

# Working creatively with young children within a context of continuous trauma

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*This paper documents and shares one experience of a therapeutic group facilitated for young children within the context of continuous trauma. It explores creative ways to work with children for whom, at an early age, experiences may have been overwhelming and their trust in the world around them has been threatened by external events.*

**Keywords:** children, group work, partnership, trauma, community-based intervention

In September 2001, Ardoyne (North Belfast) Northern Ireland drew international media attention, due to a dispute centred on students and parents, and their route to the Holy Cross School. Both parents and children experienced verbal and physical abuse from protesters on their way to school on a daily basis. The Holy Cross School is located in an area that has had the second highest death toll related to armed conflict in Northern Ireland (Fay, Morrissey, & Smith, 1997). This is also an area with high levels of social deprivation, and therefore, physical and mental health is also poor. There exists an on-going, intense conflict between paramilitary groups of opposing political allegiance. The elements of this conflict include rioting, pipe bombs, car crime, intimidation of families and torture (so called 'punishment beatings'). The school quickly recognized the fear and terror the children and parents experienced, and mobilized support, within the community and beyond, for the families. Holy

Cross School is an all girls primary school, so National Organisation for Victims Assistance (NOVA) was asked to support the 4- and 5-year-old girls. We decided to use a group format as primarily this was a community experience, and there were broad similarities in reactions. Group work would also facilitate rebuilding of trust, counteract isolation and engage the community strengths and resources. Two practitioners from NOVA facilitated two groups of five girls for eight weekly sessions.

The girls presented a variety of somatic, mood and behavioural responses. These included sleep difficulties, angry outbursts, wetting (day and night), asking questions, being more clingy or more withdrawn, poor concentration, feeling sad and not playing very much. These responses are similar to those reported in the literature on the reactions of children to a threatening external event (Eth & Pynoos, 1984; Monahan, 1993; Pynoos, Steinberg, & Goenjian, 1996; Lanyado, 1999; Perry, 2000; Shalev & Ursano, 2002).

## **A community-based intervention**

While working with the girls we knew it would be important to support and strengthen existing resources in the community. Social disconnection is recognized as one of the most prevalent responses to community trauma and continuous traumatic stress (Crawford-Browne & Benjamin, 2002). In order to increase the sense of safety

and work towards reconnection, we worked in partnership with the community counselling service, the school (it was important and helpful to have a 'link' teacher) and the parents. To increase the girls' sense of safety, it was essential to provide support and psycho-education to both the parents and teachers – the children's main caregivers. A prominent theme for the parents was the need to manage their own emotions sufficiently to be able to support their children as they had also experienced the traumatic events. The input, support and partnership with the support matrix are essential in re-creating a sense of safety in which children (especially young children) can recover.

The establishing of partnerships was important in the preparation stage of the group, as well as throughout the period of the group, and when the group was over. Communication was essential in these partnerships. Examples of communication included: a weekly summary session to parents; sending a Face Your Fear Club story (see Figure 1 below) to home and school every week, psycho-education session with teachers before the group started; meeting with teachers (those involved with the girls in the group) during the group; meeting with parents before the group started; giving parents ideas to help with sleeping and talking about feelings (e.g. Feeling faces, Figure 1 below). This helped the adults feel there was something they could do. The teachers used the Face Your Fear Club stories in class and also adapted it by choosing themes from the story and opening up discussion and activities. We gave support to the parents and teachers by meetings at different times throughout the group process, and NOVA was able to provide information about trauma and its impact to help their own processes as well. Our partners could also identify their concerns and hopes for the girls

at the beginning of the group, and they could note the changes that they saw as they and the girls received support through this difficult and confusing time.

### **The group sessions**

The group sessions provided an opportunity for expressing, containing and transforming trauma-related fear. There were four main parts to the programme of each session: an opening activity, a physical activity, a main activity and the closing. The table below (Stewart & Thomson, 2005) states the different activities used, why and how we chose to use them. The key elements were to encourage the girls to understand and express emotion, decrease their physical arousal due to the trauma, and to give them an opportunity for corrective emotional experiences. The 'story' was the main activity of exploration in this group. The initial group meeting began with a story by Nancy Davis about a Bully Lion (Davis, 1999). The girls seem to enjoy the story and the characters within it. In the next session, the facilitators had written a story using the same characters, which focused on the girls' main concern and worry about not sleeping. This group of characters (primarily small jungle animals: Mary Monkey; Sally Snake; Kirsty Bunny) then developed into the base for the Face Your Fear Club. The girls identified with the animals and the messages of each week, so that the group became known as the Face Your Fear Club. The girls made badges to identify them to the group – which also proved useful in managing fears and worries outside of the group.

The group stories (Stewart & Thomson, 2002), linked with the art activity, were important in helping the girls understand their experiences and to help integrate new patterns of meaning. Through these exercises the girls regained a sense of personal control.

<b>Weekly Group program</b>	<b>Metaphor/'Implicit Message(s)'</b>
<b>(1) OPENING/GREETING</b>	
<b>Juice Drink</b> – before group starts each girl is offered a drink of orange juice.	Conveying a message of welcome (as opposed to the rejection of the protesters).
<b>Hello Ball</b> – rolling a ball to a person of your choice and saying 'hello' to them as you roll it.	Conveying a more personalized message of welcome. Also a message of group inclusion and participation.
<b>Feelings Faces</b> – each girl to choose two faces from a pack of six depicting important experiences from their week. Faces all placed on a board and then each girl tells the 'story' of their faces. Group leaders listen and respond, giving meaning and a context to their experiences	Conveying an interest in the group members and their feeling responses particularly in relation to the trauma. Encouraging emotional communication both individually and as a group. Providing an experience of emotional containment.
<b>Summary of Group Rules</b> – (1) only one person to speak at a time, (2) no hitting or hurting each other, (3) no making fun of each other, (4) if you feel sad or worried during the group you can hold Harry Hedgehog (puppet) and talk to him and/or one of the group facilitators.	Reinforcing group boundaries. Conveying the message that we want this to be a safe experience for the girls.
<b>Indicate Weeks 'travelled' on the Group Train</b> – one carriage on the train to represent each week of the group, two coal carriages represent the holiday breaks	Conveying the predictability and reliability of the group experience, which is particularly important after a trauma. Reinforcing the time boundary of the group. Introducing the metaphor of movement and change through the image of a train.
<b>(2) PHYSICAL ACTIVITY</b>	
<b>Physical Activity</b> – weeks 1 – 4 involved a 'follow my leader' game of physical exercises. Weeks 5 – 8 used an imaginary 'walk in the jungle' to the beat of a drum. The girls walked at different speeds and negotiated different terrain, rainstorms etc. supported by the drum.	Recognizing the mind–body link in trauma; how trauma can be stored in the body. Giving back a sense of physical control. In the 'Walk in the Jungle' creating a corrective to the girls' experience of walking to school during the protest.
<b>(3) MAIN ACTIVITY</b>	
<b>Reminder of Previous Week's Story and its Message</b>	Reinforcing continuity within the group. Linking experiences and learning from one week to the next.
<b>Story</b> – one facilitator tells the group story which each week centred on the FACE YOUR FEAR CLUB; a group of small jungle animals who were learning how to deal with a bully lion. The stories were written by the group facilitators week by week in response to their experience of the girls' needs (Stewart & Thomson, 2002).	Conveying important messages about how trauma affects you and about recovery in an idiom that is accessible to the girls. Encouraging the group to identify with the main characters in the stories and with the messages conveyed by them.
<b>Art Activity</b> – mostly this involved asking the girls to draw what they thought was the most important part of the story	Identifying and reinforcing the message of the story in a more personal way. Accessing the 'personal meaning' dimension of the girls' reactions to the trauma. Recognizing the importance of this dimension to recovery.
<b>Share and Talk</b> (about the art work) – facilitators listen, reflect and contextualize the various responses from individuals and the whole group	Conveying an interest in the girl's own personal responses to the story. Providing an opportunity for the girls to learn from each other's responses. Providing an experience of emotional containment and contextualization of responses.

Figure 1: Table outlining the weekly group structure and its implicit messages.

Figure 1. (Continued)

<b>(4) CLOSING/GOODBYE</b>	
<b>Complete Carriage on 'Group Train'</b> – each girl to make a mark on the train carriage that represents that week's session.	Reinforcing the time boundary of the group. Celebrating the girls' participation week by week. Preparing for the ending of the group.
<b>'Goodbye Bear'</b> – a bear hand puppet is passed around each of the girls in turn and the whole group says goodbye to the one with the puppet; the puppet answers "goodbye everyone!"	Reinforcing the message of inclusion and the importance of making a clear ending each week.
<b>Summary with Parents</b> – including presenting parents with a copy of that week's story.	Conveying the importance of parents to their children's recovery. Providing a link between the experience and learning within the group and home life. Supporting parents in their role. Providing parents with something concrete to do at home (read the story) as a way of helping the recovery process.

Some of the girls in the group were physically tense, and at times complained of aches and pains during the session. The physical activity was seen as an important component of the group, as it recognized the mind-body link and helped increase psychosomatic control. Due to the close mind-body links, the physical activity also assisted in relaxing the girls' physically and thereby reducing high emotional arousal so that new thinking and understanding could take place. Thinking about the physical activity *creatively*: the 'walk in the jungle' activity was used to journey through the imaginary jungle to the meeting place of the 'Face Your Fear Club' (where and when the story was read) as well as provided a counter experience of 'walking to school'. The girls' sense of control in this activity increased over the weeks, with fear and uncertainty being replaced by enjoyment and co-leadership.

Thus, the group provided a place for the girls to re-establish trust and safety. This was particularly noted in reduced sleep difficulties and the girls growing capacity to name and talk about feelings. The girls also had an increased interest in playing with friends again and were no longer afraid of being alone. Overall, the perceived benefits noted

by the teachers and parents were: (communication) '*it was important to be kept informed of the approaches used so we had some support as well*'; (emotional support) '*I've been reassured that I did do quite a lot of good things*'; (understanding and meaning) '*without the group we were getting frustrated and going around in circles, not knowing how to explain things. Now we see such a change in ourselves and in N*'; and (management techniques) '*J isn't as much afraid of being on her own. . . she still loves the stories and I think they gave her some reassurance that things aren't all bad*' (Stewart & Thomson, 2005).

## Conclusion

It is possible to re-establish trust and a sense of safety in children through a relatively simple intervention, if one works in partnership with teachers, parents and, if available, a community counselling service.

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