

The Bodily Dimension in Groups of Children

Donata Miglietta

Abstract

The work is based on the results of a clinical research project made over a fifteen year period on open groups in which children of different age groups participated. In group with children, the prevailing language is the primitive one of body language, whose alphabet, represented by sensory and motor functions, directly addresses the emotions. With children it is necessary to start with this archaic language of actions because their thought processes are concentrated on motorial “explosions”. The alpha function transforms the beta elements into that which Bion calls alpha elements, namely into those psychic elements that have characteristics that can be used as thoughts. The conductor collects the beta elements and after removing the distressing aspects, returns them to the children, thereby giving them the basis of an ability to think. The transformational path for the children is based primarily upon this passage from motorial action to the ability to describe what they feel. It is therefore necessary to note how narrative in groups of children is generated through forms of bodily contact, which often arrive at the borders of action.

Consequently, the function of the conductor must be based mainly on an ability to transform movements into scenes.

Keywords: developmental age, action, play, thought

Groups with an analytic function for young children

In the analytic treatment of children, an important step forward was made when also the bodily dimension of play was taken into consideration, and it thus became possible to intervene at an even earlier age. This step meant recognizing the fact that many forms of play involve and include the child analyst through the sensory function of play. (Winnicott D., 1978). Groups with an analytic function for young children are based on the assumption that the bodily dimension and the sensory function of play are at the centre of the therapy.

The considerations that follow are the result of a research project with groups of developmental-age children carried out within the territorial services for young children in a province of Northern Italy¹, which paved the way for a therapeutic and/or preventive intervention addressed to children from four to fourteen years of age. The objective of the small groups with an analytic function was, and still is, to help children so that whatever has undergone or risks undergoing an arrest in development can evolve, and to do it in a sufficiently short period of time whenever this is possible. In Italy, A. Baruzzi in 1990 was the first to experiment the small analytically-based group for children following the Bionian method. His work has continued for many years in the groups conducted by M. Bernabei, A. Lombardozi and L. Ruberti of the IIPG of Rome.

¹ The group that coordinated the project was composed of D. Miglietta, G. Barco, S. Bellora, L. Boatti, A. Zappino.

The setting up of groups with an analytic function has proved to be a suitable instrument for meeting the requirements of both the young users and the health services for children, that are often submerged by requests for help that are difficult or impossible to answer on account of the lack of specialized personnel and financial resources of the ASL. Indications for group therapy range from socialization difficulties to phobias, inhibitions, tics, stammering, affective-based learning disorders, somatizations, character disorders. It is advised that each group should not include more than one child with a diagnosis of personality disorders and/or in the psychotic area.

Throughout the whole of the developmental age, physiological growth and mental growth are co-existing and inter-related experiences; they can be vehicles of turbulence that are destabilizing for the intra-psychic world but also for the scholastic and family environment. The psychotherapy group is proposed as an experience that goes beyond that of a class or a spontaneous group: a specific pathway that will take in hand affective and emotional difficulties, thus helping children and adolescents to overcome the blockages of affective development and to reduce the intrapsychic, relational and learning difficulties that arise during the course of growth (Miglietta 2000).

During the ten years of the research project, numerous groups have been set up for the different age groups. Six or seven children participate in each group. Selection of the young patients is through a psycho-diagnostic evaluation by the psychologist or by child neuro-psychiatrists. The outcome of these meetings is then discussed with the group conductors. If a child is accepted for the group, the evaluation is followed by preliminary interviews during which the child is informed about the group, the reason for his or her attendance and about the rules for participation. These preliminary discussions before joining the group give the children an opportunity to express their fears, expectations and fantasies and, according to their age, to speak to the therapist. Group sessions are held weekly for an hour and a quarter each; they take place from the beginning of September until the end of June, in accordance with the school year.

The groups remain "open" only during the first year, giving the group time to settle during the first period of work (some patients may leave, and there may also be new entries during the first year) in order to eventually have a fairly stable group. Parents are recommended, especially at the beginning, not to let the children meet each other outside the group, while the conductors try to avoid introducing into the group children who go to the same school or who live in the same town. The course lasts on average two years. This should give the children the possibility of passing from a somatic, acted-out or emotional way of communicating to a progressive refinement of the emotional field. The equipment required is: a table with large sheets of drawing paper, a small square table, coloured pens, pencils, glue, adhesive tape, foam rubber cushions of various sizes that the children can use to build houses, tunnels, dens, mountains, labyrinths, etc., two mattresses and several soft balls, a rope, some blankets, panels attached to the walls.

A fundamental characteristic of the groups of children is the dys-symmetric combination of adults and children. This completely distinguishes the therapeutic groups composed of children from those composed of adults, and requires a specific theoretic reflection about how this presence of the adult is experienced differently according to age: children do not all think of the adult therapist in the same way. This aspect has been studied from the

theoretic viewpoint by A. Baldassarre and M. Bernabei (Baldassarre A, 2001; Bernabei M, 2002).

Parents as travelling companions

We have observed that often families are better disposed towards the idea of the group than they are to that of dual psychotherapy, because participation in the group is often felt more as an experience of socialization rather than an actual therapy. Furthermore, our research has shown that it is useful to have a group for parents alongside the analytic work with the children. It was therefore suggested to the parents that they participate by working together in a group once a month, possibly with a conductor different from that of their children. The constancy of the setting - i.e. the good functioning of the group of children, with its weekly sessions, its timetables, its rhythms - is guaranteed by the regular participation of the children and consequently by the commitment of the parents who accompany them to the sessions. The children's space is thus differentiated and protected, while the parents can have a parallel experience (although with a different setting) with a conductor who meets them as a group. The parents are invited to speak about the children's difficulties but also about how they themselves experience the group and the conductors; they can express doubts and hopes, speak about themselves, their worries and fears, their family life, and compare things with the other parents, each person helping the other. The group proposed for the parents is also useful in avoiding sources of disturbance to the therapy with the children such as: breaking into the setting, requesting to speak to the conductors after the group sessions with the children, or simply owing to the remission of symptoms.

Pre-School Age

For pre-school age children as well, the experience of a group can become a first institutional space outside the family with shared regulations, and can represent an essential step towards growth. By encouraging socialization and the sharing of experiences, group therapy facilitates the separation processes inasmuch as it attenuates dependence on adult figures alone through the relationship with the child's peers as they interact with the adult who conducts the group. Thus, when faced with the difficulties of development, the little group, inasmuch as it is analytically conducted, can in time construct its own particular culture resulting from the depositing and germinating of the forms of subjectivity that evolve in a situation in which the internal institution and its figures have not yet been definitely established.

Freud considered action to be one of the functions used by the ego to achieve awareness of reality, and Bion suggests that action can be situated at different levels - as beta element, alfa element, pre-conception, conception, concept (Neri, 2004). We have seen how the presence and transformation of these different levels of action is used more or less intensely according to the age range. In fact, also the atmosphere of the groups varies according to the age of the children who compose them, their mental pathology, the cultural group to which they belong.

Often while supervising we have noticed how, at the beginning, in groups of children of pre-school age (four and a half to six), the contents appear and disappear too rapidly to be described. The emotions move like the multi-coloured fragments of a kaleidoscope, and the conductors often find themselves disoriented and in difficulty when they realize that they have, in any case, to undergo and tolerate in order to conduct the group of children towards the construction of shared play and the possibility of creating meaning. The conductor has to know how to grasp and use the visual and perceptive elements in order to describe them; they will play the role of interpreting activity until the time when the swirling figures slow down, and a window is opened through which each group can communicate, in its own way, the minimum level of meaning that can from time to time be constructed together (A. Lombardozzi, 1990, Cedis). The younger the children, the more they will produce a mixture of motorial “explosions”, noises, shouts and chaos in the group. Especially in the initial phases, the conductor will be bombarded by a disorderly stream of bullet-like stimuli; the elements that cross the psychotherapy room are like the threads of a tangled ball of string where it is difficult to find the end, and where there is the risk of getting tangled up in it instead. Even so, the conductor of each little analytic group is continuously curious about what is going to come out of this tangle – something that at the beginning is unknown.

School age

An important difference that we have observed is how the use of body language changes in intensity and, from being a privileged instrument for pre-school age children, it becomes modified with growth and partly loses its characteristic of a language expressed mainly through actions and movement. This would seem to be a banal observation, but it is not. With the change in age, actions and movement give way to words; but this happens in the sense that children accept the spoken intervention of the conductor who transforms the actions into narrated starting points, so that in the groups of school-age children it is easier for play to become narrative. In puberty, and even more so in adolescence, although there is still space for play, it becomes a kind of play that is transformable into tales or stories and translatable into words or plots, i.e. it becomes narratable.

Playing and narration in a group constitute a space through which to reconstruct some of the breakdowns in personal and family life inscribed in the lives of many of these children who carry heavy burdens on their shoulders (parents in communities or in prison, children living with foster-parents, etc.). By putting into play primitive behavioural patterns linked both to the maintenance of closeness as well as to the search for an optimal distance, in group therapy new ways of relating can be found. By playing, children learn to express images, scenes and representations through which they can begin to give thought and voice to feelings that are split-off because they are too intense and painful. Above all, playing in a group enables children to use their imagination. Through play, imagination allows hallucinatory transformations to become narrative transformations, and new emotions that are at the same time past emotions to be recognized. With the visualization

of play, these emotions are transported elsewhere, and once they have been removed and put at a safe distance, they can begin to be thought about (D. Vallino, 1998).

Because the symptoms of the young patients recede fairly quickly and they start to feel better, this makes them want to continue in the group even though the reasons which brought them into it no longer exist as an urgent need. Once the symptom has receded, the objective of the group becomes the progressive transformation of the emotional explosions into the expression of emotions, followed by recognition of the affects and therefore of needs. The gradual disappearance of symptoms, a greater capacity to socialize and tolerate conflicts, and the disappearance of somatizations can be considered to be the external indicators of the effectiveness of the therapy.

Also during the latency period playing and dramatization continue to occupy space although the levels of action begin to modify their expressive intensity. During latency, group therapy seeks to activate curiosity about what is happening to others; at the same time it becomes the mediator for arousing a child's interest in his or her own psychic functioning as well. In the group, children discover through their intense participation the capacity to play and to play symbolically. Imagination can be expressed through such channels as movement, play, drawing, language – activities that are shared and transformed by the work of the group and its conductor (Privat, 2002). During school age, play continues to represent that free zone into which the child can enter, imagining all kinds of events and enacting contrasting emotions that can thus be thought about and continually re-elaborated in the play itself. Inasmuch as we know that emotions must be alphabetized, the pathway to be taken with children is to translate movements into scenes, scenes into a container for the symbolic sense, the symbolic into words that can describe it. The body language and the play that we have all experienced are, for human beings, the embryos of spoken language; and it is when the emotions are put in a condition to appear in a scene, that they can take on a life and a form that from visual becomes transformed into linguistic.

The Group Conductors

What makes the play apparatus analytic and differentiates it from other therapies such as psychomotor groups, is the presence of analytically-trained conductors, their intervention and their analytic listening. For anyone who ventures into the field of groups for children, it is essential that they be able to accept the bodily dimension of the experience, and to know that they can “handle it” even when they are physically involved in playing. Conducting children's groups, in fact, means participating in the creation of a space for thought and symbolization that, more than ever, must make use of the language of play. The conductor can intervene by alternating between negative capacity and chosen facts, helping the children through the introduction of transformative images.

The therapeutic pathways followed by children in groups and by the analytically-conducted groups are a good demonstration of the creative as well as the destructive potentialities present in the field. It is owing to the intensity of these potentialities that the function of the adult and the responsibility of the conductor are of such importance. They have a high responsibility regarding the creativity that must be protected and cultivated,

and the destructiveness that must be transformed, and this requires considerable training as well as constant confrontation and exchange. The adult who conducts the group must know how to work with what is happening while it happens; his or her function is to support the movement of the group without deciding on its modes, themes and sequences that will in any case be unpredictable (Miglietta, 2012). Each child, to be able to think, must pass through play because, as Corrao pointed out, the very activities involved in playing are often also the foundation for the genesis of the self (Corrao F., 1992).

Certainly, in a group of children fragments of primitive worlds can emerge that ask to be confronted: they chose play as a means for expressing the proto-emotional. Whereas in dual psychotherapy the objects, as Ferro writes, need a narrator, we could say that in the group of children they also need a player; and if in dual therapy the narrator has to become an expert in many narrations, so in the group the player must know how to play inside the different scenarios and be prepared for all kinds of different adventures (Ferro, 1992). His ability to play the game and to let himself be involved in its sensory function enables him to operate those play transformations that, by metabolizing the proto-emotional states, move from actions towards language.

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Nota sull'autore

Donata Miglietta, psychotherapist and training analyst Coirag at the Istituto di Torino e Genova, and at the Istituto di Psicoterapia Psicoanalitica di Torino

email: donata.miglietta@fastwebnet.it