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The Art & Soul of Adoption & Foster Care Expressive Means to Communication and Healing by Joyce Maguire Pavao

Center For Family Connections (CFFC), the resource center that I founded in Cambridge, MA, serves the needs of children whose lives have been touched by adoption, foster care, divorce, and other complex family issues. Art, along with other expressive modalities, is intertwined into all that we do at CFFC. Our work is with complex families of great diversity, and art speaks all languages.

I'd like to share here some brief descriptions of the kinds of art-based practices CFFC has developed over the past thirty years in order to evoke emotion and provoke discussion with children and adults in the world of adoption and foster care.

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Imagine an English-speaking couple—who speak no Russian adopting three siblings from Russia, who speak no English. How can they build trust and communicate in the beginning days, weeks, and months of being together with no common language between them? At CFFC, we show families how they can regulate feelings and demonstrate emotions by playing trust-building games, making sculptures and drawings, playing music and using drums. Talking is a fabulous way to communicate and writing is a great way to express yourself, but a great deal of how we perceive the world comes from non-verbal cues and messages. Integrating the arts into our work with families who need extra support in communicating with their children can be a beneficial way to get to the heart of the matter, and get to the soul of the pain in a person in order to get to the healing.

Here are some examples of projects we use to open up conversations with children and adults:

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Mix-up Creatures

This project creates a space to talk about difference for children ages four to eight, but can also be used for older kids, teens and even adults.

<u>Materials needed</u>: magazines, scissors, white glue, paper (color or construction)

Time: about 45 minutes

- Cut out pictures from magazines (photos, illustrations, cartoons) of people and animals.
- Spread out all of the pictures.
- Cut up parts of the people and animals and mix them up, then glue them to the paper. You could have a dog with a little girl's head and the wings of a dove. You could glue a person's mouth over a giraffe!
- Have fun mixing up the pictures. Then tell a story about these very odd creatures and how they are so very different and it how it feels for them to be different.

This exercise will begin communication about how it is to feel different and is helpful for children and even adults who were adopted and most expressly, adopted transracially or internationally. The process of figuring out how you are the same and how you are different in your world is an important one that begins at a very early age.

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Half Done

This project can be crafted for all ages and creates magnificent discussion about what is missing.

<u>Materials needed:</u> magazines, scissors, white paper, color pens, crayons, markers, pencil, ruler, white glue Time: 45 minutes

<u>Project description</u>: Complete the rest of the picture so that you know the remainder of the story.

- Find a picture in a magazine that means something to you. It could be a picture that reminds you of your family, your friends, or something you wish for in the future. A picture of a person or animal also works well.
- Use the scissors to cut out the picture you selected.

- Place the ruler on the picture and use a pencil to draw a line that divides the picture in half.
- Following the line, cut the picture in half.
- Glue the half picture on the left side of a piece of white paper.
- Now all you have to do is finish the other half of the picture. Use pencil to sketch and then use pens, markers, crayons to add color. What do you think?

This touches on what is missing—what is not there, often a key issue for an adopted person, as well as for birth parents and adoptive parents. This project evokes a great deal of discussion.

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A Whole Life: Past-Present-Future

This project, intended for all ages, is excellent for delving into fantasies, worries and wishes. We often use this with the concurrent parent groups while the five- to eight-year- olds are doing a different project in another room.

<u>Materials needed</u>: large paper, pencil, colored markers, pens, crayons

<u>Project description</u>: Make a portfolio of your life. Pictures can tell a story like words. This picture and story is about your amazing life.

- First, divide the paper into six equal sections with the lines going across the paper.
- Section one is how you looked as a tiny baby.
- Section two is how you looked when you were adopted.
- Section three is you now.
- Section four is you as a teenager.
- Section five is as you of an adult.
- Section six is you as an older person.

Sometimes children and teens who are adopted feel truncated. If there is no story of their beginning or past, how can they envision a future? This project is always very revealing. At the art shows that we hold at the end of each six-week group session, these portraits usually generate many questions for the artist from the parents and friends who attend (which he or she may or may not choose to answer).

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As clinicians, we always interview the artist while he/she is doing his/her work. We "scribe" and write up an explanation that hangs next to the artwork at the opening (with the artist's permission).

All of the projects described above can easily be recreated at home by parents. They allow kids to be creative, use their imaginations, and have fun, and at the same time can facilitate communication about feelings, memories, and identity.

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Some other projects we have created include:

Icons of Your Ancestors

Images, pictures... what do they look like? Whether you know them or not, icons of birthparents and people known and unknown are often a theme for adopted children.

Masks

On the outside, depict how the world sees you. On the inside, depict how you see yourself. Masks can be made of paper mache, clay, cardboard, etc. A statement to start the project can be finishing the sentence, "When I look into the mirror I see..."

CD Project

Make a CD cover with a design and a number of songs on the cover. What would the song titles be?

Mirror Project

Create a collage around a mirror. Ask the question: what do you see when you look into the mirror?

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Art can provide an indirect, non-linear, and very effective way to build trust, delve into emotions, and learn how children make sense of things. In addition to art, recently we have begun to explore therapeutic interventions from yoga and meditation. Guided exercises paralleling the experiential nature of mindfulness and acceptance-based methods of healing, growth, and transformation are beautiful ways to teach a child self-regulation and to help a child focus. These alternative modalities awaken parts of the mind and brain that are not being worked with in traditional "talk therapy." Art and other expressive means provide new avenues towards healing some of the traumas and losses suffered by children and adults in the world of adoption and foster care.

Dr. Joyce Maguire Pavao is Founder, President, and CEO of Center For Family Connections. An adopted person and a nationally known family and adoption therapist, she is the author of The Family of Adoption. She is currently working on a new book, The Art and Soul of Adoption and Foster Care.