

Staying Connected: Reflections on Teaching Children Focusing in Different Cultures

By René Veugelers



In 2002 I started my Focusing journey in the Netherlands. I immediately felt the strength and power of Focusing. Marta and Ynse Stapert were the Focusing trainers and coordinators who influenced me most. After I became a Children Focusing Trainer I assisted them in several trainings in Europe. After the Dutch Focusing conference in the Netherlands in 2006, I became intrigued by the worldwide Children Focusing community. Over the following years I went to conferences worldwide and presented my Children Focusing work and experiences. My experiences with children and teenagers from working as a psychiatric nurse and social and art therapist from the early eighties, combined well with Focusing.

Over the years my Children Focusing approach and methods became widely known within the Focusing community. When Marta and Ynse retired, I inherited their work in a natural way and took over their training style.

Four key elements have evolved from my experience in working with groups:

- 1) Concrete experience (doing/ having an experience)
- 2) Reflective observation, (reviewing/ reflecting on the experience)
- 3) Active experimentation (planning, trying out what you have learned)
- 4) Abstract conceptualization (concluding, learning from the experience)

As a result of travelling all over the world and working in many different countries and cultures I realised that different cultures need different types of trainings and attunement. I also learned that participants from different cultural backgrounds integrate their experience of Children Focusing training into their own life, work and unique culture, in different ways.

These four key elements are integral to my own style of training, and have been developed through years of experience with different groups and different cultures. I have learned to attune to the wishes and needs of the participants in different countries and cultures. I am flexible in choosing the conditions that are needed for the safe holding environment of the group depending on the particular group that I'm working with. I also offer and integrate my daily Children Focusing practice into the training.

I would like to give some examples of my personal experiences, which highlight some differences and similarities in different cultures:

Hong Kong

My most recent experience was teaching a group of 25 participants in Hong Kong. When I arrived in Hong Kong, I immediately felt a little lost. I couldn't understand the language, the signs – even the smell outside and the atmosphere on the streets was completely different from my own country. In addition there is a 24/7 aliveness of economy in the city of Hong Kong. My safe place became my Hotel room on the 17th floor with a view over many other flats and apartments.

When I started my training program with the group, they all were very eager to learn and experience. But my usual structure and way of working did not resonate with them. Most of my small attunement exercises brought confusion and uncertainty to the group. They didn't get and understand my way of

Dynamic Focusing. Their lack of understanding led to a lot of questions – these questions were always relevant but I wanted to give them training experiences.

Working in a bigger group was difficult because it made it more difficult for people to feel safe to open up. They were all waiting for someone else to open up – like a sort of respect. Also I couldn't read their body language, so again I felt lost. It was as if my usual way of working and attuning didn't connect with them and even brought some resistance. After my tough experience of that first day, on the second day I shared my personal experience, and that I needed to find a different way in with them. I made some proposals for them to work in smaller groups of two or three people instead of working and exchanging in a bigger group – they immediately agreed to this.

I found that I became much more active as a member of these smaller groups. This slowed down both their and my own process and created much more safety for everyone. In the exchanges taking place in smaller groups, I heard and felt that each of them was looking towards the needs of the children in their culture. So, together in the main group, we acknowledged how hard it could be to connect with children in this more or less closed culture. We also acknowledged the importance of being aware of the constant bigger cultural influences.

This made my training approach and method even more precise: how you can integrate Children Focusing experience into your own process, your life, and even more importantly, how to tune into the needs of children. With this clarity and awareness, my training skills and style gained a new depth, and I also found different ways to support my lost parts and to maintain grounded presence.

And at the end of our intense training everyone felt more open, more grounded and more playful! This is our expression of that process and making of the certification picture:



Gaza

Another unique experience was my training week in Gaza with Mary Jennings and Jerry Conway. I supported them in offering a Children Focusing module at a trauma centre. Again the staff and workers were very eager.

The group had been trained in Focusing for adults, by Mary and Jerry and we prepared a module for working with traumatized children. Immediately with my opening exercise I felt their tension and hesitation to go inside and explore their own process. Their need was more for how to be and work with children and give them a happy and joyful experience and positive input. I understood their need in their complex life situation and I explained how Focusing worked for me and how to support sadness, anger, anxiety, grief and trauma. I explained to them that the more they were able to hold and be with their own felt senses related to these essential emotions, the more they would be able to hold and be this with the children. They understood but their resistance stayed.

I made my training very practical with smaller steps and supporting participants to integrate their own life experience into their work. It was treading a thin line: are they able to Focus themselves and face their own deeper emotions and felt senses, and to slow down their (understandable) need to support the children and give them something positive. I felt that something different and additional to the traditional Focusing process was needed.

During the training days it felt a bit artificial and I wondered if they really understood my goals and intention. Every day we made a huge space for questions related to understanding the behaviour of the children in a different way, and I realised from the sensitivity of their reactions and feedback that they easily felt judged.



The last day was very special and unforgettable. They repeatedly asked me how all this could work for children and they want to see me do it in practice. So, on the last day we agreed to bring some children to practice. I felt overwhelmed because there were more than 20 kids, ranging in age from three or four to late teens. (They had brought their own children, their family members). Without speaking their language, I immediately connected with them and three of my students were able to hold the group and offered some of the exercises from our training. What was really special was that I also felt the need of the children for something positive, AND how challenging it can feel not to be able to solve their problems immediately.

Throughout this whole day I was able to be a part of the group of children AND I supported the three students to slowly integrate the new Focusing language and interventions into their existing way of

working. Basic Children Focusing questions or instructions like: “Where do you feel it?” or “Invite your hand to express how it feels inside” or “Say hello to yourself and all that is alive and noticeable inside” became magical moments because the children immediately understood this different way of working (and the students of the centre could practice their newly learned skills and how to integrate these into their own unique way of working).

We all felt that the holding space and environment is also an important influence in this process.

This picture on the previous page captures some of the aliveness and connection.

Summary

I learned that different cultures need different types of trainings and attunement. I also learned that participants from different cultural backgrounds integrate their experience of Children Focusing training into their own life, work and unique culture, in different ways. It needs time, space and an open attitude from me as a trainer to hold and be aware of their cultural influence and background, and accepting that we can't go faster than the slowest process!

Despite all of my training experience, I never know in advance how a foreign training will go. Important aspects are:

- It is an adventure and challenge to take care of my own presence: what do I need to stay grounded in a different environment?
- How this influences me as a trainer?
- Are my usual exercises attuned to the need of the participants?
- How the participants are able (or not yet able) to find a transition into their own unique way of working?
- How can I stay flexible and open to their current life situation and integrate this into their training experience?
- It is a adventure to create an open training atmosphere where the participants feel safe, understood and are able to integrate new skills in their own unique way.

Related to the Children's work:

- A child will immediately notice and feel the different approach and attitude. (They are natural Focusers at every age!)
- This is beyond language! It is more about the way you are in presence and how you are offering interventions (instead of offering solutions)
- Each child has a need to be heard and seen in their specific environment and life situation.

If you have questions about the possibilities of the Children Focusing approach or training, my contact details are below, or look at the (new) Children page of The International Focusing Institute website where you can find a contact person in your country:

<https://focusing.org/felt-sense/children-and-focusing>

René Veugelers is a Focusing Coordinator specialising in Children's Focusing, with an emphasis on the non-verbal world. He teaches parents, therapists, teachers and others how to be with children in a Focusing way, how to (re)connect to their own inner child and how to work with their creativity. His experiences as an Art therapist and psychiatric nurse, and his training in Emerging Body Language (EBL), embrace an expanded richness of creative elements and support a natural unfolding of creative process. René lives and works in the Netherlands and teaches internationally. He is renowned as an enthusiastic and inspiring teacher.

www.ftcz.nl rene@ftcz.nl

