



Drawing a Family: Family Art Assessment in Adlerian Therapy

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When Adlerians work with children or families, the first step of the counseling process is building an egalitarian relationship with the children (Kottman, 1995). The second important component of the counseling process is investigating and understanding children's perceptions of their families and the ways they seek significance and belonging in their families (Dinkmeyer & Dinkmeyer, 1983; Kottman & Warlick, 1989, 1990). By gaining a clear picture of how children fit into their families, the therapist can begin to formulate a conceptualization of their lifestyles—how they see themselves, others, and the world and how their behavior stems from this viewpoint (Dinkmeyer & Dinkmeyer, 1983; Kottman, 1995). This understanding of children's lifestyles is the basis of the techniques used in the third and fourth phase of Adlerian therapy—helping clients gain insight and reorientation/reeducation (Dinkmeyer, Dinkmeyer, & Sperry, 1987). Adlerian authors have variously suggested using play therapy techniques (Kottman, 1995; Kottman & Warlick, 1989, 1990), questioning strategies (Dinkmeyer & Dinkmeyer, 1983), and art experiences (Dreikurs, 1986) as possible methods for gathering information about family constellation, family atmosphere, family interactional patterns (Manaster & Corsini, 1982), children's goals of behavior (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964), and parents' personality priorities (Kefir, 1981) over a period of time. Although these methods are all extremely useful in the assessment process, gathering this information may take significant amounts of time.

This article will contain a description of a method of gathering information in just one session: the Family Art Assessment Technique (Landgarten, 1981, 1987). This

strategy is “an extraordinarily quick method for aiding the family diagnostic evaluation” (Landgarten, 1981, p. 26). With this technique, the therapist can begin to understand family interactions and individual perceptions and behaviors in a very short period of time. Considering the current climate in mental health care delivery systems, a rapid approach to understanding the client and his or her lifestyle may be essential.

While the Family Art Assessment Technique would probably be most helpful to Adlerian therapists in the second phase of therapy, they can also use this strategy in other phases of therapy to: (a) observe and encourage family interaction; (b) provide concrete examples of behavior for hypotheses about family interactions, which the therapist can use in play therapy, family therapy, and/or parent consultation; and (c) to offer children and parents the opportunity to observe their own interactions with other family members. By asking parents to participate in the art activity in the early stages of the relationship, the counselor can encourage them to be actively involved in the process of therapy. The counselor also can use the technique during the re-orientation phase to help children and their families learn new ways to interact with one another and to encourage them to engage in creative endeavors together.

Landgarten’s (1987) Family Art Assessment Technique is a three-part activity. Before beginning, the counselor asks each member of the family to choose a marker or crayon. Each person is to keep that marking instrument throughout the exercise. This makes it easier for family members and the counselor to recognize which part of the product each family member created.

In the first procedure, the counselor asks the family to break up into two teams. Family members decide on team composition by whatever means they choose. After they have divided into teams, the counselor asks each team to work on a separate sheet of paper. The counselor then gives the following instructions: the members of each team are to draw something on their paper. The drawing can be whatever they want, but they are not to speak, signal, or communicate in any other way during the process of working on the project. When they have finished the project, team members are allowed to speak in order to choose a title for the project and write this title on the sheet of paper.

In the second procedure, the counselor dissolves the teams and asks the entire family to work together on the same sheet of paper. Again, members can draw whatever they want, but they are not to communicate during the drawing process. When all of the family members have finished their parts of the drawing, the counselor gives the family permission to communicate so that they can title the creation.

In the final procedure, the entire family again works on a single sheet of paper. They may again create whatever they wish, but this time they can

communicate with each other as they work. At the completion of the project, they must again agree on a title for the work.

Landgarten (1987) developed the Family Art Assessment Technique as a way to examine how a family functions as a group. She suggested that the counselor be aware of: (a) the level of involvement and initiative of each family member; (b) spatial and boundary concerns within the drawing; (c) interactional patterns among family members; (d) symbolic content of the drawings; and (e) the overall family working style. In addition to these points of observation, Adlerian counselors might want to observe: (a) how elements of family atmosphere, family constellation, and goals of behavior are played out in the interaction; (b) the expression of social interest by family members; (c) how the family uses humor in their interactions; and (d) the manifestation of each member's personality priority and lifestyle.

Family Reactions

Whether it is used in family therapy, as an adjunct to Adlerian play therapy, or in some other context, the actual assessment activity usually takes an entire counseling session. There is generally little time during or immediately after the assessment procedure to offer hypotheses or interpretations. At the end of the procedure, the counselor usually asks for feedback from the family members about that they liked and what they did not like about the activity. Family members will frequently tell the therapist, "See, this is what is always happening!" Often family members will "catch themselves" and notice particular patterns of behavior that are similar to their ways of interacting at home. These are especially rich moments in which the family can brainstorm about more effective ways to interact. The counselor can also point out particularly positive interactions noticed during the activity in order to encourage the family and begin assisting family members to view themselves as significant and valuable. The counselor should always look for cooperation among members and highlight this when giving feedback in order to promote social interest in the family.

If the counselor is working with the family in family therapy, he or she will probably choose to integrate interpretations based on the Family Art Assessment on an ongoing basis in subsequent sessions. If the counselor is working with the child in Adlerian play therapy, he or she will probably choose to use the information gathered during the activities within the context of the counseling relationship with the child and in consultation with the parents. Sometimes, however, the Adlerian play therapists may want to arrange for special sessions with the entire family to offer interpretations and hypotheses to all members of the family.

Case Study

The following case study illustrates an Adlerian application for the Family Art Assessment Technique.

Background Information. Alexander was a 7-year-old referred for play therapy by his teacher. The family's original concern was Alexander's temper tantrums at school, which his teacher reported were "disruptive to the entire class." Joan and Richard, Alexander's parents, also expressed concern about Alexander's behavior. They reported that he also exhibited temper tantrums with the other members of the family, especially in public places, and that he frequently dawdled during breakfast and dressing, causing the rest of the family to be late.

Alexander was the oldest of three children. He had a 5-year-old brother, Michael, and a 2-year-old sister, Janet. Michael was a quiet child who appeared to have taken on the role of the oldest child in response to the problems the family was experiencing with Alexander. Janet was friendly and outgoing, and Joan reported few difficulties with her. Joan, 38 years old, had chosen not to work outside the home and was very involved with her children. She reported that she frequently "felt out of control with the kids. I am either constantly yelling at them, or I am letting them do whatever they want to do." Richard, the children's father, was a 40-year-old chemical engineer who worked long hours and was frequently away from home. Although a loving father, he tended to alternate between attempting to control the children and telling Joan that she must learn to control the children better.

Family Art Therapy Technique. In the interest of gathering a great deal of information in a relatively short period of time, after spending several sessions establishing a positive relationship with Alexander, the play therapist asked the entire family to come to a session to complete the Family Art Therapy Technique. Alexander and his family came into the session with an air of expectation, with all of the members expressing excitement about doing something together. As the therapist explained the instructions, Joan kept repeating the instructions to the children, while Richard listened intently, ignoring the rest of the family. When choosing their markers for the drawings, Joan allowed the children and Richard to choose first, then took the remaining marker for herself.

Drawing One. For the first drawing, the therapist asked the family members to divide themselves into teams. Alexander immediately chose Joan as

his partner. Joan told Richard that he would be paired with Michael and Janet, and Richard nodded in agreement. Alexander was eager to get started, and when the play therapist told the family to begin, he ran over to the large sheet of paper on the wall and began to draw a flower design in the center of the paper. Joan hung back, hesitant to begin, until Alexander grabbed her hand and pulled her over to the paper. Joan then began drawing a scene in which two small figures were in a small boat on choppy water. Alexander then embellished the drawing by placing small hearts between the two boats. When it was time to title the drawing, Alexander suggested "Cave People in Boats in Love," and Joan agreed.

Richard's team was a little slower to get started. While Janet ran over and began scribbling as high as she could reach on the paper, Richard and Michael seemed unsure of how to begin. After a few moments, Michael walked over and began drawing a large pyramid on the right side of the paper. Richard joined in with an elaborate wall encircling the perimeter of the paper. Unlike Alexander, who had difficulty observing the no-communicating rule, Michael worked intently on his drawing, seemingly unaware of his teammates. When it was time to name the drawing, Richard suggested "Pyramid with Scribbling and a Wall around It." Michael took an appraising look and nodded in agreement.

Drawing Two. During the second drawing, in which the family worked together on the same sheet of paper but could not communicate with each other, each family member was careful to stay within his or her chosen space. Janet was the only exception; she scribbled as high as she could reach all over the paper. Joan concentrated on drawing figures—in a boat, camping, riding bicycles, and the like. Richard drew a tree and other plants, then added a wall around the perimeter of the paper. Alexander once again copied and embellished his mother's drawings. Michael drew another large pyramid shape and spent the entire time coloring it in with heavy strokes. When it was time to name the drawing, Alexander suggested "Scribble City," Joan suggested "Family Vacation," and Richard commented that the whole scene looked prehistoric. After some discussion, they compromised on "Scribble City Pre-historic Vacation."

Drawing Three. For the third drawing, Joan commented that she liked the plants that Richard had done on the previous drawing and suggested that they draw a flower garden. To begin, Richard drew a wall along the perimeter of the paper, then spent the remainder of the time drawing walkways leading to a fountain in the center of the paper. Joan and Alexander worked on drawing flowers, with Joan drawing and Alexander copying her work. Richard gave Janet another piece of paper to draw on so that she would not "mess up"

the family drawing. Once again, Michael drew a pyramid shape and spent the entire time coloring it. When Alexander expressed displeasure at having a pyramid in the garden, Joan turned it into a mountain with snow and skiers on top. Michael did not seem to notice the change and continued coloring it. When it was time to end the session, the family, after some discussion, named the drawing "A Magical Place with Flowers and a Mountain."

Reactions. Because the three drawing activities used most of the session, there was little time left for the play therapist to make observations to the family. Instead, she asked everyone in the family what they liked and disliked about the activity and what they noticed about the drawings themselves. Everyone agreed that it was a fun activity and that it was hard to keep quiet when they were not allowed to communicate. When asked to respond to the drawings themselves, Richard remarked, "It looks like Joan needs a vacation!" with which Joan agreed wholeheartedly. Perhaps the most telling remark was made by Alexander, who said, "All Dad did was try to put fences around us." Curiously, no one commented on Michael's pyramids. When the play therapist asked him about them, he shrugged self-consciously and said that was what he liked to draw.

Interpretation of the Activity. The therapist's interpretation of the Family Art Assessment Technique can begin with the initial introduction of the technique to the family. In this family, Joan busied herself with the children while Richard focused on listening to the instructions. This division of the family reinforced what the counselor had already concluded about the family's dynamics: Richard tended to distance himself from involvement with the children, and Joan tended to stay overinvolved with the children.

Clues to the family members' lifestyles could also be gleaned from the choosing of drawing instruments. In this session, Joan allowed the other family members to choose first and took the remaining marker for herself. Joan's behavior indicated her personality priority—pleasing—by trying to make sure that everyone else was happy.

Alexander demonstrated the goal of his behavior, power, by deciding how the family would be divided into teams. When Alexander announced that Joan would be his partner, none of the other family members disagreed. Joan, in her pleasing mode, tried to make sure that this did not hurt the feelings of Richard and the other two children by telling Richard to take them as his teammates.

Although the therapist should avoid overinterpreting the family's drawings, it is important that he or she not dismiss repetitive themes. In this Family

Art Assessment session, Richard drew a wall around the perimeter of the paper in each of the three drawings, thus encapsulating the entire drawing. The therapist interpreted these walls as Richard's attempts to assert his own personality priority and express his lifestyle by placing "controls" on an otherwise chaotic situation and his attempts to control Alexander and the other members of the family. Richard acknowledged the therapist's guess with a recognition reflex—a nod and a slight widening of his eyes—but did not respond verbally. The drawings done by Joan may indicate a desire to escape from the routine of her daily life. Although one drawing (two people in a boat) may have demonstrated her wish to spend time alone with Richard or her attachment to Alexander, her other drawing pointed to a desire for the entire family to spend time together in enjoyable activities.

Alexander's overinvolvement with Joan was evidenced by his choosing her for his teammate and his preoccupation with copying and embellishing her drawings. The therapist interpreted Alexander's lack of creativity as an attempt to gain power by allying himself with her. During the drawings, Joan appeared to encourage Alexander's involvement with her even to the point, during the third drawing, of discounting Michael's work in an attempt to mollify Alexander.

Because this was the only session in which Michael was present, the significance of the pyramids drawn by Michael is uncertain; however, they may represent his desire for stability in the home or striving toward the goal of inadequacy. Michael's behavior suggested a lack of connection with the rest of the family. Michael's drawings were the only ones "wiped out" by another family member when Joan turned his pyramid into a mountain to satisfy Alexander. The therapist noted that no one spoke to Michael about his drawings and that no one asked for his input in deciding on a topic for the drawings or naming the drawings. Concerned that Michael's problems were being overlooked as the family concentrated on Alexander, the therapist suggested that Michael also be seen for play therapy.

Application for a New Understanding of the Family. The play therapist was able to use some of the insights she had acquired through the Family Art Assessment Technique in individual play therapy sessions with Alexander and in parent consultations with Joan and Richard. With Alexander, the therapist made some "guesses" about his purpose in throwing temper tantrums, daydreaming, and dawdling. When she suggested to him that maybe it was his way of gaining power in various situations, he looked her in the eye and said, "You must be pretty smart to figure that out."

In an individual parent consultation with Richard, the therapist explained that children with parents whose personality priority is control often resort to

temper tantrums, daydreams, and dawdling as a means of regaining some of the control (Christensen & Schramski, 1983). The therapist recalled the “walls” that Richard had drawn during the family session and wondered aloud if maybe they were symbolic of Richard’s attempts to control his family and influence Alexander’s behavior. Richard agreed that he felt afraid of loosening his control on the children and admitted that something needed to change in the family. Together, Richard and the therapist generated a new plan—setting up logical consequences for temper tantrums and for dawdling at breakfast.

A parent consultation with Joan eased more of the morning situation. Alexander had complained to the therapist that his mother did not allow him to pick out his own clothes. Joan admitted that she had trouble allowing Alexander and the other children to grow up and that she could see how her overinvolvement with the children could be stifling for them—even to the point of stifling Alexander’s natural creativity, as evidenced in the Family Art Assessment. She agreed to allow Alexander to be responsible for selecting his own clothes and dressing himself, even if it meant that he was late for school. By helping Alexander become more responsible and letting him face the consequences of his behavior, Joan found that Alexander was more cooperative.

The play therapist (with the permission of Alexander and his parents) consulted with Alexander’s teacher as well. Alexander continued to have problems at school, but the temper tantrums and his periods of withdrawing into himself lessened as his teacher set up logical consequences for tantrums and gave him more responsibility in the classroom. Alexander had demonstrated a natural talent for drawing and an avid interest in science, and his teacher helped him to capitalize on those interests.

In play therapy sessions, the therapist encouraged Alexander to get his need for power met in a positive way by asking for what he wanted directly. At the beginning of the therapy, Alexander believed that the only way of getting the power that he felt he needed was to have tantrums or withdraw from the family—worrying and frustrating his father and mother. By helping Alexander to see that these behaviors were not working for him and that he could change them, the therapist was able to use the play therapy process to help him generate new behaviors and attitudes that were more effective. By role-playing with the puppets in the play room, Alexander learned to express his desires verbally and found new ways of maintaining his place in the family.

Summary. The Family Art Assessment Technique session with Alexander’s family was highly successful. The family had viewed it as a positive, enjoyable experience, and the therapist felt that she had quickly gotten to know them better as individuals and as a family unit. In a later parent consultation

session, Joan remarked that the family session was one of the few times she could remember the family interacting with each other without arguments breaking out.

The Family Art Assessment Technique also offered the therapist a unique experience of seeing family members interacting with each other. In other types of family therapy, there are usually constraints placed on interactions due to the presence of the therapist. With this technique, however, the family soon forgot that the therapist was there, and she was able to catch a glimpse of the inner workings of the family. In one hour, the therapist was able to observe, firsthand, Joan's overinvolvement with Alexander, Richard's need to control the family, Alexander's tendency to try to grab power, and Michael's distancing from the family.

It was very helpful for the therapist to be able to observe Alexander within the context of the family. Alexander demonstrated none of the creativity that the therapist had seen in the play sessions. Rather than the thought-provoking, exuberant drawings that the play therapist had come to expect of him, Alexander was content to reproduce or embellish Joan's drawings. This information was invaluable as the therapist worked with this family. Within a relatively short time after this family session, the family and the therapist were able to generate new ways of interacting with one another that eased the problems that Alexander was experiencing at home and in school.

Conclusion

Adlerian therapists can use the Family Art Assessment, either in family therapy or as part of Adlerian play therapy, to explore family members' lifestyles (including the effects of family atmosphere, family constellation, personality priorities, and goals of behavior), family interactional patterns, family problem-solving skills, and the level of social interest in the family. This approach gives the therapist a nonthreatening way to approach a family, gather information about how children and other family members perceive themselves in the context of the family and how family members interact with one another. It can also provide concrete examples for the therapist to use when sharing hypotheses and interpretations about lifestyles and interpersonal relationships and making suggestions for reorientation and reeducation.

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