A Child's Fear of Choosing after a Traumatic Loss
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Your client is a ten year old girl who is so fearful of making friends she will not speak during playground activities. Her parents have told you their daughter lost her best friend in a traffic accident. Suggest some of the ways you may approach her fears and involve her interest in connecting to other children again.

An answer suggested by Ann E. Hale, MA, TEP

This child has experienced the pain of sudden loss and is coping as best she can to control her world so she doesn't experience this degree of loss again. My first efforts will be to find a workable connection and to help her feel at ease in the workspace and with me. I show her the drawers I have of magnets, several hundred small figures and objects which can be placed on metal stages, as figures in an auxiliary world. (Working with these is similar in principle to sand tray.) I also have a collection of pillows and stuffed animals and various sized chairs and areas of the room where we can control the lighting. I show her all the drawing materials and ask her to draw me a picture of "the very safest place she can think of." When she has completed the drawing I place it on a metal stage. Next, I have her choose a figure for herself and to place it somewhere on the picture. Then we make up a story about the picture and her. I ask her if she will allow me to keep the picture here so that there will always be a safe place here for her when she returns.

This will be a similar process to later having her draw a picture of her playground at school. She can choose figures to represent (1) children who want to play or talk with her; and (2) children she wants to play or talk with. Also, she can choose something to represent what gets in the way. At some point I will introduce the idea of her friend being with her. For instance, "If your friend was here whom would she choose to play with you?" "Does she understand why you aren't talking to anyone at recess? Who would she talk to?"

My guiding principle will be to help this child have a conversation with her friend and talk about things they didn't get a chance to say to one another. This child may not realize that her friend was also prevented from speaking to her and may have things to say as well.

Throughout I like to use made-up stories which I encourage to come from her. Stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end. The construction of a story is similar to life. Due to the sudden death of the friend the "middle" section of their story as friends did not get to be very big. One of the things we can do in the therapy is enlarge on the "middle" section and fill it with things they might have done together. I would look for opportunities to introduce other friends into these stories, to enlarge the social atom to

include others. When fears arise, they can be identified. She can choose figures for them and have conversations with me about what to do about them. She can also choose figures to represent her bravery and courage. This choice process is a way to re-connect her with the choice process in general.

She can construct the playground, and play with the notion of speaking to other children. She can practice speaking with them through the use of figures which she has chosen. This practice will provide a "rehearsal" and help her build confidence relating again. She can even practice telling the other children why she didn't feel like talking

Resource: Moreno, J.L. "The Social atom and death" in The Sociometry Reader edited by J.L. Moreno, et. al, Glencoe, Illinois, The Free Press, 1960, pp. 62-66.Â Â

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