

Counselor's Toolbox

Building Bridges with Kids Using Expressive Activities



by JULIE LOWE

Far too often, we expect children and teens to be insightful and articulate. We expect them to tell us what they are thinking and feeling, and why. But children are usually not able to answer questions and self-reflect in this way. They do not have the capacity, maturity, or skills to think about their emotions, thought processes, and motivations. They *have* emotions, thoughts, and are very much motivated by internal desires, but are often at a loss to understand these dynamics themselves or explain them to others. Working with kids often requires a different approach than we use with adults. We need to offer winsome, thoughtful ways to help them express what is happening internally and grow in the skill of engaging and drawing them out (Prov 20:5). And once we know them, we need to find kid-friendly ways to speak God's truth into their lives (Col 4:6).

Much of our success or failure at ministering to children has more to do with our skill in connecting with them than with their ability to articulate themselves. It is vital that we learn how to meet a child at their point of need. Over my many years of working with children, I have used a variety of ways to do this using what I call *expressive activities*. In this article, I will describe how and why these activities are useful and contend this is true because they reflect God's creation, and even how

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God relates to us—*his* children. To illustrate, I have included one of these activities: the Emotions Highway.¹

What Are Expressive Activities?

Expressive activities are demonstrative, winsome ways to draw out what is going on in the heart and mind of a child. These activities are both *expressive* in that they enable young people to meaningfully communicate their thoughts and feelings and *projective* in that their revelations are also symbolic of their inner world. These activities are nonthreatening, developmentally and emotionally appropriate, and enable communication in ways that are more natural for kids. As we use this type of activity, we step outside of our usual (and often ineffective) way of relating to children and enable them to use their “language” to explain what’s going on with them.

This is the kind of incarnate love that God is calling us to exhibit to the children who come to us for help. It meets them where they are and then encourages them to grow in love toward God and others. In this way, we are following God’s example.

Following God’s lead. Think of the many ways God models this manner of love to us. We understand God only because he reached down and engaged us *on our level*. He spoke to us in ways we could understand, using stories, parables, and creation itself to communicate who he is and who we are in relation to him (Ps 19:1–4; Rom 1:19–20). He did even more than that by sending his Son to fully live out our experience and dwell among us, ultimately dying on the cross for us (Phil 2:6–8). Jesus fully entered into our brokenness and humanity, our limitations and struggles (Heb 4:15). He entered into our dark experience and breathed in life and hope.

Missionaries also follow God’s lead. They understand the need to fully immerse themselves into a culture, a language, and a mindset to really know, understand, and minister to an unreached people group. It takes time, energy, resources, and careful study to know how a different culture operates, thinks, and approaches life, as well as how to effectively

1. This article is adapted from Julie Lowe’s chapter “Expressive Activities: A Biblical Rationale,” *Building Bridges: Biblical Counseling Activities for Kids and Teens* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2020), newgrowthpress.com.

bring the gospel to them. Indeed, the love of God compels us to be thoughtful and intentional in engaging whomever he has placed in our path of ministry. It is, therefore, our responsibility and privilege to follow God's lead and find ways to engage with children and teens.

The range of expressive therapies. There has been a lot of good work done in the counseling field that is worth our consideration as we think about how to thoughtfully engage with children. Most expressive

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activities are considered to be a form of play therapy.² This includes art, drama, dance, music, the use of therapy animals, and other tactile experiences. Because of its name, many people mistakenly assume that it involves a counselor just sitting with a child, playing with toys, and that very little intentional work is being done.

This couldn't be further from the truth. There is skillfulness in knowing how to use play to draw out a young person and thoughtfully speak back into their world.

Those in the (secular) play therapy field work hard to speak the language of children. They work to find tools and resources that help children resolve life struggles. There is a commitment to understanding children developmentally, having a knowledge of the issues young people face, understanding the impact of painful events, and offering resources to help children heal and grow. Some very brief descriptions of these therapies are as follows.

- Art therapy: the use of visual arts (painting, coloring, collage, sculpting, drawing, etc.) to encourage creative expression and help a child voice struggles and overcome the limitations of language.
- Animal-assisted therapy: a counseling intervention that incorporates animals (horses, dogs, cats, pigs, birds, etc.) to increase or complement the benefits of counseling.

2. The Association for Play Therapy (APT) defines play therapy as “the systematic use of a theoretical model to establish an interpersonal process wherein trained play therapists use the therapeutic powers of play to help clients prevent or resolve psychosocial difficulties and achieve optimal growth and development.” “Why Play Therapy?” Association for Play Therapy, <https://www.a4pt.org/WhyPlayTherapy>.

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