

Involving children playfully in family therapy

john casson and david steare

How best to involve children and young people in systemic practice and family therapy has long been debated and considered. For example, children have felt their realities have not been acknowledged in sessions (e.g. Strickland-Clark et al, 2000). When children attend family therapy they are usually brought to the session in the same way that persons can be seen as being brought to therapy by problems, rather involuntarily. Perhaps, just as people become opposed to their problems, carers become opposed to their children. To complete a triangle, maybe the therapist becomes opposed to the diagnosis or labelling of problems. Whatever the therapeutic positioning employed, it is likely to be based on verbalisations symbolic of life outside the sessions and enacted with the therapist. However, as Heins reminds us “children learn more through their eyes than through their ears. Unfortunately, many parents and some therapists are quite addicted to ‘ear bashing’.” (Heins, 1988, p.143)

Narrative techniques have been very creative and, from ‘Sneaky Poo’ onwards, have often captured children’s imaginations, especially when used in conjunction with attractive worksheets and certificates. However, narrative techniques still seem to depend upon verbalisations by

the therapist – something children hear rather than see. It may be useful to supplement verbal interventions about children and problems with a visual representation of the relationship between the two. Ideally, the child should decide how that is done, but this paper will introduce the idea of the Communicube which allows children visually to explore their relationship with the problem using levels, buttons and spatial patterns.

the communicube

The Communicube is a transparent five level structure measuring 23cm square and 27cm high with a grid of 25 squares on each level. It is a new communication tool that facilitates the exploration of complex, multi-layered experiences. It was developed during doctoral research with adults who hear voices but has been found to be useful with clients of all ages by therapists of many different orientations. The Communicube is similar in ways to the Family Dialogue Set (Balmбра, 2006) which works however in two dimensions rather than three.

Roles may be symbolised by buttons, or other miniature objects, and placed onto the Communicube: these may then be available for any family member to talk about, speak to, or to play. Buttons, stones, other miniature, symbolic objects and



The Communicube

figures can be used to plot where members of the family feel themselves to be in the structure and the issues they bring to therapy. John uses a draw-string bag for his buttons and objects which can then be emptied out on to a table, whilst David uses a shallow box that children can rummage through.

systems and structures

Systemic therapy emphasises the interactions and connectedness of the different parts of a system: it examines structure. The Communicube enables the mapping of the structure of complex systems, whether intrapsychic or relational. Such mapping promotes the emergence of meaning and hence communication. Cronen and Pearce (1985) offered a five-level framework for the analysis of families. They named this the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM). They stressed the interactivity of family members in co-creating meaning via speech acts (level one), episodes (level two), relationship (level three), life scripting (level four) and family myth (level five). They stated that such meanings are organised hierarchically and that social structures are ways of managing consciousness of various elements.

of structure and interaction

These patterns of communication may be symbolised on the five-level Communicube. Cronen and Pearce advise that there is a degree of reflexivity between levels and that therefore CMM analysis always employs at least three levels. They state that there is a tension in family systems between confusion and clarity: too much confusion may need some clarity; too rigid a clarity may need loosening with some resultant confusion. The Communicube may facilitate both these processes in exploring family dynamics. Furthermore, these processes may be structurally co-ordinated into a literal view of relational differences through the three dimensional structure of the Communicube. Cronen and Pearce state:

“Communication is not fundamentally an individual problem of ‘correctly’ mapping structure in action, but rather a social process of coordinating action and managing structures” (Cronen & Pearce, 1985, p.71).

Fruggeri (2001) suggested the development “of a language for the description of joint actions” that may facilitate explorations of interconnections between the individual and the relational. However, the development of such a language (‘speech acts’) may be rendered superfluous through individual/family enactment (drama/actions), generated via the use of ‘transitional objects’ (Winnicott, 1971) such as the Communicube, which promotes symbolisation, story/narrative and drama/enactment.

What seems to be evoked in enactment is an attending “to the roles through which people communicate” and an affecting of “the way that others express themselves. In other words, if a particular meaning is ascribed to action whilst it is being taken, some roles can change and in turn influence other roles.” (Farmer, 1995, p.102). Roles may then be examined and even played by different members of the family (as when, using psychodrama, family members may play each other’s roles.)

To protect the confidentiality of clients, the clinical examples of working with families in this paper are composed from several families and therapists working in different parts of the country. All client names are pseudonyms.

the communicube in practice

The first step may be for the family to speculate what the structure is or could be. When the Seamore family saw the Communicube they felt it was a space-age chessboard out of Star Trek. This was something they could all identify with:

it was a significant family connection. This was particularly noticeable for the teenage son, who had never talked before in sessions.

The next step may be for each member of the family to place a button representing his or her self in the structure simultaneously and the family then discuss the pattern that becomes apparent. It may then be useful to give each member of the family a chance to show their configuration of the relationships and family issues, using buttons or objects to symbolise people, roles and concerns (toy animals might be used to represent issues; little figures to represent imaginary roles). The Communicube offers the opportunity to share different perceptions: the family pattern can literally be seen from different perspectives as family members move around and look at the structure from different sides. The Communicube offers families an opportunity to play together as well as to communicate beliefs, wishes and feelings that may have otherwise remained unspoken and so troublesome. The different levels of the structures do not have set meanings; they will mean what the family members choose them to mean and that meaning will emerge during the process of the session.

being pushed out

When introduced to the Communicube, Mrs Williams chose her first button to represent how much she loved her children. On hearing his mother’s story about this, her son Paul, diagnosed with ADHD and with reactive attachment disorder, replied that he hadn’t realised how much his mum loved him. His much older sister Jenny, pushing a button off the edge of the structure, showed her mum that she wanted to leave home (mainly due to the effects of her brother’s ADHD behaviours). The family had been attending for over a year but Jenny had never spoken to anyone about this before. Mrs. Williams then started talking with her daughter about how she could have overlooked her needs whilst trying to cope with her son’s behaviour.

war and peace

The Otto twins initially chose military buttons. Although they talked at length about war, e.g. the Iraq war, they used the military buttons to talk about ‘protection’: protection for themselves and for their mum. It seemed important for the brothers to explore their warlike and aggressive positioning so that the aggression could be narrated from within the family to those outside. This appeared connected to mother’s story about receiving treatment for depression and she had explained her choice of pastel coloured buttons in terms of needing peace, quiet, calm and relaxation. Thus the conflict between different family members’ needs: of rough and tumble play versus peace and relaxation, could be talked about.

distance and closeness

The Tandy children’s names had been placed on the child protection register under the category of child neglect. The worker had been focusing upon establishing a therapeutic alliance with the single parent mother. The Communicube was introduced on the fourth family session. The eldest daughter, assumed by case conference to be rejected by her mother, went first. She put her ‘pretty’ button on a corner square on the top tier. Her mother went next, and put her button on the opposite corner square on the bottom level, and started to talk about being in care as a child. The youngest child, a toddler, was asked if he wanted to play, and went next. The referred daughter then placed her second button next to “mum’s”. The therapist could sense mother’s tension, and she responded by going to the top tier and placing her button in

the opposite corner to her daughter's, and carried on talking about being in care as a teenager. The referred daughter then placed her next button a little further away from mother's second, and the youngest child started placing his buttons next to his older sister's. When the older sister expressed frustration at her sibling following her, mother expressed frustration with her eldest daughter following her. This narrative developed into mother and daughter talking about wanting things, with the daughter talking about her brother getting in the way of her and her mother, and her mother talking about being pushed out of her family of origin. During this exchange the youngest child sat on his mother's lap, and the mother hugged and cuddled him.

opening up, holding and containing:

Suzy and her mother appeared to use family sessions to blame and punish each other. When mother asked that Suzy attend sessions on her own, Suzy began to open up about her life and history. Following narratives about being abused and neglected Suzy was introduced to the Communicube. She seemed very excited and readily took up the offer to use it. She used contemporary films like 'The Day after Tomorrow' to talk about feeling cold and frozen, and TV series like 'Robot Wars' to talk about feeling 'old fashioned' and worried about 'going out of date'. By the fifth button Suzy was talking about characters from horror movies and talking about guns. At this point she said that she found the conversation too confusing and asked to play a different game. The board game 'Creating Solutions' (www.creatingsolutions.org) was offered and Suzy's mood seemed to change rapidly as she enthusiastically explored possibilities in her current situation. The Communicube had seemed to open up for Suzy more than she could cope with at that particular time. However, these painful confusions (between herself and her mother) remain for her, and are still being considered during follow up conversations. The Communicube is but one method of both opening up space for creative expression and for containing what is expressed.

conclusion:

The Communicube offers therapists and families flexible, creative communication tools that provide structure, and enable complex family systems to be explored, meaning

to emerge and stories to be told. Often, when we struggle in life, the patterns we have difficulty with are those that are fundamental to our struggle: the patterns of our emotional life and our relationships. The Communicube facilitates communication about these complex patterns. Psychotherapy has not only to do with examining old, dysfunctional patterns but also with creating and exploring new patterns. Using the Communicube we can build a more complex picture of our experience, create new patterns and gain an overview of the whole.

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John Casson is a dramatherapist, psychodrama psychotherapist, supervisor and trainer and inventor of the 'Communicube'. His book "Drama, Psychotherapy and Psychosis: Dramatherapy and Psychodrama with People Who Hear Voices" is published by Routledge. See: www.communicube.co.uk
 David Steare is a social worker and systemic practitioner working in Child and Adolescent Mental Health. David's joint project with staff from other agencies: 'Angels from Space'; won his NHS Trust's Quality Award in 2004.

