

‘I can see you, you can’t see me’
Focusing oriented therapy with Children: a fresh approach ⁱ
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Those were the words of a 12 year old boy called Bram, after he wrapped himself in toilet paper and pretended to be a mummy. I mirrored his words as he laid himself on a table and lay still . . . for more than 15 minutes. I occasionally let him know that I saw his chest rising and falling and invited him to sense inside when there was any inner movement and to just follow it. Then I simply waited. Eventually he began to move slowly and shuffled towards me a bit stiffly. He was really walking like a zombie.

As he reached me he said: “I can see you and you can’t see me”.

I mirrored these words back and invited him to sense inside if they had a quality or if there was an inner place where they were coming from. Smiling, he said: “Yes, this is about me” and started to unwrap himself, throwing the paper into the room with lots of energy. Before this session Bram had not looked me in the eyes ~ afterwards he always made eye contact. When his father came to pick him up we shared this story. He was very touched, realizing that these words and descriptions exactly fitted their way of being. In this article I will describe my working process with Bram, who is diagnosed with Asperger syndrome. He experiences panic attacks and has lots of anger. He had several different therapies, none of which really worked or were attuned to him enough to make any discernible difference. Our way of being and working together evolved as a step by step process of moving forward with a lighthearted sense of spontaneity.

Attitude

A child can form and hold strong connections with their implicit knowing, their own self-governing, with what can be sensed in the body and with their Felt Sense (FS) of life experiences. Sometimes this is implicit, just waiting for the right moment and quality of attention to bring it to light and sometimes it asks for and needs a bit more exploration. The mirroring and pausing aspects of reflection are essential for me and remain at the core of my basic attitude. This is a never-ending process of development requiring the therapist to stay in close connection with her/himself, through their FS.

In essence, as a therapist, I am mostly with my own Felt Sense ~ checking how and when to respond and when not to intervene. I am careful with process questions; listening to what may be behind words, attitudes, and behavior, as a way of quietly intensifying and deepening my empathic capability. I must stay with the ‘tension-field’ between structuring and following, always returning freshly to ask inside: "In this moment . . . am I contributing to the developmental process of the child’s personality?" and/or "Am I where the child is? . . . Am I connected with the child?" The attitude I carry is crucial, pointing to the essence of Focusing with Children and how it differs from the way we may work with adults.

I aim to maintain an awareness of the four main areas of connection to a FS: bodily awareness, symbols or imagery, connection with your life or story and the emotional quality. Working with children I am always looking for a fresh entry point to the aliveness of the moment, through any one of these. It is this commitment to check in freshly with both the connection and the ongoing contract being formed and reformed with the child that sets it apart from other approaches that may be used with adults.

As a therapist, I ask myself again and again: "Are my thoughts, speech or actions against...to...for...about...the child?" This enquiring attitude supports me to be near and to be with a child. I constantly ask: "Is this unfolding more from 'the outside to the inside' of the child, or from 'the inside to the outside'. Trusting and being connected to the implicit wisdom of any child in front of me and the wider arc of the process itself, allows me to work confidently. I want to share some important elements of my way of working with children that facilitate the step by step development of a child's inner process.

First Contact

I use body language as a constant reference point and offer open questions about any distressing situations in a child's life that may often be ~ tangled. I keep one eye on facial expressions and gestures and if I notice something happen that may point to some emotion being active, then I mirror it. Like; when his eyes change, his hands tighten or if his feet start moving quickly. These elements all come from inside with no interpreting . . . just mirroring. All kinds of feelings become clearer. It's like looking through a microscope to give all our senses some attention. Then children are both seen and heard within the safety and creative centre of their own way of being.

Contact- contract

Initially Bram said that he was upset and afraid he couldn't handle situations. He was very angry with his sister and sometimes his parents. We agreed to give these feelings attention and to find ways together, from the inside out, for how these feelings may want to be expressed, to unfold and to discover what they needed or wanted. Bram really wanted to be "happy", so this was our contract and our direction.

I am aware that this is always his direction during each step forward that we make together, whether that is full of newness or whenever we retread old ground. When there are new elements of emotion forming, I check in with Bram about whether it is ok that we give these new things some attention. The purpose of this is always to allow Bram to stay in control of the process. He guides himself, supported by my containment and I keep renewing a fresh, open connection with him, making the direction and the forward steps explicit. I am letting the child know my intention (I am transparent and congruent) and when the child doesn't want or can't follow the next step . . . then I move back and pause . . . returning to the previous step of the process instead of always trying to offer something 'new' that may not be wanted or needed.

Working with the Body

Children need to make a bodily connection and ground themselves solidly. The first few times we worked together, Bram clearly had a lot of energy. Immediately I attuned to this and so there was no 'sitting down and inviting the attention to go inward'. Instead, we used his bodily sense of this energy to make a more grounded connection.

Working with children who have Asperger's syndrome draws you to find ways of describing their FS of the whole inner energy, because it is often harder for them to connect with separate feelings or some body parts. For example: their energy level can often be like 'a tornado, my inner volcano, a lion or . . . a whushhhhhh!. It is much easier for them to relate through metaphorical language as it can articulate the energy of things altogether and may also imply the direction they want to move in or point to whatever aspect in them needs some attention.

On one occasion I saw that Bram's feet were restless, so we invited them to start to move more. He stamped his feet, jumped up and down and moved around using his arms and his whole body. I invited him to sense the difference between moving faster or more slowly and I also had a body map available to him, made on the computer, on which he could draw where and what he was sensing inside. This became evident as Bram expressed: 'I want to concentrate better. I can't relax and focus enough'. 'I want to be more slow. I feel like a madman'. And also, 'How can I end my activities more gentle. It's hard, I cannot do many activities at once, so I get frustrated, how can I do that better'? So, we also agreed that each time we worked together we would start with bodily movement. This would become our contract and his structure to give him a feeling of safety.

Bram 1

What followed the invitation to 'draw his body a little' was a good example of Bram more fully inhabiting his body. After we did some movement together he stayed with his attention in his feet, one foot was on a new piece of paper and the other foot on a separate sheet. He drew all kinds of colored lines inside his initial outline. Then he grabbed a fresh piece of paper to draw his head and then another, drawing other body parts. We then looked at all these separate elements lying on the floor together. Suddenly, he remarked that: "It seems like a puzzle, all kind of loose things, loose elements". I asked him which part needs attention. He said "my feet". He looked at his feet, looked back at the drawings and drew something more of how it was inside his feet. He shared that his feet were old with a lot of "happenings" and that "they had experienced difficulties but they were still happy". Then it finished naturally. We agreed that some other time we could look at other body parts.

Over the following weeks I invited Bram to check his inner body in the same way. Some more body parts got attention and their inner stories emerged from out of this new way of working.



Listening in Three Directions

Listening to your own FS, Reflecting the FS of the child and Inviting the child to be more attuned to their own Felt Senses. Those are the three directions. It seems simple though it is not easy at all. It is an organic process of consistently finding the right balance between mirroring, reflecting, pausing and also allowing the right description or expression to emerge from the felt sense form of just summarize how it all is now.

Trusting the process is a particularly important aspect of FOT with children. The more you are able to stay connected with your own FS the more you can sense what the quality could be

of the child's FS. This is always speculation. (Even when we may have a clear, strong FS we are always have to check this with the reality of the child's senses and their responses)

Mostly a child will not have any immediate words. Offering small attuned pieces of reflections and choices of a possible FS allows the child the elbow room inside to sense deeper into what 'suits' them. As a guide we use our own FS as a kind of compass. Only after my own inner pausing and balancing of all these elements: can we really offer an attuned intervention to a child.

Bram 11

Another moment in the therapy, when Bram was very angry, showed the delicacy of the interaction and relating between me, as a guide, and the child. His mother brought him that morning to therapy with the words "just solve it please". Bram was enraged, shouting at his mother. When she left the room, he visibly settled down. His eyes were almost closed and he ignored me. Without warning, he walked to a large closet in the corner of the room and remained quietly inside. I did nothing to disturb this activity only mirroring what he did; that he was entering the room and moving to the closet.

While he was inside I resisted the urge to look in the closet and just waited. Every so often I invited him to bring his attention back to check inside how it was inside right now. I carried no expectation of a reply. I reflected: "there was some emotion when you entered the room and maybe you could check inside how this emotion is right now, or if it wanted to do something?" Bram kept quiet for more than 35 minutes.

The whole time I was waiting I could not see or hear him, apart from catching the sound of his breathing. Suddenly I saw his little finger around the door, then his arm, then his face, then his huge smile and his wanting to have a pillow fight like we had done at other times. I just mirrored his whole behavior and we fought with the pillows. At the end I invited his hands to express something of how it was inside right then, but he could not. When his mother came back she saw another son altogether. When I asked him if he wanted to share any of the stories he replied: "I stayed in the closet and I was able to start to really move from out of myself instead of other people asking me. I really needed this time ". I mirrored this back, invited him to check where he could find this starting point again. He just held his hand on his belly and smiled. Both Bram and his mother left with a smile.

Boundaries and Safety

When working with children it is particularly important to be aware of your own boundaries. More clarity within yourself about this will improve the level of safe containment that you can confidently offer to a child or a group. It is important to be as congruent as possible and there are some specifics of language that support us in that intention. For example: using the word AND instead of but. "I see your feet running through the room AND that's not allowed right now", "I see your fists want to smash the window AND it's not safe to do that here. Let's find a safer place for you, your hands and for us both. "

Bram tended to hold energy in his body. The more time he spent with me the freer he felt. He always liked to move and walk though sometimes he became a little too enthusiastic. Then he wanted pillow fights. There was always some anger connected with this so I was very aware of safety aspects and offering him clear boundaries at the time. Structure is important here and so instead of just letting him fight for an hour I would make a contract for 5 minutes pillow fighting and then we would check inside how it is (offering a chance to pause the situation between us) and then another 5 minutes and then finding a step to a more personal issue. I would always repeat these structures to maintain consistency for any child.

Bram 111

An example of boundaries and safety was a moment in therapy when Bram was becoming more and more liberated in his movements. As a consequence his anger was more available for him. Mostly this was internal and we did some more pillow fighting to support him to be more connected in his body. There was a visible, discernible change here. Bram was more and more into hitting the pillow as if the anger took over his whole body. I mirrored this process back and invited him to make some smaller steps with me so that he could stay more in control instead of the anger taking over his whole body. He looked at me and we both agreed that we would first make ourselves aware of our whole body by stamping our feet and then letting our hands follow the invitation to express any anger that was perhaps still inside.

Bram drew his inner anger here:



Afterwards, he was much more able to hold his inner anger. He described it as if “there was a hammer banging on the inside of his body and the pressure was growing step by step. It was a little animal in his head that got wilder and angrier and the only thing that helped this animal was . . . to explode! After he drew this picture we had a pillow fight with a new awareness of what this little animal needed. He told me the animal felt much softer, less angry and that the anger did not get hold of him as it had done when we started.

Mirroring and Suggestions

These are necessary elements of the basic attitude in Focusing with Children, though they are more subtle and delicate in nature, than at first glance. Children are often quite capable of "talking" about something: the more you reflect, the more this will encourage them to "talk" instead of sensing inside. So it is important to find a balance of mirroring the qualified words and supportive senses in their language instead of just mirroring everything.

There are characteristics to mirroring when being with children that are well worth noting. A good way of mirroring builds more depth of inner connection, trust, courage, safety in the child, and can carry forward the inner process of discerning different possibilities. You can mirror what a child says or shares, particularly something ‘special’ and also what the child does and shows with its body. The emotional quality and tone of bodily felt feeling matters greatly in discerning what is sensed behind words and behaviour: a discovery, a visual change or the indication that something positive or new has come.

How the therapist expresses their hypothesis about what they think is going on within the child's world can have a positive impact on the unfolding process. The expressions are tentative and respectful. These are some examples; 'Would you like to hear what I'm feeling inside about what we're doing?' 'It seems like....' 'Sometimes there are children who...'. 'Maybe something in you...' Always make clear to a child that he can always disagree whatever you suggest or reflect back. The child can check inside if it feels all right, or if their body disagrees somehow with anything. Encourage children to say "no" when something does not fit. Keep checking, regularly, with the child for any quiet "no", both verbal and nonverbal or in any other way. Active mirroring, in contrast to asking questions, gives more space to children to explore themselves.

Sense the difference for yourself between "was this an exciting play?" and the open quality and curiosity embedded in the quite different statement "well . . . this was an exciting play . . ." followed by simply waiting for what comes now, freshly, from the child, into this open and welcoming space. Timing is crucial to these interventions as well as intonation of the voice and the subtle quality of our own state of mind and intention. I make choices and take decisions constantly when mirroring which can lead to felt shifts, if we greet whatever comes without judgment in the inner body of the child. Again, simply said though often not so easily done. The relationship between guide and child depends on the quality of our connection to our own Felt Senses. (see Listening in 3 Directions, above)

Symbolization

Children are already able to symbolize from their FS at a young age, though they may not easily find words. Symbolization using creative expression is easier for children and therefore the most accessible way for them to express their experience.

Words and language can arise from the inside out, instead of learning from the outside in. Children may have no solid language for their feelings yet and so you can offer them a possibility of expressing how 'it' feels inside, in their own way. When you allow them a creative pathway to symbolise their feelings and senses through movement, sound or art making, they can find it easier to freely express and explore themselves and their inner senses. I always say: 'let your hand choose the colour' 'invite your hand to start moving from the inside out' or 'your hands know what they are doing'.

I do not ask for any words of explanation once a child is symbolizing. When children are allowed to develop their own rhythm and experiencing process, something is generated. The specific mirroring/reflecting of the guide makes space for sensing behind words and behavior, perhaps for a subtle emotional quality or new symbolization arriving without any clear meaning yet. In general my intention is always to maintain connection with my felt sensing while I am expressing anything relating to them.

Symbolization through play, drawing, clay and storytelling is like a continuous 'finding a handle' and 'resonating', (two of the steps from Gendlin's *Focusing (1981)*) allowing 'something inside' to be heard and move forward. Sometimes a child is accompanying its expressing with words. The therapist can invite words to come after the expression: 'Does the drawing have anything to tell us?' or 'Which part of the drawing could use some attention from you?' Or you both can look at the colours, direction and weight of lines, mark making and both the place inside where the child drew from and the place where they choose to draw. My attitude and invitations are not in any way about analyzing or judging. Instead, I support children to find their own words for what is expressed and to discover and explore what is going on in their body through drawing. Other things to note include; what is the child's wish, their desire or need and what supports the process to move forward in small, incremental steps.

I want to share an example now, of symbolization in Bram's creative process. Earlier I described how he expressed his inner anger. This example is about how I supported him to express anxiety.

Bram IV

Bram told me that he had a nightmare and was really scared. He did not feel heard or understood by his parents; this makes him even angrier. I invited him to sense inside for how and where his feelings were. He was not able to and became even more frightened. He could not make a bodily connection and was overwhelmed by images. I explained that I saw his need and that something seemed to be holding everything inside. I suggested that maybe he was able to describe it to me, so my hands could draw his image. It was immediately clear to me that this would support his process. Step by step his inner FS showed itself on the paper through my drawing. I kept checking that he was in control. I saw that his whole body was involved and that his attention was fully concentrated. I also saw his body relax more as the expression became clearer.

At the end I invited him to check inside, if this drawing was a good representation of his feelings and if he wanted to add something more (maybe with his own hands). He clearly and directly said 'no', 'this is really my nightmare. It's inside my chest. It wants to come out, with his axe'.



We looked at it together and step-by-step his inner story began to unfold. This figure was a dwarf that always haunted him while he was sleeping and that scared him. Seeing and facing him now, on the sheet of paper, brought relief and Bram wasn't so afraid anymore.

We both looked at the expression and found that the crux of this all was that the dwarf was not able to move. He just stands still. Bram became really relieved and said that his hands wanted to tear the drawing apart. I invited him to do this, while I invited him to check with his feelings inside. So he did. With each tear of the paper, he became more alive. His chest was not painful anymore.

At the end he was very glad. I invited him even more to be involved in the process. I asked him to check if his hands could, right now, draw how it was inside - Bram was happy to do that.



After drawing his anxiety as a whole like this, his hands then wanted to draw his inner self. He felt really FREEEEEEEEEE, happy and empty. So far he has never had this nightmare again.

Endings

Bram and I have worked through his issues for eighteen months and I still work with him. At first we met weekly and after twenty sessions we agreed to meet fortnightly. Both Bram and his parents have witnessed many changes: he has found more inner peace, his confidence has grown and he is much more able to share his thoughts and feelings. He has become more playful, is making real friends at school and has developed more trust in himself.

We agreed together that at the end of this year we would stop therapy. The issues that still need some attention relate to finding ways to identify when he has a problem and finding possible action steps that he can take to really 'do' something about it or when he needs to ask for help and support from other people. We always decide together about any next step that should happen.

Summary

It's not possible for me to capture the essence of Bram's process here or to relate the whole story of an approach to Focusing with Children. It's about a unique relationship that emerges over time and a consistent way of being with a child, using the Focusing steps and process as a guideline.

Regardless of the age of the child ~ when a parent, teacher, or therapist has the basic attitude and makes space for a child, Felt Sensing can be simple and direct. In this approach children learn to trust their deepest inner sense of rightness and to trust their bodily feeling with all the truth and meaning to be found there. They will come to involve their bodily felt sensing in their everyday life just by getting more used to listening to it and knowing that this feeling carries meaning under the story that helps us all to relate to and deal with problems in daily life.

Rather than deny our difficulties, sorrows, and troubles or drown in them, we can allow ourselves (whether adults or children) to feel the difficult, sorrowful, scary or angry feelings without another layer of anxiety, judgment or criticism. Children can clear space inside by learning to see the value of briefly placing problems outside themselves, through lighthearted, creative play and self-expression. For example: drawing, painting or sculpting the whole problem or their bodily sense of 'it'. In this way any problem becomes more visible for a child and solutions can emerge from the expression itself or a difficulty may even become quite resolved from the expression alone. As a consequence, children remain more firmly at the center of their understanding of thoughts, feelings, emotions, situations and their whole

lived experience. They can learn to concentrate, listen more empathically to other children and also to resolve conflicts within themselves and with others.

In this article I have mentioned several elements worth bringing to the attention of anyone working with children using a Focusing attitude, including:

- Maintaining consistent contact and making fresh contracts about next steps and a fluid awareness of the main entry points into a FS: bodily expression, symbols or imagery, something around the story or life connection and the emotional quality present.
- The importance of consistent mirroring and inviting things back to the body, where our implicit knowledge of things is carried. For example: ‘May I ask, where do you notice it in your body? How does it feel? And how does ‘it’ want to be expressed . . .?’
- Always being aware of our own boundaries first, our level of congruency and the resulting knock-on effects in corresponding levels of safety and confidence for the child.
- The benefits of metaphorical language, creative play, symbolization, repetition and consistency of structure during the ongoing process and how these behaviors build trust. Together, all this supports children to discover the next right step for them, to make in their developmental process.
- Also be aware of how it is possible to repeat each Focusing step, over and over again, so that they form the foundation of the structure and spirit of being together.

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