

Deepening Parent/Child Relationships Through Play

by Linda Hanlon

“I feel like I’ve gotten my child back”

The quote comes from a parent who recently participated in a filial programme that was designed to deepen parent/child relationships through play and illustrates the potential of such programmes. This article explores a personal experience of using a filial programme designed by Dr. Garry Landreth and most recently presented in his book ‘Child Parent Relationship Therapy: A 10-session Filial Therapy Model’ (2006) co-authored by Sue Bratton.

Filial therapy, which incorporates a number of theoretical approaches, was developed in the 1960’s by Dr. Louise Guerney and Dr. Bernard Geurney as a treatment for children with social, emotional, and behavioural problems. They recognised this to be a useful means of helping children and their families to overcome or prevent difficulties that would otherwise undermine them. Since then, Filial Therapy has become widely accepted, practiced and is variously known as Child Relationship Enhancement Family Therapy, (CREFT), Filial Play Therapy (FPT) and Filial Family Therapy (FFT).

Landreth (2002) defined Filial Therapy as

‘a unique approach used by professionals trained in play therapy to train parents to be therapeutic agents with their own children. Parents are taught basic child-centred play therapy principles and skills, including reflective listening, recognising and responding to children’s feelings, therapeutic limit setting and building children’s self-esteem’.

This client-centred model encourages the development of the child’s innate ability to self-actualise. In creating a non-judgemental and accepting atmosphere using those skills, the play therapist establishes a therapeutic alliance with a young client. The same model is applied to parents as they receive instruction on the use of non-directive techniques. As the parents develop confidence with those skills, the positive effects begin to permeate throughout the relationship as a whole. As Landreth puts it:

“Filial therapy is not focused on solving problems or a quick fix but, rather, is structured to enhance the relationship, between parent and child with the parent serving as the therapeutic agent of change” (2002).

Many experts have contributed to the development of Filial Therapy. One such expert is Rise VanFleet. In her most recent book *Filial Therapy, Strengthening Parent-Child Relationships* (2005) she states;

“Filial therapy has received increasing recognition by the clinical and research communities as an effective approach to strengthening parent, child, and family relationships”

She further describes the overall aims of filial therapy as being

To eliminate the presenting problems at their source

To develop positive interactions between parents and their children.

To increase family’s communication, coping and problem solving skills so they are better able to cope with future problems independently and successfully.

Since the Filial Therapy model was first devised by the Guerneys, there has been over forty years of rigorous research. VanFleet, Ryan, and Smith reviewed the empirical history and research reported in VanFleet (2005) and concluding with the following comments:

“Empirical studies helped shape the filial therapy method itself, and a body of research has grown that consistently demonstrates its effectiveness and applicability. Studies have shown its long-term benefits for children and families, making it a robust intervention for a wide range of problems, as well as an effective preventive modality.”

During postgraduate training as a play therapist, at the children’s therapy centre in West Meath, I became especially interested in the work of Landreth who is Regents Professor in the counselling Department of the University of North Texas. It is in his book *‘Play Therapy, The Art of the Relationship’* he outlined the 10-week programme of Filial Therapy, which he refers to as Child-Parent-Relationship Training (CPRT). In the programme, a group of selected parents are trained in the use of non-

directive techniques to be used during 30-minute 'special play time' taking place weekly in their own homes with their child.

When I first became aware of this programme, I was involved in providing one to one play therapy and working with a small group of children. The demand for this work began to increase rapidly both in private practice and within the organisation I work for. I came to realise how many more children could benefit if parents had the skills to use with all of their children. The most recent group of parents I facilitated had a combined total of 21 children. I felt that a program such as this would be of significant benefit both to parent and child. In an age where so many pressures are brought to bear on parents, busy lifestyles, career obligations, and financial constraints, and many parenting alone, this programme offered real hands-on assistance to enhance skills already present and to encourage the implementation of new ones.

Landreth, in collaboration with Sue Bratton, outlined the programme in the following format: A group of between 10-12 parents are invited to participate in a ten-week program of two hours duration per week. Two therapists facilitate the group for the duration of that period. The focus throughout is centred on the fact that play is important to children, play is their language and toys are the words. Whereas adults talk about their experiences, thoughts and feelings, children use toys to explore their experiences and express what they think and how they feel. Therefore, parents are taught to have special structured 30-minute playtimes with their child in their own home and using a kit of carefully selected toys. Parents learn how to respond empathically to their child's feelings, build the child's self-esteem, help their child to learn self-control and self-responsibility, and set therapeutic limits during these special playtimes.

Landreth and Bratton suggest that in this special playtime, the parent creates an accepting relationship in which the child feels safe to express himself through his play-fears, likes, dislikes, wishes, anger, loneliness, joy, or feelings of failure. This is not a typical playtime. In this special playtime the parent learns to let the child take the lead in the play while they follow, but always in charge of safety and boundaries. During the

playtime reprimands, put downs, evaluations, and judgements are suspended. Parents are only asked to practice these skills during the 30-minutes as it would be impossible to maintain this 24 hours a day 7 days a week. Between weeks three and four parents will have begun their first special playtime at home and will continue to do so each subsequent week. During the programme, time is given to check on how the special playtimes are proceeding and the facilitators and the group itself give support and encouragement as parents become increasingly more confident using the skills.

When children experience a play relationship in which they feel accepted, understood, and cared for, they play out many of their problems and, in the process, release tension, feelings, and burdens. As this happens the children will begin to feel better about themselves, begin to recognise their own strengths and begin to self regulate. How a child views themselves will have a significant impact on behaviour. When children feel better about themselves, they will behave in more self- enhancing ways than self- defeating ways.

For the past three years, I have been involved in facilitating groups using this programme. It has been my experience that this programme offers a very holistic and encouraging learning format and is very pro-parent. Parents not only learn a new way of being with their children but also gain an insight to their own childhoods, and experience meeting parents who share similar concerns. The feedback received is testament to how parents responded to this program. For myself, the passion I have subsequently developed for this therapeutic intervention is directly related to the belief I have in empowering parents with relevant skills. This information would have greatly benefited me in my early parenting days had I been aware of it. I believe that where a parent is an emotional ally to a child then they are most often the better therapeutic agent. It is also a very flexible model, which can be designed to meet the specific needs of a particular parental group. Such groups would include parents of special needs children, domestic violence units, young mothers, those fostering or adopting, marginalized groups, multi-cultural groups and those parents who are incarcerated. The applications are numerous.

My personal experience of conducting a number of filial groups has been positive and uplifting. All of the participants reported improvements in their relationships and a reduction in the presenting behaviour, which was the initial cause for concern. They felt closer to their children and developed compassion for their own inner child bridging the gap between the seriousness of adulthood and the playfulness of childhood. Strong bonds developed between the members of the group and I suspect friendships have grown as a result of the experience. I should mention that follow up meetings were arranged and were held six weeks after completion of the programmes. Special play times are conducted during the programme but they need to continue after the programme has finished to ensure on-going effectiveness. Plans are afoot to create an advanced programme to reinforce skills and to ensure the continued support for parents. One of the difficulties I encountered however has been creating awareness among parents regarding this programme. Perhaps this article may go some way towards creating awareness among those involved in the work with children and their families.

In conclusion, play is the central activity of childhood and it's been long recognised as children's primary source of communication. This programme offers a parent and child a real opportunity to deepen their relationship and create genuine understanding of the child's world. Special playtimes are an enjoyable and fun experience. If I ever doubt the long lasting benefits of such a programme, I'm reminded of a question Landreth often asks of prospective parents:

“In twenty years from now what would we like our children to remember about their childhoods? Birds fly. Fish swim. Children play” (Landreth, 2006).

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