


**What to Do When Children “Clam-Up”**

**Expressive Arts Strategies to Facilitate Communication with Traumatized Children and Youth**  
 Australian Childhood Foundation (ACF) 2018 International Childhood Trauma Conference | Melbourne Convention Centre

Cathy Malchiodi, PhD, LPCC, LPAT, ATR-BC, REAT  
 Trauma-Informed Practices and Expressive Arts Therapy Institute | USA




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**When Children and Young People Don't Talk or Won't Talk...That's What This "Talk" is About**

- Children do not always start to **verbalize** their concerns upon arriving at our offices or facilities.
- “Clam-up” is a term that refers to a **child's silence in response to a request to disclose information.**
- How do we discover ways to allow children to **communicate, particularly on their own terms and pace?**




---

---

---

---

---

---


---

---

**Expressive arts therapy = Sensory-Based Attunement**

Non-Verbal Communication **emphasizing the senses**

You are not just interacting through talk; **you are interacting through sensory-based exchanges** [similar to early attachment experiences]




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**A Few of the Reasons Children and Young People “Clam-Up”**

*Crenshaw (2008) summarizes, “Any child, any adult for that matter, would prefer to avoid the ‘hard stuff” (p. 22).*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**If We are Trauma-Informed, It’s Not Just “Resistance”**

Lessons Learned About Reframing “Resistance” from Work with Abused Children and Child Witnesses to Violence

1. Adaptive Coping and Survival Skills
2. No Words Available [Developmental & Stress-Related]
3. Cultural and personal preferences for communication
4. Often brought to treatment by adults involuntarily



“This is me.”

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Selective Mutism...A Popular Term**

- “Social Anxiety” related; shy, conditioned not to talk, cultural preferences can be a factor too.
- Some children with Selective Mutism have Sensory Processing Disorder (DSI) which means they have trouble processing specific sensory information. They may be sensitive to sounds, lights, touch, taste and smells.




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Selective Mutism v. Traumatic Mutism

- Children with traumatic mutism usually **develop mutism suddenly**.
- Example --a child who **witnesses** the death of another person, violence or other traumatic event.
- Is now **unable to process the event**, and becomes mute in all settings.




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Fear...a powerful influence

Domestic violence and child abuse and maltreatment, especially repeated exposure:

1. Our voices or gestures can initiate a cascade of physiological responses and reactions—“emotional hijack”
2. Silenced by caregivers and even our justice systems that fail to protect them if they disclose their experiences.



Six-Year-Old's Drawing of Domestic Violence

---

---

---

---

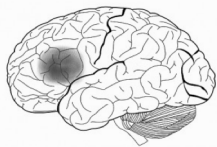
---

---

---

---

### Brain-Based “Clamming Up”...When Language Becomes Difficult or Impossible



Broca's Area of the Brain



Mask by Combat Military Veteran



Survivor's View of Dissociation

---

---

---

---

---

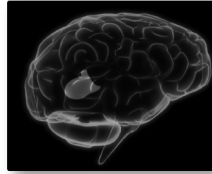
---

---

---

### “Broca’s Brain” and Trauma

- The experience of trauma makes verbal language difficult and, in severe cases, impossible (van der Kolk, 2014/Body Keeps the Score)
- Broca’s area of the brain may actually “shut down” when individuals attempt to talk about traumatic events [aka “speechless terror”].



Does Creative/Art Expression Wake Up Broca’s Area?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Expressive Arts Therapy | The Reparative Impact on Returning Military

- An effective way to bypass parts of the brain responsible for speech and language [emerging evidence].
- Reconnecting the **implicit [sensory] memory** of traumatic experiences with **explicit [narrative] memory** to begin the process of psychological reparation [one theory].
- Helpful when there is **traumatic brain injury** as well as **posttraumatic stress reactions**.



National Intrepid Center of Excellence (NICoE) Healing Arts Programming and Others

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### And What About Technology and “iGen?”



Cathy’s new hobby—taking photos of people in airports who are not talking to each other and not making eye contact!

---

---

---

---


---

---

---

---

**Art Therapy Research:** Art making [drawing, doodling] increases language and memory, decreases stress



- When the hands are engaged in creative activity, **people tend to verbalize 2 to 3 times as much** [various studies] than just talking alone.
- Also **more memory is accessed** [various studies].
- 15 minutes of drawing or doodling = **measurable cortisol reduction**

---

---

---

---

---

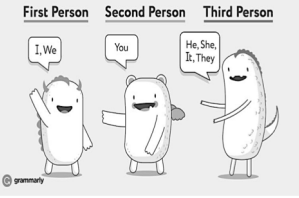
---

---

---

**Does How We Speak About Art Expressions Make a Difference? Let's Explore This...**

Researchers have wondered:  
Can talking or writing about art expressions in the third person rather than first or second person pronouns be a better strategy to reduce stress?




---

---

---

---

---


---

---

---

**Is a trauma narrative helpful? It depends...**

In a 2015 study, Wisco et al found that **narrating a traumatic event in the first person was associated with greater heart rate and other elevations in body response versus narrating in the third person.**




---

---

---

---

---


---

---

---

**"Windows of Tolerance"**

Finding just the right amount of expressive arts that can be tolerated... can be key to narratives.



**Window of Tolerance**

**Hyperarousal Zone**

2. **Sympathetic "Fight or Flight" Response**  
 Increased sensations, flooded  
 Emotional reactivity, hyper-arousal  
 Intrusive imagery, flashbacks  
 Disorganized cognitive processing

↑

**Window of Tolerance**  
**Optimal Arousal Zone**

↓

**Hypoarousal Zone**

1. **Ventral Vagal "Social Engagement" Response**  
 State where emotions can be  
 tolerated and information  
 integrated

3. **Dorsal Vagal "Immobilization" Response**  
 Relative absence of sensation  
 Numbing of emotions  
 Disabled cognitive processing  
 Reduced physical movement

Adapted from Ogden, Minnen, & Pain, 2006, p. 27; 32; Carigan, Fisher, & Hall, 2012, p. 2

---

---

---

---

---

---

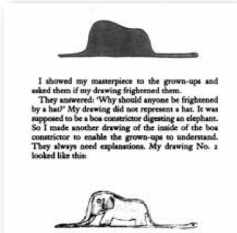
---

---

**The Artist is the Expert... What You Say Makes a Difference**

Children are the experts on their art expressions

- Don't project your own reactions (story from *The Little Prince*).
- Be curious, assume you know nothing; this will stimulate child to tell you more.
- Take a stance of "not knowing"



I showed my masterpiece to the grown-ups and asked them if my drawing frightened them. They answered: "Why should anyone be frightened by a hat?" My drawing did not represent a hat. It was supposed to be a box containing a digestive elephant. So I made another drawing of the inside of the box containing to enable the grown-ups to understand. They always need explanations. My drawing No. 1 looked like this:

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Another Known Strategy to Help Children Communicate [Crenshaw and Others]**



**Therapy dogs can alleviate stress and trauma, promote relaxation, reduce aggression, relieve agitation and anxiety, and encourage movement, socialization and verbalization.**

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

A Summary and Review So Far..

- **Communicate uncomfortable memories or feelings in a safe manner** through either an expressive art form itself or through telling about the art form through a "third person" or non-first person narrative.
- **Work within the window of tolerance**– not too overstimulating or under-stimulating.
- **Hold a "beginner's mind"** when witnessing each child's creative communication
- And **having a "co-therapist"** [canine is one example] can make a difference for many children.




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Case Examples and Strategies




---

---

---

---

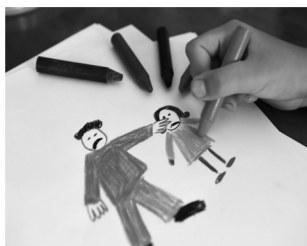
---

---

---

---

Telling Without Talking...is it possible?




---

---

---

---

---

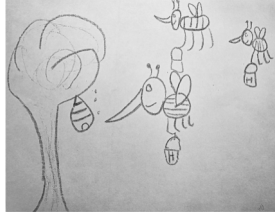
---

---

---

**"Bee sting" – Telling without Talking About Sexual Abuse**

- Initially undisclosed sexual abuse by father
- Arina, 8 year old girl with younger brother [toddler]
- Staying at a shelter program, parent self-referred them to program
- Liked to draw and tell stories
- Complex case with many surprises
- Eventually resolved by Child Protective Services [removal of father]; family therapy between mother and daughter ongoing



Arina's spontaneous drawing... "The Stinger Bees"

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**What do We Do When We Feel We Must Get Disclosure from a Child?**




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Children Who Are "Stuck" in a Trauma Narrative...How do We Change [Redirect] the Conversation? Or Do We?**



"If you don't like what's being said, change the conversation."

-DON DRAPER, MAD MEN

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

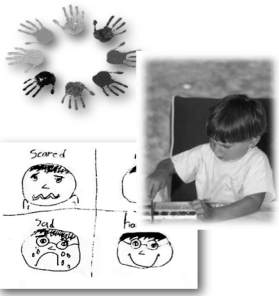
---



Different Art Materials [media variables] + Different Interventions [activity or directive] Have Different Results

Child may prefer to "talk" through certain media and not others!

A mask may "talk" or figures in the sand may come to life




---

---

---

---


---

---

---

---

Final Thoughts and Summary




---

---

---

---

---


---

---

---

Meeting Children "Where They Are"

- Respect the pace of the child; every child has a different internal pace for trust in the relationship and a sense of internalized safety.
- Offer children and youth not only the opportunity to speak directly or through third person methods, but also **options for silence at key moments.**




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Use Expressive Arts as a Best Practice...**

- Be curious! Your enthusiasm and genuine interest are key to children's storytelling.
- Support calm [self-regulation], connection [secure relationship/trust], and confidence [mastery and self-efficacy].
- Try asking for third person responses to help children talk about negative feelings and experiences.
- Become familiar with a variety of art-based approaches and media [through hands-on learning and clinical supervision]—one medium may stimulate a narrative more than another!

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Rhymes with Orange** □ Hilary B. Price



**Time Permitting...Questions**  
And Thank You!

---

---

---

---

---

---

---