LYING and STEALING

Whose Problem is It?

When children present in play therapy with developmentally age-appropriate problems, parents’ reactions can sometimes exacerbate the problems. While children need good therapeutic care, and their behaviors may need attention and limit-setting, it is also essential to help parents grasp the larger context of their children’s states. Parents’ understanding can reduce their reactivity and help prevent scapegoating of children. Furthermore, attention to root-level problems helps parents to gain insight into how their own life issues are stirring up, and how their growing awareness will benefit the child. Daniel Siegel referred to such holistic mindfulness on the part of parents as “mindful parenting” (Siegel & Hartzell, 2003). The following case study demonstrates how Mindfulness-Based Play-Family Therapy (MBPFT) integrates play therapy, family therapy, mindful parenting, and child development theory (Higgins-Klein, 2013).

Case Study – The Child and His Family
Nathan, now eight years old, had been coming to therapy for the past three months because of his anxiety. Though both parents dated Nathan’s anxiety back to his infancy, they had not reached out for help until his dishonest behaviors emerged at age eight. His school referred him after he stole candy from another child’s backpack. Prior to this event, his parents had been afraid to get help for Nathan because they worried that having therapy might label him.

During the initial four-session evaluation with the parents, I learned relevant background information. Nathan was biting his nails, pulling out his eyebrows, and having difficulty expressing feelings. Nathan’s mother, Sarah, had suffered anxiety all of her life and also bit her nails, while his father, Alex, was more laid back at home, despite his high-pressured job. They conceived Nathan after a year of medical interventions to assist conception. As the only child in the family, he received a lot of caring attention from his parents. I learned from the developmental history that he had seemed anxious even as an infant, when he would not sleep during the day and wanted to be held most of the time. His mother had intended to return to work when he was six months old, but believed that no one would be willing to give such a fussy baby the care that she gave him. She postponed her career until he was three years old. During that time, she found that she was happy staying home.

By the end of the first three months of play-family therapy, some symptom relief was achieved. Nathan had stopped pulling out his eyebrows, and his deceptive behaviors were reduced. However, he was now wetting the bed every night. Around this time, I began to suspect that he was stealing things from the playroom. When three little tin soldiers that he liked were missing just after his session, I felt rather certain. At the following session, I asked about the missing soldiers during our 20-minute Talk Time prior to the play therapy. Nathan denied taking them, but his mother contradicted him, saying that she had seen him playing with them at home. She reminded him that he had told her that a school friend had given them to him. Her tone was harsh because, in her anxiety, she imagined her son in jail. I decided it would be helpful to invite both parents to a parent meeting for our next session.
Mindful Parenting Component
MBPFT includes monthly Mindful Parenting meetings aimed at helping parents understand normal child development (Davies, 2011; Higgins-Klein, 2013). The therapist encourages parents to understand how their own fears may be intruding on the child and how their leadership in being honest benefits the whole family system (Goldenthal, 1996). The meeting with Nathan’s parents included encouraging his mother to consider pursuing her own therapy to help with her anxiety.

During our parent meeting, I learned that his lying at home had gradually become more frequent. Alex said, “He’s a deviant liar.” Rather than seeing his behaviors as signs of an alarming personality shift, I suggested that we regard their intensity and frequency as indications that Nathan needed help with emotional issues underlying his anxiety. The parents were relieved to learn that at about eight years of age, most children experiment with stealing and lying. The development of concrete operational thinking, as described by Jean Piaget, gives children this age a new sense of life complexities. In an effort to understand those complexities, children may test their parents (Flavell, 1963).

I recommended that they have an honest conversation with Nathan letting him know that when kids get to be his age, they begin to realize that they can trick their parents and get away with it. He can lie or steal something and sometimes his parents will not know. I suggested that his mother use the recent example, when she believed his claim that the three tin soldiers were given to him. I have found that most children this age will stop the dishonesty relatively soon, once the parents admit that it is possible for the child to deceive them. Parents must follow this admission with a strong, clear statement of the family value that it is not acceptable to lie or to take what belongs to others. Wanting my support for their discussion with him, the parents requested a family meeting that would include Nathan.

Family Meeting
At this family meeting, the parents did well taking the lead in communicating with Nathan what we had discussed at the parent meeting. Nathan listened with curiosity and seemed quite satisfied to have his parents acknowledge that he could trick them. “I thought I could fool you,” he said. I affirmed and supported their dialogue. Then Nathan brought up the issue that it did not seem fair to him that his father was allowed to lie. We now listened with curiosity as he spoke. “I was in the back seat of the car a couple of weeks ago, and you were on the phone with Uncle Joe and you told him that you had been out of town over the weekend when he asked why you didn’t go to his barbeque. If you can make things up, why can’t I?” Interestingly, Alex had not made the connection between his habit of telling “little fibs” and his son’s lying. To the father’s credit, he admitted that he should have told the truth to Uncle Joe and said that he too would work on doing better with this. Following this meeting, Nathan stopped taking things from the playroom.

The Child’s Progress
As his weekly sessions continued, Nathan was having success transforming his vague anxieties into concrete fears. During Talk Time, we discussed feelings, using a doll that has four faces with various expressions: happy, sad, angry, and scared. Nathan located the feeling of sadness in his throat, fear in his stomach, and anger in his legs – he told his mother and me that anger made him feel like kicking. At one Talk Time, with his father present, he made a sandtray about what made him anxious in his real life. He admitted being afraid of going upstairs alone at home and of robbers breaking in. There was progress in his ability to tell his parents, not only during therapy, but also at home, about these fears, which are typical for his age.

Throughout the play therapy part of his sessions, Nathan often included the use of sandtray. During his Exploratory Stage, his anxiety became evident externally through the metaphors of his play. For example, Photo 1 shows a dry sandtray in which he had a huge shark that was eating all of the whales, dolphins, and fish. After entering the Deeper Awareness Stage, while staying in pretend, Nathan’s sandtrays helped him rework his anxiety. For a few weeks in a row, he used the wet tray to create a story of a tiny rabbit and a huge dinosaur. They were the only two pieces he used, aside from the dozen trees that made up the forest. From week to week, the vulnerable rabbit built a mound of
sand, and rose gradually to face the giant dinosaur. Finally, the rabbit was able to move from being afraid of the dinosaur to feeling powerful enough to confront him [Photo 2]. As the story progressed, Nathan became more competent at speaking up in his life as his symptoms gradually abated.

The Mother’s Individual Therapy
As communication between Nathan and his parents became more honest, Sarah was motivated to ask for individual sessions to address her own anxiety. She was drawn to the sandtray, and the pictures she made were often profound and healing. Through the course of her therapy, she addressed her childhood trauma that was related to her mother’s death. When I was charting her genogram during the fourth evaluation, she had briefly told me about her memorable sixth birthday, which she called the “Revelation Story.” One day, after six months of creating her own sandtrays, that traumatic story reemerged in full force.

For this sandtray [Photo 3], Sarah selected pieces spontaneously, as usually. On the left, there was a huge spider crawling out of a treasure box, filled with snakes and bugs. A small green spider leaned on a gift box on top of the huge spider. In the upper left corner, a robed and hooded skeleton held a skull in its right hand and a clock in its left. In the upper right corner was a large, quaint stone house with an outdoor staircase and a butterfly on the roof. To the left of the house was an angel holding an infant swaddled in yellow cloth. In front of the house, a couple with horrified faces held hands. To the right, there were a large birthday cake and a small clear stone with the word “imagine” printed on it. In the center was a pewter “Dorothy” holding “Toto” in a basket and a pewter “Queen of Hearts” with her distorted, angry face turned toward the girl. Behind them was a Fairy Godmother in pink. Behind these three figures was a tornado.

When Sarah’s scene was ready, we had our usual three minutes of quiet to mindfully “be with” the picture. When Sarah broke the silence, she was puzzled by her selection of pieces. She made a few comments, then, after I reflected her statement that she had not wanted to pick the Grim Reaper she cried for five minutes. I sat quietly and compassionately with her. Then she explained that her parents had lied to her. They never told her that her birth mother had died of breast cancer when she was an infant and that her mother was actually her stepmother. Her eight-year-old cousin, Cara, revealed it on Sarah’s sixth birthday. Her parents defended themselves, saying that they had wanted to tell her the truth before she turned six, but postponed it because of her obsession with insects and dying.

Sarah continued to talk about the revelation experience. Near the end of the session, she picked up a piece she had used before, a large, pink eraser with the words “For Big Mistakes” written on it. She put it in front of the horrified couple that she identified as her parents, and she said, “They lied to me.” I nodded and reflected, “Yes, they lied to you.” She looked at the picture quietly for a minute then moved the angel holding the swaddling child closer to the center of the tray. “That does it, I’m finished.” I nodded.

During a subsequent family meeting, Sarah told her son about this painful “untruth” in her life. Sarah better understood the roots of her struggles with self-esteem and she began gradually to express compassion for herself. Both the reduction of her anxiety and the admission of her childhood experience with deception reverberated with Nathan’s issues of anxiety and deception. Her healing “parented” his healing by providing for Nathan, as he pursued his own therapeutic work, the supportive environment and the personal example that are at the essence of mindful parenting.

References

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