

Hypnotherapy for Children

by Roberta Swartz

I feel quite fortunate to have worked with a wonderful pediatrician who before retiring at the age of eighty, referred children of all ages for hypnotherapy. Prior to meeting with Dr. Favara, I had worked with a handful of younger clients but not at all to the degree I was about to experience. Over the course of two years I worked with approximately seventy-five kids. I quickly learned that working with children was very different than working with grown-ups; I had to move well beyond my own established techniques in hypnotherapy, beyond those that were effective for adults.

I threaded together my experience as a clinical hypnotherapist and as a mother as I navigated many new responses and approaches. I also drew from my background as an adapted physical education teacher when I worked with severely emotionally disturbed, mentally retarded, autistic and severely physically delayed children of all ages. Most of the children I worked with in hypnotherapy already had plenty of very difficult situations in their life. Some of their experiences were quite extreme and I remember thinking, "No one should ever have to experience such things, let alone a young child."

As I settled into this somewhat new arena I found that working with children was rewarding and enriching. There was something about helping a younger person bring clarity to their life before they matured that was quite pleasing for me as a therapist. In addition, children are highly creative, spiritually wise and often quite psychic. These hidden aspects are often at the seat of their struggles and are a wonderful avenue for establishing rapport and building their self worth and confidence.

Whenever you work with a minor, for best results you must work with at least one of their parents. Best case scenario is when you can get the family involved. You may also need to work with one of their siblings. Unfortunately, this is not always the case and you may only be able to formally work with the child. While fantastic changes can occur, when other family members are willing to participate in therapy, the foundation for ongoing transformation is greatly enhanced.

I learned that different age groups present their own dynamics in the therapy room. I've separated these as presented below. Please keep in mind these are generalized age groups. Your client's level of cognitive development, emotional maturation, levels of processing and readiness must all be taken into account.

Age groups that require different approaches with hypnotherapy

womb experience through 2 years of age

3 years old through 5 or 6 years old

6 or 7 years old through 10 or 11 years old

11 or 12 years old through 15 or 16 years old

15 or 16 years old through 18 years old

For this article, we'll begin by looking at some of the common components I have found when working with children ages three through five or six since this seems to be quite challenging for many therapists.

Children ages three through five or six

Children in this age group are fun to work with because their imagination is easy to access. Most of the work we do is through the use of waking hypnosis incorporated with play therapy, imagery, artwork, or song. To the unaware observer it will appear that no therapy is taking place at all.

I remember working with a young boy who was six years old at the time. He was having trouble with using the toilet. According to his mother, he'd often hide behind a chair or find some other hidden place to urinate or have a bowel movement. He was physically beautiful, very bright and creative. He was also extremely sensitive as most children are. His mother was very controlling and critical of her son. I watched him recoil each time she spoke about his problems with frustration and disapproval.

With an awareness that problems of this nature tend to stem from "control issues," the picture became quite clear that I also needed to help his mother change how she was approaching her son. And so our dance began as I worked through waking hypnosis with both the mother and her child. While I provided a brief education about hypnosis to his mother, I let "Mike" play with some blocks. After a few minutes, I got down on the floor and I began to play blocks with him as I continued talking to his mother. As we played I praised Mike, making favorable comments about his structure or thanking him for sharing. Some of my comments purposely countered his mothers unkind words. I brought out some clay and asked Mike to make a small clay figure of a boy sleeping on a bed. As he did, I made a toilet and some "poop." I told silly stories about animals going to the bathroom; stories that were humorous, incongruous and somewhat confusing. I asked questions. I rambled on and we laughed. We then made up a story about the boy in the bed and the toilet. Mike put the yellow clay (pee) and the brown clay (poop) in to the toilet. He laughed some more as I gave direct suggestions regarding this action. All the while his mother sat on the couch. She seemed unsure and very far away but I stayed focused on Mike never worrying about how all of this might appear to his mother.

The following week in our pre-hypnotic interview, I learned that Mike's mother was very upset with me. Why? Because she was expecting hypnotherapy and all we did was play. I asked her if anything had changed over the last week. Her response was, "Yes. Now that you mention it, Mike had fewer accidents this week. His bed even stayed dry a couple of nights. Generally speaking, he just seems happier." I then took some time to educate her about waking hypnosis and that what looked like "just play" was indeed good therapy. After a few more sessions and a custom CD, this young boy was free of his problem. His mother softened her ways and even though I haven't seen Mike in over three years, he still remembers our time together quite fondly. His mother is now a great believer in hypnotherapy and she completely supports the work.

The use of puppets in hypnotherapy

Another fantastic avenue for working with this age group is to use puppets. I have a few different puppets that children can pick from for our work together. One puppet is a kangaroo with a baby in her pouch. Puppets are a great way to build rapport, to use waking hypnosis through story telling and to give the child a voice. Sometimes I let the child take the puppet home and I use it as an anchor for a post-hypnotic suggestion. The puppet becomes a bridge between their world at home and the world of hypnosis and it transfers responsibility from the therapist to the child in gentle increments. I have seen great improvements for many problems including eliminating fears and unwanted behaviors with this approach. The following steps demonstrate how this process unfolds. Please keep in mind this is supported with waking hypnosis and the use of Ericksonian suggestions throughout.

1. The child is dissociated from the therapeutic situation to varying degrees. The therapist has the power. The child wants control but doesn't know what to expect or what to do.
2. The therapist gives the power to the puppet. This is one step inward towards the child but the child still feels safe and somewhat removed from taking responsibility.
3. The child takes the puppet home. This is one more step inward because it becomes much more personal. I ask the child to bring the puppet to bed with them if possible.
4. The child comes back for another session and brings the puppet with them. They are in control of the puppet and they feel a sense of personal connection. The puppet now acts as a bridge to strengthen rapport. It can provide a subconscious perception of safety and control. They also bring their own favorite stuffed animal or doll to our session.
5. The magic is transferred from the puppet to their favorite item. This brings the responsibility and the control one more step inward, closer to the child.
6. The final step is for the child to learn how to do what the stuffed animal provided for them. Bring the responsibility from external to internal. Depending on the child and the situation, this may or may not be appropriate at this time and it may or may not be necessary.

The use of artwork during hypnotherapy

1. Have the child color a picture while you interview their parent. Get feedback from the child and then incorporate these ideas into your session. You can use the picture for a post-hypnotic suggestion and have them take the picture home and place it by their bed.
2. Get into a circle and you begin by telling a story based on the information you received in your interview. You the therapist, begin the drawing and then pass it around the circle. Each person adds something to the drawing based on the story. Continue adding to the picture and once again, use this as a post-hypnotic suggestion. For example, if the child

draws purple hearts, she can make purple hearts with her mom and then they can post them around the house.

The use of songs in hypnotherapy

Songs are a wonderful avenue for the use of waking suggestion, post-hypnotic suggestion and repetition. I usually create a little "jingle" to a familiar melody for the child to sing. For example, the following jingle was used for Mike and was sung to the tune of twinkle, twinkle little star. "I'm as happy as can be when I'm in control of my poop and pee."

Formal hypnosis

Young children rarely sit still even in hypnosis. They tend to shift around, open their eyes, look around and may appear uninvolved. Continue deepening and storytelling through imagery and be sure to get confirmation when needed. You can use a post-hypnotic suggestion based on the previously mentioned ideas. Let go of expecting your young client to slip into deep relaxation but know that your ideas can still make an impact.

Roberta Swartz has worked as a Clinical Hypnotherapist for over 27 years. Her new book Me, Myself and Mind will be available in July 2011. For an inside look please visit <http://www.memyselfandmind.com> or go to <http://www.hypnosis4yourlife.com>.