

HELPING CHILDREN (AND ADULTS) TO FIND THEIR INNER HOME

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The theme of the 25th International Focusing Conference in 2013 in Switzerland was “Coming home”. For me this expression points to our inner home, coming home to ourselves, and welcoming and including all our inner guests into our inner home.

This paper explores how we can help children to find their inner home by answering three questions:

1. How do we look at children? What is our basic attitude towards them?
2. If I want to help them to find their inner home through Focusing, what exactly is it that I want to teach children?
3. What do we need for ourselves before and during this experience of teaching Focusing to children?

I found my answers to these questions by reflecting on my work as an experiential psychotherapist, asking myself how I integrate Focusing in my work and also by exploring what is so attractive and true for me in doing some Focusing exercises I really like, for example, the elevator rides of Lucy Bowers (2001, 2002) and the inner weather of Shoji Tsuchie (2003).

The answers to these questions give me a framework for looking at what exercises feel right to do with children. I offer here some examples of good practice based on this framework.

1. How do we look at children? What is our basic attitude towards them?

This is an important question because children notice the basic attitude adults hold towards them. We can't hide our basic attitude from them because they *hear* it in the language we use when we talk to them, and they *feel* it in the kind of relationship we develop with them.

It is very important that our attitude towards children reflects a deep respect for them. We do not present ourselves as the adults who know everything and to whom they should listen. Instead we are standing next to each other, equal in the sense that we are both experts on our own inner worlds. We want to take the child seriously.

Having a respectful attitude will make a real difference to how we teach a child Focusing and how we talk and listen to them. As Marta Stapert (2000) observed in her workshop on “How to be with children in their Focusing”:

Through language our basic attitude is expressed. We need to develop new sentences for talking to children. A lot of sentences now and in the past reflect an attitude of suppressing children, not taking them seriously, not giving space to a child. We need to make new sentences that reflect respect and a positive attitude towards children. And we need to ask open questions, offering space without pressure, nothing has to be said, nothing has to happen.

For me, this basic attitude also implies that we go where the child and his/her process goes, and that we respectfully follow wherever the process takes them. It is important to maintain a Focusing attitude, to be with them with open-ended questions, allowing them to find their own answers within themselves. We want to open the door for children to find, develop and trust their inner knowing so that they will become independent human beings, standing firmly in themselves on their own two feet. Analia Zaccai (2009) says:

Children are knowers; they have a natural knowing capacity. We must not fill them with what it should be and with our knowledge and contents. Filling them is omitting their authentic self. Focusing is making time for their inner knowing. We need to make space for their inner knowing. An important question for children is: “What is it like for you? What is it like inside you?” It is important to let them talk from there. We do not want to tell them what to do and how to do it until they are 11 years and then suddenly when they turn 12 years old expect them to be able to choose for themselves.

How we teach Focusing follows and honors the inner knowing process of the child. All we need to teach them is how to *get* to their inner knowing and how to *be* there so the process can unfold.

Basic respect towards children implies that we do not guide them toward any specific content — or put a label on their inner experience. As we sit with a child or a group of children, we really cannot presume to know what is on their minds or what they are ‘holding’ in their bodies. We cannot even begin to imagine what might have happened to them prior to coming to school that day. And neither can we imagine what inner effects these previous experiences have had on them as they sit before us. So let’s not instruct them to go to a certain content. Let’s not assume that we as adults know what they need to work on now. Let’s respect children as individuals and live what we preach: trusting both their and our inner process.

For example, if we are invited to do some Focusing with children whose classmate has suddenly died, we shouldn’t assume that every child’s inner experience at that moment will primarily center on the pain of the loss of their classmate. Maybe one girl, when asked to check inside, might find an inner excitement about an upcoming dance performance while another child might be experiencing anxiety about missing out on his birthday party. Let’s not assume that we know and they don’t.

For me there is no fixed program or a fixed way to teach a child Focusing. My approach develops in and out of the interaction between me and the children, meaning that I have to let

go of knowing in advance which exercise I will do and when and how I will do it. Teaching in this way requires flexibility to follow wherever the process takes us. Of course, such an adventure is only possible when there is a real trust in the Focusing process, that whatever will happen is OK, a radical acceptance of whatever Focusing brings forward.

2. If I want to help them to find their *inner home* through Focusing, what exactly is it that I want to teach children?

My aim is not to teach children the 6 steps of Focusing as you might do in a workshop for adults. But what can I teach them instead?

For me the most important thing to teach children is the process of the *inner act* (finding the way to go inside and *be there* with whatever comes up) and the *inner attitude* (being there with friendly, open and welcoming attention for whatever is there).

The handle for me for this process is PEAS.

- First of all the process is about *Pausing*. Stopping my usual way of living and doing. Simply taking a break from all my usual stuff. Stopping my habitual reactions.
- And making a welcoming space for *Experiencing*. Going into my body, dropping down to the experiential level, and inviting whatever needs my attention now or sensing the whole thing about a situation and waiting, giving *it* time to develop.
- And when something is there, *Acknowledging it*. Being there for *it*, starting a relationship with *it* by saying *hello*, and making sure *it* knows that I have noticed *it* and allowing *it* to be there for as long as *it* needs to be, and where and how *it* needs to be there.
- And then *Symbolizing it*, building and developing our relationship and getting to know *it* better, listening to *its* story, from *its* point of view, being in a welcoming relationship with *it*, respecting *it*, making space for whatever *it* needs to tell me for now and for what *it* is not wanting and wanting for me.

These four letters help me not only as a Focusing trainer and as an experiential psychotherapist but also as a teacher of trainers and psychotherapists. PEAS outlines the four most basic principles that people new to Focusing need to learn. PEAS is also a handle for looking at new Focusing exercises to evaluate whether or not they fit for me, and whether or not I want to add them to the basket of possible Focusing exercises I might want to do with people.

My inspiration for PEAS comes from working together with my colleagues who are experiential psychotherapists in Belgium, Frans Depestele, Ellen Gunst, Chris Van de Veire and Joke Van Hoeck. We collaborate on how to integrate Focusing in therapy. PEAS is also based on Ann Weiser Cornell's Inner Relationship Focusing (1996, 2005). We agree that the main task is building a nurturing inner relationship between "I" and "something in me". "I" is turning towards "something in me", offering it Self-in-Presence and then, within this allowing environment, "something in me" can tell its story and unfold in its life forward direction.

This radical acceptance of everything opens the door to welcoming all our inner guests and frees us from dividing our inner world into good parts and bad parts. Whatever is there carries a knowing of what is implied and of its life forward direction. That is why I am very careful not to instruct or guide children towards some content or some kind of felt sense or labeling a felt sense as pleasant, nice, hard or difficult. Developing this inner relationship of including and listening to all their inner parts empowers children's inner voice, thus helping them to become independent adults.

PEAS is not my only handle for teaching Focusing. Another one I learned from Lucy Bowers (during her workshop in Pforzheim in 2010). She says that all children need to know are two verbs: *noticing* and *nurturing* because that is the essence of Focusing. If they can *notice* and *nurture* something, then forward movement can come.

And during Analia Zaccai's workshop in Flanders in 2009 I found yet another handle. It is the principle of inclusion. She teaches children this principle of inclusion by living it in the class.

We are unique and everybody is different and everything is worth valuing inside and outside. Focusing is inclusive attention and value to what is being felt (good, pain, our well being, our creativeness, likes and dislikes, uncertainty, discomfort....). (p.9)

She starts by teaching children body-awareness. And from there the children start to ask questions. She finds that they want to Focus more frequently, often asking what it is that they are doing and if there is more to know. Of course, the children are free to choose whether or not they want to go inside. If they don't want to do that, they do something else with another group in the class.

This process of contacting their inner knowing is strengthened by carefully following what the children are saying and responding with open questions. One very important question is, "What is it like for you — *inside* you — now?" Nothing is pushed on them, and the children know that everything they bring up is OK.

Teachers should offer a lot of possible follow ups and invite the children to respect their choices. They are free to choose whether or not they want to symbolize it. If they want to symbolize, they are offered different possibilities and are invited to choose what fits for them now: drawing, painting, making a mandala, working with clay, writing, reflecting upon drawings or words, exchanging with a friend, or with the teacher, or in a small group. And again, they know that they don't have to do any of these activities. Whatever the next step that the child feels inside is OK to do next.

This radical attitude of "everything is OK" makes it easy for the children to really understand that it is OK to be yourself.

3. What do we need for ourselves before and during this experience of teaching Focusing to children?

It is absolutely necessary that you are an experienced Focuser yourself before you start teaching Focusing to children. You need to have experienced in your body what can happen during Focusing, and to have built a basic trust in the process of Focusing. When you really know in your bones that Focusing works and how it works, this inner knowledge will be felt when you meet the children and want to teach them Focusing. You will not feed their brains with facts, but you will be a living example of what you teach: they see you doing what you're saying. Or as Analia Zaccai (2009) would put it: "Be a walking Focusing attitude!" (p. 10)

Mary Jennings, Phil Kelly, Derek McDonnell and Kay McKinney also feel that people need a good grounding in Focusing before they start Focusing with children. That's why the first three months of their training program for foster parents in Ireland are devoted entirely to teaching Focusing to the foster parents. Once the foster parents learn to trust their own unfolding process, then the subject of Focusing with children starts.

Marianne Thompson (1992) writes:

As parents or adults working with children there are some simple basics we need to learn before we can teach them to focus. First, we need to have a body experience of what Focusing feels like from the inside, and a body-feel for movement and felt shifts. Second, there needs to be a sense for not trying to fix or control the children. And third, it's very important to have a sense for a caring feeling presence toward whatever hurts or frightens us before we can teach this to the kids. This step is really the most important for them, because just like most of us they have been trained to run from hurting places. (p.3)

Marianne Thompson's advice points to a second reason why it is important to know Focusing for yourself before you start doing Focusing with children: you need to know your own inner world and be able to take care of your own inner hurt places. In her workshop "It should not hurt to be a child" Lucy Bowers (2010) said: "When you interact with children, the child in you is in contact with that too, it is part of the interaction. The hurt places in you can either help or hinder this contact. Your inner child needs to be nurtured." She advised that when you notice something interfering with your contact with a child, you can acknowledge that interference as something in your own inner world and promise to give it attention later.

Zack Boukydis (2012) in his latest book, *Collaborative Consultation with Parents and Infants in the Perinatal Period*, also writes: "Infants call forth parents' own inner infant or inner child memories." (p.195) Later, he further explains that "work in focusing oriented parent-infant consultation and therapy includes times for 'dyadic' sessions and individual sessions with parents. During individual sessions some therapists may facilitate parents to do inner child/inner infant work." (2014, p. 170)

The third reason that you need to be an experienced Focuser yourself before you start working with children is that you need to know how to stay connected to your own felt sense while doing something else, in this case teaching Focusing to children, because being with your own felt sense while teaching Focusing to children is a complex process. So it is important to practice being with your own felt sense in other situations where you are teaching something to others — or where other people are involved in an emotional process.

This tuning in towards your own felt sense will be important during the teaching process because your felt sense will give you a feel of what tempo is right, when to go to a next step, or when to round off. Your felt sense will also give you a feel of when a Focusing moment might be good in a specific group. And it is exactly the place from where you listen and the place from where you reply. Lucy Bowers (2007) sums it up:

The key to using Focusing effectively with children is for the caregivers, whether parents, grandparents or teachers, to know, understand and practice Focusing in their own lives. Intimate knowledge of the Felt Sense and how it operates in the body, and of the “Focusing Attitude” and its importance in providing a gentle, compassionate presence, are all necessary for movement in the process. (p.85)

When you teach Focusing to children, it is also important that you are authentic, real, and not in some kind of role. Analia Zaccai (2009) also thinks that when you stay connected to your own felt sense, what you say comes from what you truly feel and think. Being authentically yourself and sharing that when it fits is really appreciated by children and teenagers who are more used to seeing adults as role models. Being genuine conveys the essential concept that “It is OK to be myself.” (p.3)

And last, but not least, it is important to have fun together when you teach Focusing to children. A sense of fun reinforces that Focusing is not just another school activity, something they have to do and learn, something imposed on them from outside. Rather Focusing is something which is fun to do together, as Eugene Gendlin (1986) points out in his dream-work: “Love and enjoy the dream, interpreted or not...Enjoying the dream is more important than interpreting it. Therefore, don’t work so hard that it stops being pleasant and exciting...Just love the dream and expect another.” (p. 27-28) In the same way it is important that children love and enjoy this connecting to their inner world.

Marta Stapert (2000) in her workshop on “How to be with children in their Focusing” also wants us to keep it playful. She advises us to just notice what’s happening inside and you might want to draw that. But these drawings are not for interpretation. Instead, Focusing should be all about the wanting to spend time in your *inner home* and to go inside, discovering what *lives there*, and symbolizing that — and that’s it! Avoid imposing heavy, adult instructions or intellectual interpretations of the drawing. Emphasize the playfulness of being free to go inside, of saying hello to whatever is there, and of staying there with whatever comes up for a while.

4. Conclusion

Several **principles** emerge from these ideas that can help us build a **framework** that can point towards instances of good practice for Focusing with children — and with adults.

1. We need an attitude and language that reflects respect, taking children seriously, **empowering their inner knowing, following the process of the child**. The above implies not guiding them toward content, not labeling their inner experience, not holding on to a fixed program.
2. We want to teach children the **process of the inner act**, how to get inside and how to be there so that whatever is there can unfold in its life forward direction. Implied here is teaching **PEAS**, teaching a nurturing **inner relationship** with all their inner parts, teaching **noticing and nurturing**, and teaching **inclusion** (a radical acceptance of everything).
3. We need to be **experienced Focusers** ourselves because we need to know in our bones that Focusing works and how it works. We need to really **trust the process**. Secondly we need to know **our own inner world** in order to take care of our own inner hurts and frightened places. And thirdly, we need to be able to be connected to **our own felt sense** while being with the children. We need to be **authentic** and real and speak from our felt sense, and not from a role. We want to **have fun** together.

There are many instances of good practice that demonstrate the value of this framework. Let me share some of my favorites with you.

- Reading books that tell something about Focusing, the Focusing attitude, felt sensing, or having a nurturing relationship with your inner parts. For example: *There's no such thing as a dragon* (Kent, 1975), *The little bird who found herself* (McMahon, 2008).
- Focusing exercises: Elevator rides (Bowers, 2001, 2002, 2007, 2008), Inner weather (Tsuchie, 2003), KOL-BE (Perlstein, 2013, Coenen, 2011), Guided imagery of a tree in full bloom (Verliefde and Stapert, 2003).

I hope that this article encourages you to reflect on your own Focusing principles and instances of good practice in your own field. All feedback is welcome.

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