

CLINICAL EDITOR: Readers are guided by the authors through windows and doors that may strengthen our understanding of the children we work with in play therapy.

The Symbolism of Windows and Doors in Play Therapy

The Windows

*In these darkened rooms, where
I spend oppressive days,
I pace to and fro to find the windows.
When a window opens, it will be a consolation.
But the windows cannot be found, or I cannot find them.
And maybe it is best that I do not find them.
Maybe the light will be a new tyranny.
Who knows what new things it will reveal?
Constantine P. Cavaffy*

Windows are literally the visual bridge between inside and out. In the poem by Cavaffy above, windows provide welcome light but also pose a threat by virtue of what the light might expose. Similarly, Violet Oaklander (1988) discusses how windows bring both light and darkness from the outside, in her book, *Windows to our Children*. She utilizes windows as a compelling metaphor to capture the therapist's efforts to create access to the child's inner world of emotions.

As human beings we are often drawn to the bright, warm light that shines through windows, possibly representing health, growth, and the courage to change. At a deep, unconscious level, we may also fear the light that the windows allow in as they may metaphorically illuminate the darkness in the inner recesses of the soul. At times we may prefer the comfort of the familiar darkness as opposed to the risk of the exposure of parts of ourselves whether conscious or unconscious that we choose to keep hidden. Practically, windows and light traditionally symbolize an opening and illumination of darkness. Psychologically, the uncovering of the shadow, or all that is hideous and hidden about us, can be an ambivalent, uncomfortable experience for many.

The symbols of windows are commonly used by writers from Emily Bronte to contemporary authors such as Stephen King and Dan Brown to capture symbolically psychological issues of central characters in their stories. If an

observer views the outside world through a window they will be constrained by a limited visual field. In Emily Bronte's novel *Wuthering Heights* (1847), windows were interpreted by many critics to symbolically depict spiritual entrance and escape in her gothic novel. Also the window though transparent is a barrier between the viewer and the world on the other side. Children who tend to be isolated and disconnected from their social world in many instances enjoy a rich inner life; but, they are not fully engaged with their external environment. They become more observers than participants.

In children's drawings of houses many clinical hypotheses can be generated about the way windows are depicted. If the windows are missing, this could be interpreted as a fear of examination by others of inner secrets or conversely the fear of looking through the windows to see what is outside. John O'Donohue (2004) the late Irish poet, discussed how some eyes have seen too much, tragic events that no human being or child should ever have to see. From this perspective traumatized children not including windows in pictures could



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be perceived not so much as a refusal to look inward, but a weariness of the darkness and motivation to reconnect to the beauty and invisible embrace around and within them.

Windows that are barred in children's drawings may suggest secrets to be protected, a prison that one is confined in - even if it is of one's own making. It may suggest the need to protect oneself from an intrusive world perceived to be threatening or unstable. In literature windows sometimes symbolize an intolerable situation that needs to be escaped. In children's drawings sometimes the windows in the house are placed high up so that it would not be possible to look out or look in even though some light is available to those on the inside suggesting an ambivalence with respect to the interface between the inner and outer world.

One recent example from the clinical work of the authors involved a 10 year-old African American male who was a Hurricane Katrina evacuee. He and his family were stuck on a roof as flood waters arose and were one of many who received a dramatic air-lift evacuation. They were displaced by the storm and hunkered down in a Red Cross shelter for several weeks.

During this time, the play therapist and child drew together. After three sessions, once trust and rapport began to develop, the therapist asked the child to draw a picture of how he saw his world. The child drew a massive prison with many windows across the top of the building, all with bars across them. The roof was on fire, with bursts of flames being emitted from within the prison where the fire originated. The child said that the prisoners were trapped by rising flood waters, and they could not get out. He said they started a fire to break through the roof so they could escape or else they would die. The child had not disclosed any of the events to the therapist surrounding him and his family's traumatic experience that is until he symbolically did so through a drawing during play therapy. Because of the less-threatening and developmentally-appropriate modality of using art or creative means to communicate, children are sometimes able to express difficult events and feelings to a caring person both symbolically and concretely (Green, 2009). This expression of emotion and the telling of their story of pain and fear are often times therapeutic alone. In the next section, the symbolism of doors is examined, beginning with the poem, Doors, below.

Doors

Take me back again, and wake this child that's sleeping.

Slip inside my head, and make my mind believe it.

You open up the doors I close.

The things you do bleed into my heart and soul.

I try to let these thoughts unfold.

Unlock my mind, and open up the doors I close.

I am not alone.

I feel you watching over me.

Slip inside my soul, until the light is closer.

Chakra

Doors are often utilized in our vernacular to represent opportunity. A job well-done may open doors for advancement while closed doors may represent self-sabotage and underachievement, or lack of ambition. A door partly open may suggest new possibilities or potentials. Doors open or closed or part-way open may symbolize key relationships in the child's life. Closed doors may represent rejection, deprivation, or missing out while open doors the opposite. In play therapy scenarios with severely deprived children, a common theme is enactment of a grocery store scene with the customer (a role often assigned to the therapist) showing up to buy food and suddenly the store owner (child) slams the door and places a "CLOSED" sign on the door. This play theme, often with intense affect in the child, could depict the child missing out not just on the "goodies" of life but basic nutrients (food).

*“Doors are often utilized ...
to represent opportunity.”*



Doors likewise in children's drawings or in play therapy when children construct houses out of Legos™ or Lincoln Logs™ can invite many potentially useful clinical hypotheses that will be either confirmed or dismissed based on the continuing flow of the child's own responses and associative activity. Doors that are placed in the house high up without steps can symbolize how inaccessible the house may be for both those inside and outside of the house. Doors with bars or multiple locks suggest a heavy emphasis on security and a degree of fear and vulnerability. Obviously, the question to be explored is whether the barred doors are meant to keep the occupants of the house in or the outside world out or a combination of both. A door with a window may suggest more comfort with the intersection of inside/outside and the larger the window even more so. The following paragraphs comprise an example of the authors' clinical work to illustrate the symbolism of doors in children's play therapy.

Viola, a 10-year-old African-American female from the Southern portion of the U.S., was an only child raised in a single-parent home by her biological father. Her mother died when she was two-years-old from cancer. Viola's father worked one full-time and one part-time job and therefore was not at home much to raise his daughter. Viola was often home alone as young as six-years-old, sometimes feeling neglected, isolated, and unloved. She would often have to complete homework, watch TV, eat dinner, and play all by herself. She came into play therapy after being chronically sexually assaulted by a 20 year old male cousin who was caretaking for her periodically on weekends while her father was working his part-time job.

Viola was initially diagnosed with Acute Stress Disorder. Then after a month, her symptoms did not alleviate, so her diagnostic label changed to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). She mainly held her pain and suffering within, presenting as a quiet child, with a soft voice and a shy and introverted demeanor. While play therapy was predominantly non-directive (i.e., when the child leads) for the first few weeks to build trust and rapport, therapy eventually evolved into more directive techniques as the extended developmental assessment was underway. Sometimes, directive art techniques, particularly through the creation, analysis, and interpretation of symbols, facilitate communication between a therapist and a child sexual assault survivor and may be healing as the trauma narrative develops (Green, 2008). Viola drew a series of houses or variations of during weeks four-seven of play therapy. The first home she drew was a home with windows that had X's crossed through them and a door with a small peep hole. No people were included in this drawing. Viola explained that this was so she could "watch and see if any bad people were coming." In the second drawing, the house still had X's on the windows, and the peep hole was still present. In this drawing, she included herself, her father, and a pet dog. She said the door was always locked so no bad people could come inside while they were not at home. The therapist explored this with her further, and she acknowledged that sometimes she's

scared of being home alone. In the third drawing, the house looked basically the same. The therapist asked if anything had changed from the last week, and she said the door wasn't locked all the time, just some of the time. Also, the windows did not have X's on them. The therapist stayed with the metaphor of the drawing and asked Viola if the girl in the drawing became less scared. She responded quietly and with a smile, "Yes. She feels a little safer."

Viola expressed later in therapy, after the sixth month, that she did not want anyone to ever know that her dad was working and she was home alone. She said she blamed herself because she thought she was unlovable. She also said when her cousin raped her, she felt even more unlovable and "gross on the outside and inside." Not communicating her hidden pain and suffering to the therapist or any adult for the first several months after the sexual assault, she used artwork to symbolically portray her inner landscape. While many interpretations could be made regarding her drawing and the progression or regression of the symbols in the series, the therapist mainly acknowledged, non-judgmentally, her statement of overwhelming shame and hurt. He emphasized and honored her sadness and her not wanting anyone to get close to her too quickly to hurt her again. She portrayed her inner turmoil symbolically through the locked doors, the peephole, and the crossed out windows. The therapist was careful not to be overly reflective or interpretive with the child for fear of deepening her misattribution of guilt.

The locked door that eventually became unlocked and the windows that eventually became open may have symbolized Viola's inner transformation of self-healing and progression of trust between her inner and outer world. The therapist was deeply grateful to simply be able to witness and respect the production of these symbols and carry some of this child's pain, if only for a very short period in her life.

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