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Shame and Guilt in Christian Children: Interventions with Projective Techniques and Play Therapy

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Psychotherapy issues for religiously committed clients have been explored in several recent books and articles. While these works have focused on adults, little has been written on the therapy issues of religiously committed children. Emerging research suggests that children's conceptions of God are quite different than that of adults. Moreover, due to their concrete thinking, children often find it hard to grasp theological foundations to the Christian faith (e.g., salvation by grace) that adults typically assimilate into their world view. While children generally learn of God's grace and mercy in Sunday school, it has been found that some of them nonetheless struggle deeply with issues of guilt and shame. It has been well documented that children do not have the same cognitive and language abilities as adults, and therefore require considerably different modes of psychotherapy. For latency aged and younger children, play therapy is often the treatment of choice. This article will present a case study of a Christian child who participated in a projective assessment and play therapy for healing of shame and guilt issues.

The impact of one's religious beliefs in psychotherapy has found increasing interest among members of the psychological community (Lovinger, 1984; Malony, 1985, 1988; McDargh, 1983; Narramore, 1984; Rizzuto, 1979).

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While such topics as the assessment of religious maturity, the psychodynamic meaning of religious beliefs, and the psycho-spiritual meaning of guilt have been enjoying recent scholarly attention, it is noteworthy that nearly all these works have focused on the issues of adults. Conversely, the literature on these same issues in children has been lacking.

Havighurst and Keating (1971) were among the first to point out the paucity of studies on psychological aspects of childhood religious commitment. In their investigation of children's conceptions of God, they found that children indeed begin to organize belief systems of God as young as four years of age. Ahlskog (1985) noted that children typically possess a "latent theology," in which they quest to believe in God or some other form of ultimate reality.

The task of investigating the dynamics of children's religious faith is particularly challenging because they lack the language skills that are required for similar studies with adults. Research on child development has found that children perceive the world and God in concrete ways, lacking the cognitive sophistication to deal abstractly with such intangible matters as God until they reach early adolescence (Elkind, 1978; Fowler, 1981; Piaget, 1969).

Heller (1986) found a way to bypass such cognitive limitations in children by using projective measures. He based this method on Elkind's (1978) finding that, "... children's anecdotal information and stories can produce valuable insight into their religious constructions not so easily discovered by more highly structured means" (Heller, 1986, p. 14). In his landmark study on children's conceptions of God, Heller had forty children draw a picture of God, tell a story about the picture, and then interact with God through fantasy play with dolls. He found that children differed by age group (as well as by gender and religious denomination) in their themes

and images of God. For instance, the four to six year old group graphically evidenced a preoccupation with an "... intrusive orientation toward a good/bad polarity, which seems to result in too 'conscience-oriented' a religious practice" (pp. 135-136). Heller noted the great extent to which these children linked religion with obedience, and the degree to which some of them struggled with anger over perceived religious control. In his sample of ten to twelve year olds, Heller found a preoccupation with suffering, death, and the hereafter.

Given that children conceive of God with varying degrees of concreteness as they grow, it is not surprising to note that they often find it hard to grasp theological foundations to the Christian faith (e.g., salvation by grace) that adults typically assimilate into their world view. While most Sunday School curricula emphasize God's nature as gracious and merciful, a number of Christian children nonetheless struggle deeply with issues of guilt and shame.

Guilt has been described as an objective state of having transgressed a moral rule, while "feelings" of guilt can actually constitute a psychological defense against unacceptable motives or affects (e.g., rage, helplessness) (Lovinger, 1984). Tournier (1962) made a useful distinction between true and false guilt, with the latter being the more neurotic sort that is often addressed in psychotherapy. Belgum (1963) identified guilt as a pivotal meeting point of psychology and religion. Heller (1986) found that children who evidenced guilt tended to link it with their anger, their feelings of excitement, and with a subsequent fear that God would punish them.

While guilt is concerned with the rightness of one's actions, shame is primarily a feeling state in which one feels inherently defective or inferior. Corresponding to Tournier's view of true versus false guilt, Bradshaw (1988) distinguished healthy shame from toxic shame. According to him, a person with healthy guilt might say, "I made a mistake," while one with toxic shame might say, "I am a mistake." Kaufman (1989) linked toxic shame with a compelling urge to hide or withdraw from the source of the shame.

It is not uncommon in adult psychotherapy to address issues of toxic guilt and shame, especially as these interface with one's religious faith (Bradshaw, 1988; Lovinger, 1990; Narramore, 1984). However, such therapeutic techniques typically consist of talking in fairly abstract language. It has been earlier documented that children lack the cognitive sophis-

tication to benefit from such techniques. Therefore, while children struggle with similar issues of toxic guilt and shame, they require a considerably different mode of therapy.

For latency aged and younger children struggling with these issues, projective assessment coupled with play therapy seem to be the treatment of choice. Fantasy and imaginative play have been found to be particularly potent in helping children enact the mastery of difficult situations (Bettelheim, 1976; Garvey, 1977).

It was noted earlier that children's stories can provide valuable insight into their religious constructs (Elkind, 1978). Indeed, as one of Heller's young subjects declared, "God is with you when you draw or write a story" (Heller, 1986, pp. 111-112). Thus, projective measures and play therapy seem to be particularly well suited for the treatment of Christian children who are struggling with issues such as guilt and shame. To illustrate the use of such interventions, the following case is presented.

Case Study of "Jacob"

Background Information

"Jacob" was the eight year old son of devoutly Christian parents. Their request for a psychological evaluation of Jacob was triggered by several incidents in which they caught him "stealing and lying." Jacob's father stated that he was appalled at this behavior, deeming it as sinful and unbecoming of a Christian. Jacob's parents hoped that the assessment would help them learn how to be more effective in their methods of disciplining Jacob for such infractions.

I was a bit surprised to discover that such cardinal sins of "stealing and lying" actually referred to Jacob "stealing" candy from the kitchen and "lying" about the tell-tale empty candy wrappers that were found stashed under his bed. The severity of these offenses was contextualized when his parents explained that Jacob was deathly allergic to most foods, including candy. My suspicions that the parents were exaggerating on the word "deathly" were abated when they added that in Jacob's short life, he had been hospitalized 36 times for life-threatening allergic reactions.

These crises imposed a tremendous strain on his parents' job commitments (his as a minor league athlete and hers as a human services provider). Nevertheless, they stoically tolerated this upheaval

and structured their lives such that they never left Jacob alone in the hospital.

They worked hard to instill this stoicism in Jacob, believing that forming his character with stern moral fiber would help him find the will to survive future allergy attacks. However, his mother wondered at times if they were expecting too much mental toughness in young Jacob. His father's thinly veiled contempt of such a possibility was reflected as he conceded, "Maybe he needs some pity party at times."

Projective Assessment

Conducting the psychological evaluation with Jacob proved challenging. Though painfully small in stature for an eight year old boy, he breezed into the office with a persona the size of a mack truck. Ruddy, winsome, and (as I was to discover in his IQ testing) intellectually brilliant, he darted around the office and explored it with ravenous curiosity. He barked out responses to the tests with such ferocious intensity that he seemed to shout rather than speak. His voice was raspy, and his shoulders heaved as he wheezed and gasped for breath between phrases. While he obviously relished this chance to display his intellectual prowess, he seemed to be trying too hard, to the point of exhausting himself. Between his seemingly frantic level of activity (e.g., frequently darting away from the testing table) and subsequent bouts of exhaustion (e.g., laying his head on the table with a raspy whisper, "My brain's tuckered out. I can't think anymore."), it became difficult for me to contain my growing frustration with the slow pace of the testing.

One such moment happened during the administration of the Figure Drawings test. In mid-story he suddenly went off-task and bolted off to play with some stuffed animals. When I gently directed him back to the table, he ignored me. I then told him firmly that he needed to come back and finish the stories before he could take another break. At that point Jacob froze in his tracks and looked at me as if startled. What he immediately did next with the stuffed animals made *me* freeze in my tracks. He growled to the stuffed animals, "You're all being BAD!" Then he threw open a cabinet door and shoved the animals in it. He slammed the door shut, wheezing and shouting, "There!" Turning to me, he reaped, "You know, this way if the animals are playing too rough they can be put in the cage there for punishment."

Almost reflexively, I reached into the cabinet and took out a stuffed animal. Setting it on my lap, I began to gently stroke its fur. "Jacob, I'll tell you a secret. Sometimes when I'm in here, the animals come out and run all over the room. But I know that they don't do it because they're bad. They do it because they're scared. They can't help it. So when I see them running around here, all frantic-like, I put them on my lap and pet them and rub their backs, nice and gently. And that calms them down. I tell them that it's okay to feel scared, and that someday when they're grown up, they'll learn how to calm themselves down when they're scared, all by themselves."

It wasn't until later that day when I re-read Jacob's Figure Drawings test stories that the full force of this incident hit me. In his story about a tree, he stated:

This is a tree that, um, an old timer grew. [What is going to happen?] Nothing, the tree—um, the person got killed and was buried under the tree and the roots were set aside so the tree was buried with the coffin and they had a ceremony for the dead person and they put the tree back up and it gave shade again. [What was the tree feeling?] Trees can feel. It feels the coffin under its roots.

Jacob's narrative revealed a preoccupation with dying that is idiosyncratic for an eight year old child. I discovered that this theme intensified in his story about a family:

[Tell me a story about the family.] Oh, no! (hand on forehead) The mother and dad were in the park and then they were having a great time and then it started to rain and rain and they went in and watched tv and saw that there was a tornado coming in—my brother Noah called it a termato—and a baby plant got—a baby tree got pulled out of its socket, out of the ground, and it was terrible. [What were they thinking?] Oh, no! That baby tree, we think that it might die before we have a chance to save it. Aaargh!

It was precisely at this point that Jacob went "off task" and bolted off to play with the stuffed animals. I was thankful as I re-read the test protocol that I had recorded the content of his sudden, frenzied fantasy play with the stuffed animals:

(pulls monkey's arm up and down) The monkey's crying because it's upset and mad because the tree got pulled out of its socket. He's hungry—here! (pretends to stuff food frantically into monkey) There! No more!

[Trying to get Jacob back on task at this point, I ask him what the family in his story are feeling.] They're feeling like their house is gonna be torn down by the tornado! [I try gently, then firmly, to get Jacob to return to the testing

table. Instead, he races around the office with the stuffed animals. Thus begins the scene of Jacob stopping and growling to the stuffed animals, "You're all bein' BAD!"

Jacob's issues with guilt and shame suddenly became clear to me. Here was a boy who was terrified of dying, and who was even more frightened that such fear would make him a "wimp" in his father's eyes. Surely Jacob must have sensed his father's shame and disappointment over being an athlete whose son was a runt. Moreover, Jacob had spontaneously revealed during the testing that there were bullies at his school who would pick fights with him, "testin' ya to see if you're a regular kid or a wimp." Perhaps Jacob's shame over his fear of dying was all the more overwhelming to him because it apparently lurked outside of his conscious awareness. When asked to complete the sentence, "My worst experience in life was ...", Jacob had responded, "I don't have one yet (pause) but there is one: when my brother went downstairs and found my basketball hoop was bent." Such a response was curious for a youngster who had had 36 near death experiences.

It is likely that Jacob was, at some level, furious with his father for being so unresponsive and downright ridiculing of Jacob's deep-seated feelings of frailty, neediness, and vulnerability. Because such hostile feelings towards a primary caretaker were threatening to Jacob, he developed a good deal of guilt over his anger, in addition to feeling shame for feeling so needy and anxious to begin with. It is not a coincidence that Jacob's "off task" behavior of frantically (anxiously) playing with the stuffed animals culminated in his pronouncement of guilt, "You're all BAD!" His act of shoving the animals in a "cage" reflected both his projection of guilt (punishment for wrongdoing) and of shame (forcing the animals into an exile of hiding).

It is useful at this point to recall Heller's (1986) observation that four to six year old children showed a preoccupation with an intrusive orientation toward a good/bad polarity, resulting in too "conscience-oriented" a religious practice. Indeed, when Jacob had been asked to complete the sentence, "Nothing worse can happen to a man than ...", he responded, "going to hell." Jacob's lack of modulation was further evidenced when he had confided to me that he had stolen candy from the kitchen, adding that, "I deserved the punishment I got ... I figure I'll be glad my parents did this when I grow up—otherwise, I'll probably have ended up in jail."

In this regard, eight year old Jacob certainly seemed to be struggling with the psycho-spiritual issues more characteristic of a child half his age. However, it is also useful to recall Heller's finding that ten to twelve year old children were more inclined to be preoccupied with issues of suffering, death, and the hereafter.

It is clear in Jacob's Figure Drawing stories that his ruminations were strikingly similar to those of children up to four years older than himself. However, what Jacob lacked was the cognitive sophistication with which to assimilate his thoughts of dying. His concrete level of reasoning was evident in his response to the question, "What is the tree feeling?" with "Trees can feel. It feels the coffin under its roots." (Likewise, he had finished the Sentence Completion Test item, "When I let go ..." with, "I drop it.")

Jacob's struggle with guilt over his so-called sins of "stealing and lying" was poignantly enacted in his fantasy play of frantically stuffing the toy monkey with food when it was "crying and upset that the baby tree might die." It is curious that Jacob's presenting problem or "sin" had involved stealing candy from the family kitchen. Jacob's issues with food were underscored as I witnessed his seemingly insatiable hunger during the testing sessions. He devoured his mother's nutritious snacks within minutes, and then roved the office to scout out more food. When offered a cup of herbal tea, he put the entire used tea bag in his mouth, struggling to extract the last morsel of juice from it. He then opened a drawer and found the staff's supply of apple juice, for which he implored to have a drink.

Jacob's restricted diet did not seem able to fully account for the intensity of his food cravings. Reconstructing his life, I realized that his history of 36 inpatient hospitalizations had likely involved a series of intensely uncomfortable fasts as the doctors attempted to diagnose one food allergy after another. Moreover, with an hour seeming like eternity to a baby, the fasts were likely traumatically frightening for him, resulting in an awful unconscious dilemma: "If you eat you may die; if you don't eat, you may die."

Since this trauma happened when Jacob was so young, he did not have the cognitive skills with which to dispute the "false" or "toxic" nature of his shame and guilt (Bradshaw, 1988; Tournier, 1962). Instead, he rather transparently enacted his toxic guilt and shame with the stuffed animals when his anxiety was aroused during the projective assess-

ment. By using the projective technique as a bridge to begin treatment with Jacob, I believe that my response of petting the stuffed animal on my lap was a first step toward healing for him. By remaining within the frame of fantasy play in my response to Jacob, I believe that I was able to enact a glimpse of the compassionate grace that God extends to each of His children, including Jacob.

Play Therapy Interventions

Following the projective assessment, I participated in a series of richly imaginative play therapy sessions with Jacob, the master story-spinner. Together we bravely faced such perils as the evil witchdoctor whose medicine was really poison, and the dinosaurs who were afraid that the volcanos might kill them (adding that if he ever saw a volcano, he would take a huge rock and plug up the hole, to keep the dinosaurs from dying).

As I let Jacob concoct such fantasy play themes for each session, I sought to enter into his stories with a therapeutic ear attuned to his core conflicts which might (and, in fact, did) surface. In particular, I listened for symbolic expressions of shame over his deep seated fears of physical illness and the possibility of his dying young. Additionally, I listened for evidence of false guilt in the face of a God whom he perceived as mercilessly punitive.

During the first few of our eleven sessions of play therapy, Jacob displayed a good deal of grandiosity, arrogantly refusing to comply with some of the limits that I set with him. Curiously, one of those limits involved his darting into the staff's break room and "stealing" apple juice, thus enacting with startling transparency the "stealing" of candy issue that prompted his parents to refer him for treatment. The other limit that he disobeyed involved his insisting on flying a toy airplane into the road outside the office at the end of the session. Concerned for his safety as he would dart into the road after the plane, I told him that he could not continue to fly the plane so close to the road. He outright disregarded this limit and then finally conceded, sarcastically muttering, "ok, you're the boss." It was evident that he did not comprehend that I was exercising authority over him in an effort to help him be safe. Instead, at that moment I had seemingly become a "bully" to him.

The theme of limits and authority intensified several weeks later when Jacob's father accompanied him to the session. In his father's presence, clearly

racked with pangs of shame and guilt, Jacob confessed to me that he had been "real bad" that week, stealing candy from the kitchen again. After I escorted his father to the waiting room, Jacob and I proceeded to "unpack" what had happened. He confided that his father had threatened to send him to a lawyer if he didn't shape up, and that people who steal end up going to jail for punishment. I found it hard to follow the convolutions of this guilt-laden youngster. What was clear to me was that Jacob's distortions involved an extreme idea of divine justice that was not tempered with love or mercy (Stob, 1978). In other words, Jacob's psychospiritual development seemed to be arrested at an early age, in which God's justice is not sufficiently fused with His nature as gracious and compassionate. Jacob was clearly buckling under the assumptions of his faith, needing new handles with which to cope with his young concepts of sin, punishment, and grace.

Interventions at this point with an adult would likely involve rational discussions. However, this would clearly not do for Jacob. Indeed, when I had tried such direct conversations before with one young patient, he picked up a puppet and declared, "No, YOU don't talk—HE (handing me the puppet) has to talk!"

Fortunately, Jacob provided the inroad I needed at this point. He picked up a set of cowboy and indian toys, and had the cowboy begin attacking the indian because the indian was a "thief." I entered the story by taking the side of the thief, supplying the grace and compassion for the thief's deprivation that I thought Jacob was having trouble assimilating. Perhaps even more effective still might it have been if I had thought to pick up the indian and simply ask Jacob, "Does God still love him, even when he steals things?"

Jacob spent the rest of that session (and most of several subsequent sessions) relentlessly beating up on stuffed animals that he declared were "bullies." As I reacted to these displays of anger without shaming or quenching him, the nature of his fantasy took several curious turns. He asked if we could pretend that our arms were paralyzed, and proceeded to limp and writhe around the office, with his back bent, speaking feebly. I suspect that he was finally able to access his traumatic memory traces of lying in hospital beds, deathly ill, needing to keep his arms immobile due to the intravenous needles stuck in them.

Another curious turn of his fantasy came as he spun a tale about "king mosquitoes" who were as big as your fist, and who wanted to drink all of your blood. He declared that they "didn't know how to tell when they'd had enough," drinking until they killed themselves. (By this time in the session, Jacob had pleaded for and then consumed at least a quart of water, tea and juice.) I believe that as he enacted this transparent metaphor, Jacob was able to resolve his inner conflict of wanting to devour everything in sight, while lacking the ability to set limits on his food intake. On a psycho-spiritual level, Jacob seemed to begin to grasp the insight that when God sets down laws for us to obey, He does so out of a loving desire to protect us from what is harmful to us, and not out of a motive of wanting to be the "Divine Bully."

By this time in Jacob's treatment (session 9), I perceived that Jacob's playful ramblings in our sessions and my attempts to respond empathetically were beginning to bear the fruit of generalizations to his life at home and school. He told me that he had found the courage to stand up to "the school bully" for the first time. His sense of relief and empowerment over this feat was obvious.

My second clue that Jacob was successfully generalizing what he was learning in therapy came during my final consultation with Jacob's parents. His mother remarked that Jacob seemed noticeably calmer at home since he began to work with me. She added, "There's just one thing I don't understand. He'll be running all over the room, frantic-like, and then he'll suddenly dive-bomb onto my lap and lay there, pleading "Ma, will you rub my back and pet me?"

Released from the shame of feeling vulnerable and desperate for reassuring affection, Jacob was able to ask directly for that affection from his mother. Moreover, he was able to make peace with the limits of his own ability to manage his impulses and cravings, and was able to ask an authority figure for help in setting those limits. Perhaps, as he lay in his mother's lap, Divine justice finally brushed shoulders with Divine lovingkindness.

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