

Using the Tree of Life in Family Work

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Introduction

In a previous paper *Tree of Life in Sundbyberg Sweden* (april 2011) we described how we have been trying to use the concept in different kind of work with children and young people.

One example is how we used the method in a workshop with two young brothers (8 and 9 years old) and their parents. The children have been placed in foster care for 3 years.

In this paper we elaborate that story. It is just one example but hopefully it can inspire others to use Tree of Life in different kind of Family contexts.

The children were placed in foster care after a serious suicide attempt by the mother. She has been struggling with mental health difficulties for many years. Their father had a social situation and some difficulties with his temper and other things that made it impossible for him to take care of the children. The parents were divorced since many years.

During a period of time we have been working with this context; the parents the foster parents, the two boys, and some other relatives, in order to preserve and improve relationships in the family and also enhance cooperation between them all. The parents have also been working individually with their difficulties.

When we come across Tree of Life we immediately thought that it could be used in confirming and rebuilding relationships within broken families. Since we knew this particular family quite well, and knew that they trusted us, we felt that it was possible to invite them to join us in an "experiment".

Preparation

We began with introducing the Tree of Life Concept to the parents. They were thrilled by the idea at once, especially the mother. We presented the idea to the foster parents that also thought that it would be great for the children to do this exploration together with their parents.

We decided to work with the Tree in a one day Workshop. We imagined that it would benefit the process doing all at the same time. We wished to facilitate experiences of connection and togetherness and to create a space where the two boys could have full attention from their parents.

For that purpose we mixed the day; work, play, lunch and coffee and lemonade breaks.

First step was to have a preparatory meeting with the parents where we introduced them to the method, and planned the day in detail. It was important to talk about how they best could function as facilitators for their children, how they had to share their time with each child, and lead the dialogue in order to highlight important memories, stories from the past, different people's strengths and abilities and all the other topics that you can come across in working with Tree of Life.

It was important for us that the parents took the primary role in guiding and supporting the children's work with their tree. Our role was more of a backup, secondary support, and to take care of the overall structure of the day. As preparation for us we made a really detailed schedule for the day. It helped us keep the structure and ensure that we had enough time for each part. Of course we didn't follow the schedule minute by minute, but it gave us a good framework to lean on to, especially when it was the first time we did this. (We attach the schedule we used for this day).

It would be a good idea to let the parents make their own Tree of Life before taking the role as facilitators for their children. In this example we didn't have enough time for that. We also think that it is better to do that in a group context where parents can be outsider witnesses to each other. The group context is important for reaching all possibilities within this method.

Workshop with the Family

Then it was time for the workshop with the two children and their parents. The family already knew us well from previous meetings so we didn't need to spend time in getting to know each other before working with the tree.

If it's a new acquaintance we think it's a good idea to use some time to talks and exercises that bring the whole family and you as a leader to a space that feels comfortable and that open up for storytelling and remembering conversations.

We got started with a short ceremony which included presentation and answering some small questions about ourselves. We used a "talking stick" and a short ceremonial talk in order to make the introduction to a ritual that brought the group together.

After a short introduction about Tree of life to the two boys, they draw their tree on a large paper. They decided to work on the floor, and it was good to see the parents immediately lying on the floor beside the boys.

On our preparatory meeting with the parents they discussed how they would "switch" between the children so that the collaboration would be as balanced as possible. They didn't like the idea of a rigid schedule with "mathematical justice". Instead they decided to communicate and collaborate during the day so that their sons got enough attention and support from each parent. We liked that a lot. Working like that they would give their boys a comforting and reassuring experience of having parents that today is able to collaborate and communicate respectfully with each other – although they have had a lot of trouble with that in the past.

The best part is that the parents succeeded in fulfilling their intentions. Their cooperation during the day was calm, flexible and supportive to each other. We think that the joined focus on the children's trees; valuable memories, strengths, skills, dreams and aspirations, significant people and so on, contributed to that.

After the sketch of the Tree was finished we worked step by step with each part. Together with the family we talked shortly about "the Roots" of the Tree. We asked question to both the parents and the children – what they remembered about their roots; places of birth, grandparents,

their skills and way of life, what they appreciated about their roots and so on. The parents could lead their children in to certain memories, just by using a word or telling a short story, and then it was possible for us as group leaders to ask the children more questions about that memory. This took us about ten - fifteen minutes.

Then the children went to their Tree and started to write down and draw something that were connected to our talk about their roots. The parents stayed beside them, helped them to remember and answered questions from the children about relatives, places and memories. The younger boy was only eight years at this time, and he needed more time for and support with his writing. This part needed about 15 – 20 minutes to finish.

We went on with the rest of the Tree in the same way; first a short talk about what could be inside the metaphors, the Ground, the Trunk, the Branches, and so on, and then the children worked with each part with support from their parents.

This work was mixed with brakes, playing together, and sometimes catching some air. We ate lunch together (organized by a small café nearby). Of course, one can choose to make lunch together as a part of the day.

When the two Trees were completed we went on to the telling and retelling. In this part we played a more active role in interviewing the children about their Trees. We asked questions like:

- What thoughts come into your mind when you see your Tree?
- Is there something special you want to tell us about your roots (The ground, what's in the Trunk, and so on)?
- Have you learned something new about your roots, yourself and so on?
- Can you tell us one story about when you had good use of this particular skill?
- Which persons among you do you think really like that you have this dream about the future?

One of us interviewed one child at a time, and the rest of the family listened.

After the interview we made a short retelling of what we have heard, highlighting some parts. Then we turned to the other family members and asked them if there was anything in particular that touched them or evoked some interesting thoughts.

Finally the other family members got the opportunity to add something personal to the Tree that we've been talking about. We used small notes (stickers) formed as butterflies, clouds, flowers that they could write their message on. It could be about strengths, good memories etc, which they wanted to tell about their son/brother. And they were also invited to put some words around it.

We could really see how much the boys enjoyed to experience the resonance from the other family members.

Afterwards we thought that it would have been a good idea to widen the group that was participating in this part of the day. The foster parents and the father's new wife were invited to the closing ceremony. But in this case it would have been even better to let them in as outsider witnesses in the telling and retelling part of the process.

At this time of the day the children (and the rest of us) were beginning to get pretty tired. We had one part left to do – the storms of Life. They were sitting in the lap of each parent, when we talked about Storms in general – dangers that could threaten Trees in the forest. We noticed that the two boys had some difficulties to grasp the metaphor (maybe partly because of tiredness).

We asked them in general about what could be difficult for children in their lives, what could be “storms” in children’s life. It wasn’t so easy for them to come up with examples, but the father gave an example that led them into other examples as well. Then we asked if there had been any storms in their lives. They sat quietly thinking in their parents laps but didn’t come up with any idea. Then mother said, “You remember when I went to hospital. That must have been a big storm in your lives.” They both nodded, but didn’t add any words. We started to talk about what helped them through that storm. With a little help from the parents they could come up with some ideas.

But at this time they were really tired. And the guest’s had arrived for the closing ceremony. We expressed how grateful we were about sharing the day with the family, and that the children had been working so thoroughly with their tree.

At the closing ceremony we offered something to eat and drink, and the family was invited to tell freely about their experiences from this day. We had the two Trees on the wall. We invited the guest to say something about what they saw. They were curious and looked closely on what the boys had written and drawn. There was some funny stuff in the Trees that made everybody laugh. The guests were also invited to share some thoughts about what caught their attention in the Trees. This final part became a wonderful moment of sharing thoughts about the children’s strengths, and about strengths and aspirations in the context around the boys. Finally they both got a Diploma and applause from the audience.

Closing remarks

Our experiences from this day are inspiring regarding working with Tree of Life in a Family context. Maybe it’s better to do the work during two days instead of one. We’ve added some other reflections above about what could be made differently (see framed paragraphs).

We are pretty sure that you need this workshop approach in order to get the best out of the Method. It is harder to create the kind of Metaphoric space you need for the Tree of Life if the work is spread over several ordinary sessions.

In this particular case we think that the Tree of Life has contributed to lasting and richer relationships in the family and in the whole context in spite of that the children still are living in foster care. They haven’t lost their Family. They have gained one more.

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