

## An Introduction to Using EMDR with Children

EMDR is an innovative method of psychotherapy that has gained acceptance worldwide. At this point there are over 30,000 mental health professionals trained to provide this valuable technique for resolving trauma and emotional distress. EMDR has been found effective in resolving emotional distress arising from difficult childhood experiences or the effects of critical incidents such as automobile accidents, assault, natural disasters, and combat trauma. Other problems treated with EMDR are phobias, panic attacks, addictions, and pain management. Increasing positive resources and sports performance enhancement are other ways EMDR can be used.

Psychologist, Francine Shapiro, discovered EMDR by chance in 1987 when she was taking a walk in a park. She noticed that while she was thinking about some negative life issues and voluntarily moving her eyes back and forth, the intensity of the negative thoughts and feelings were reduced. Dr. Shapiro first studied the impact of EMDR on Vietnam combat veterans who were still suffering from post traumatic stress disorder. She found that this new technique showed good results reducing their nightmares, flashbacks, and intrusive negative thoughts.

By 1989 Dr. Shapiro was teaching her EMDR techniques including her basic protocol to trained clinicians and researchers from around the world. Since that time EMDR has evolved into a complex method that brings together elements from many major therapy streams.

In spite of the significant amount of research that has been carried out by neuroscience researchers, they still have not been able to explain exactly how EMDR works in the brain to bring about the significant changes that are evident. However, there is evidence which points to an innate processing system which is in operation when the brain is thinking. When something very upsetting happens the brain cannot process information as it normally does and consequently is not able to store the traumatic information and sensations in the brain system as other memories are stored. This upsetting event appears to be stored as a chunk of unprocessed information which is stuck in the memory system. When something happens to reactivate the memory, since it is not processed and stored as other memories, the person is flooded with the same intense feelings, negative beliefs and sensory information as when the event happened. Such upsetting memories may have a profoundly negative impact on the way a person sees herself and the

world around her. This person will also feel like the event that happened in the past is never over for her but is constantly intruding on her present reality with the intensity as if it were happening for the first time.

Children who are still developing their neural connections within the brain and forming their self-identities are probably the most vulnerable to trauma. Overwhelmed by intense feelings and physical sensations they usually shut down and internalise their feelings or act out in very aggressive ways. Unable to put into words what is happening to them, children usually try to cope with their uncomfortable feelings by avoiding them all together. Negative beliefs about themselves and unhealthy coping strategies become locked into the way they live life. Many parents fail to recognize the behavioural changes, somatic symptoms and fears and phobias their child is developing because of their own unprocessed trauma. Another confusing part for parents and counsellors is the way the meaning of an event for a child is what makes it traumatic. What we consider traumatic may not cause problems for a child and what we see as a small or insignificant event may create huge problems for a child.

Even though the EMDR protocol was designed to be used with adults, adaptations can be made which enables children to engage in this process. There are many creative ways to engage children which facilitate the willingness and ability of children to use EMDR for processing trauma memories or installing positive feelings. In the next article I will go into more detail about what kind of issues are helpful for children to process with EMDR as well as several creative ways of engaging children in that process.

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For further information on EMDR you can check out these web sites:

[www.emdria.org](http://www.emdria.org)

[www.emdr.com](http://www.emdr.com)

[www.childtrauma.com](http://www.childtrauma.com)

For training in EMDR contact [www.sue@frasercounselling.com](mailto:www.sue@frasercounselling.com)