

**Elena Keller, special psychologist for visually impaired children, “Parents of the visually impaired” Foundation (FRIZ), Moscow , Russia.**

**CLAY IS A TREATMENT: EXPERIENCE IN ART-THERAPY AT A RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL FOR BLIND CHILDREN.**

This lecture is the result of five years of work as a psychologist and a ceramic teacher at boarding schools for blind children in Moscow. The idea for this clay- method came in the process of teaching and working with a group of children with serious emotional problems at this school. My first degree was in art history and the second was in special psychology. Throughout my work I have tried to use both areas of my experience.

**External reasons .**

We all know about the existence of clay-modeling lessons in residential schools for the blind. Sometimes they are the only way for blind children to express their feelings in art form , which is available for them.

On the hand until now psychologists who work with the blind do not have a complete system for testing the emotional sphere of visually impaired clients. There are some very good tests for cognitive and logic skills, but not for emotional sphere. This happens, because most of the tests used by psychologists in mainstream schools and hospitals are based on drawing tasks.

“ Why is it necessary to consider the emotional sphere of the blind child ?”,- somebody may ask . He or she will be quite right, if the child has no behavioral , communicative, psychological or social problems. However, very often children, who live in residential schools have problems that result from their way of life. The lack of privacy, strict regulations, stressful relationships with classmates can make a blind child too aggressive or too closed and negatively influence the child’s development and ability to communicate with people.

**Internal reasons**

The last six years have been a period of rapid development in various methods of psychological support for people with problems and disabilities in Russia. Changes in the society , financial crisis, the breaking down the mental stereotypes have influence the psychological health of people. A new generation of Russian psychologists have found themselves in front of the sea of human pain and inadequacy. In this situation they have looked to all kinds of workable methods of therapy, used in western countries: Rogers’ non-directive therapy, play therapy, NLP, psychoanalysis, brain-gym, training of personality growth and so on. These knowledge gave us the opportunity to understand the reasons why some children have behavioral problems and find ways to overcome them .

Clay-therapy emerged from a special ceramic class for visually impaired children with behavioral problems, living at the boarding school. We noticed that sometimes visually impaired children have difficulties in modeling clay not only because of their disability ( low development of fine motor, etc), but mostly because of their emotional condition. Non-reflexed negative skills ; fear and aggression were so strong inside of

some visually impaired children at the boarding school, that they could only manipulate the clay by beating and tearing it. They had no creative ideas or desire to make something, and were able only to express their feelings using physical violence.

Usually such behavior is not allowed, but we understood that prohibition was deadlocked. In that case their hidden fears would prohibit them even to touch the clay. "Do it please", - we told the children, - you may do anything to the clay that you want".

At the beginning we could not imagine that this phrase will release a powerful stream of unexpected personality changes, creating an atmosphere of basic trust toward people and environment among our little clients.

### **Description of therapy.**

This path from the phrase "do it please" and positive changes in the child's abilities was not short and straight. It had many steps and stages and it differed for every child. Psychotherapy itself was not the aim: we realized that something happens only after a long period of common work.

The **first stage** of the process was to allow the child more or less active and aggressively manipulate the clay. He or she felt the clay, its texture, smell and weight. The child tried to contact with the clay, to feel its response to his or her activity.

It was a tactile conversation: the clay's language was its changing the form. If the clay was beaten it became flat. If it was rolled between the child's fingers, it became a ball, a spiral etc. The child could add water or sand. He or she could dry, or fire, or dissolve it. Every activity had an answer, every event had a reason.

Later we realized, that this method was very effective for multi-handicapped children. It developed their ability to think and to connect with the environment. It was a good training ground for fine motor skills as well. In addition we sometimes took different kinds of clay from nature or used for medical purposes, allowing to the child to play with it and to move his or her hands in it.

In general this stage was a stage for releasing negative energy, and the extra aggression that interfered with the child's safe contact with the world.

The **second stage** was to allow the children to model anything they wanted. Every idea, every wish the child had was acceptable through sometimes the children were frightened or antisocial. The child's words, the "story" now become for us more important, than the clay itself.

Identical pieces of the clay could now perform different strange, but important things for the children:

"This is a monster"

"This is a dead man"

"This is a bus. And this is a man. (the boy put the figure under the bus's wheel)

"This is a turtle. It is afraid of being dye"

For us the most important thing now was to keep the atmosphere of the basic trust, to forget about our role as teachers, to learn to hear and understand the child. The children's stories were awful and funny in the same time. Our little clients verbalized their fears and attitudes, reflected events and situations, which were important or painful for them.

## Case study.

**DIMITRY ( 9 years)** was a visually impaired boy, studying in a boarding school. He became v. i. because of the retinoblastom and could still see a bit.. Sometimes he was too much aggressive towards his schoolmates, which could have resulted in expulsion from school. The beginning of his modeling was typical for children with the same problem: he made a lot of energetic manipulations with the clay ,beating and breaking it apart. Then he decided to make a relief and told us that he wanted to model an eagle.

- "This is an eagle. He catches the birds."
- "Why does he do it?"
- "Because they are foolish."
- "Does he have friends?"
- "No. There are only little birds around. They cannot be friends."
- "Why?"
- "The eagle eats them."
- "Does he catch birds only for meals?"
- "No. He catches because he likes to do it."
- "Is your eagle angry?"
- "Yes, it is."
- "Why is he angry?"
- "Because he has no home."

This comment was very unexpected, but we suggested that the boy model a house for the eagle. He made it on the top of a high mountain. Nobody could come there without permission. Nobody could make noise. Nobody could take anything from his home.

- "Does the eagle catch birds now, after he has a home?"
- "Only for eating."
- "Can he have friends?"
- "Maybe, because he can invite somebody to his home."

Of course, we cannot maintain, that the transformation of eagle's story could directly effected the boy's behavior ; but in the process of our work we were able to notice one of the possible reasons of the boy's in-adequacy. The reason was typical for children from the boarding school and was strengthened by his visual impairment. The lack of a feeling of security came both from the internal and external conditions of his life.

## Is it really a method?

Technically this therapy is not new and is a very well-known as a related form of drawing therapy. Drawing methods are wide used for seeing children both for therapy and for testing.\* In our work with blind children we are not able to use them. We tried to use modeling instead of the drawing; clay instead of paper and pencils; texture, mass and form instead of color , spots and lines.

Formally this method is not yet a therapeutic and test system . It has not been theoretically analyzed and is not approved for use among the population of the country . It has not yet been thoroughly explained and interpreted and is more connected with the sphere of art and environment, than with assessment in education.

But I trust, it has several very important advantages, which may make it interesting for people who work with visually impaired children.

1. It is a soft and gentle method, applicable for young children and people who are mentally challenged. Usually this category of people is not involved into psychotherapeutic and testing activity because of the possibility of negative influence on their health. This method may be more or less effective, but it cannot be harmful, as no harm come from modeling clay.
2. It is a synthetic method, associated elements of play, art, physiotherapy, development of speech and cognitive skills, relaxation and psychological help. It may be used for therapy and assessment in the same time. It is a kind of drawing therapy for the blind, but it is better, because it is multifunctional.
- 3 Clay-therapy may become a method of psychological “Quick help” for those visually impaired children, who had got emotional problems and live in boarding school. For some of them it really can be hopefully means of emotional survival.

### **References**

1. Gardner R.A. Psychotherapeutic Approaches to the Resistant Child. N-Y.1975
2. Oaklander V. Windows to Our Children N-Y 1988