

A Case Study Summary: Annie Lea Rose

Annie was a four year old patient in the oncology ward when she first became my client. She was diagnosed with osteosarcoma of the upper arm, which is a soft tissue tumour growing out of the vicinity of the joints. Upon first diagnosis the possibility of amputation of her arm was a real factor in her prognosis. She was to commence twelve months of intensive chemotherapy and radiotherapy to reduce the tumour so that surgery could be performed.

My first session with Annie was two days after diagnosis. All our sessions take the form of drawing and painting, because I have learnt over the years that for four year olds the visual medium offers the most effective tools for developing imagination and for self expression.

I ask her to paint a picture about what it is like to be in the hospital. Annie paints her hospital bed, big, dark and black. She paints a few items in the room, yet the painting was void of any people. As she paints she talks about her drawing and I am able to develop a picture about her emotional state through the information given directly by her. I determine that she feels very alone and frightened, so I spend some time with her to develop a safe and trusting connection with her, to help her through this difficult time.

The nursing staff requested I start some in-depth therapy with Annie as she was experiencing extreme problems coping with her medical procedures. She was bed-wetting and suffering bouts of withdrawal and hysterical fits of panic. I ask Annie to participate in a 'feeling exercise'. In this exercise, Annie is asked to draw eight different feelings she is experiencing about being in the hospital.

From this exercise, Annie's biggest issue for her was in the treatment room itself, where she was taken to have needles and other medical procedures. I ask her to draw what it was like in there. She drew with full force. When I asked her to explain the drawing, Annie tells me what happens in the treatment room. There is red rain, which she said, kept away the black poison rain, which also appears in her drawing –

"The red is the good red rain and it sends the black rain away"

She said that if you touch the black rain you will die. She drew blue islands and the sea and her teddy that takes care

of her. She tells me she hides in the islands with her teddy called Boris, who made sure no-one harmed her.

I was amazed at the ability of a four year old to transform a painful and stressful experience into a place of hiding and safety with the support of her teddy bear.

I was also interested in how she used her imagination to protect herself. If Annie could develop a place of safety within the pain, then she could cope much better. I work on developing a place of safety with her and we use her story as a source of visualisation, each time she went into the treatment room.

Afterwards, she draws me pictures of the places she visits. In one of those drawings, she was flying with Boris and Blackie the bird in a plane over a waterfall, while having the chemotherapy/radiotherapy treatment.

Follow-up session - one month after the first session, I ask Annie to paint a picture about how she is feeling now when in the treatment room. I thought it was important to see how she was coping emotionally and to be fully conscious of any changes.

Annie drew herself lying on the treatment room table, having her needles. She had a smile on her face, her favourite nurse was by her side and so was Boris, the teddy. Annie was feeling much safer and supported and presented a picture of emotional stability.

How can we as adults support children to express using art? We must not underestimate the ability children have to understand and process their feelings and their need to express them. However, two important aspects to understand are: Young children go through stages of development in learning to express themselves; and, this approach of using the expressive arts and Psychophonetics with young children is different from how it is applied when working with adults.

This extract is adapted from the article:

Birch, L. (1999). *Heart to art therapy: Exploring the journey where art meets healing*. Melbourne, Australia: 'Diversity', Natural and Complementary Health Magazine, No. 18, Nov; 8-11

You can read the full article on the website – on the **Articles** page.