



## **MAGIC IN PSYCHOTHERAPY WITH CHILDREN**

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“Magic is an innovative way of working with children. It is a technique that emphasizes child involvement, fun, action, and the use of imagery and metaphors. Counselors need to realize that they are only limited to their own imagination and that they perform magic every day without realizing it. They perform “levitation” by raising children’s self-concepts. They help clients “transform” their attitudes and behaviors. They even help children’s irrational beliefs and fears “vanish” while making self-confidence “appear”. All counselors are magicians in some way!”

Bowman, R.P. “Bob”. (1986). *The Magic Counselor: Using Magic Tricks as Tools to Teach Children Guidance Lessons. Elementary School Guidance & Counseling*, 21(2), 128-138.

Magic works because our brains are constantly filling in the gaps presented by the stimuli in our environment. If you’re forced to look away during one of those gaps due to a distracting event or person for even half a second, by the time you look back, the magician will have created the illusion.

Magic is a highly engaging activity that can get the attention of children quickly. It is useful in facilitating the child’s involvement with the therapist.

The anxious child will generally be made less tense and will then be freer to engage in higher-order therapeutic activities. Magic is a very effective distraction from tension/anxiety.

The child who is very resistant often becomes less so after such an “icebreaker.” The uninvolved or distractible child will usually become quite interested. Magic facilitates attention and involvement.

Magic makes the social worker more fun to be with and more attractive to the child. Magic contributes to a deepening of the therapeutic relationship. The social worker should not reduce themselves to the level of clowns.

Magic has also been used with disabled clients to help eye-hand coordination, patience and attending behavior (Bowman, 1986), as well as detecting depression in children.

Magic increases self-concept, can stimulate creative thinking, enhance the ability to think analytically, and increase interpersonal skills.

Simple magic seems to delight children and fill them with amazement. These magical illusions create an awe inspiring curiosity within children. This curiosity leaves them eager for more.

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### **1. Rapport Builder - Trust building.**

Using illusions may allow clients to process how it feels to be tricked or how it feels to trick someone else. It may provide an opportunity to discuss good secrets versus bad secrets. In a counseling relationship, the counselor may gain leverage with the child by revealing the illusion in an effort to encourage the client to be open about potentially guarded or sensitive information.

## **2. Recognition of boundaries and personal rights/safety.**

Magic arts may help clients practice the demonstration of appropriate boundaries by setting clear rules and guidelines during illusions and related activities. Clients may have to process their impulsivity mishaps and acknowledge the concept of the magician's personal space as well as their own. The idea of asking permission before performing a trick on someone can be used to highlight benefits of this element.

## **3. Applying lessons to remove barriers to learning.**

Specific issues may be addressed such as reinforcing lessons about the dangers of drugs and alcohol or the "misdirection" of advertising companies by using magic arts activities (Gilroy, 1998). The activities may prove useful for clients struggling with issues of grief or loss by processing loss in terms of where something goes when it disappears.

## **4. Empowering the child and self-esteem.**

After using an illusion in the classroom, a social worker may choose to teach the clients the trick. Not only is the social worker teaching them a new skill that they can repeat for peers or adults, but also allowing them in on a "secret" and allowing them some leverage, or control, that may be very helpful for some clients. The performer can potentially do something the audience member(s) cannot; therefore, helping to promote self-esteem and self-confidence.

## **5. Instilling hope.**

Instilling hope may transpire when the most difficult situations can sometimes seem to work out in the context of your illusion. The illusion may help to symbolize optimism, the possibilities of change, or turning negatives into positives. The magic arts counselor may incorporate what Purkey and Schmidt (1990, as cited in Spruill & Poidevant, 1993) referred to as the plus factor. The plus factor is the notion that even the most difficult situations can be made to seem easy. This conceptualization may be particularly helpful for clients who felt inadequate or have depressive symptoms.

## **6. The illusion as a metaphor.**

Using the trick as a metaphor for a specific lesson may promote heightened teachable moments by promoting social/emotional development and health/wellness in children (Gilroy, 1998). For example, magic illusions that "break out" or "escape" can represent overcoming obstacles and achieving goals. According to Spruill and Poidevant (1993) the use of magic objects and actions can metaphorically represent information that is not easily accessible to children and can bring to the surface heretofore unspoken thoughts and feelings.

## **7. Reframing.**

This concept allows one to look at things from another perspective and teaches the skill of reframing in the context of the magic illusion. The social worker may assign clients a week of trying to figure out a particular trick, then process what it was like to have to "think outside the box" and apply this skill to their own challenges. This concept may teach clients how to problem-solve.

## **8. Interpersonal skills.**

The social worker can model appropriate social skills when performing. This educational factor allows clients to practice or perform an illusion with peers or adults in order to exercise appropriate interactions, practice giving and receiving feedback, and practice presentation or assertiveness skills versus aggression. This may be an effective way for clients who like

excessive attention to receive it appropriately.

### 9. Group cohesion.

Magic illusions may be an effective ice breaker for small counseling groups. The social worker may perform an illusion in which teamwork is necessary in order for the effect to work. Clients also may be given particular roles to the particular dynamics of the therapy.

### 10. Assessment tool.

Magic arts can be used in conjunction with established techniques and testing to help gauge or assess for certain learning disabilities. Monitoring the response to certain magic illusions may be effective in highlighting depressive symptoms, hyperactivity or attention challenges, and frustration tolerance/anxiety concerns (Gilroy, 1998). For example, a client struggling with hyperactivity or poor impulse control may insist on the illusion being revealed or may shout out their theory about the secret to the social worker's illusion.

### 11. Academic learning.

Many illusions may help clients practice cognitive skills, such as following complex directions, sequencing, memory, conceptualization and problem solving. Furthermore, illusions tend to involve colors, numbers, alphabet/reading or mathematics.

Levin, David M. *Magic Arts Counseling: The Tricks of Illusion as Intervention*, Georgia School Counselors Association Journal, Volume 13, 2006.

## THINGS TO REMEMBER

- ✘ Therapist should not reduce themselves to the level of clowns.
- ✘ Use tricks on occasion, for short periods of time.
- ✘ To bribe or not?
- ✘ Practice a patter for the trick.
- ✘ The magician's ethical code of silence.
- ✘ Should use tricks on occasion, for short periods of time.
- ✘ Should not overuse their abilities.
- ✘ Not black magic or voodoo.
- ✘ Gradually build a small collection.

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