

FROM UNDER THE COVERS A Tale of Focusing with My Daughter

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My first encounter with Focusing came at a somewhat difficult and challenging time in my life. It did not take long before the fundamentals of Focusing, such as ‘making room’ for *it*, allowing *it* to be there, and learning how to listen to what *it* has to say, became an integral part of my everyday life. Slowly I began to appreciate that Focusing was not just something that I could schedule to do for 20 minutes a week, but was rather a way of *being*, with both myself and others, that was not constrained by any limitations.

As my learning of Focusing continued, I found myself struck by a nagging question: *Why had I never learned any of this before?* It seemed inconceivable that I had lived for so many years without knowing how to navigate my inner and outer worlds with the gentleness, compassion, and wisdom that Focusing offers. How was it possible that the process that brought light back into my life had remained in the darkness for all those years? It pained me to think not only of what I had missed out on, but of what others who do not know of Focusing are having to do without.

Then something clicked for me. I remembered reading an article on the Focusing Institute’s website by Mary Hendricks (2005) in which she used the phrase “teachable Focusing moments”. She defined it as “when you create conditions for the Focusing process to happen right now and then name it, or, if someone has just Focused spontaneously, you can point to it and name it” (Hendricks, 2005). As I was a novice at Focusing at the time of reading her article, I did not feel I was at the level of “teaching” Focusing moments such as Dr. Hendricks described. But something about the idea of “Focusing moments” deeply resonated with me. I felt like what I *could do* was look for “moments” in my everyday life where I might be able to bring parts of the Focusing process into my interactions. And so I began to be on the lookout for “Focusing moments”.

As a stay-at-home mom, most of my potential “moments” came in my interactions with my children. At the beginning, I used Focusing mostly intra-psychically, to help keep me grounded (and sane!). In time, I started using the process more interpersonally, for example, to help the kids make their own decisions (“See what feels right to you to do about this”). Then, on a few occasions, I had the opportunity to use more of the Focusing process when the kids were experiencing difficult issues, such as dealing with overwhelming feelings. The following is a recent exchange I had with my daughter that I would like to share with you...

At an annual eye exam, we found out that my daughter, age six, needs glasses for reading. Upon hearing the news, she became quite upset and once in the car, began to cry and emphatically announced that she did not want to (nor would she!) wear them. The situation did not improve when we arrived home — by then, she did not want me to tell anyone that she needed glasses, including her father. As not telling her father was not an option for me,

I struggled to get her to be “okay” with the situation. Nothing I did or said seemed to help. If anything, my efforts seemed to exacerbate the situation, and her emotions spiraled more and more out of control. It was clear that it was time for a different kind of approach, and all I could think of trying was a Focusing-oriented one.

I suggested that we go up to her room, where we could talk more about it. She finally agreed, and we made our way upstairs. Once there, I realized that the first thing I needed to do was help her find a way to calm down, as she was overwrought with emotion. I invited her to come onto her bed and get nice and comfy under the covers — which she gladly did. Once there, I told her how much I wanted to talk to her about the glasses, but I was having a hard time hearing her because of all the crying. I gently asked if it would be okay to try and get “a little bit quiet” so I would be able to hear her better. With lots of hugs and reassurance, she began to settle and soon she said she felt calm enough to talk.

We began by exploring what was making her so upset. After a few exchanges, what emerged was that she was embarrassed about having to wear glasses. She was afraid that everyone would make fun of her, that no one would want to be her friend, and that she would somehow be different because she wore glasses. I could see that this feeling of “embarrassed” was really big, so I tried to help her separate herself from “it” by using a typical Focusing reflection: “So there’s a part of you that’s feeling really embarrassed right now.” Boy, did that reflection not go over well! She quickly replied that it was not a “part” of her that was embarrassed — it was “all” of her! So that was my cue that what we needed to work on was finding a way to help her get some distance from “all that embarrassed.”

Onto my next Focusing reflection: “Wow... so this embarrassed is really huge. Maybe let’s see if we can make some room for it.” Again, I was off the mark with my reflection as she replied that the embarrassed was not just “really huge”, it was “everywhere”! It seems the embarrassed was in all of her, all of me, all over the room, all over the house and all over the world — really huge indeed! Another “wow” on my part, “that’s really a lot of embarrassed... maybe let’s see if we can put it somewhere so it’s not all over the place.” “It’s too big to put anywhere,” she responded, and I felt stymied as to how to help her get some breathing room from the looming presence of the “embarrassed”. As I sat with my own felt-sense of how it must feel to have something that big on me, the idea came of working to get just a small piece of it off, and so I went in that direction, “Oh yes, it is too big to put anywhere. Maybe let’s see if we can take just a really tiny, tiny piece of the embarrassed and put it somewhere.” She sat quietly, and I was not sure if she grasped what I was asking of her. So I offered a few suggestions: maybe we could put it on her bookcase, or in her closet, or out in the backyard. None of those fit. Then it came — she said we could put it in her dresser drawers. “Ah yes, we can put the embarrassed in your drawers.” “Yes,” she agreed, and with that, she felt much better. We had carved out a little space for her to be and that was enough — for now.

The next day came and she began to cry again about needing glasses. I invited her to go upstairs to talk some more, and she readily agreed. The first thing she did, completely on her own, was to get under the covers and say that she needed to calm down a bit so we could talk. I gave her some time, and when she said she was ready, we began. The embarrassed

feeling was still there. “Yes, of course it’s still there,” I said, and I sensed it was time to acknowledge its presence: “And it’s okay for it to be there.” I repeated that phrase several times, validating that it was okay for her to be having whatever feelings she was having about this issue. Then I forged gently ahead: “Is there anything the embarrassed wants to tell us?” “NO. It doesn’t want to talk,” she answered. “Okay,” I said, “That’s okay... it doesn’t have to say anything. Can we just let it know that we are here... and we will listen to anything it has to say if it ever feels like it wants to talk?” Then she did the cutest thing — she told me to wait, and she put her head under the covers for about 30 seconds, then came out and said she told “it” (the embarrassed) that we would listen if it wanted to talk. And with that we had made our first contact with the embarrassed.

At bedtime (as is so often the case), the feelings re-emerged, and my daughter asked if we could talk some more. I knew right away that she meant if we could continue talking in our Focusing-oriented way. I said “of course” and settled down next to her. I began by saying “Hello” to the embarrassed and said, “We know you’re there... and it’s okay for you to be there... and if you feel like talking now we would be happy to listen to anything you have to say... we won’t laugh or make fun of anything... we won’t get mad either... we just want to very gently listen to what you have to say.” With that she said she would go check if the embarrassed had anything it wanted to say, and under the covers she went. A few moments later she came back out and said, “The embarrassed is scared.” “Oh... so it’s feeling scared.” “Yes,” she said. “It’s scared everyone’s going to laugh at me... even Daddy” (hence why she did not want me to tell him). Rather than jump in with reassurances that her father would not laugh at her (especially since he wears glasses himself!), I stuck with reflecting back exactly what she had said. As I did this, she was able to articulate more of what she was afraid of, and I could see she was beginning to make some progress with her processing of this difficult situation.

But I still had my own dilemma: I needed to tell her father about the glasses even though she was adamant that I didn’t. How could I do what needed to be done while protecting the wishes of my daughter and the integrity of our relationship? A quintessential “both/and”!

Not knowing what to do next, I did what has become second nature these past few years — I turned inward to my own felt-sense. What came for me was that I needed to find a way for it to be okay with my daughter that I tell her dad about the glasses. I needed to help get her to an “okay place” so it would not feel like some kind of a betrayal when I shared the news with him. And so I tentatively began, “Can you maybe check and see what little thing we can do to help the embarrassed and scared feel a little less embarrassed and scared that we tell Daddy about the glasses?” Under the covers she went. When she emerged, she said there was not anything that would make it feel okay. I gently pressed on, offering some ideas: “Let’s see... would it help the embarrassed and scared feel a little less embarrassed and scared if you told him yourself... or maybe it would help if I told him for you?” She took in what I said and went back under the covers. This time when she came back she said, “It says it’s better if you tell him alone.” And so began a series of remarkable exchanges that went something like this:

“OK... so I’ll tell Daddy on my own. Maybe see what feels right for me to tell him.”

Under the covers she went and out she came with this:

“You can tell him that I need glasses, but that I don’t have to wear them all the time, just for reading.”

I reflected back:

“So I’ll say to Daddy: Erin needs glasses, not for all the time, just for reading.”

“No,” she corrects me, “I don’t have to wear them all the time.”

“Oh,” I say, picking up that my reflection was not quite right. I tried again, “Daddy, Erin needs glasses, but she doesn’t have to wear them all the time, just for reading.”

“Yes,” she says, and I can see that she is beginning to brighten up and is very much “into” what we are doing.

“Is there anything else it wants me to tell Daddy?”

Back under the covers she went. This time she came back saying:

“Yes... tell him I don’t want to talk about it any more after you tell him.”

“OK... and Daddy, Erin doesn’t want to talk about it any more with you after this.”

“Right,” she says, and I offer another invitation to see if there is anything else it wants me to say.

With that, she pops back under the covers and comes out adding:

“Tell him not to tell anyone else, not even Nana and Papy (her grandparents).”

“Ah... and Daddy, Erin doesn’t want you to tell anyone else that she needs glasses.”

“Not even Nana and Papy,” she corrects me again, and I am amazed at how attuned she is to the nuances of my reflections. This time I reflect back exactly what she has said, and then move forward in asking if there is anything else *it* wants me to say.

She thinks for a bit, and I offer some suggestions of other things she might want me to say. Amazingly (to me that is!), she does not take any of my suggestions immediately. Instead, after I have had my say, she goes back under the covers. After a while, she comes out with something that she had created herself that incorporated bits and pieces of what I had suggested. And so she added:

“You can tell him that I was very brave at the eye doctor, especially when he put the drops in.”

I carefully reflected back what she had said and she gave me a big “Right!” when I finished. Once more I asked if there was anything else it wanted to say and one last time, she went back under the covers and when she returned said:

“For you to say the whole thing!”

“OK,” I answered, and with that, I said aloud the entire “script” she had crafted. In spots she did some additional fine-tuning, and I kept repeating the whole thing until it fit for

her. Finally, we had found her “okay place” and also an okay place for us to stop — again, for now.

In the morning, my daughter came to me and said the embarrassed was ready to “come out” of her and be “sticking around” her instead. I asked what we needed to do to get the embarrassed to come out and be around her. She said to go over (again!) the way I was going to tell her dad about the glasses. So sentence-by-sentence I went over everything we had discussed — exactly — the night before. When I was finished, she smiled and said the embarrassed was around her now. I asked if it was okay with her if I told her dad about the glasses to which she willingly said “YES!!”

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SOME REFLECTIONS

On a personal, and soon-to-be professional level, Focusing has become a major part of my life. As such, I have become increasingly interested in developing my ability to weave Focusing more fluidly and naturally into my interactions. That I have been able to use parts of the Focusing process with my children has been both a joy and testament to the fundamental universality of Focusing. From my limited experience with my kids, I have seen first-hand how it is possible to use various “steps” of the Focusing process with children. Remarkably, they seem to “get it”. If anything, they readily “join in” and display an unmistakable excitement and enthusiasm for the process, even when working with difficult issues. And just like when working with adults, *shifts come* — spontaneously, surprisingly, yet consistently. And just as with adults, there is that felt-relief that comes from processing an issue from the inside out.

As I come to a close, I am reminded of how humbling this experience with my daughter has been for me. All too often my interactions with my children are anything *but* the story I described. AND — to have had this experience, even if just once — has filled me with such profound hope that there is a gentler, more respectful way of relating to each other (and ourselves). That way is Focusing. By honoring “what’s there”, no matter how embarrassing or scary or downright unpleasant and ugly, Focusing gives us the tools to find our own voice, listen to it, and live from it. What more could a parent possibly want for his/her child, let alone for him/herself. I hope you will join me in being on the lookout for “Focusing moments” in your everyday life and help continue to bring the light of Focusing into our world.

(By the way, guess who came to me crying two nights before the start of Grade One asking if we could go upstairs to her room and talk!)

REFERENCES

Hendricks, M. (2005, May). Grass roots globalization: Creating free, self-organizing spaces in the social body. Speech presented at the 17th annual Focusing International Conference, Toronto, Canada.

