

STAYING IN FOCUS

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FOCUSING AS A SCHOOL PROJECT

By **HARRIËT TEEUW**, *Focusing Trainer, The Netherlands*

In Holland we organized a foundation called "Focusing with Children." In this country, we need a foundation to contract with the school directors and to approach donors to raise funds for the project so it is easier for schools to adopt. The foundation then can pay the trainers, while the school only pays for the needed materials.

We promoted a program which employs a Child Focusing Trainer (ChFT), who first prepares teachers with an Introduction. We believe that Focusing with children can only take place if the adult can do it.

Next, the ChFT teaches the children in 10 sessions of 45 minutes each, one session per week scheduled during the school day. The teacher participates also. The ChFT is a model for the teacher. The teachers do the Focusing exercises together with the children, so that they experience Focusing themselves.

In the eighth and ninth session the teacher guides the children in "clearing a space" and "focusing on something inside," using drawing as the medium of expression, under supervision and coaching by the ChFT.

We are developing a research-questionnaire to use before and after the program, for the children as well for the teachers. Our intention is to translate the program into English this year. The protocol was written by Marta Stapert and Jos van de Brand.

All lessons begin with, "Say Hello to yourself and place your hand on the part of the your body where you feel something the most." This we make into a ritual. Then we have a short introduction and talk with the children about the topic of the day. After that we do some sensory-motor exercises in order to make contact with the body. For example, "Stamp with your feet on the ground as hard as you can." Then we bring our attention to the inside and put on paper what we experience. It doesn't have to be a beautiful picture, but it has to fit with the inside feeling.

One Example of a School Project I am coordinator of lunchtime care at my children's primary school. I, representing our foundation, offered the Focusing School Project to the director and got a contract. The project took place between January 2004 and May 2004 and consisted of three parts:

1) An introduction of the project to the school Director. The director then deliberated with the teachers, and after that the director and I made the contract.

2) Ten lessons for each of three groups: Group 1 (ages 6-8); Group 2 (ages 8-10); Group 3 (ages 10-12).

3) Four meetings with the four teachers of the school and (sometimes) the Director, apart from the sessions in the classroom. The first of these meetings was to make appointments and to speak about practical things, along with a group Focusing experience. In the second meeting, still at the beginning of the project, I gave the teachers an introduction to Focusing, the Focusing attitude, reflection and a Focusing experience.



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The third meeting came halfway through the project. We talked about the experience of the project so far, the different roles of Focusing-companion and teacher, and how to use Focusing interventions during the day. During the fourth meeting, which fell after the 10 sessions in the classroom, we evaluated all that had gone before.

Experiences With Teachers Since the meetings with the teachers took place at the end of the school day, we always began in an disorganized atmosphere of unrest. Sensing the hurriedness they brought with them, I began these meetings with “clearing a space.” They were surprised by the effect on them, how they could let go of their stress and thoughts and create a space for my teaching. Now they knew what the effect of “clearing a space” could have for their pupils.

Three of the teachers had an open and curious attitude towards the project. The fourth teacher had obvious reservations. For me it was good to know this, so we could give his reserve attention, and so we could accept and acknowledge it. Along the way he discovered the value of the project. Altogether it stood for the openness and respectfulness with which we worked together as a group.

Experiences in the Classroom In the classes we noticed how naturally the children brought their attention inward when asked. The invitation went like this. “We are going to listen inside and maybe it will help to close your eyes (they know that if they don’t want to, they don’t have to.) Now feel your feet on the floor, remark how your body is supported by the chair, notice your breath going in and out...you don’t have to change anything, just notice how it goes...and now bring your attention inside, through your chest and stomach area...

Nearly without hesitation, they drew from their felt senses on their paper. But Focusing was not easy for all of them. One boy, who in other lessons demands a lot of attention, didn’t like to close his eyes and listen inwardly. For me that was fine as long as he didn’t disturb the other pupils. He asked me, “Miss, can I draw about war?” As the subject was “something nice,” I shivered with this idea...took a moment to let that go...and asked him if that was what came up in him when the subject was “something nice.” “Well, I like to play war games on my computer.” I encouraged him to draw his nice feeling. When we evaluated the project, this boy said that it was good that he could draw what he wanted to. This was obviously important to him.

On the request of the teachers I made two lessons (the 8th and 9th) into a combination of both Focusing and the social-emotional program they already use in school. The teachers were especially grateful for that because it gave them the idea that they could integrate Focusing into their own program.

Some Evaluative Remarks from the Teachers There was a remarkable difference between the first drawings and the later drawings. During the first lessons making a nice picture was important. Later on the pupils used more movement and colors with the crayons across the paper.

- I have become conscious of the words I use and how I used to make judgements and even say them out loud.
- It brings rest/quietness in the classroom.
- Expressing themselves by drawing is for most children a way for relief. Not for all of them. Others prefer to use words in their drawings also.
- I hope and believe Focusing gives children more space inwardly.
- I’m going to use Focusing in my social emotional lessons.
- To reflect works perfectly and gives more connection with the children.
- I’m going to have the children reflect one another, because it supports a good relationship between them.
- For the younger group it is too difficult to reflect each other. The teacher is the model here.
- I like the idea of letting them clear space with little notes in the classroom.

Some evaluative remarks from the children

- I’m going to draw at home when something is difficult for me.
- When I’m drawing, there comes more of it.
- I like Focusing-drawing more than just ordinary drawing. Focusing-drawing is about something.

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Short Focusing Moments For Busy Kindergarten Teachers

By *ÁGNES KOVÁTS, Focusing Trainer, Hungary*

I am a kindergarten teacher working in the Freinet approach, a person-centered pedagogic method based on the free self-expression of children. In our school, children are accustomed to being listened to personally. We record the free wordings that accompany their creations. Parents can see and read them when they come to fetch their children. So, when I learned Focusing, it seemed to be a normal way for me to work with children.

I would rather call my Focusing with children Focusing moments. We kindergarten teachers work with groups of 25 children. That means that we cannot spend more than 2-3 minutes working with one child individually in the presence of all the others. But miracles can happen even in a short time.

The primary condition for a miracle to happen is that I am all right in myself. Difficult situations can evolve within minutes. Those are annoying both for the child and for me. I can only be with the child in a Focusing way if I have enough internal free space.

One everyday example of a difficult situation: Frequently a parent doesn't pick up their child on time, when the kindergarten closes. The child starts to be worried, seeing the other children leave for home; then the teachers leave too. I am naturally also nervous, wondering what will happen now. I know at the same time that I have to give a feeling of security to the small child who is in a difficult situation. I need to provide security in insecurity.

Short moment for myself: At such a time, I prepare an internal free space. First, I find an accepting, friendly atmosphere in myself. Then I examine the place of disquiet or insecurity in me. Where is it felt most, and what is connected with it? Then, I gather up the whole and let it withdraw, like clearing a space. Then I turn my attention back to my chest and see if I can breathe more freely. The whole process doesn't need to take more than a few seconds. After that I can be with the child without any emotional blocks. We talk, play, and draw.

Short moment for a child: As we wait, the child may express his worry. I propose that he sense where he feels it most. I say, "What happens in your body, that is so worried about when they will come? Where in your body (here I gesture with my hand across my body) do you sense all that? Where do you feel it most? How does it feel there? How can we express this?" The answer can be a gesture in the air, a movement with a toy, or a scrawl on the paper. It brings a sigh of relief and relaxation. The small child peacefully plays further. I have observed that I have a special, intimate relationship with those children with whom I have experienced such Focusing moments. It is often expressed by a blink of the eye that is understood only by us. Also, they nestle up to me when we meet.

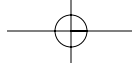
Focusing Moment with Parents: My Focusing Trainer friends helped me create a Focusing moment for participants in our parents' club. First, I asked parents to turn their attention inside, into an internal accepting space, and then to imagine the moment of morning departure from their children. I say, "Can you stay with what happens in your body when you imagine your child crying because you are leaving? Where is that in your body? Formulate from that feeling some heartening and comforting words...write them down...then draw a 'message' for your child."

I bound those sheets into a book, then read them to the children during nap time. I also bring it out when a small child misses Mother. The bigger ones bring out "the book

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SOMETHING FROM NOTHING

IN SIX AND SEVEN YEAR OLD LEARNING DISABLED CHILDREN

By LAURA BAVALICS, *Focusing Trainer, USA*

A few years ago I was part of a new program in the school system in Budapest, Hungary. They created a special class as a bridge between pre-school and elementary school for children who had both serious learning and behavioral difficulties.

The children, between six and seven years old, and their parents were supported by a helpful and caring team of psychologists and special education teachers.

I was one of the head teachers in this class. When the school year started it was clear to me that one of my most important goals was to help these children become friendly with themselves. So it happened that Focusing became part of our routine.

From the first day, and every day, we sat in a circle drawing and doing Focusing exercises for about half an hour. The children discovered their own bodies. Often we started the process by paying attention to parts of our bodies and to their signals. Then I invited the children to take a trip or journey.

For me it is always important when I am Focusing with children that we find a safe place inside. In this way, whenever the children venture into their feelings and something comes up, be it frightening or sad, the safe place is still there. The children can feel the safe place inside and can return there whenever they need to.

It is always a wonderful feeling when children share their inner experience with me. Now I would like to share with you some of the important things that they told me about their drawings of their safe place. (I always listen and mirror them when they share their experiences. Here I will only record what they said.)

A: "This is a brain! Yes! That is the strongest part of my body. I can fit all of myself in it. That is my safe place. They can't break that at least."

M: "This is a drawing of some kind of bell. It's snowing. This is me, or eventually, my mom. It's her. Well, I can say it's me."

G: "These are the mountains. There is me. There is a little mountain that's here inside me. This is a mountain too. This is my safe place."

VR: "My safe place is in my heart."

R: "This is a cave. There are the flowers under the roof. This is me, and that is the finish line. Beside the tree is a protector thing. I use it so the house won't fall over."

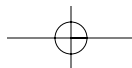
What you have just read, they shared with me after two months of Focusing each day. It was touching to hear them because there is so much inside them.

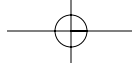
Two months later, the children became more open and the class dynamic started to change. Initially, the aggression and frustration they felt turned against one other. Slowly they were able to pay more attention to each other and to solve their conflicts. The aggression didn't disappear, but it wasn't directed against one another any more.

The life situation of these children hadn't changed as yet (divorced parents, adjusting to step-parents, living in a shelter); however, the children began to recognize their difficult feelings, and they realized that they needed something to help work out the feelings inside. One day the whole group spontaneously started an interesting game, a healing game. They started to fight against the NOTHING. They were running with sticks and yelling. Because they were so much into their game, I asked only a few questions and found out the NOTHING was there.



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It comes sometimes, they explained, and they can feel it. The NOTHING is invisible, and they have to fight against it because it wants to hurt them. You can imagine how touching it was to see what they were doing with that. Before, these children were against each other. Now, together, they were fighting something that was in all of them. Later, when we were Focusing as a group, I said, “Maybe we can invite the NOTHING back, to see how it is inside you now.” They listened inside; they felt their safe places. Then we paid attention to the NOTHING. After a drawing period, they shared their experiences with me one by one.

Here are some of their experiences.

G: “This is when I don’t feel well. When the NOTHING comes. I feel it in my heart. Like I am in many closets. This is what helps, to draw about it.”

A “This is a NOTHING. It’s always around me, and inside me too. It’s always following me. It’s a good thing that it is here, I can fight with it. I feel it in my heart and in my brain, like a danger coming. I am lucky that I am not alone, because then it would win over me. It would be good if it would die.”

R: “This is the three-headed NOTHING. Under the ground, there is a NOTHING world. It has a ‘confuser.’ I always hear it when it comes--like a scream. I would like to get it, so this trembling would stop. The NOTHING is gone, it goes down here.”

O: “It happened in the back yard. I saw the NOTHING. I started to fight. I felt it in my heart that I like to fight. I win over the NOTHING. Then I don’t feel it. The only thing that helps is if I trick it.”

G; “Drawing One is ugly. Drawing Two is ugly too. Drawing Three is me, with the NOTHING behind me. It’s invisible, and it has a sword in its hand. The NOTHING can come any time, and it’s always invisible. But I can see it, because I have special glasses on. I always have the glasses on and they are invisible too.”

Z: “This is kind of a strange feeling. I don’t really know. It’s kind of purple around my belly. The green is the Nothing. It doesn’t feel good when it comes, but I just have to call my friends and then it feels better.

That was the beginning of the wonderful connection that these children made during the one year they were together. What happened to the NOTHING? It’s simple really. The NOTHING wanted to show itself--show that it existed. It needed attention and care. Slowly the NOTHING game disappeared. We continued Focusing every day and listening to each other--expressing and drawing whatever came from inside each child.

This is how I learned that SOMETHING comes from NOTHING. 


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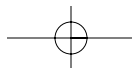
of parents” by themselves and “read” it. This is their favorite book. Other colleagues have adopted this idea, too, without knowing Focusing. Parents and children who have shared this experience have a different relationship.

Focusing Moments with Colleagues: Although my director gives me a chance every year to explain Focusing to my colleagues, so far they are only curious; they make jokes about it. In informal moments, I tell them a lot about how I am with the children. Last time they expressed surprise, “Why do the children love you so much? They are playing quietly when you are near them at the playground. We talk to them a lot, but they don’t obey us. You only make sounds like ‘aaah’ and ‘mmm’, nodding your head!” I explain that the children feel seen and acknowledged by my sounds, which express better than words that I am accompanying them. I make eye-contact, turning my body towards them and eventually touching them.

When I first learned Focusing and experienced fantastic changes in myself, I thought that this method would spread fast. After all, it does not need extensive training; it is based on our innate abilities, and anyone can learn it. I understood that it is more than a technique; it is a view of life that can best be spread by experiencing the process. I sum it up in Gendlin’s words, “The most that we can do is to be present as a fellow human being.”

Steps of Outreach: Freinet Pedagogy is an international movement I encountered in France and Germany. In Hungary there are more than 100 Freinet pedagogists in Kindergartens, and around ten special Freinet Kindergartens. Whenever there is a conference of Freinet pedagogists in the country, I offer a presentation or workshop about Focusing with children.

Beyond my job as a teacher, I give Focusing training weekends. I offer articles about Focusing with children to pedagogical magazines; they used three this year and maybe one next year. I am full of ideas about how to spread Focusing with children, convinced as I am that it helps children grow up with a treasure inside. 



Focus On: *Mari Orban*

By *JAN HODGMAN*, *Focusing Trainer, USA*

Mari Orban is a children-psychodrama therapist and certified Family Systems psychotherapist. She founded The Focusing Institute in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, where she and others began a private practice in child and family psychotherapy. She was also the chief organizer of the 5th International Children's Focusing Conference.

JH: Hello, Mari. Can you tell us how you started using Focusing with children?

MO: I began learning Focusing in 2001 from Marta Stapert, Madeleine Walder-Binder and Ynse Stapert, when they held the first Focusing with Children training in Romania, at Cluj.

At that time, I worked as a psychologist in special education, and I had a small class, including children with behavior problems, ADHD, and dyslexia. There were eight children, between the ages of 8-16, on many levels of emotional and cognitive development, many of them with multiple difficulties. I used Focusing for the first time with them, putting in practice step-by-step the knowledge accumulated in the training. Focusing helps reinforce in me the appropriate attitude toward a child. It helps me develop my own acceptance, openness and respect for every child's personality and inner resources. In that rather authoritarian school system this was not a prevalent attitude.

In the daily life of the school the children weren't admired or regarded as individuals. The goal was to develop them according to official plans, to produce measurable results, to control them. Focusing gave me a chance to slow down and understand much more the children's inner needs, to see their invisible, sensitive parts, to appreciate them. And that helps kids, too, to slow down and grow in their own way.

JH: Have you used Focusing in other situations?

MO: After spending three years at this school, I had the chance to use Focusing in a very special place. I worked at a baby hospital with very young babies (ages 1-36 months). I combined Focusing with "humanizing" early intervention programs. In this hospital babies had digestive and feeding problems, most of them from very difficult circumstances and facing long hospitalization.

One of my main tasks was to help their emotional development. In this situation a very useful Focusing step was mirroring, all kinds of non-verbal and verbal mirroring. And it was very important to give initiative to these small babies, who didn't have any experience of controlling their environment.

Sometimes it was emotionally exhausting to be the "caring mother" for thirty little babies, each of them with an immense need for love. I remember I used Focusing for clearing my inner space, to be open for the fifth, sixth, and seventh baby. It wasn't easy, but it was a very warm, nice period of my professional activity.

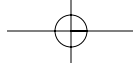
JH: Please describe what you mean by mirroring?

MO: Non-verbal mirroring reflects the gestures and the mimicry of the child, in a soft and gentle way, expressing acceptance and understanding. Most mothers instinctively have this attitude with their own children. I did it more consciously, aware that I have 30 minutes for each child, and in this bit of time I'm here exclusively for him/her, to listen to that special child's signs, to be involved in a personal communication with him/her. It's like a dance, in which the child has the initiative. At the same time, it's like a rising spiral; in this secure atmosphere the child gains the courage to try out new movements which are reflected, and then repeated by the child. In this step-by-step way usually something new appears, something a little more complex or different.

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FOCUSING IN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL IN JAPAN

By **KAZUKO AMAHA**, *Focusing Coordinator, Japan* (English translation by Eriko Amaha, her daughter)

Currently, all public junior high schools (ages from 13 to 15) in Japan employ a certified clinical psychologist (or, rarely, a physician) as a school counselor who comes to school once a week. Some grammar schools and public high schools also have school counselors. I, myself, work as a school counselor at grammar, junior high and high schools. I would like to share how I use Focusing in my counseling sessions to help teachers and students.

I practice individual counseling when students, parents, or a teacher visit the counseling room. Since my visits are once a week, I want to ensure that everyone in the school can use my services within my limited time. Also, I know it's not easy for anyone to voluntarily come to the counseling room. Many children have problems and lack the ability to talk about themselves. My hope is that the children can rediscover the source of wisdom that lies within each one of us. I am making progress slowly.

My activities center on the following three points:

1. I want children to realize that they have feelings and to focus on their bodies.
2. I counsel in a group (or class) in order to meet many students. Of course, I must do this with care and consider issues such as privacy. Meeting in a large group gives me a chance to understand the students and to encourage students to talk to their teacher or me or even visit the counseling room.
3. I create a harmonious counseling environment so students can help each other and solve problems themselves.

To make it easier to book time, I occasionally discuss with school principals or teachers the importance of talking about inner feelings and ask for their support. I try to do class sessions at least once a year.

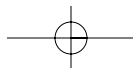
What I do in the classroom: There are normally 35 to 40 students in a 50 minute class. The classes most often requesting my help are junior high school students who are at the middle of puberty and have difficulty controlling themselves. I begin by Clearing A Space. As they are sitting on a chair, I ask the students to focus their attention on their bodies. As feelings emerge from inside, the students will be asked to jot their feelings down into a box drawn on a piece of paper, but first I explain that this box is to help organize their feelings. I tell them this task does not affect their grades. I usually introduce this session by asking them where their feelings are located. They give answers, which are neither right nor wrong.

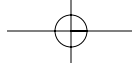
I use music to allow students to get in touch with their feelings and each change they experience. Music is the bridge to opening the communication between the students and their feelings. I prepare three different types of music. I play each CD for about 90 seconds. I also ask students to draw pictures to express their feelings as they listen to each piece of music. If I don't have much time, I ask them to tell what they are feeling out loud. Students discover that when I switch the music, changes occur somewhere in their bodies in a matter of seconds. It is quite important for them to capture those subtle changes.

Organizing feelings: Feelings can be confused and contradictory and in need of sorting just as a room or desk needs organizing. I hand out a prepared piece of paper for each student. After they have greeted their bodies, I ask students to sit comfortably and pay attention to their breathing, and I ask them to be as nice to their bodies as they would be to other people. I ask them to check inside. Anything that comes out from their inside place needs to be recognized and treated nicely. The students are provided with a paper displaying several empty boxes. "Ask your body gently, 'Is there anything you're worried about? Is there anything that bothers you or makes you happy?'" Let's



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put those things that came out into one of the spaces on the paper.” Students use words, pictures or colors to describe their feelings. I tell them, when they’re done, to ask their bodies if anything else is left. I keep doing this until nothing is left. Students can add anything they want. If they like, they can also put a lid on the box. If their body says it’s done, then the work is finished. I also ask them to answer the questions on the paper about scheduling times with me, either singly or in a group.

Afterwards: Usually, there are 3 to 7 students in each class who want to have a word with me. In addition, there are often students who come with their friends. I try to conduct a session with these students as soon as possible. In my counseling room, I have prepared a white board on which I have written down a poem. I also like inviting students to share other poems or drawings. Students who come to the room, read other students’ poems and write down their own feelings. In so doing, they share their feelings in a natural way. This is a wonderful process to watch. I also leave a notebook for them.

When I can use individual Focusing-oriented psychotherapy, I find that just being with them is most important. Mirroring is the best way to be with them. We should not forget to pay attention to our own felt sense. To help them express themselves by drawing, writing or playing requires an abundance of Focusing skills.

Focus On *continued from page 6*

It’s the same with sounds and vocalization. The babbling period is crucial in language development, and reflecting these sounds, like an echo, is very important. Many children in the baby hospital gave up trying to communicate, to babble, because they didn’t have a safe partner during their long hospitalizations. My main task was to help them enter into contact with other human beings, to recover their lost basic trust.

JH: And what is your work now?

MO: At present I’m working in private practice with children and adults, and I have a part-time job as school psychologist in a Montessori school, a softer and more child-focused atmosphere. I integrate Focusing in my daily work in both of my workplaces.

Most of the time I’m working in individual sessions with children, and I do Focusing-oriented play-therapy with them (4-12 years old). I don’t normally teach Focusing steps to the children, although there are some exceptions.

JH: Could you describe Focusing-oriented play therapy?

MO: Yes, there are three distinct levels where Focusing is involved: in the therapist's inner Focusing work, in maintaining the Focusing attitude in communicating with the child, and the third, very important level, in helping develop the child's own inner Focusing process, helping the child connect with his/her own body felt sense. Sometimes that can happen in an explicit way, like teaching the expression of felt senses by drawing, colors or movements. Sometimes the therapist can help to express inner feelings using a play-material, like a puppet’s or animal's emotions. Sometimes that can lead to the child's direct awareness of his/her own inner feeling, and sometimes it is enough just to have this identification with the puppet to help the child express heavy feelings and to feel understood by the therapist. In every case the child shows the way, and the therapist follows him/her.

Another special issue is contact with the parents during therapy. In an ideal situation, the parents are also coming for counseling, and we have a contract to work with them. But sometimes they don't want to come, and the therapist has very short moments of contact when they bring children to the Therapy Center, drop them off to have them “fixed,” then pick them up at the end of the session. I like to use these very short contacts with parents to “irradiate” something from the Focusing attitude to them. My experience is that many times the therapist's honest admiration, respect and appreciation for this “bad,” “problematic,” “unbearable” child, expressed by gestures or short words, can shift the color of the lenses of the parents’ eye-glasses. If the therapist (seen as “The Specialist”) enjoys being with their child, the parents may get a new perspective. Of course, it is very important to accept the parents too, including all their anxieties, even their lack of cooperation.

JH: Anything else you’d like to add?

MO: I maintain the Focusing attitude, staying in gentle and honest contact with the clients. Also I Focus with myself, right at the time and after the therapy sessions, letting all the session details connect and fall into in their proper place. It is then easier to be open for the next client.

