common in children with anger control problems and is the result of a combination of neurobiological factors, temperamental predisposition and socio-cultural environment, interacting with many mediating influences. Impulsive-reactive aggression is different from the violence that results from the long-term and insidious effects of toxic social environments. Kenneth V. Hardy and Tracy Lasloffy (in press), in *Dying to be Saved: Treatment Principles with Violent Adolescents*, distinguishes anger from rage. Anger is defined as a reaction to a frustrating situation. Rage, on the other hand, has deep and long-term roots often resulting from invisible wounds, especially among those who grow up with extreme poverty, exposure to domestic violence, high-crime neighborhoods, and violence in school. These influences eventually result in the

loss of dignity, hope, and faith in themselves and others.

Child clinicians need to appreciate this distinction because anger management training is an inadequate response to children who suffer rage. While anger management training, based on empirically supported cognitive-behavioral methods, has value in helping children with tenuous impulse control and poor social skills, it does very little for children disconnected from their community, and does not address the complex emotional process related to invisible wounds resulting from repeated devaluation, humiliation, and degradation (Crenshaw & Hardy, in press).

James Garbarino (1999) in his excellent book, *Lost Boys*, notes that he has never interviewed a youth facing charges for a violent crime that, upon closer examination, had not been traumatized. Like Blow-Up Bernie, these children view themselves as “bad kids” and the sense of “badness” is deeply entrenched in those who express rage. Children prone to reactive-impulsive aggression also view

themselves as “bad” because they are unable to stop and think—to reflect on their choices—and, as a result, they frequently find themselves in trouble at home and at school. Their identity, however, is not crystallized around being a “bad kid” in the same way as is that of youth who have suffered extreme devaluation, humiliation, and degradation and who have given up hope. The loss of hope, dreams, and vision for a better life is one of the most painful and crushing of all the profound and repeated losses a child can experience.

When un-addressed trauma is at the core of a complicated emotional process, a comprehensive treatment strategy is needed. I attempt to spell out such a strategy in both the *Handbook of Play Therapy with Aggressive Children* (Crenshaw & Mordock, 2005a) and *Understanding and Treating the Aggression of Children: Fawns in Gorilla Suits* (Crenshaw & Mordock, 2005b) as well as in a book chapter devoted to violent and traumatized youth involved with child welfare agencies that includes a detailed case example (Crenshaw & Hardy, in press). It should be noted that intensive individual

treatment for children with severe trauma is a rather rare event. Far too many children are simply viewed as "bad kids" and as Hardy (2003) has noted, that is exactly what they receive: treatment (i.e. punishment) for "bad kids." While violence is a hideous poison in our world, and I denounce and deplore it as does Hardy (2003), I can not regard as credible the imposing of stiffer sentences on youth who bear already the scars of unrecognized, untreated trauma as a viable solution to this vexing problem in our society.



### Child Drawing # 6: Blow-Up Bernie

In the drawing above, Bernie is laying flat on his back with a bomb underneath him that explodes in this picture. This is a good example of the kind of drawing often seen from children who have been exposed to violence. They never know when "the bomb" is going to go off and consequently can never feel completely safe.



Children's feelings go underground for many reasons, but the overarching principle is that children disguise their feelings or deny them when it is not safe to express them and this is especially true of children growing up in violent homes. A need to hide or disown one's feelings can lead a child to be truly confused about their genuine feelings and even their true sense of self. It has been my experience in working with children of domestic violence that they often arrive at my office in what I refer to as a "turbo-charged" emotional state or what van der Kolk (2003) might call a hypervigilant or alarm state. Due to the constant threat of violence that surrounds them, their physiological systems are hyper-aroused. It is difficult to do therapy under these conditions, since van der Kolk has demonstrated that higher cortical centers go off-line when the mid-brain and brain stem are in a hyperaroused state. Consequently, I have developed a variety of soothing and calming activities to begin sessions with such children. Some children prefer to calm their hyperarousal by listening together to music that they find relaxing

and soothing, others may prefer doing breathing or muscle relaxation exercises together, while still others may prefer to take a walk together or draw. It is important to make these activities collaborative so the children do not feel they are all alone in coping with their hyperaroused physiological systems.

## STORY FIVE: THE TREE ON TOP OF THE HILL

### The Story (Ages 7-12)

A long time ago, in a far away land, a tree was planted on the top of a hill overlooking a castle occupied by a King. The castle has long since decayed and fallen into ruin. The walls have crumbled; weeds have grown up in what used to be the courtyard. The dungeon that many centuries ago held prisoners who had disobeyed the decrees of the King had collapsed and was covered by rocks. There have been many changes in the land since the tree was planted, and Kings and Queens no longer rule the country. There have been numerous battles and wars, famine, droughts, and sickness. But the tall, proud tree at the top of the hill still stands. It truly is a strong tree with great dignity.

### Drawing Directives

Now, if you are comfortable doing so, close your eyes for a moment and try to picture that tree

standing tall and proud on top of the hill. Try to get a clear picture of the tree in your mind. When you are ready, gently open your eyes and draw as best you can that tree on the hill that has survived and weathered so many hard times, but still stands tall and proud.

### **Follow-Up to the Drawing**

Include in your inquiry questions about others depicted in the picture.

1. What title could you give to your drawing?
2. If the tree could feel what would it be feeling in your picture?
3. What is the relationship of any others in the picture to the tree?
4. Is the tree in your picture healthy or sick? Is it strong or weak?
5. Who cares about the tree?

### **Storytelling Directives**

Every person who has been on a long journey has many interesting stories to tell. This tree has had a long journey and has lived through many

changes. If the tree could talk what stories would it tell? The tree has seen and survived so many challenges. The people of the village knew it had many stories to tell. Pretend that the people who live in the village climbed the steep hill and are gathered around to hear the story of the tree.

### **Follow-Up to the Story**

Therapists can look for significant themes that capture key feelings or conflicts with which the child is struggling and then cross-validate these themes by examining the child's other stories. These metaphors can then be used in interpretative reflections upon subsequent artistic creations. Additional questions that might be asked of the child follow:

1. What made the tree decide to tell its story?
2. Why did he pick this time to do it?
3. What would be a good title for the tree's story?
4. What did the village people learn from the tree's story?
5. Does that tall, strong, and proud tree that has survived so much remind you of anyone?



### Child Drawing #7: The Tree on Top of the Hill

Catherine's Story (11-years-old): I am going to tell you about one of my stories that the people of the village might want to hear. A long time ago in a far away place there lived a king and queen in this big castle. "What can we do?" they asked the gardener. He said, "Why don't you plant a tree—a sugar maple tree—then we can have sugar, too." The gardener went to a forest and picked a maple syrup tree to put on top of the hill. Then, a thousand years went by and the castle came down. Then, a new family came and they sat under the tree. The tree said, "You should build a new castle right here by me and all your wishes will come true." Another thousand years went by and another family came and they said that they don't like the shape of the tree and want to cut it down. The tree said, "Don't do that because I will help you" They asked, "How will you help?" The tree said, "I can't tell you the way I will help you right now. In a few days something will happen and I will be able to help!" A few days later the wife got sick. The man came to talk to the tree. He said, "My wife is dying." The tree told the man to mix a potion made of lavender and maple syrup. The man mixed the

potion and gave it to his wife and she got better each day. The man told his wife about what happened. His wife was the one who wanted to cut the tree down, but now realized that the tree had saved her life. So the tree was given a new lease on life. The tree said, "That's why I am still here."

This clever story expresses a powerful theme, often noted in the drawings and stories of children, of needing redemption for real or imagined wrongdoings or shortcomings. They fantasize about heroic acts that will, once and for all, transform the disappointment they feel in themselves into the respect and admiration of others. The threat of being cut down may symbolize their powerlessness and vulnerability in a world where they are towered over by adults and under the control and domination of "bigger people." If they have also suffered devaluation, derogation, humiliation, or loss of dignity and hope, they suffer from what Kenneth V. Hardy, Ph.D., (2003), Director of the Eikenberg Institute for Relationships, calls "invisible wounds." Invisible wounds are not as easily recognized as visible injuries, like a broken arm in a sling, but they are just as real and perhaps even more painful. Of all the injuries a child can suffer, none is as devastating as the crushing of the spirit.

Children don't differ much in terms of their hopes, dreams, and aspirations, but they differ enormously in the opportunities they have to realize those hopes and dreams. Sometimes the child has an invisible barrier, like a learning disability, that represents a formidable obstacle to success in academics. Sometimes they are devalued because they are children of color in a racist environment, or female in a society that privileges male traits and devalues female traits. Sometimes they grow up in extreme poverty in a society that marginalizes the poor.

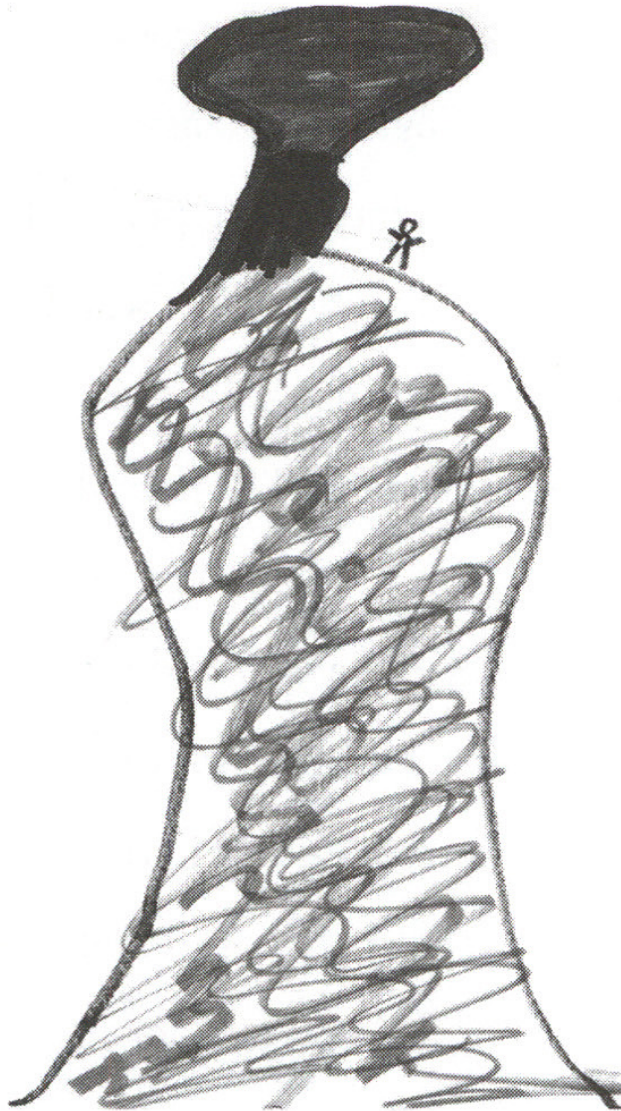
Most caregivers and educators are dedicated and committed to the best interests of children. However, over my long career, I have treated children who suffered indignities and humiliations from the exceptions—caregivers or educators who should have chosen a career that didn't entail working closely with children. I have also seen children who have suffered verbal, physical, and sexual abuse inflicted by people they once loved and trusted, most often a member of the family;



the shattering of trust is one of the invisible wounds that is the slowest to heal.

I have been inspired by these children's courage, strength, resilience and determination to persevere in the face of severe obstacles. I marvel at their ability to learn to trust again, their willingness to forgive, their ability to still smile and laugh, at least sometimes, when there is so much pain in their lives. I treasure their ability to dream new dreams, to retain their sense of wonder and their fighting spirit. As adults, however, we can't afford to delude ourselves into believing that children, no matter what their environment, will somehow be resilient and turn out okay. Some environments are so toxic that the children can't recover. James Garbarino (1999) makes this point when he discusses the research of Professor Patrick Tolan (Tolan & Guerra, 1994) who has conducted extensive studies on inner-city youth in Chicago growing up in poor and high crime neighborhoods. The findings suggest that no matter how resilient a child may be, when social conditions are poisonous to an extreme degree, the adverse impact can

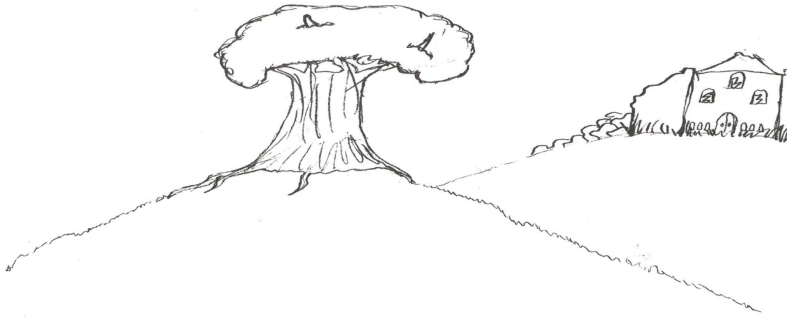
overwhelm whatever resources exist in the child and family to achieve a better life.



### Child Drawing #8: The Tree on Top of the Hill

Roberto's Story (8-year-old boy): I was grown by a castle in the 1400s. There I witnessed many battles.

There I watched as the King ruled the land during the late 1700s. I watched the revolutionary war. During one point in 1770 I witnessed someone being hanged on my limbs. Now in 2004, almost over 700 years, here I stand. The end.



### Child Drawing #9: The Tree on Top of the Hill

Jose's Story (9 years-old): The wars were awful, how bloody the hill was that he was on and how many scars he had. How nice it was during the winter, spring, summer, and fall. He told the people of the village how people's houses had changed over the past few hundred years. They were first built out of logs, stone, and brick. Now houses are built with all kinds of modern materials. People were short and tall and now they are more normal size. People used to be gruesome, now they are nicer. He tells them a ghost story. People like them, now they have nightmares; they are really good ghost stories.

This story is very typical of children who have been exposed to either violence or trauma. "People used to be gruesome," as well as his more recent positive experiences: "Now they are nicer." He still has nightmares, but they are not as frightening and chilling as before: "People like them; they are really

good ghost stories.” I have found the tree to be a symbol of life and its endurance through hard times pulls for the adversities that many children, especially those resistant to talk therapy, have experienced. Roberto’s tree, in Drawing #8, “witnessed many battles.” Through the tree the children can begin to tell their life story, although typically in small segments at a time. This is healthy. After all, if a child spilled everything in response to a single drawing or story, I would worry about the child’s lack of defenses.

Crucial to working with resistant children is a therapeutic attitude of healthy respect for the child’s defenses and an understanding of how they protect the child from further harm. The height of therapeutic narcissism is to expect that, because we are “warm and fuzzy,” the child should drop their defenses, give up their guardedness, and open up to us. The reverse is true—we should be glad they have these defenses. Even though their defenses are primitive, they enable the child to survive in the face of difficult obstacles. Some, in their short lives, have experienced and survived

more horror than their adult therapist has encountered in a significantly longer life. These children have much to teach us about survival, resilience, toughness, and perseverance in the face of extreme hardships and adversity. Our goal is not to get them to shed their primitive defenses, but rather to use those defenses in a more conscious, deliberate, and flexible way until they can develop more mature ones.

Therapists should always reframe defenses as adaptive, honor and respect them. Paradoxically, when the therapist approaches therapy with this attitude, the child will have less need for their defenses because the therapy has become a safe place (Havens, 1989).

Early in my career, I observed the devastating effect on children of destructive emotional battles between parents. I once treated a family where the parents engaged in stormy, intense battles that had led to 13 marital separations, but they always came back together for an additional round of fighting. Some people, especially those with low self-esteem

or chronic depression, would rather live with constant fighting than live alone. I became involved in this case after the father ended up in the hospital with a broken skull. His 16-year-old son, feeling desperate and totally fed-up, hit his Dad over the head with a glass soda bottle in the middle of a fight between the parents. Sadly, his 4 year-old sister had developed ulcers.

Most parents mean well and do not deliberately subject their children to toxic emotional climates. Nevertheless, when their own relationships are threatened, parents who ordinarily are quite concerned about their children's welfare can engage in warfare that has a nuclear fall-out for their children, often with tragic results.

My clinical experience with the "tree that has seen so much, and weathered many hard times," is that it pulls forth stories of domestic violence and the witnessing of violence and other life experiences that, if not traumatic, have been emotionally significant.

## STORY SIX: THE BALLISTIC STALLION

### The Story: (Ages 9-12)

There once was a magnificent stallion that everyone admired for his strength and beauty, but no one could ride him because he bucked violently, even with the most expert and experienced riders. Often he would dump his would-be riders even before they could get settled in the saddle. One rider managed to stay on for ten seconds, and he was a champion rodeo rider who was very determined and lasted ten seconds on his third try. The stallion's bucking was so wild, he became known as the Ballistic Stallion. His owner, believing the horse would never be ridden, told his friends that he wanted to sell the horse at a reasonable price.

Sally, his twelve-year-old daughter, was extremely upset when she heard the news. Although she had never been allowed to try to ride the stallion, she loved watching the horse gallop in the field. She loved all horses, but she felt a special

bond with the stallion because she admired his spirit and fight. Sally was a scrappy kid herself and never liked to give up on anything that she was determined to do. It went against her core beliefs and values to give up on anyone, but especially on the Ballistic Stallion, who she watched from a distance and admired greatly.

Sally begged her Dad to delay selling the horse, but he said, "Sally, no one can ride that horse and when I get a fair price, I am going to sell him." Sally appealed to her mother, but she said, "Sally, your father's mind is made up, he is going to sell the Ballistic Stallion. There are other horses, and besides neither you nor anyone else can ride that stallion." Telling Sally that she couldn't do something made her even more determined to prove that she could.

Sally was in a race against time. She spent as much time as possible in the bottom pasture, where the stallion was fenced, studying his movements and admiring his beauty, strength, and spirit. Sally thought long and hard about all the



riders who had traveled from afar to prove that they could ride the stallion when no one else could. She thought about their attitude. They had been determined to break the spirit of the stallion. In her heart she knew that this was the wrong approach. She knew she would fight to the end if someone tried to break her spirit. She made up her mind that she would, in every way possible, honor and respect the spirit of the stallion. Sally also counted on the fact that her Dad, also a strong-minded person, would not accept an offer he didn't consider reasonable. She realized that, given the stallion's bad reputation, getting a good offer might take a long time.

Initially, she thought she would have to race against time, but she realized if she approached it that way, she would surely fail. She knew that to truly respect and honor the spirit of the stallion, she would have to move at his pace. Sally understood that progress might be slow with possible setbacks along the way. Perhaps her Dad might sell the stallion during her efforts, but it was a chance she had to take because pressuring the

stallion to go faster than he was prepared to go was doomed to failure. Fortunately, it was the beginning of the summer, giving Sally some time to put her plan in action.

Sally's parents were aware that she loved to watch Ballistic Stallion run in the bottom ten-acre pasture, frequently bringing her binoculars to get a close-up view. They did not know, however, about her plan. From her position along the recently painted fence, Sally had watched Ballistic Stallion gallop numerous times. She, now decided, that it was time to watch the stallion from inside the fence. She climbed over and watched closely for any reaction from the stallion, but he did not seem to notice. She moved into the pasture and away from the fence about ten yards. The stallion, munching grass, looked up, but seemed unconcerned. But, immediately when Sally took another step closer, the horse took off to the far corner of the bottom pasture, running in an excited way in a large circle. The stallion let Sally know that she came too close. To let Ballistic Stallion know that she had understood his "message" and

that she respected the distance he needed her to keep from him, Sally not only moved back to where she was located before the horse reacted, but also clear back to the other side of the fence. Ballistic Stallion became curious and, perhaps, a little puzzled by Sally's actions. After staring in her direction for a long time, he took two more trips around the far corner of the pasture and then trotted up towards the northeast corner of the pasture where Sally was standing on the other side of the fence. To Sally's amazement, he came to a spot no more than twenty yards from where she was standing. He looked at Sally as if he were trying to size her up. Animals, like children, are not easily fooled. They can tell if someone really cares about them and they also know when they don't. Sally loved and admired the stallion. She felt a bond with Ballistic Stallion because they both had a very strong spirit that others often just didn't understand. Their strong spirit sometimes got them both in trouble because other folks mistook their strong spirit for meanness or stubbornness. These folks just don't understand that a strong spirited

animal or person needs to be handled in a very special way.

The story of how Sally became the first person ever to ride Ballistic Stallion is a long story, but her success began when she moved to the other side of the fence when the stallion felt threatened by her nearness. The stallion learned that she respected his need to keep his distance and, as a result, he gradually came closer. He eventually allowed her to pet him, then to let her rub his nose, and, later, to give him treats of oats, which he ate out of her hand. After some time, she was able to put a bridle on him and lead him around the pasture. There were days, however, when Ballistic Stallion would not cooperate. He did not feel comfortable, for one reason or another, and on those days, Sally made no attempt to put a bridle on him. Later on, Sally was able to put a saddle blanket on him and walk him around the field. Soon after, she was able to put on a saddle. When she first put the saddle on him, he bucked a little, but his heart was not in it. Ballistic Stallion knew, from the first day he sized-up Sally, that she would be the first person to ride

him. He knew this because he could tell that she, like him, was determined and would never give up. He also knew that she understood him and would handle him according to the special way he needed.

Sally's parents were shocked and speechless, when one late August afternoon, Sally rode the stallion right up to the front door of her house. Needless, to say, Ballistic Stallion had a home for good, and a place in Sally's heart forever.

### **Drawing Directives**

Now I want you to get as relaxed and comfortable as possible. If you wish, you may close your eyes. I want you to try to get a clear picture of Sally and the stallion and when you are ready please draw them as best you can.

### **Follow-Up to the Drawing**

1. Tell me about your drawing.
2. What title would you choose for your picture?
3. If others are included in the picture, who are they and what is the nature of their relationship with Sally and the stallion?

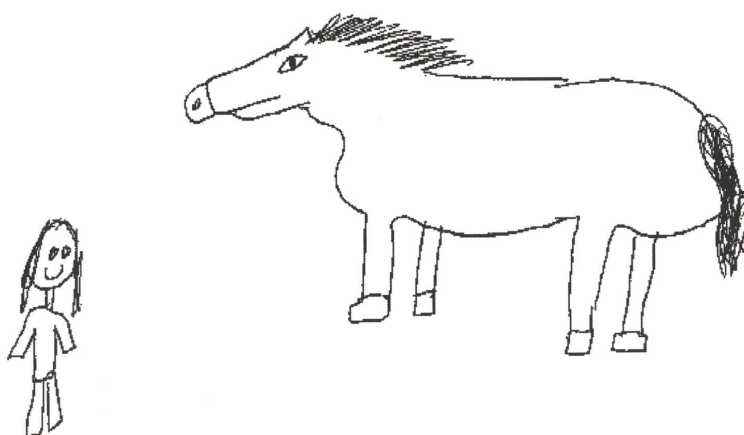
4. Does Sally or the Ballistic Stallion remind you of anyone?
5. If so, tell me about that person. How is that person like Sally and/or the stallion?

### **Storytelling Directives**

Now I would like you to think of a time when there was something you were determined to do. Perhaps, like Sally, no one thought you would be able to do it, but you did. You showed the same fighting spirit that Sally and the stallion showed. It might have been something you were afraid to do, at first, like jumping off the high diving board, but you did it. Or maybe it was a time that your parents and teachers thought you were going to fail a class, but you pulled it out. It doesn't have to be as dramatic as riding a stallion that no one else could ride, but a time when you showed the same kind of fighting spirit that Sally and the stallion showed in the story. Perhaps it was a time when you felt like giving up, but you didn't. Now, when you are ready, tell me your story.

### Follow-Up to the Story:

1. What would you choose for a title to your story?
2. What does the story say about your fighting spirit? Your courage? Your determination?
3. What can be learned from your story?
4. Can you think of other times when you showed the same fighting spirit and did something that no one else and perhaps even you thought you could not do?
5. Pretend that you were asked to give a talk on the subject: Why you should never give up. What are some of the main points you would make?



### Child Drawing # 10 The Ballistic Stallion and Sally

Elizabeth's Story (11-years-old): It reminds me of myself. When I first started riding lessons I had to make the horse that I was supposed to ride gradually comfortable with me. Sadly this horse died recently but I have learned to do the same thing with the new

horse I am riding. Little by little I got the horse comfortable with me.

Please note: Since this story presents a significant opportunity to validate strength and determination in the child, the therapist can reinforce and highlight these assets further by asking the child if she would like to draw a picture showing her overcoming the odds to do something that others didn't think could be done.



## STORY SEVEN: BEHIND THE CLOSED DOOR

### The Story (Ages 9-12)

Jerome, age 12, was sitting in the principal's office, at Platte Fork Middle School, on a hard-backed, uncomfortable chair, for the twelfth time this school year, and it was only March. He knew that the principal, Mr. Reece, and his teacher, Mr. Pulley, were meeting with his parents. He could hear voices getting louder and louder, but he couldn't make out what they were saying. He knew they were deciding whether he would be suspended for the rest of the year, and given home tutoring, or suspended for five days and allowed to continue at school with a one-to-one aide. At this point, Jerome didn't much care what they chose behind the closed door because he had pretty much given up on school, convinced that everyone at school had given up on him. So, if they decided he couldn't come back to school the rest of the year that was okay with him.

Jerome was in major trouble after an incident in the hallway that took place in the brief time period between his social studies and science class, around 1:30 pm. Roberto had been teasing and taunting him all year long and they had been in fights before. In fact, about half of Jerome's visits to Mr. Reece's office resulted from some kind of fight or battle with Roberto. This time, however, it was more serious. Roberto called Jerome an "idiot" and "dumb cluck" one too many times and he took a swing at Roberto as they were going down the hall. Jerome missed with his punch, but Roberto didn't. He landed a hard right hook to Jerome's jaw. This not only hurt Jerome but also made him even more furious. He hauled off with a hard right of his own, aimed squarely at Roberto's head, but in the meantime, Mrs. Hansen, who was behind the boys when the fight broke out, stepped between them, hoping to break it up.

Jerome caught a glimpse of Mrs. Hansen and was able to pull back slightly, but it was too late to stop his fist from landing a blow to the face of Mrs. Hansen, who fell down in great pain. She was lying

on the floor, grasping her head with both hands, moaning in pain. Both Jerome and Roberto looked horrified and shocked. Almost immediately, a large group converged on the pair and separated them. The security guard and the assistant principal arrived quickly; otherwise there would have been a riot. A huge group of middle school boys and girls were staring daggers at Jerome. They were outraged that Jerome had hit Mrs. Hansen, a popular teacher, and unwilling to consider it an accident. Regardless of how it happened Mrs. Hansen was lying injured on the floor.

The security guards and assistant principal moved the group away from the scene, eventually breaking up the group and getting them headed in the direction of their next class. But not before a number of them shouted at Jerome, "We are going to get you for this!" "You are going to pay big time for this!" The principal grabbed Jerome by the arm and escorted him away from the angry crowd. The school nurse, Mrs. Reece, the wife of the principal, helped Mrs. Hansen off of the floor and took her to the nursing office. The assistant principal took

Roberto with him. Mr. Reece told Jerome on the way to his office that he had really blown it this time and that he would have to wait in the outer office until his parents arrived and a decision was made about what would happen to him

About 45-minutes later, his parents arrived. They were so angry with Jerome that they couldn't even speak to him. Jerome just looked at the floor. He could not look his parents in the eye. Jerome's jaw was really hurting, but what hurt a whole lot more was that he had hit and hurt Mrs. Hansen and that no one would ever forgive him for that, even though it had been an accident. He even had thoughts of making a run for it by bolting out the door, but he knew that action would make a bad situation even worse. The principal, Mr. Reece, his teacher, Mr. Pulley, and his parents were still talking loudly, expressing very strong feelings behind the closed door, while Jerome just slumped deeper into his chair.

## **Drawing Directive**

Now try to relax and get as comfortable as possible and try to get a clear picture of Jerome in your mind. You can picture him in the principal's office, in the hallway, during the fight, or anyway you choose. Is he alone or is he with others? Who else is there and what are they doing? When you have a clear picture in your mind draw that picture as best you can.

## **Follow-Up to the Drawing**

1. What title would you give to your picture?
2. If others are included, who are they and what is their relationship to Jerome?
3. What is Jerome feeling in your picture?
4. What do you think will be decided behind the closed door?
5. What are the strong feelings that were expressed behind the closed door by Jerome's parents? Mr. Pulley, his teacher? Mr. Reece, the principal?

These are simply samples of useful questions. Each therapist will have other questions specifically relevant to the child in treatment. This applies to all the follow-ups in this guidebook.

## **Storytelling Directives**

Now I want you to pretend that you are Jerome's friend and that you know him better than just about anyone outside of his family. You ask permission to speak with Mr. Reece, Mr. Pulley, and Jerome's parents before the final decision is made. You explain to Mr. Reece's secretary that you have important information that they should know about Jerome. She confers with Mr. Reece and he agrees to let you speak to the group of adults who are meeting about Jerome. Make up a story about what you would tell them about Jerome, important information that could influence the final decision about what will happen to Jerome.

## **Follow-Up to the Story**

1. What title would you give your story?
2. After telling your story, do you think the Principal and Mr. Pulley might allow Jerome back at school?
3. Have you ever been involved in a situation like Jerome's when you were in a lot of trouble for something that you didn't intend to do? What did you feel at the time?

4. What was the strongest feeling that Jerome had when he was sitting in the principal's office outside the closed door? What were some of the other feelings he was experiencing? Did you have any of these same feelings?
5. Has anyone ever gone to bat for you or stood up for you?
6. How do you think things turned out for Jerome in the long run? What was his life like when he became an adult?

This projective drawing and storytelling strategy taps into several key issues. It offers opportunities for expressing empathy and understanding for a child in trouble, a situation that many children in treatment easily identify with. It offers an opportunity to practice being helpful to others, a behavior, identified through research, as important for development of resilience. It allows for an "inner-world-reading" of the degree of hopefulness about the future and provides an opportunity to assess the child's perception of resources that can be tapped when in major trouble. Therapists should pay close attention to the strength and effectiveness of the case the child makes on behalf

of Jerome, as well as the affect behind it. Does the child believe that Jerome is worth advocating for, or does the appeal on behalf of Jerome seem half-hearted? The effort probably reflects similar attitudes toward the self.

This exercise, more so than the others in this series, allows for close identification with the central character since many children in treatment have had plenty of experience being in trouble and/or in the principal's office. Unfortunately, children coming to therapy often feel, at least in the beginning, that they are once again "in the principal's office." The crucial role of empathy can not be overstated in terms of preventing serious problems with aggression and violence. Development of the capacity for empathy can help to break a cycle of violence that has been passed on for generations. Parents can emphasize empathy in the follow-up of incidents involving some kind of hurt inflicted by children onto others. They can also require the child to express, in a sincere and heartfelt manner, remorse for what he or she has done and an understanding of how this



hurt the other person. This offers the child a valuable learning opportunity. There just simply is no more important pro-social skill than the capacity for empathy. Also, parents and therapists can promote self-empathy by creating a climate of acceptance in which the child knows that, while their behavioral acts will not always be accepted, they are loved and accepted by their parents, no matter what. In this emotionally supportive context, a child will learn to condemn specific acts (appropriate and healthy guilt) but will learn self-empathy and will not engage in self-condemnation (destructive sense of shame).

## "Jerome at The Office"



### Child Drawing #11: Jerome and Me

Drawing and Story by Mark (12 years old): Mark was so identified with Jerome's plight that he titled his picture "Jerome and Me." His story of what he would say in the meeting follows: Jerome has no patience and he can't control his anger and he can't believe what he did. This other kid, Roberto, is always making fun of him. Jerome is smart; he is fun to be with. He almost always is there to back me up. He is

like any other kid; he likes video games, sports, and wrestling.

When following up Mark's drawing and story, he described Jerome as feeling really embarrassed and upset. He is also lonely because nobody wants to be his friend after this happened. When asked what the decision behind the closed door might be, Mark said that Jerome would be suspended for about two weeks and given another chance, but only one more chance. He described both Jerome's parents and his teacher as shocked by Jerome's behavior, as well as Mr. Reece, the principal, as being "really mad." Mr. Reece can be seen yelling at Jerome's father through the window. In terms of the outcome, Mark thinks that his sticking-up for Jerome made a difference, and that he convinced the principal and teacher that Jerome could do better and should be given another chance. It is interesting that when making the case for Jerome, Mark made no mention that hitting Mrs. Hansen was an accident. This is probably because impulse-ridden kids, like Jerome, with whom Mark closely identified, after experiencing a number of similar

incidents, feel that no one is likely to believe that such an action could be an accident, even if true.

When Mark was asked about a time when he got into a lot of trouble for something he didn't intend to do, like Jerome, he described taking a candy bar from a store, when he was very young, perhaps five or six. He said that he didn't think it through and found himself in big trouble. Mark was quite taken with the expression he had drawn on Jerome's face when talking about his own experience of being in trouble. He described Jerome as being "expressionless, like he is in shock, like in a horror movie." Mark said that when he gets into trouble for something he didn't think through that this is exactly how he feels. Mark was able to recall an incident when he got into trouble at school, but another boy took the blame for it. That incident was the only time when he could recall someone going to bat for him the way he stood up for Jerome in the story. Mark's view of Jerome's long-term future is quite hopeful, paralleling his own turn around, since Mark has made considerable progress in anger control, in impulse and emotional

regulation and is now doing well in school. Mark sees Jerome getting a good job in the future after going to college. "He went on to be a wrestler, because in wrestling you can fight and he likes to fight." Mark sees Jerome as still angry and needing to fight, but able to re-channel his feelings in a constructive way while making a living doing it. This is a rather adaptive and creative solution, although one can certainly question the realism of such an outcome.

The title of this story has further symbolic implications that may be evocative for some children. In using potentially evocative techniques it is a guiding principle that the therapist must be careful to ensure that any activation of powerful emotions is something the therapist is prepared to handle. *The Decision Grid for Play and Child Therapy* (Crenshaw & Mordock, 2005a, 2005b, Crenshaw & Hardy, in press) was developed precisely for this reason to guide the child therapist in making judgments about the child's readiness to approach emotionally laden material. Sometimes inexperienced child therapists get into trouble

because of their need to prove they are doing "good therapy." By proceeding patiently and respecting the pace the child needs to go, they may feel they are "not doing enough." This becomes a countertransference issue that contaminates the direction of the therapy. The therapy then becomes driven not by the child's genuine needs but by the therapists' needs to demonstrate adequacy. Throughout this guidebook it has been emphasized that therapy should be child-responsive, not driven by the needs of the therapist to validate competence nor driven by some kind of misplaced loyalty to a particular theoretical approach or technique. The therapist should be familiar with a wide range of theoretical approaches and a comprehensive repertoire of interventions so he can call on what is needed at this particular time with this specific child in this situation and context.

One of the reasons that the title can be evocative for some children is the implication that important things go on behind closed doors. Not only the deciding of punishment as was the case of Jerome, but in families with appropriate

boundaries, the intimate lives of the parents with each other, and in some cases potentially destructive family secrets. An example of a positive secret would be the parents planning a surprise birthday party for the child behind closed doors. However, if the parents are hiding facts, such as the child was adopted and she is now nine-years-old and is likely to find this out accidentally from a distant relative or someone in the community, this would be an example of a potentially destructive secret. In my clinical experience secrets create serious trust problems. Sometimes the truth is not revealed until accidentally discovered in adult life, perhaps even after the parent dies. This almost always creates additional problems around trust for the child. I have come to believe with conviction that children can handle the truth as long as we prepare them and guide them in facing the harsh realities of life. What they can't handle is not knowing whether the people they rely on the most are being truthful with them.

## **STORY EIGHT: THE BUMBLEBEE WHO COULDN'T STOP STINGING**

### **The Story (Ages 7-12)**

A long time ago in the beautiful flower gardens at Partridge Park, about 40 miles south of London, there lived a little bumblebee that could not stop stinging. She even stung her friends, not to mention the foxes, the peacocks, the horses, the hens and roosters, the people who worked in the beautiful gardens, and all the people who came to see and enjoy the beautiful flower gardens. Her friends just couldn't understand it. They tried to talk to her in bee language, but she didn't want to talk about it. Each time they tried, she just flew off and stung someone else. No one knew what to do and most everyone, even those who wanted to be the bee's friends, were getting really mad at the bee.

One day the bee was gone for a long time. Everyone in Partridge Gardens, the gardeners, the visitors, and the animals including the foxes, the



rabbits, the peacocks, the squirrels, the chipmunks, and skunks, breathed a sigh of relief and felt much safer. Then one night the bee came back. Everyone was scared that the little bee would start stinging everyone again, but she didn't. The little bumblebee had changed and no one knew why. (Stop here if younger children get restless and are eager to draw and then summarize the rest of the story before giving "The Storytelling Directives").

Finally, one of the little bees, her most trusted friend approached the little bee and said we are so curious about where you went. What happened to you that you have changed so much? You used to sting everyone and now you don't sting anybody. Will you tell us the story? The little bee was quiet for a long time and then she said, "Pass the word, I will tell you and all the others tonight in front of the rose bushes."

There was much talk among the people and all the animals. Each one had his/her own idea about where the little bee had gone and what had happened but no one knew for sure. The little

bumblebees closest friends had a strong hunch that the reason she used to sting everyone, including her friends, was that she must have been stung herself in a very hurtful way, maybe more than once. They decided that the little bee must have made up her mind that, from then on, she was going to do the stinging and the hurting before anyone had a chance to sting or hurt her again. No one, however, not even the little bee's closest friends, had any ideas about where the little bee had gone and what had changed her so much. So as the sun went down and darkness began to appear, a huge crowd gathered in front of the beautiful rose bushes. The gardeners were there, the visitors who had come to the gardens to enjoy the flowers, some of whom had been stung by the little bee, the peacocks, the rabbits, the squirrels, the horses, and the foxes all gathered in front of the roses and the little bee said, "Now I will tell you my story."

## **Drawing Directives**

Before the little bee tells her story, close your eyes if you wish, make yourself comfortable and as relaxed as you can and try to get in your mind a clear picture of the little bee and then draw the little bee as best as you can.

## **Follow-Up to the Drawing**

Please tell me about your drawing.

Some issues for the therapist to consider:

1. At what stage of the bee's development is the drawing focused? Does it show the bee before or after the little bee's dramatic change?
2. Is the bee alone or in the company of others? If others are included, what is their relationship to the bee? Are they friends? Are they family? Are they enemies?

## **Questions for the Child**

1. What is the little bee feeling in your picture?
2. What title would you give your picture?
3. Is the little bee safe or in danger?
4. What is the bee doing in your picture?
5. Does the little bee in your picture remind you of anyone? If so, explain how.

## **Storytelling Directives**

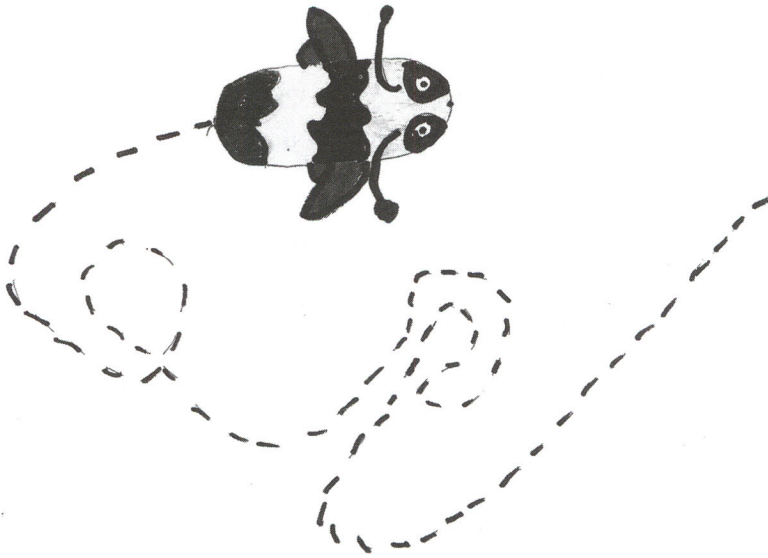
Now the huge crowd around the Rose Bushes has grown even larger with the porcupines, deer, and possum among the latecomers joining all the rest of the animals and people. They could hardly wait any longer to hear the bee's story. The little bumblebee said, "I know you all are anxious to hear how I made such a big change. My story has a beginning, a middle part, and an ending. I will start from the beginning. When I first came to Partridge Park, I... "

(The child continues).

## **Follow-Up to the Story**

1. How does the child explain the bee's transformation? Is it magical or achieved through persistent efforts?
2. Did the little bee accomplish this change alone or with the help of others?
3. Was there a clear turning point in the little bee's life?
4. The child's story of how the bee changed reveals important clues as to the child's theory of change and this is an important factor in the

psychotherapy outcome research. If the child's theory of how change takes place is not congruent with the approach taken by the therapist a desired result may be more difficult to obtain.



### Child Drawing #12 The Little Bee

Brian's Story (age 9): The bee met up with a wise old bee that told the little bee that you don't sting everyone. The wise old bee said you only sting those who frighten you. The little bee was much happier because now she had many more friends and realized that her good friends were right that she had been stinging everyone because she had been stung herself too many times when she was little. Even though she now understood that although she had a right to be mad, she did not have the right to sting everyone. The little bee had learned something very important and all the animals and people listening to her story did also.

Anna's story (age 11): Anna named her picture above "Flying Home," "The little bee is excited

because she soon will be home and seeing her friends again. She was stinging people because she had nothing else to do and she was bored. She changed because she has something else to do. She can play with her friends. She learned by watching all the other animals playing together and having fun that she could do this too. Before that she didn't think she could have enough friends even though other bees had tried to be her friend, but she couldn't see it. Now she can and she is much happier."

Anna and Brian's stories capture a key struggle in many children who, because of the defenses they have developed to protect against further hurt, are unable to take advantage of opportunities for closeness with others even when they are presented these chances repeatedly. It is almost as if these children make a pact with themselves that they will never let anyone get close enough that they could be hurt again. Sadly, like the little bee they end up lonely, isolated, and often depressed. The little bee, disappeared and went off by herself, and she began to notice that the other animals were having fun with each other. Then a "light bulb" went off in the bee's head and she realized, "I can do that." At that point she returned home eager to see her friends. Many children, however, have been so badly hurt, that when they tell the story, the bee does not come back and is out there

somewhere all alone and cut-off from others. Anna's story corresponds with positive changes in her school and social adjustment. She is more hopeful and tells a story of hopeful change and transformation based on observing what others do and realizing she was missing out on the fun things in life. The defenses, adopted by children, sometimes become so rigid and automatic that they end up depriving themselves of the social sustenance needed in order to feel that life is worthwhile.

## STORY NINE: THE ANIMAL THAT NO ONE WANTS TO HUG

I am grateful to Dr. Joyce C. Mills whose presentation, on June 5th, 2004, to the New York Association of Play Therapy in Buffalo, New York was entitled, "How to Hug a Porcupine." Her use of this clever metaphor inspired me to write this story.

### **The Story (Ages 7-12)**

One group of animals exists that if you get too close to them, you are almost certain to be hurt. Do you know what animals I am talking about? There are many large animals in the wild that might hurt you if you invaded their territory or came too close to them, such as, tigers and lions. But I am thinking of an animal that my friends and I often encountered on the hikes we took in the Catskill Mountains in upstate New York. One of my friends, Lewis, had a beautiful Golden Retriever named Teddy. Teddy was a wonderful dog and everyone loved him. But one day Teddy made the mistake of getting too close to this animal and poor



Teddy was in great pain because his face was covered with sharp quills. Now you know that I am talking about porcupines. Lewis had to pull each quill out of poor Teddy's face one at a time, causing Teddy still more pain.

We often encountered porcupines on our hikes but they never once acted aggressive or, in anyway, threatened us. Nevertheless, Teddy thought this was a playful animal and gave it a playful nudge. I can't help but think about the story from the porcupine's point of view. The porcupine is better equipped than just about any creature of its size to defend itself against natural enemies. So when we encountered a porcupine on our trail, it didn't need to be aggressive because it's coat of quills was all the defense and offense that a small animal could desire. This kind of protection, however, may come at a high price. I am curious about the story of a porcupine. It would seem that not one animal, not even its mother or father, could give the porcupine a hug or snuggle up to it. I wonder if the porcupine wishes that, at least

sometimes, it could shed its coat of quills and be able to romp and play with friendly animals?

It would be hard to find a more lovable, friendlier animal than Teddy and he was out having a fun romp in the woods. He had no intentions of hurting the porcupine, but never having tangled with one before, he thought it would be great fun to give it a playful nudge. How sadly mistaken poor Teddy was! It was painful to hear Teddy's yelps every time my friend Lewis pulled out one of the quills covering Teddy's face. The porcupine's natural shield of sharp quills does not distinguish between playful friend and dangerous enemy. So the porcupine missed out on this special opportunity for play and fun with this wonderful Golden Retriever that everyone couldn't help but love. How sad for Teddy, but it's also sad for the porcupine.

### **Drawing Directives**

Now I want you to get as relaxed, calm, and comfortable as you can and if you wish, you may close your eyes. Try to picture that porcupine in

“your mind’s eye.” When you are ready, if your eyes are closed, gently open them and draw the porcupine as best as you can.

### **Follow-Up to the Drawing**

Let’s begin by your telling me about your drawing.

Issues for the therapist to ponder:

- Is the porcupine drawn alone or with Teddy or other animals?
- Are there any people included in the picture? (Some aggressive children, especially those uncomfortable in the human world, often fantasize about being alone with animals or in a sanctuary in the natural world. Since people were in the story their omission in the child’s drawing may be of significance.)
- Explore with the child the feelings of both the porcupine and Teddy (if he is included in the picture).
- Is there action in the picture, e.g., a chase, a fight? What is the nature of the action? Aggression? Flight?
- Ask the child: “What title would you like to give to the picture?”

- Ask the child to: "Pretend that the porcupine and any other animals included in the picture, such as Teddy could talk. What would they say?"

## **Storytelling Directives**

Now once again, I want you to be as relaxed and comfortable as possible. If you wish you may close your eyes, but you don't have to. If it helps you to relax, take a deep breath in through your nose and out through your mouth. If the child seems tense, offer to do the deep breathing relaxation exercises with him. Now, that you are comfortable, I want you to try hard to imagine what the life story of a porcupine might be. Let's pretend that you have been chosen to be the voice of the porcupine and to tell his story to the other animals. Perhaps the other animals, like Teddy, have learned the hard way to stay away from porcupines, but had never stopped to consider what life is like for a porcupine. Imagine being a porcupine, well protected, shielded with sharp quills all over your body. No one dares to come too close to you, not even the friendliest of animals, like Teddy who just wanted to play. Once an animal like Teddy gets a face full of quills, it is

almost certain that the animal will never come close to you again. Try to put yourself inside the skin of the porcupine. Are you lonely? Are you sad? Are you angry? Do you like it the way it is? Are you happy? You are well protected but cut-off from everyone? Would there be any changes you would want to make? Be the voice of the porcupine and tell its story so the other animals can understand and really feel what it is like to be a porcupine.

So all the animals in the Catskill Mountains sent a representative to the top of Blackhead Mountain on the night when the porcupine agreed to tell its story. Teddy was there, and so was the black bear, the mountain lion, the squirrel, the snake, and so on, and they all were eager to hear the story of the porcupine. The porcupine began, "My fellow animals, my friends, and my enemies in the Catskill Mountains, I wish to thank you for giving me this chance to tell my life story. I am going to start from the beginning, but my story has a middle part and an ending. It all began when I was born right over there on Thomas Cole Mountain. I was ..."

(child continues from here).

### **Follow-Up to the Story**

The dilemma of the porcupine reflects the struggle of many resistant children brought to therapy. They have developed a good offense and, like the porcupine, a good defense as well. They do not allow others to get too close. It is difficult to get to know them and their life stories. By taking the voice of the porcupine, they may, to a degree, be able to express through the metaphor (from a safe symbolic distance) the story of what it is like to be isolated from others. It gives them opportunity to practice the crucial skill of empathy, to take the place of the porcupine and to imagine how it must feel. This strategy can also lead to greater self-empathy and understanding. If the children can appreciate the dilemma and pain of the porcupine, they may come to see themselves in a new light and not simply just "a bad kid," as so many of them tend to do. Some children can explore the meaning of their story directly, since the porcupine's anguish goes right to the heart of

the resistant child's painful struggles. For others, it can be more productive to remain within the safety of the metaphor. One way to accomplish this is to set up a question and answer session after the porcupine speaks. Some sample questions follow:

1. "My name is Teddy and you probably don't remember me, but I sure remember you. Did you mean to hurt me as badly as you did? I only wanted to play with you. I never wanted to hurt you."
2. The bear asks, "Did you always have that coat of sharp quills?"
3. The mountain lion asks, "Do you ever wish that you could take that coat off? Even, if it's just for a short time?"
4. The deer asks, "How do you think your life would be different if you didn't always have your coat of quills on?"
5. The rabbit in a timid voice asks "Mr. Porcupine, if you had a kind heart, how would anyone know?"
6. The fox pipes up and asks, "If you could be a different animal what animal would you choose to be?"

7. The snake follows by asking, "Why did you pick that animal?"
8. The chipmunk said, "I am just a little guy myself, I am wondering has anyone ever hurt you badly?"
9. The coyote had a final question, "Has anyone ever helped you? If so, how?"

### **Further Issues for the Child Therapist to Consider**

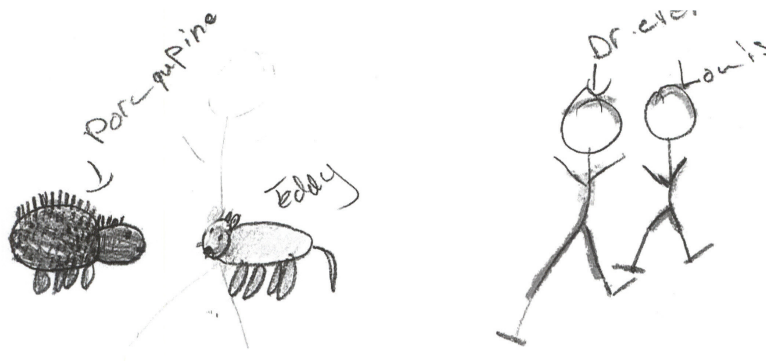
This story, like *Behind the Closed Door*, elicits the capacity for the most important of all pro-social skills—the ability to empathize with others. In this case, the empathy is not only for the porcupine, but also for the child who closely identifies with the plight of the porcupine. Self-empathy is usually required before genuine empathy for others can develop. This can be fostered by the therapists acceptance of the child. The child will gradually internalize the warmth, compassion, and caring expressed by the therapist and such internalization may be one of the chief gains made by the aggressive or resistant child in intensive therapy. This in turn lays the groundwork for development of the capacity of empathy, a crucial factor in



breaking the cycle of aggression and later the potential for violence (Fraiberg, Adelson, & Shapiro, 1965; Garbarino, 1999; Crenshaw & Mordock, 2005a 2005b; Crenshaw & Hardy, in press, Hardy & Lasloffy, in press). Like the porcupine, the children may have experienced little closeness with and acceptance by others. Each child's story may yield important clues as to where they are in the development of the capacity for empathy.

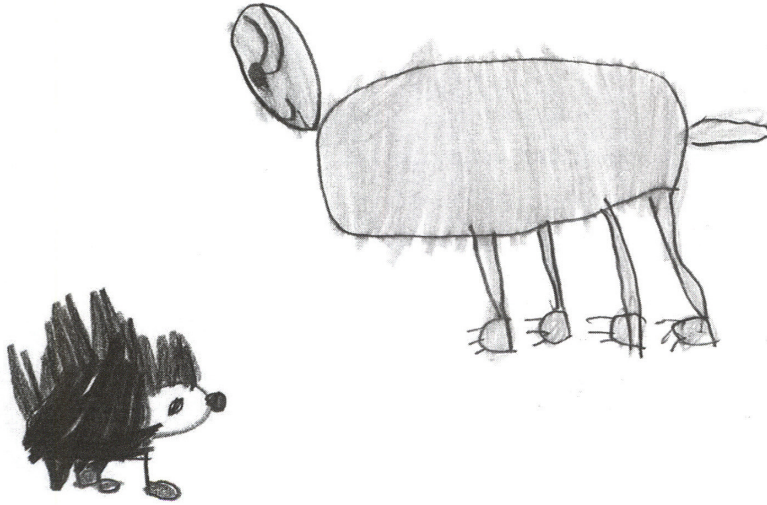
When children can, to any extent, put themselves in the place of the porcupine and appreciate the feelings of the porcupine, it is an encouraging and hopeful sign. Many aggressive children are totally stymied by this part of the task, at least at the beginning of this emotionally focused work. Empathy involves multiple skills, including the ability to take the perspective of another and to appreciate this perspective on both a cognitive and affective level (Epley, Savitsky & Gilovich, 2002). The latter capacity is especially underdeveloped in aggressive children. Some children can display skill at perspective taking and cognitive understanding

of another's position, but they display no affect when doing so—no true empathy.



### Child Drawing # 13: The Animal Nobody Wants to Hug

Willie's Story (age 9): "My life has been quite lonely. Teddy I didn't mean to hurt you. Sometimes I wish I could just play and romp in the woods like so many of you animals do, but no one can really get close enough to realize that I am not such a mean, or bad animal. I sometimes dream of the day when I won't need my coat of twills."



#### Child Drawing #14: The Porcupine and Teddy

Jose's Story (age 6): "Teddy if you still want to play,  
I won't hurt you. I am sorry"

Children under 7 usually cannot elaborate much on their stories, but there are always exceptions. Although Jose is unable to expand on the theme that the porcupine misses out on a lot of good and important opportunities for fun and connection with other playful animals, he is able to express regret and a willingness to begin anew and to apologize. His story came at a point in his life when his family faced a painful transition and his wish to make a fresh start connotes a hopeful and positive view of the future: one is willing to face mistakes and move on from there.



### Child Drawing #15: The Animal that Nobody Wants to Hug

Marks story (age 12): "This man fell and landed on the porcupine, he ended up getting a mouthful and handful of quills. It was a bad day for both."

This brief story is interesting because Mark, although doing much better at the time of this drawing, has a history of emotional and impulse regulation problems and frequently was out-of-sync with his surrounding world. It would be easy for Mark to identify with this unfortunate man who tripped at just the wrong time and landed on all things, a porcupine! Mark has had plenty of experience of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, doing something that was inappropriate at the time, and finding himself facing unpleasant and unanticipated consequences.

This kind of story is very typical of the experience of ADHD children and other kids with disruptive behavior disorders who frequently find themselves in trouble, showing poor judgment, bad timing, and facing unanticipated and unpleasant consequences. The impaired social judgment and lack of social awareness in addition to weak visual spatial skills and motor skills are also frequently seen in children with Non-Verbal Learning Disabilities (Rourke, 1995). These children are often mistaken for ADHD children in the early school grades because their poor visual-spatial skills frequently make them look like they are not able to focus when instead they receive so little information from their visual processing that they simply don't bother looking at people, they make very poor eye contact. Often these children are tuned in, however, through their usually good auditory processing skills. Their weak motor skills, however, may lead them to frequently bump into others, thus once again making it more likely that they will be mistakenly viewed as ADHD.

## STORY TEN: THE LITTLE PIG THAT DIDN'T FIT

### The Story: (Ages 7-11)

Many years ago, on a Northwest Missouri farm, a female pig was born that became known as the Little Pig That Didn't Fit. She was the runt of a group of eight piglets born on December 9th, 1961. Her bigger, stronger sibling piglets pushed her aside when it was time for the sow pig to let her piglets suckle. She often felt resentful because she could only receive the mother's milk when her pig brothers and sisters were completely satisfied. Sometimes the little pig would not get the nourishment she needed to grow healthy and strong. As a result, her siblings continued to grow bigger and stronger and she barely held her own, so the gap between her and her sibling piglets got bigger and bigger. Her brother and sister piglets made fun of her, as did all the other pigs on the farm. Farmer Wilson was also getting frustrated. He often would say, when chewing the fat" at Bud Meade's garage, where the farmers tended to

gather, especially on rainy days when it was too wet to plow, "I can't figure out what is wrong with that little pig, she just doesn't suckle well and all the others are growing bigger and stronger and the little runt is hardly growing." Farmer Wilkerson said, "She just doesn't seem to fit with all the others."

(For restless and younger children stop here and go to Drawing Directives. Summarize the rest of the story before giving the Storytelling Directives).

Things did not get any better. In fact, they got worse. The more frustrated that Farmer Wilson became, the more her siblings and the other pigs made fun of her and laughed at her, the less willing she was to do what was expected of her. She didn't seem to care whether she ate the food that Farmer Wilson put in the trough twice a day. She deliberately aggravated Farmer Wilson by digging a tunnel under his fence not only allowing her to get out, but also leaving enough space for other pigs to get under the fence. When Farmer Wilson rounded up the other pigs, chasing them back into the

fenced lot, the Little Pig That Didn't Fit made Farmer Wilson chase her all over the field before finally heading through the gate. This made Farmer Wilson very mad. He would often yell out, "I don't know what I am going to do with that runt pig; she just doesn't fit with the others. The other pigs picked up this theme and would sometimes mock the little pig and chant all together, "You are a runt, you don't belong, and you don't fit with the rest of us!"

One night, after another long day of using her snout to root underneath the fence, the little pig escaped under the fence, but this time she only dug deep enough to let herself out. In fact, the other pigs didn't even notice that she was gone. When Farmer Wilson came to feed the pigs that next morning, he also didn't notice that the little pig was no longer there.

The little pig traveled a long distance and she was now tired and hungry. When her little legs got so heavy she could hardly take another step, she was startled by a little girl's voice, "Oh Daddy",



"Look at the cute little pig." Farmer Porter stared at the little pig and said, "Well, I declare, that must be the little runt pig from Farmer Wilson's farm" "He is always talking about that little pig that doesn't fit with all the rest" "Oh Daddy," said the little girl, whose name was Joyce, "but she is so cute!" "Can we keep her, Daddy?" "Oh no, Joyce," "I have to call Farmer Wilson right away; he is probably looking for his little pig." Joyce was heartbroken and so was her friend Donna who had come to visit. Farmer Porter and his wife had horses and cows on their small farm but no pigs. Joyce and her friend Donna both thought the pig was so cute and would fit right in with the horses and cows on the farm. Farmer Porter was quite surprised, when he called Farmer Wilson that Farmer Wilson didn't even know the little pig was missing and didn't seem concerned about it. He said to Farmer Porter, "That little runt has been a nuisance ever since she was born and she just doesn't fit in with the other pigs, how would you like to keep her?" Farmer Porter was not expecting this and didn't know what to say, but knowing how happy it would make

Joyce, his little girl, he finally said, "Well sure, if that's what you want, we'll keep her" When Joyce heard that, she let out screams of pure joy, jumped up and down, and hugged her Dad and Mom, as well as her friend Donna. Her parents had never seen Joyce so excited and happy. Joyce and Donna ran out to the fenced in area around the barn and gave the little pig a big hug. Joyce picked her up and squeezed her with all her heart. The little pig had never been picked up or hugged before and didn't know what to make of it. In fact, it scared her and she started wiggling and squirming and screaming loudly. Joyce put the little pig down and she went running off to a dark corner of the fenced pen. The little pig was uncomfortable with the very thing she always wanted. The little pig was confused. She always wanted to be hugged, to be loved, to feel special, and to belong. Now the little pig had what she always wanted, but perhaps she didn't feel she deserved it. Maybe she couldn't trust it, maybe she was afraid that something would change or go wrong at Farmer Porter's farm and that, once again, she would be the Little Pig That

Didn't Fit. We will never know if any or all of the these things that the little pig worried about would come true, all we know is that the little pig was very uneasy.

Now Farmer Porter and his family could not have done anything more to make the little pig feel more welcomed. Even the horses went out of their way to make the little pig feel part of the farm. They got a kick out of the little pig running around squealing, always using her snout to dig holes in the ground. They thought the grunts of the little pig were funny and gave them a good laugh. They really liked the little pig. The cows were not particularly friendly, but the little pig soon realized that cows just do their own thing: chewing their cud, looking for a pond to wade into on a hot day, or finding a nice shade tree to sit under.

The little pig was puzzled by how uneasy she felt. She asked herself, "Why am I not happy?" "Joyce and her parents made me feel so special and, yet, I feel like I don't belong. It just didn't make any sense. The only place where she felt

comfortable was in the place where she didn't fit. Slowly and sadly, she began to move in the direction of Farmer Wilson's place. She kept going for a long time, using her talented snout to dig tunnels under fences that she needed to cross. Finally, weary and tired, she came to the fence that separated Farmer Wilson's from Farmer Porter's property. She knew that if she dug a hole under the fence, she would be back in the place that she didn't fit, but where she felt most comfortable. She hesitated, realizing she had a choice—perhaps the most important choice she would ever make. Her other choice was to go back to Farmer Porter's place where she was treated so well and where everybody had tried hard to help her feel she belonged, but the more they tried the more uncomfortable she felt.

### **Drawing Directives**

Now try to get as comfortable and relaxed as you can. You may close your eyes, if you wish, and try to get a picture of the Little Pig That Didn't Fit.

When you are ready draw as best you can a picture of the pig that didn't fit.

### **Follow-Up to the Drawing**

1. Tell me about your drawing.
2. Tell me about the others in the picture (if applicable) and their relation to the Little Pig That Didn't Fit.
3. What title would you give your picture?
4. What is the little pig feeling in your picture?
5. In your picture is the little pig at Farmer Wilson's or at Farmer Porter's place?

### **Storytelling Directives**

Now, I would like you to think about the choice the Little Pig That Didn't Fit has to make. She has to decide whether to go back to the Wilson's farm, where she never fit, but feels comfortable there or she can decide to go back to the Porter farm, where she was made to feel welcomed, but couldn't feel comfortable because she, too, had come to believe that she was the Little Pig That Didn't Fit. Make up a story about the little pig that includes the actual choice she made, what problems came

up for her on the farm she chose to go back to, and how it worked out in the long run for the little pig.

### **Follow-Up to the Story**

1. What would be a good title to your story?
2. Does the story of the "Little Pig That Didn't Fit" remind you of anyone? Have you ever thought even for a short while, that you didn't belong?
3. Did you feel, even briefly, that you didn't fit in school? Family? sports? club?  
If so, tell as much as you can about what that was like for you.
4. What advice would you give to anyone who feels that they don't fit or belong?
5. Can you remember a time when at first you didn't belong, but you stayed with it and in the end you felt you did belong?



## Child Drawing # 16: The Little Piglet

Drawing and Story by Elizabeth (age 11): The little piglet will go back to farmer Clark's place where they tried so hard to help her feel she belonged. Eventually they get more pigs and then the little pig no longer feels so special and is able to feel more comfortable.

Elizabeth's story succinctly captures a key dynamic for children with significant attachment problems. This story, like *The Misunderstood Mouse*, with a theme of "not fitting in" or "not belonging," goes to the heart of the conflict experienced by children with attachment disorders or those who fear intimacy. Children in the foster care system, those with frequent disruptions of early relationships, have profound difficulties with bonding and attachment. Like the little pig in Elizabeth's story, many of these children do better in group-care than in family settings because of fewer demands for intimacy and closeness in group-care. When other pigs were added to the farm, the little pig no longer felt so special and could feel more comfortable. When children are required to fill a void in the lives of parents or when they have a special role to play in fulfilling unmet needs of caregivers, they are put in untenable

positions. For children with attachment disorders, it is a tremendous strain to relate in the intimate manner expected within families.

In a previous writing, I explain this core conflict as a “crisis of connection” (Crenshaw, 1995). The prospect of closeness, longed for at one level, is also feared, if not terrifying. Frequently, these children will sabotage relationships when closeness starts to develop as a result of the anxiety aroused by the threat of intimacy. The sabotage may take the form of acting-out behavior or running away. When they run away, they are running from the warmth the attachment figures offer, warmth they have always longed for, but are too frightened to trust.

Although children with attachment disorders can become extremely disorganized emotionally by the possibility of closeness, paradoxically, they are also sensitive to any threat of separation or loss. This is understandable when you consider that many of the children have suffered multiple losses. Typically, these children do not reveal their feelings



about loss, perhaps not even acknowledging their losses to themselves. But if a shift in the environment occurs, which threatens separation or loss, the children react intensely. During my years in residential treatment, I was amazed by how often a child made a suicidal gesture after a particular childcare worker or teacher went on vacation or was absent from work or when the child's family underwent some change. When parents separate, the fear of many children is that they will have no place; they will not fit in or belong in the parent's new lives. These powerful issues of attachment and loss, acknowledged or not, can easily be overlooked. When working within a family systems orientation, whenever you meet with a child or a family, the question in the back of your mind should always be, "Who is not here, or no longer here, who was once important to this child?"

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