

This article provides an explanation of Focusing, which contains many guidelines on how to be with children's grieving process and what is supported for their process. Mourning needs time, space and attention and you cannot: "go faster than the slowest grieving process"! As a parent and as a therapist, that is helpful to realize. If, after reading this article, you have questions or are (seriously) concerned about a (possibly) stagnated grieving process, you can always contact us. Our details are at the end of this article.

Being together of children and adults is a big, not always easy challenge. The aim is that we can enjoy each other's presence and development together. In education, at home and at school, we are looking for appropriate answers to the current complex socio-emotional developmental tasks that the child faces. Focusing can make a contribution, especially aimed at supporting and processing feelings associated with divorce and other major events.'



*"I feel a knot in my stomach"  
told the 10-year-old girl whose parents were divorced.  
This piece of work helped her to put her feelings more at a distance.*

### **Focusing by children**

Children who Focus learn to listen to their own wisdom. Adults who guide children and know about Focusing can be with the child in a respectful way with the inner wisdom and give it space. It gives the child the opportunity to bring out his self-resolving capacity and to behave accordingly. Focusing by both the adult and the child can contribute to a good, relaxed, clear and also limited relationship with each other, in which everyone can come into their own.

### **What is Focusing**

To focus means to direct our gentle attention to what is going on inside of us. Our inner reactions to what we are experiencing or have experienced. Focusing is for everyone, we are born with the skill and most of us unlearn it when we go to school and learn to reason. With Focusing we use a physical feeling (felt sense) for example: "a stone on the stomach or a lump in your throat". Instead of moving away from it, we focus on it. By being there with friendly attention and without judgement, something is already happening and you will learn more about it. The result is often relief, even if something comes up that you are not happy with and it gives a new fresh perspective on the whole. Focusing is something a child or adult does themselves. You cannot be focused by another. However, a facilitator can be there together with the focuser and listen to it. This promotes the focusing process. The listener is expected to be present in an empathetic way, without filling in or judging.

### **Short history**

Focusing was developed by Eugene T. Gendlin, Ph.D in the 1960's and comes from the direction of Rogers' client-centered approach. Gendlin discovered Focusing when he was researching the successful client. He studied exactly what the successful client did, worked it out in 6 steps and made it learnable and accessible to everyone.

Since the late eighties, Marta Stapert from the Netherlands, as a child psychotherapist in a school for Special Education, has developed focusing for children, both in psychotherapy and in family, school, special education, day care, child protection institution, children's hospital. It concerns individual dealing with children in therapy and in daily situations in family and school, as well as learning Focusing in groups. Focusing with children is practiced in many countries in the most diverse institutions and cultures. It is always about a certain way of life, which has been interrupted in some way. Due to situations such as divorce, loss or other major events. The body constantly wants to find this original way of life again. And if you give that a little chance, it will happen. That's what we're really looking for: the energy and the way of life that should have been there all along - and not the cause that got it stuck.

### **What does Focusing offer the therapist and parent?**

Focusing can be used as a means of self-reflection, as shown here in the following example. One facilitator felt that one of the boys in her group really hated her. He made it very difficult for her with his rebellious behaviour. In a Focusing process, together with her Focusing partner, she found the physical feeling of how she experienced this boy's behaviour. In her inner, gentle attention, she found a painful feeling in her chest, tight as in a stranglehold. When asked: "How long have you known this feeling?" slowly an old memory surfaced. This past experience was very similar to the experience with this troublesome boy. By paying attention to it, this could be disconnected. The next day there were no collisions. She recently told me that they had become great friends. By paying attention to the physical feeling experienced in the body, trusting it has something to say and letting it speak, the inner tension can dissolve. As a result, behaviour changes and a different way of contact becomes possible. A positive relationship with yourself and with the child can develop.

### **What you can do**

- Pay attention to the physical feeling about something and listen to its meaning.
- This can also be short if you are busy.
- Mirror the words of what the child shares with you/ ask few to no questions, take the time to REALLY hear what the child wants to share.
- If the child does not want to say anything (yet), look together for a better, more appropriate moment

A Therapist or parent who can Focus themselves can help a child (or adults) to make contact with the physical feeling (Felt Sense) and listen to it together, acknowledge it and give it the opportunity to express it.

### **Focusing by children**

Focusing is basically the same for children as it is for adults. We help the child to kindly pay attention to what is going on inside so that they can get a grip on it. It is surprising how easily and spontaneously children can respond to this. When the child has connected with what they feel about something inside, the next step is to express this feeling, to invite the child to search for the symbolization that fits it. Symbolizing the inner experience helps the child to get a grip on his own world and what is happening around him. This allows his or her behaviour to remain open and flexible.

In pretend play, children are constantly symbolizing their inner and outer worlds. We can provide them with different forms of expression, for example: words, moving, making sounds and coloring or drawing. Because young children cannot express themselves so easily in words, we as adults can carefully give words to what the child is experiencing. Even for babies, this has a dissolving effect if the right wording is found. Correct coloring and drawing are easy to use for the young children and appeals to most children. The inner experience that was previously not expressed in their behaviour, or was expressed ineffectively, is moving again.

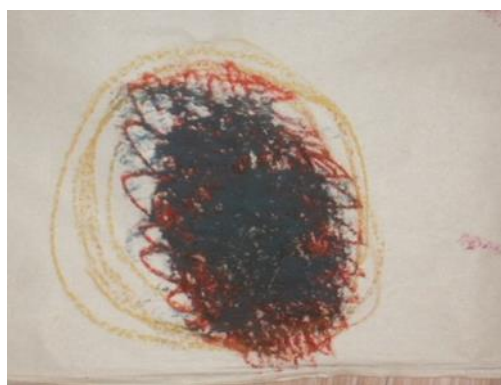


*"I am very angry" and it is SOOO much, I am full of it!  
said a 15-year-old boy whose father left the family.  
He became calmer after expressing and expressing*

By symbolizing through color and with the movement of the hand, a process of letting go develops in the child. You can offer this symbolizing 'what it is like inside' through drawing and coloring to a child, or in a group. Focusing is not only for children with difficult experiences in their lives and difficult behaviour. It gives a child security and self-confidence because it strengthens his problem-solving ability. The child becomes calmer and the ability to concentrate and absorb improves with better school performance. More harmony is created in family and group.

An example:

Young boy of 10 years old, he is gloomy; The family has already moved 5 times, he has difficulty making friends and has hardly any language or words for his feelings. He really wants to have 'support'. I invite him to check how he can notice this inside his body. He finds this very difficult, so we make a step-by-step process together. I first let his hand choose the colors that match this feeling it is red and yellow. The crayons are placed next to each other and then black is also added. These three colors move as it were as a kind of circle across the paper and suddenly, he notices how this drawing is felt and experienced inside.



*While reflecting, colours create his inner experience.  
It's spinning round circles at first, then there's some yellow around it. By drawing this he gains more insight into this Felt Sense around his theme of 'support'. Then he discovers that this Felt Sense, this red and that yellow, is trapped behind his chest. It just goes back and forth like a kind of boomerang.*

Because he puts his hand on it, he can welcome it and give it more attention, this already makes an essential difference. He now knows that he can support it himself. He finds out what the meaning is to him and he can come back to it at a later date. Relieved, he goes back to class with his hand on the spot where 'the boomerang' is.

In summary, Focusing is a way of inviting a child where and how he experiences something of a situation. That is usually on an area or specific place in the body with some kind of symbol. By inviting the child to pay attention to this and not to ask about the context, the child himself gives his attention to that specific feeling inside. The child will experience, that he is there, and there is something in him that he feels that he can be with and listen too.

As you notice, the attitude and invitations of each child are tailored to their own process and possibilities, mirroring what is and arises, supports this process. And so the child's own process unfolds. I can't go faster than the slowest process. Offering to listen together to what is inside always remains an invitation, the child decides whether or not it will happen.

### **What you can do?**

- *Ask the child what is happening inside at the moment, how it feels and where it is in their body. (Possibly you invite their hand to go to that place)*
- *Ask the child what colors, shape or movement go with it.*
- *Invite the child to put those colors on the paper where the hand knows how it wants to move.*

### **Symbolize:**

Symbolizing is expressing how the child feels and experiences something. It is powerful because a child can look at it. A child asks inside what colors, movements, shapes belong to it so that it wants to be expressed. The effect of it is that it gives space and change to the feeling inside. You have different forms of symbolization: verbalizing, writing stories, drawing, painting, clay, play, movement or, for example, your own attribute.

Your basic attitude towards the child and his feelings is mild, non-judgmental and giving space. And if something is made or drawn, it is important not to interpret, not to go into WHAT has been drawn, but does the drawing want to say/tell you something. A child automatically knows what the symbolization means, something is heard / recognized / felt.

Short invitations: Can I ask you something personal? Where do you feel it in your body? ...  
How does it feel there? ..... and how would it like to be expressed?.....

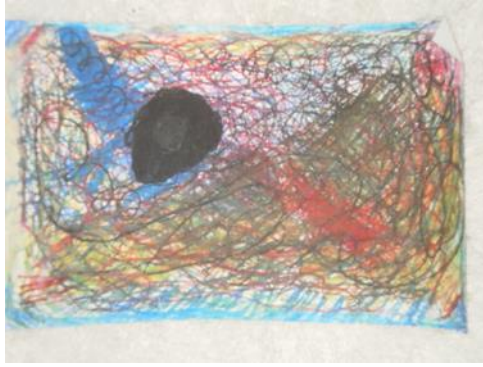
'Guidelines' for children experiencing grief and how Focusing supports this:  
Marta Stapert, Harriet Teeuw, René Veugelers

### **1. Realizing the loss (realizing what happened)**

- Tell, draw, play what happened
- Create memory book
- Draw what it was like before and after the event (family, themselves)
- Telling, drawing, playing the cremation/burial/funeral
- Where is ..... now? Fantasies, what others say, etc

Exploring questions that children often have:

1. Is it my fault?
2. Is it contagious, will it kill me, fear of living
3. Who will take care of me now, fear of losing the living parent too
4. Should I take care of/comfort the others in the family. Pay attention to burdens, placed on the child or to other family members (e.g. grandpa / grandma)



*Among all my joy there is also sadness” said this 13 year old boy, who sometimes lived with his father and sometimes with his mother. The different boundaries and approach had a varying effect on him*

## **2. Experiencing and coping with the feelings of loss**

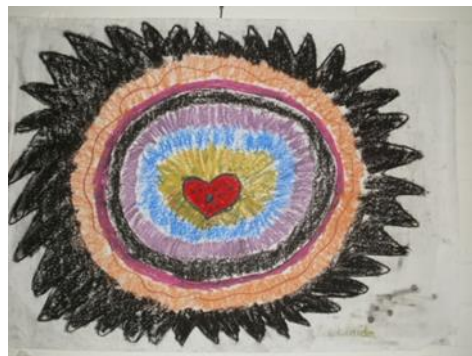
- Drawing, modelling, telling, acting out feelings associated with the death of.....
- Read stories about feelings of loss
- Making a feeling mask: what does it look like on the outside and how do I feel on the inside
- Keep a diary
- Focusing on feelings, what's going on inside you, how it feels inside



*Yes, that's exactly how it feels!" a Turkish girl said something to her parents, (about moving from Turkey to here). She missed her language, her friends and the safe environment*

## **3. Adjusting to an environment without the deceased, or that which was so important**

- What did ..... always do, and what did you do together with ..... (memory book/box,
- What do you miss the most?
- How is this going to continue? Are there other people who can take over?
- Have the others around you changed and what can we do about it?
- Rituals
- Realizing when in the future you will especially miss ..... (birthday, graduation)



*“my heart is armoured” and that helps this 16-year-old girl who has experienced terrible things in her early childhood.*

#### **4. Invest in new relationships**

- Share with others
- Telling wishes and dreams, drawing
- Drawing yourself as a baby, now, as an adult, elderly (perspective, future-oriented)
- How are things going now, which people do you need most, now and in the future`



*After rain comes sunshine, after sorrow comes relief  
after anger comes happiness and space!  
“My inner safe place”*

These grieving tasks and phases can of course be discussed interchangeably.  
Focusing deepens and enriches the entire grieving process.

#### **Children who Focus:**

- Learn that they are in charge of their emotions and concentrate better on the tasks at hand.
- Learn to handle their problems instead of denying them or getting overwhelmed by them.
- Learning to listen more to other children and to empathize with the other. It increases their social confidence.
- Connect with themselves on a deep inner level and learn to express their feelings in an acceptable way.
- Listen to what is going on inside them. Through this focused, respectful attention, they get a grip on their sometimes difficult, angry, fearful or aggressive emotions. As a result, they express themselves more mildly.
- Pay specific attention to their questions and problems, making behavioural change visible. They learn to take responsibility.
- Learn to have confidence in their own abilities and learn to find out what is right and fair for them. It increases their emotional well-being.
- Find their own solutions to their problems and thereby develop self-managing ability.
- They become more independent by experiencing their own competence.



*I feel myself as powerful and in presence*

## Guidelines for parents with children and young people who are grieving

- Taking care of themselves (as a parent/adult)

This is the main condition of caring for children. The trick is to find the right distance from difficult feelings. Don't get completely overwhelmed by the sadness and don't push away from the sadness, but allow it and be with the pain. Techniques of Focusing can help with this.

- Show openness and feelings

The adult is the model for dealing with feelings. No one benefits from suppressing feelings. (It's like trying to submerge a ball in a swimming pool. It goes well for a long time until you're not paying attention, then the ball just shoots into the air and you can't control it anymore)

- Let them know that feelings are normal

Feelings of fear, guilt, anger, and rebellion are normal in a grieving process. Both for adults and for children and young people.

- Be open and honest in giving answers

Don't try to make the truth more beautiful than it is. Children and young people have a Felt Sense when something is not right. They need to trust that they will be told the truth no matter how painful it may be.

- Don't force them to talk

Some children and young people shut up and find it difficult to talk about their pain. While it is good to express emotions, there is no point in putting them in front of the block. Provide a safe and trusted environment so that they can come up with it when they are ready. Don't assume there won't be anything if they don't want to talk about it yet.

- Listen when they are ready to talk.

Listen with sincere attention when they are ready.

- Don't tell them to be strong

Don't give them advice or tell them to be strong. Let them know that they are doing well, even if there is something sad.

- Find a friend / family member who can take care of the child if you are too sad yourself.

Sometimes it can be (temporarily) too difficult for the parent to take care of the child or young person. It can be helpful to find support in the local area for you and your child

- Make them feel like they can be a child.

Some children take care of the parent or other (younger) children as a survival strategy. Let them know that they can be children at all times and are not responsible for the happiness of the whole family.

- If one seeks specialist help, one should do so in a way that normalizes and does not stigmatize

Let them know that it's perfectly normal to get temporary support from a therapist or counsellor. This can be done through individual assistance or a supervised support group with a number of peers.

- Keep in mind that the loss comes back at every crossroads in the development

Some scars keep reopening with every major event in life.

For example, when obtaining a diploma or transferring to a new school. And later when they get married or have children of their own.

- Being alert at sensitive moments for children with grief.  
There will be moments that will be extra difficult for the child or young person with grief. For example, the parents' evening, the school musical, the Christmas celebration, birthdays, Father's Day or Mother's Day. Let them know that they can always turn to the adults when things get tough. Discuss with them how they want to deal with it.

#### **\*Learn Focusing techniques**

Focusing techniques help deal with emotions. Adults who have learned to Focus themselves can support this process in children and young people. Focusing is a natural process for Children and teenagers in grief, they often unlearn it when they grow up. You can learn Adult Focusing through life levels; online and life, some specific Children Focusing training are giving by CF coordinator in the world: look at our International site; [www.childrenfocusing.org](http://www.childrenfocusing.org)

#### **Information about Focus training and courses:**

KinderFocus Centrum Nederland: [www.kinderfocuscentrumnederland.nl](http://www.kinderfocuscentrumnederland.nl)

The KinderFocussen Foundation: [www.kinderfocussen.nl](http://www.kinderfocussen.nl)

Children Focusing Corner: <https://focusing.org/felt-sense/children-and-focusing>

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*Something is unfolding!*