

Using EMDR with Children in Therapy

Eye Movement Desensitization & Reprocessing (EMDR) is a therapeutic technique that works very effectively with children. In over six years of practising EMDR with children I have used it to help children deal with; sexual abuse, witnessing and experiencing physical and emotional abuse, automobile accidents, parental deaths, hospitalizations, negative reactions to parental separations and divorces, problems related to ADHD, abandonment issues, low self esteem, being hit by a car, anxieties and fears, anger management issues, and problems with being teased and bullied.

Although EMDR was developed to work with adults who had experienced severe trauma and had PTSD symptoms, it can be adapted to work very effectively with children for a variety of issues. When I began using EMDR over six years ago there were no books printed which clearly outlined how to adapt the adult protocol for children. Over the years of using EMDR with children I have developed some strategies which help to create the therapeutic container for conducting EMDR. These strategies are not necessarily present in all EMDR cases but certainly increase the success of the EMDR if they are.

Strategies which facilitate conducting EMDR with children

- Parental awareness and support of the EMDR process. Some times it is very effective to have parents collaborate in writing a therapeutic story of their child's trauma which can be used in the EMDR processing.
- The child's sense of safety and trust in the therapeutic relationship.
- Having the child symbolically represent their feelings about the trauma or problem situation before processing with EMDR.
- The therapist's sensitivity and creativity in helping the child process difficult feelings and memories. It is helpful if the child realizes that the uncomfortable feelings and memories can be released from the body & mind.
- Allowing the child to feel like they are in charge of the EMDR process and can take a break when they need to.

Of course excellent clinical skills, good basic training in EMDR, and an awareness of trauma and its impact on the child's developing sense of self would be helpful. Supervision with a trained EMDR consultant with experience working with children would help in the learning process as well.

Since children naturally want to avoid dealing with uncomfortable feelings or traumatic memories, it can be challenging to engage children in EMDR. This process which ask children to think about something they have

been working hard to suppress can be scary for children. Unfortunately the negative coping strategies the child develops to avoid the uncomfortable thoughts and feelings, creates long term problems for the child and/or the families. Many parents do not recognize the impact of the trauma on the child because they are either dealing with their own PTSD symptoms, are in denial about the impact of the event on their child or simply do not recognize what trauma behaviours in children look like. Sometimes parents need to proceed with their own counselling to work through their issues so they can be more emotionally present and responsive to their child's needs.

It is gratifying to see and hear about the dramatic changes in children following EMDR. Fears and phobias disappear, self esteem improves, sleep problems and nightmares cease, positive behavioural changes occur, learning problems may decrease, normal play returns, obsessive/compulsive behaviours decrease, and social skills improve. For some children the EMDR is able to bring about the improvements in one to three sessions. For other children with more long term, complex problems, the EMDR may be conducted over a longer period of time which includes installing positive resources with EMDR as well as working at traumatic experiences.

In my next article about EMDR I would like to cover some EMDR therapy techniques which have been used successful with children as well as describe some creative techniques I have developed for facilitating EMDR processing with children.

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

www.emdria.org

www.emdr.com

www.childtrauma.com

For training in EMDR contact www.sue@frasercounselling.com