

# *Discovering children's responses to trauma: a response-based narrative practice*

**By Angel Yuen**

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Modern discourses of victimhood, which are often present in instances of childhood trauma, can contribute considerably to establishing long-term negative identity conclusions. However, focussing on children's *responses* to trauma can aid in conversations that contribute to rich second story development, without re-traumatising children or young people. These kinds of enquiry can focus on children's acts of resistance, places of safety, and other skills of living. This paper gives examples of therapy informed by this approach, and provides a map of four levels of enquiry for conversations with children and young people which elicit and build upon responses to trauma.

Keywords: children, trauma, externalising conversations, re-membering conversations, memory theory, second story development, double-storied memories

## **PART ONE: CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE AS AGENTS IN THEIR OWN LIVES**

When I first met with Megan<sup>1</sup> when she was fifteen years old, she told me how her mother had died two years previously after a life of destruction, depression, alcohol and hopelessness. In our first conversation, Megan provided me with a synopsis of her difficult childhood. This had included not only the trauma of her mother's death, but also experiencing child sexual abuse, being exposed to high alcohol and substance use, and witnessing violence. After she had described this to me, she stared at me knowingly and said, 'As you can see, I'm pretty messed up and I'm not even sure if you can help me!'

As a school social worker and private therapist, I have had many conversations with children and young people who have been vulnerable to an array of very serious and traumatic events. As a result, I know well that children are not strangers to trauma. Children and young people have confided in me stories about the deaths of parents, exposure to abuse and violence, living with a parent with serious mental health difficulties or high substance use, abduction, severe bullying, ongoing racism<sup>2</sup>, emigrating from war-torn countries, and/or facing several injustices from within and outside their families. After hearing these sorts of stories, it is not unusual for the child or young person to repeat Megan's statement and identity conclusion, 'I'm messed up!' It's also not uncommon for other people to ascribe negative identity conclusions to these young people, such as, 'He's damaged for life because of the years of abuse he went through as a child'.

### **DISCOURSES OF VICTIMHOOD**

Contemporary discourses of victimhood can contribute considerably to establishing long-term negative identity conclusions. In Toronto, as in many other major cities around the world, discourses of victimhood are ever-present in the media with regard to violence and other traumatic events. For example, a few months ago the Toronto community was shocked to hear of the murder of a fourteen-year-old boy in his school in the middle of the day. Almost instantly, the news was splashed with headlines such as: 'The pain of the loss will be

there forever', and commentaries describing 'Twenty per cent of the students will never get over it!' In these statements, there is a perception that the child/young person subjected to trauma is unable to have any effect whatsoever on their own life and that they will be forever vulnerable.

When helplessness becomes the dominant story in a child's life, their sense of agency is erased. Caregivers and professionals referring children to me who have experienced significant trauma often say things like 'He will never get over it', 'She is ruined for life', 'How could he/she ever be the same?' Often, these well-intentioned concerns are accompanied by caring and compassion, but I think these narrow descriptions inadvertently have children experiencing less and less agency in their lives. I do not want to minimise the intensity of pain and distress resulting from trauma and the devastating effects on children and young people. However, these single-storied accounts can be crushing of hope and promote the construction of 'disabled' identities. These victim stories not only shape an individual child's life and identity, but they can also define communities of children who are vulnerable, thus creating a picture of powerlessness and desolation for their future.

### **UNHINGING FROM 'VICTIM' LIFE STORIES**

Despite the discourses of victimhood, there are also individuals and groups who are determined to not be defined by stories of trauma. With regard to child sexual abuse, counter-stories to the notion of psychological long-lasting damage are offered which question the claims that child sexual assault inevitably leads to lasting emotional distress (Kamsler, 1991; Mann, 2006; Silent too Long, 2001). Adams-Westcott, Daffron, and Sterne (1992) considered the use of a number of therapeutic conversations to help people who have experienced childhood trauma escape victim life stories and discovered that they *can* make a difference in their own lives.

More generally, we hear unique survivor stories of childhood trauma and the ability of individuals to overcome adversity. These tellings offer an important counterpoint to pathologising descriptions. However, I believe that these stories of 'beating the odds' go much further than just a child's capacity to survive and thrive. Ungar (2005)

argues that it is a shallow description of 'resilience' to attribute success to something inside an individual alone, and emphasises the necessity to develop thicker descriptions of resilience. With this notion in mind, it's my preference to unearth the sources of resilience which are linked less to cognitive strategies and internal understandings, and more to children and young people's actions, skills, and knowledges. This, then, is resilience that is the outcome of experiences, identity stories, and connections with others.

Along with these preferences, it is my intention to engage in explorations which can be hope-filled by assisting children and young people<sup>3</sup> to unhinge from victim life stories before these take hold of their identities. These explorations seek out sources of resilience and open space to alternative knowledges. These conversations elevate personal agency by exploring where the child feels that they can be influential in their own life, where they can be an agent in their own story.

## **CENTRING CHILDREN'S KNOWLEDGES ABOUT THEIR OWN LIVES**

I am continually reminded of, and saddened by, children's limited power in the context of talking about their dilemmas and troubling situations. Within the dominant psychological cultural beliefs and the many theories about children, it seems that children are often not consulted about their thoughts, actions, and the problem-solving skills they possess.

White (2000) poignantly questions the competing 'truths' of childhood as described in the culture of therapy:

*There is now such an abundance of explanations about children's expressions of life, such an avalanche of competing 'truths' about the origins of such expressions, such a multiplicity of assertions about children's nature and about their needs, and such an explosion of narratives about child development and its stages, that it now appears that childhood has been theorised in all of its intimate particularities. Regardless of the relative merits and veracity of these theories, they are routinely taken up, in popular and in professional culture, in the interpretation of, and in the management of,*

*children's actions in ways that neglect any exploration of the possibilities that are available for consulting children about these actions. In fact, in relation to children's expressions of life, the term **action** is rarely employed. (p. 15 emphasis added)*

This is dramatic in relation to children who have experienced significant trauma, where diagnoses such as attention deficit, post-traumatic stress, conduct, and anxiety disorders have become pervasive and medications typically prescribed. With these deficit descriptions, children's sense of agency is lessened, while reliance on expert professional knowledge is increased. Often, when children and young people do have something to share about the meaning they attribute to their symptoms and injustices faced, these are commonly thought to be inadequate, irrelevant, or insignificant.

I highlighted 'action' in the quotation above, as I agree that it's a term rarely employed in relation to children's expressions of life. Children and young persons who have endured trauma are often asked questions which elicit effects and impact on their lives, yet children are often not consulted about the actions they took and how they responded. An exploration into only effects of trauma is concerning to me, as there is a risk of re-traumatising children.

## **CONVERSATIONS ABOUT TRAUMA WITHOUT RE-TRAUMATISING**

My hope is that, in working with children who have experienced trauma, we can ensure that they are not vulnerable to re-traumatisation when speaking of what they have been through. This hope and concern has been important in guiding me in the questions I choose to ask in therapeutic conversations, and in creating a safe context for children to speak about their experiences.

Over some years, I have learned that how I speak with children and young people about events of suffering, injustice, and/or oppression can make a significant difference to how engaged and comfortable they are in the therapeutic conversation. In my experience, many children do not want to talk about the 'bad things' that have happened to them. Their reluctance is indicated by saying, 'I don't want to talk about that!' or, more

subtly, they may change the subject, provide a thin response, or perhaps respond simply with 'I don't know'.

White (2006a) speaks about the importance of providing a different territory of identity in which a child can stand, prior to speaking about their traumatic experiences and how second story<sup>4</sup> development provides this different territory:

*When meeting with children about experiences of trauma, the story of this trauma and the effects that this has on the child's life is often the first story that is brought to our attention. This story requires recognition. But there is also a second story of how the child has responded to these experiences of trauma, and this second story is often overlooked. No-one is a passive recipient of trauma. Even children respond in ways to lessen the effects of the trauma, to seek comfort, to try to preserve what is precious to them, and so on. This second story is very important. The ways in which children respond to trauma are based on certain skills. These skills reflect what the child gives value to. And what the child gives value to is linked to the child's history, to their family, to their community, and to their culture. (White, 2006a, p. 87)*

With the development of a second story, children are provided with a safe space to talk about their experiences of trauma without reliving the experience. The second story also acknowledges that, even though a child may not have been able to stop a traumatic event which may have involved a range of abuses, or had no control over events of suffering such as disease or death<sup>5</sup>, ample possibility still remains to co-discover how they have responded to these events in many ways. With this in mind, I am interested in asking questions that elicit experience-near descriptions of children's actions and responses. In doing so, I want to present a willingness to engage in conversations with children using their words and language, thereby privileging their knowledge.

## CHILDREN'S RESPONSES TO TRAUMA

As I thought more about this concept of the second story, I found myself curious and eager to

embark on a project of discovering responses. Asking about responses essentially involves asking about what children did. I ask specific, yet straightforward questions about the actions they took during times and events of trauma: 'How did you respond or what did you do?' The children and young people are asked to describe how they responded to trauma rather than how they were affected (see Wade, 1997). While these questions were already familiar to me, I have recently become more active and deliberate in routinely entering this line of enquiry.

## A PROJECT OF DISCOVERING CHILDREN'S RESPONSES

Over the past year and a half in this project of discovery, I have engaged in several conversations with children and young persons, ranging from six to seventeen years old. Half were children who were currently experiencing or had experienced trauma, and half were adolescents who had historically faced significant trauma when they were children. As I have become more purposeful about discovering responses to trauma, I have begun to explore what they did and how they responded before, during, and after traumatic events.

The following questions have assisted my inquiries:

- How did you respond? What did you do?
- What did you do when you were scared?
- What did you show/not show on your face during times of abuse?
- Where did you hide when you were scared?
- What did you do once you found a place to hide?
- Even though it was not possible for you to stop the violence as a child, how did you attempt to protect yourself or others?
- How did you comfort yourself and your siblings?
- How did your brothers and sisters comfort you?
- What did you do/are you doing to lessen the effects of abuse/witnessing violence/death of your parent, etc?

In my ongoing efforts to create an atmosphere that was child-friendly and not intrusive, I am

conscious about asking the above questions in a low-key way. I find that with gentle persistence, children and young people offer a multitude of responses. A six-year-old boy shared that he taught his two-year-old toddler brother how to count to ten in English, French, and Spanish, to distract him and lessen the effects of abuse after beatings. From this conversation, I also learnt how that toddler, barely able to talk, would comfort his big brother by bringing him a tissue when he cried.

I also learn about children deliberately finding ways to not show distress, anger, fear, or sadness on their face in order to minimise the severity of abuse or to lessen the effects of trauma on their everyday life. One child named this skill his 'fixing-face abilities' while another young woman who experienced years of sexual abuse as a little girl called it 'putting on my outside happy look while at school'. Now as a sixteen year old young woman, she thinks this may have been one of her 'skills in living' which allowed her to continue playing with other children.

## EXPLORING PLACES OF SAFETY

In asking about the *places*<sup>6</sup> of safety for children during times of immense fear, children bring forth many images of their creative responses, and are therefore less likely to feel like a passive recipient to trauma. Michael, a seven-year-old boy who faced emotional abuse which he described as 'the bad, angry, and scary voice', would often hide from place to place in his house in attempts to 'get away' from the harsh voice. His hiding place of choice was a closet that was never used. By simply asking where Michael hid, he became more in touch with what else was happening at the time and how he responded, thus providing a more experience-near description. When I asked him, 'So when you hid in the closet, what did you do to comfort yourself once you were safe?', he replied, 'The way I made myself feel better was to sing a song to myself and that would make the tears go away'.

I mentioned Megan earlier who described herself as 'messed up'. As she told me more about the difficult times of her life, I wondered about the ways she had kept herself safe when her mother would pass out from high alcohol use. She replied: 'I think I was about six years old and I remember

being so afraid that intruders would come in while my mom was passed out. Sometimes drug dealers would come. So I would hide. There was this old mattress that was tucked underneath a bed and I would wiggle in between the mattress and hide under the bed'.

I asked her how long she would be under the bed, and she remembered that it was sometimes up to eight hours at a time. I asked her, 'What did you do all of those hours underneath the bed? That's a long time to be hiding. I know it was ten years ago, but do you remember yourself as a little girl and what you did or what you thought about while hiding?' Megan thoughtfully said, 'Hmmm ... this sounds funny ... but I used something sharp to carve things in the board above my head while I was lying underneath there all that time. I would carve 'x's and hearts. I would put the initials of people that I knew I wasn't safe with beside the 'x's and I would carve the initials of people that I knew cared for me inside of the hearts. Then I would think about my mom eventually waking up and how I would help her to feel better and take care of her. And then I guess at some point I fell asleep'.

## ACTS OF RESISTANCE

Often open opposition, rebelling, or fighting back would have posed danger to the children who spoke with me about their experiences of abuse and violence. Therefore, I have found it useful to enquire about their acts of resistance by asking questions that elicit descriptions of very subtle and micro-level responses (Wade, 1997). For instance, one eight-year-old boy described and recollected his resistance to the upset and unfairness of his ongoing abuse and mistreatment when he was very little: 'I knew that I couldn't show that I was really mad or else she would hurt me. So I just kept a straight face and instead clenched my hands tight inside my pockets. She couldn't see my hands, but clenching them meant that I could be mad without her knowing or seeing it. I wouldn't give her the satisfaction of having a reason to beat me!' By learning about children's acts of resistance such as this, I also find out more about the thoughts and actions that sustained them during difficult times.

## RESPONDING TO 'I DON'T KNOW!'

Sometimes, when I first ask these response-based questions to children and young people, they reply with 'I don't know' or say 'Nothing ... I didn't do anything!' When asking questions about children's responses, I am mindful that many of these young people have been in contexts where their actions may have been negated, put-down, insulted, or minimised, and that children's personal agency and 'sense of self' is often erased by traumatic experience. Moreover, discourses of victimhood perpetuate the idea of victims 'doing nothing', thus adding to the erasure of children's sense of agency.

Hence, it can take time for children who have endured traumatic experience to believe that we really want to learn about their life, and hear about their experiences in their words. I also believe that if a child cannot answer a question, it is my responsibility to ask a question that they can more readily answer.

To assist children in not experiencing a 'failure-to-answer', I sometimes share a story of another child's response, and ask if they can relate to this story. I also become eager to be introduced to stuffed friends, pets, and imaginary helpers that children have had. These are often light-hearted conversations in which I get introduced to Ellie the Elephant, Pookie the Bear, Max the dog, the Easter Bunny, and many others. With imaginative questioning, many stuffed friends and loved pets are brought into the therapy room, and I learn that they have lots of information to share about the child's responses, skills, and values – and how both provided comfort to each other during very hard times.

## PART TWO: BUILDING UPON CHILDREN'S RESPONSES TO TRAUMA

### RENDERING SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGES VISIBLE

Like other narrative practitioners, I am interested in rendering the skills and knowledges of children and young people more visible and accessible (Buckley & Dector, 2006; Hayward, 2006; Mitchell, 2005; Ncube, 2006). These include children's abilities, talents, cleverness, and, most importantly, their own understandings of their experiences and competencies.

Interestingly enough, upon discovering a multitude of *responses* to trauma, children and young people's many *knowledges and skills* also became more apparent. As seen in Megan's story, by finding out how she kept herself safe by hiding under a bed, her skills in discerning safety during unsafe times were brought forward. Furthermore, her knowledge about ways of caring for her mother during hard times was rendered visible.

A young man named David shared traumatic memories of being locked in a small basement room sometimes for eight to ten hours at a time. At seventeen years old, his best guess was that he probably spent a few hundred hours locked in the basement from when he was five to eight years old. David recounted this period of immense fear in his childhood: 'He put me there every other day. There were many days that I had to go in there just after returning home from school. It was a cold tiled floor and it was very scary – and hard to see with hardly any light. Sometimes he would sit there for hours screaming at me just outside the room, and he would tell me that demons were going to get me. I was scared to death'.

To assist David in noticing his responses I asked, 'This may seem like a strange question ... but what did you do during all that time when you were scared? For all of those hours you spent locked in that small and dark room, what did you do?' David explained that there was all kinds of junk in the basement room: 'Sometimes I would look at a jar of screws and examine each and every one and focus on them. This would help to not let the fear grow or to think about the possible demons. If I just focused on looking intently at the screws then it would stop me from thinking about being scared'. After this response, we then had a conversation which explored David's 'focusing skills'. I asked him, 'Would you say that you started to develop some focusing skills? Did your focusing skills help you at other times when you were scared?' David thought of another time that Fear could have overtaken him by attempting to convince him he would die from extreme cold: 'Once he locked me in a shed in minus ten degree weather with just a candle burning. I just sat there and stared at the candle and focused on the flame so I wouldn't think of the cold getting to my body, or the fear of freezing and never being released. I watched the

candle burn for a few hours and didn't take my eyes off of the flame'.

David then decided that these focusing skills had been not only helpful to him at that time, but they also had grown and developed over the years. He remembered that when he was seven years old, fear was no longer getting the best of him and he would focus on all the different odds and ends of junk in the small basement room. As an anti-boredom tactic, he began making and fixing things with all of the different pieces of junk: 'I had to spend hours at a time in the basement, so I would find things to fix and do. I remember once I took a broken circuit board, a walkie-talkie, and a talking dinosaur and made a moving robot. I liked figuring out how to make things work'. With the development of a second story based on his responses, David now noticed his focusing, fixing, and figuring out skills where before these were neglected.

### **CLEVERNESS AND PERSONAL AGENCY**

Hearing about Megan and David's responses to trauma as children had me thinking how clever they both were at a very young age. As I always want to check out the significance of events with young people consulting with me rather than making assumptions, I was interested in finding ways in which Megan and David could reflect upon the significance of their earlier actions.

I asked Megan, 'You were only six years old and were able to find a way to keep yourself safe during dangerous times. And you knew who you were safe with and who you were not safe with and carved those initials in the wood. What's it like for you to think of that six-year-old girl doing those things? What do you think about yourself as that little girl?' Megan smiled and replied, 'You know ... I think I must have been pretty smart when I was little!' When I asked David to reflect on the meaning of his responses, he was somewhat surprised about his ability to focus and concentrate so well at an early age: 'I think that's pretty amazing for a five-year-old boy to be able to focus so well'. Now as a seventeen-year-old young man, he realised that his talent for handy-work most likely began at a very early age, and he expressed feeling proud of his ability to fix things.

During these conversations, not only were David and Megan invited to think differently about themselves but, more significantly, they began to feel that they could be influential in their own lives. Eliciting responses and making connections of these responses to skills and knowledges were important practices to this second story development and co-constructing personal agency. Where previously the effects of the trauma identity story blinded the moments of exception, there was now a developing sense of personal agency.

### **SHRINKING THE STUCK THOUGHTS: CONVERSATIONS WITH A BOY EXPERIENCING FLASHBACKS**

Developing rich stories about children's responses and skills can generate renewed and more positive identity conclusions. The following story demonstrates in more detail how this can occur.

Billy<sup>7</sup> was referred to me by his father Doug and stepmother Lucy when he was eight years old. Four years previously, Billy had been abducted by his biological non-custodial mother. For three years, while Billy was between the ages of four to seven, Billy and his toddler half-brother experienced daily physical and emotional abuse from multiple perpetrators. Upon his return and hearing about the abuse, Doug and Lucy consulted with me about their immense worry and fear of Billy being 'damaged' from the trauma he had experienced. They themselves had been left immobilised from the three years of not knowing whether they would ever see Billy again.

In the first sessions, I met with Billy individually and with Doug and Lucy. Billy shared how he had responded to the trauma in ways which lessened its effects: 'I would just try to draw the thoughts off my mind by finding any paper and pens, crayons to draw. I still do this and it helps'. He also talked about how he used his 'fixing-face abilities' to not show anger or upset, and to minimise the severity of the abuse. Billy recollected how he used his memory to keep thinking about his father, stepmother Lucy who he called 'mom', and baby brother, and his wishes and hopes to return to them: 'I was only four years old and even though I was told over and over again that my mom, dad,

and brother weren't my real family ... they could never take my memory away'.

After several conversations over a six month period, and with a great deal of family support, Billy did settle back into his old home. The 'damaged' negative identity conclusion was diminished as he started to play again, have fun, cherish family time he had missed for three years, and do well in school despite his large gap in learning.

However, a year later, Lucy called to say that she was again very concerned, as Billy was experiencing multiple flashbacks of the abuse. In catching up with Billy, now nine years old, he shared that he had awful thoughts and memories of the abuse 'stuck in his head'. We entered an externalising conversation<sup>8</sup> about the effects and influences of the Stuck Thoughts. They were bringing fear and worry to him in the day time and they interfered with his ability to get to sleep at night time. The Stuck Thoughts had been reminding Billy of the past violence, cursing, untrue stories, threats, and weapons. They repeatedly played visual images in Billy's head of him and his brother being physically abused, and a dog named Max being beaten as well.

At this point, Billy was holding his head in his hands to show me how the stuck thoughts were physically hurting his head. I therefore didn't want to pursue enquiries about the effects, nor invite him to give details of visual images of the flashbacks, as I was aware that this could be re-traumatising. Before talking about the 'bad thoughts', as Billy had termed them, I wanted to provide him with another, safer territory of identity to stand in. I was also curious to learn more about Max the dog, who I had not heard about in our initial conversations, as I thought he might provide clues to discovering further responses that Billy had made in relation to the traumatic experiences he had been subjected to. I soon learnt that Max lived in the home where the abuse had taken place, and that he would look out for Billy and help him when he was hurt. Hearing this, I inquired as to how both Billy and Max comforted each other:

### **RE-MEMBERING<sup>9</sup> MAX**

Angel: What would Max do when he knew you were hurt or sad? How did he try to comfort you?

Billy: He hopped like a basketball when he knew I was hurt, or upset. He did silly things like chase his tail or he would run in circles and fall down ... and he would try to cheer me up.

Angel: Why do you think he would he want to cheer you up?

Billy: Because I was nice to him and didn't hurt him and I was the only one who took care of him. In the mornings other people in the house wouldn't wake up to look after him ... but I would.

Angel: If you could imagine that Max had a voice and could talk what would he say if I asked him about how you took care of him?

Billy: He would say that I fed him and cleaned up after him and that I would wake up for him in the morning when he was barking.

Angel: What would you feed him ... dog food?

Billy: No, there was never any dog food because no one would ever buy food for him. I'd give him leftovers.

Angel: What kind of leftovers?

Billy: Anything that was there ... bones and any food that was leftover.

Angel: You were only four years old ... how did you know when Max was hungry?

Billy: By his bark! He barked a certain way when he was hungry and would pant when he was thirsty.

Angel: Do you think you had some skills in knowing how to take care of animals even though you were really little?

Billy: Yeah! I guess I did!

Angel: What do you think of that four-year-old boy and about all of the ways he knew about taking care of a dog?



Billy: (smiles and keenly replies) I think he's pretty smart!

Angel: It's nice for me to get to know Max and how you helped each other during difficult times. And to hear about how you took care of him by making sure he was fed and how you played with him. If I asked Max what this might tell me about the kind of boy you are what do you think he would say?

Billy: Ummm ... Max would say ... 'He's good, fun, and he cares a lot'.

Angel: Why did you care about Max so much?

Billy: I like Max! He's like my little brother.

Angel: Do you think Max thought of you like family as well?

Billy: I think so because he's known me longer than his own mother. I'm like his big brother.

Angel: If I asked Max how much he cared about you ... what do you think he would say? Would he say a little –medium – lot – huge?

Billy: He would say ... 'More than you can imagine!'

Angel: What's that like for you to think of Max saying that he cares about you 'More than you can imagine'?

Billy: I would say, 'Wow, that's a lot!!'

Angel: How is this conversation going for you by the way? Are these questions okay?

Billy: Yeah! It's really good! I haven't thought about Max in a while.

Angel: If Max knew that you were having a tough time today with Stuck Thoughts hurting your head a few years after the abuse ... what do you think he would do?

Billy: He would play with me to make me feel better. He was always happy to see me. I think he would jump for joy.

Angel: What does this conversation about thinking about Max wanting to make you feel better and being so happy to see you do to the thoughts in your head? Are the Stuck Thoughts the same, shrinking or growing?

Billy: They're shrinking ...

Angel: Knowing that the Stuck Thoughts are shrinking ... I'm just wondering how your head feels now compared to the beginning of our conversation?

Billy: My head feels a lot better and it doesn't hurt right now.

Angel: If you continued to think about Max and how you and he cared so much for each other and played with each other during terrible times ... would that help to continue shrinking the terrible thoughts in your head?

Billy: Yeah ... for sure!

## **DOUBLE-STORIED MEMORIES**

With an enquiry into responses rather than effects, Billy's associations of the trauma of the abduction were now not only about the harm done to him, but also about how he and Max helped, comforted, and cared for each other through dangerous and fearful times. This conversation created double-storied memories, with full memories rather than half memories of the trauma<sup>10</sup>. For quite some time, Billy had not thought of Max. Through remembering Max as a loved pet, the period of trauma was restored to full memory.

Having developed a second story of goodness and caring, an alternative territory of identity was provided for Billy to stand in to begin to talk about the 'bad thoughts' which were stuck in his head. At this point, I heard more details about the abuse that he had been subjected to, including memories of severe violence, tricks, and dishonesty. Billy made it clear that he wanted to share with someone

the details of the Stuck Thoughts (which had otherwise been unmentionable up until that time) and to feel less 'alone' with the effects of the trauma. By bringing forward Billy's 'clever' skills, he could now be an agent in his own story. Restoring his sense of agency was evident as he keenly reflected on his taking care of Max. With elevated personal agency, revised understandings of his own actions and identity, and with the opportunity to speak about what had previously remained unspoken, the Stuck Thoughts (flashbacks) diminished and were eventually no longer present.

## **CONNECTION-MAKING QUESTIONS AND CONVERSATIONS**

In conversations with children and young people, I ask questions in order to co-create meaning. While I am not wanting to impose my thoughts or assumptions, I still aim to be influential by asking what I call 'connection-making questions' to assist children in attributing their own meaning or significance to an event or action.

In the conversation with Billy, I discovered that he responded to trauma in many different ways. These included acts of comfort, feeding Max, and recognising a certain 'hungry bark'. In naming these responses, I was interested in the significance Billy gave to them, so I asked the connection-making question, 'Do you think you had some skills in knowing how to take care of animals even though you were really little?' Billy became wide-eyed and eagerly replied, 'Yeah! I guess I did!', and he immediately made links between his taking-care skills and knowledge of himself as a smart boy.

Providing children with a summary to reflect on their new meaning of hidden experiences, followed by a connection-making question, can also be very helpful in helping children attribute meaning to events that might otherwise have been neglected. With Billy, I provided the following brief summary: 'It's nice for me to get to know Max and how you helped each other during difficult times. And to hear about how you took care of him by making sure he was fed and how you played with him'. After this summary, I followed with the connection-making question, 'If I asked Max what this might tell me about the kind of boy you are, what do you think he would say?' Through this questioning, alternative

knowledges of Billy's identity were discovered: 'Max would say, "He's good, fun, and he cares a lot"'.

Billy continued to make connections and associations as we explored his caring for Max 'like a little brother'. To make additional sense of his experience I asked questions about Max's caring for *him* and Billy speculated that Max would care about him 'more than you can imagine'. What had previously been only a story of the effects of trauma was now linked to a story of two-way contribution, where not only Max helped and comforted Billy, but also how Billy contributed to Max.

This back-and-forth conversational connection-making allowed us to further build upon Billy's responses to trauma. With every answer from him, I learned of new meanings, thereby allowing me to ask the next connection-making question.

## **RICH SECOND STORY DEVELOPMENT**

Connection-making questions and conversations put children more in touch with their own skills and knowledges, and through this process second story development becomes possible. Children become able to richly describe their own responses to trauma, and what these responses, skills, and knowledges may reflect. I cannot emphasise enough the importance of this conversational partnership, as rich second story development will not happen by chance. As a therapist, I play a key role. I am influential by asking particular questions which help children to make new meanings about their experiences and actions.

In following sessions with Billy, we had the opportunity to richly describe the importance and value he places on being a big brother. When I asked Billy who would know about his caring brotherly ways, he immediately named his mother and father. In the following sessions, Lucy and Doug were happy to join me in tracing the history of these themes. They had several delightful stories to share about Billy being a loving brother with his younger half-brother. To link Lucy and Doug's knowledge with Billy's, I asked him, 'How important is being a big brother to you?' He replied, 'To me ... it's enormous. Being a big brother is like having a kid'.

I believe that these sorts of relational aspects of children's responses to trauma are significant in

sustaining them through traumatic times and in journeys of healing. ‘Relational aspects’ here refers to the contribution of significant figures in a child’s history, and how their responses to trauma reflect their connection to these important figures.

In speaking with Billy, I recalled our conversations from the previous year where he used his ‘memory skills’ to remember his mother, father, and brother despite three years of being forced to say that they were not his family. Billy recollected that even though he could be coerced into saying untrue statements, his memory skills could never be taken away. These skills spoke strongly to Billy’s honouring and valuing of family life: ‘I would close my eyes and picture my mom and dad and baby brother and how much they loved me. I knew that they were always thinking of me too. We were always thinking of each other all the time. I just kept wishing every day that I would return to them and they could never take hope from me or my memory of my family away’. Lucy and Doug shared and recollected a similar hope: ‘We always held hope that a lot of what we had taught to Billy about love for family and caring for others was instilled before he was abducted and he and we never ever lost that’.

In what otherwise could have easily been overlooked, Billy’s memory skills and what they spoke to were acknowledged. The theme of *love for family and caring* which had sustained both Billy and his family during the years of trauma was richly explored.

### **A GUIDE FOR SECOND STORY DEVELOPMENT – QUESTIONS TO ELICIT AND BUILD UPON CHILDREN’S RESPONSES TO TRUAMA**

The following guide is intended to assist practitioners in talking with children about their experiences of trauma. The questions offered below elicit varied responses to trauma and build upon these responses to create a context for rich second story development. The guide is structured into four levels of enquiry<sup>11</sup> in order to progressively co-create meaning in conversational partnership. An answer from the child or young person at each level allows movement to the next level of enquiry by the therapist. In this way, the child and therapist will incrementally move from level to level – starting from the lowest and progressing to the highest level. Level Four (the highest level) involves a rich description of a child’s responses to trauma which reflects the child’s values, skills, knowledges, and also links to significant figures in their lives.

<b>DESCRIPTION OF FOUR LEVELS OF ENQUIRY</b>	<b>QUESTIONS</b>
<p><b>LEVEL 1 DISCOVERING CHILDREN’S RESPONSES AND ACTIONS</b></p> <p>In this level, we encourage children to name the events (responses and actions) of trauma.</p> <p>This level is the lowest, with questions that will most likely be easier for a child to answer, such as <i>‘What did you do?’</i></p> <p><i>Note: An exploration of responses at this level (vs. effects) can help to begin to restore and/or develop personal agency where the child feels that he/she can be influential in their own life.</i></p>	<p>Questions that can be asked to elicit responses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How did you respond? What did you do?</li> <li>• How did you and your sibling(s) comfort each other?</li> <li>• How did you comfort yourself?</li> <li>• What did you do when you were scared?</li> <li>• Where did you go during times of fear?</li> <li>• How did you attempt to keep yourself safe?</li> <li>• Where did you hide?</li> <li>• What would you do when you found a safe place?</li> <li>• What would you show on your face?</li> </ul>

DESCRIPTION OF FOUR LEVELS OF ENQUIRY	QUESTIONS
	<p>Additional specific response-based questions re:</p> <p><b>Lessening the effects</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• After the abuse, was there anything you did that helped to lessen the effects?</li> <li>• How did you make yourself feel better?</li> <li>• Is there anything you are doing now that helps to get through it?</li> </ul> <p><b>Skills of living</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did you have 'imagining' skills?</li> <li>• Did you have a refuge of sanctuary?</li> <li>• Was there a place that provided you with comfort and safety during difficult times?</li> </ul> <p><b>Acts of resistance</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did you do things to resist or oppose?</li> </ul> <p><b>Significant stuffed friends and pets</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did/do you have a stuffed friend/pet that helped you?</li> <li>• How would your stuffed friend/pet try to comfort you?</li> <li>• How did you and your dog help each other?</li> </ul>
<p><b>LEVEL 2 MAKING LINKS OF CHILDREN'S RESPONSES TO THEIR KNOWLEDGES AND SKILLS</b></p> <p>When a response has been named, questions in this level involve making links and associations of the response to knowledges and skills.</p> <p>By asking connection-making questions, there is the assumption that all children and young people have meaning-making skills. Even very little children have meaning-making skills.</p> <p>Provide a summary using the child's descriptions and knowledge in order for him/her to reflect on and give meaning to their responses to trauma.</p>	<p><b>Connection-making questions could include:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How did you know to do that?</li> <li>• What name would you give to this skill?</li> <li>• What do you think of yourself as a younger boy/girl and all the things that you did?</li> <li>• How do you feel about this knowledge/skill you have?</li> </ul> <p>Provide a summary followed by a connection-making question:</p> <p>Example:</p> <p>So ... when there was terrible fighting and things being broken, you would take your little brother and sister outside to get away and play at the park. You said you would distract them. How did you know how to do that? Would you call what you did distracting skills? ... or do you have another name for what you did?</p>

DESCRIPTION OF FOUR LEVELS OF ENQUIRY	QUESTIONS
<p><b>LEVEL 3</b>  <b>MAKING LINKS OF SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGES TO PREFERRED WAYS OF BEING (SUCH AS VALUES, BELIEFS, HOPES, COMMITMENTS)</b></p> <p>When a skill or knowledge is rendered visible, we can invite children to reflect on, evaluate, and draw realisations from the meaning they have made.</p> <p>Personal agency is elevated when skills, knowledges, and values are made known.</p> <p>When a skill or knowledge has been identified, we can provide a summary using their descriptions for the child to reflect on and give meaning, and make links to values and intentions.</p>	<p>Connection-making questions could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why was that skill important to you?</li> <li>• What do you think of yourself as a little boy/girl and knowing at an early age how to focus / keep yourself safe?</li> <li>• What to you think this says about the kind of person you are?</li> </ul> <p>Provide a summary followed by a connection-making question:</p> <p>Example:  You've shared lots of times with me that you used your distraction skills to keep your little brother and sister away from the fighting. Why was it important to you that they did not see or hear the fighting? What do you think this would tell me about you?</p>
<p><b>LEVEL 4</b>  <b>RICH DESCRIPTION OF RESPONSES WHICH REFLECTS VALUES, SKILLS, AND KNOWLEDGES</b></p> <p>In this highest level, we want to richly describe responses and what they may reflect.</p> <p>We can trace the history of the knowledges, skills, values, and commitments in life.</p> <p>In this level, questions are asked to explore the influence of significant figures in the child's life on their skills, knowledges, and values.</p>	<p>Questions which richly describe responses, skills, knowledges, values:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the history of this skill/value in your life?</li> <li>• Who introduced you to this skill?</li> <li>• Where did you learn this skill?</li> <li>• Who wouldn't be surprised that you value_____? What would they say they appreciate about you and your value for _____?</li> <li>• When did it first become important in your life?</li> </ul>

## ILLUSTRATION OF A CONVERSATION WHICH BUILDS UPON RESPONSES TO TRAUMA

### Level 1 Discovering responses and actions

David: *I remember he took a heavy cane and hit me with it. He hit me so hard that the cane broke in half.*

Angel: *How did you respond? What did you show on your face?*

David: *When I was being hit I did not show any fear. I just looked at him and didn't show anything on my face.*

### Level 2 Making links of responses to knowledges and skills

Angel: *So you found ways to not show a reaction? How did you do that?*

David: *I just concentrated!*

Angel: *Do you think you had some concentrating skills as a child?*

David: *Definitely, if I set my mind to it ... I could concentrate.*

### Level 3 Making links of skills and knowledges to values, beliefs and intentions

Angel: *You've told me about other times that you made a point of not showing any fear, upset or anger on your face. What do you think that might tell me about what was important to you? Why did you want to use your concentration skills to not show fear?*

David: *It was the only way to get back without hurting him.*

Angel: *Was that something important to you .... not hurting him or getting back with violence?*

David: *Yes ... non-violent ways of getting back were important. Now I can look back and say, I never touched you!*

### Level 4 Rich description of responses

Angel: *Is that something you stand for ... Non-violent ways?*

David: *Yes ... for sure!*

Angel: *Why is this important to you?*

David: *I know what it is like to be hurt and I don't want to ever hurt others!*

Angel: *Has this always been important to you in your life? Is there a history to this?*

*Who would know about your commitment to non-violent ways and not hurting others? Is this something that you learned from someone in your life? What might they say they appreciate about this? And so on ...*

## REFLECTIONS

Discourses of victimhood can obscure the cleverness, competencies, and knowledges of children. These discourses can also influence therapists. When working with children who have endured significant trauma, counsellors sometimes lose hope during the process of seeking ways forward.

In this paper, I have tried to describe my own 'project of discovery'. In working with children and young people who have had traumatic experiences, holding onto the belief that regardless of the nature of the trauma, children and young people *always* respond, has opened significant possibilities. An enquiry into the responses a child has made to the traumatic experience (versus the effects of what they have experienced) can make many things possible. When we discover multiple actions, multiple responses, links can then be made between particular responses and children's skills, knowledges, and values. Rather than making statements which imply the child *will never get over it*, by exploring responses we can co-discover how they are *getting through it*. In saying this, it's not my intention to avoid the facts of the trauma and its effects, as I know that children may express that

they want to talk about what they have endured. In fact, by providing safety and a newer territory of identity for children to stand within, we can open space for children and young people to speak more clearly about events which they have not previously spoken.

I hope that by sharing these ideas, stories of my work, and a guide for second story development, that this will enable other practitioners to be on the lookout for children's responses and for creative ways of acknowledging these and building upon them... even one response can be a gateway to rich second story development!

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> All of the names of the children and young people throughout this paper are pseudonyms. I would like to particularly acknowledge and thank Megan, David, and Billy for their willingness to share their stories with hopes of helping other children and young people who have experienced trauma.
- <sup>2</sup> The trauma of ongoing racism is prevalent and relevant in my work in schools in the multicultural context of Toronto. Although the content of this paper does not include the broader considerations of the power relations of culture and race, it is an area which I have an ongoing commitment to address the inequities for many young people. For a description of a way of working with young men who are grappling with the effects of racism, see Yuen (2007).
- <sup>3</sup> Although the focus of this paper is on work with children and young people, the ideas and questions hold relevance to adults who have experienced childhood trauma and particularly for those whose lives are continuing to be defined by trauma. I would like to acknowledge Sue Mann as a reader who reflected on the relevance of the ideas to work with adults who have experienced childhood trauma.
- <sup>4</sup> Throughout this paper, I refer to second story development. However I do not want to imply that there are only two stories to trauma, as there can be other subordinate storylines to be found in the shadows

of the dominant trauma stories (see White, 2006c). Also, the second story does not replace the first story, but rather in the development of a second story, there can be a parallel story alongside the first story of trauma. The reason I have chosen to use 'second story' more often than 'subordinate stories' is that I have found this languaging easier to grasp in teaching contexts for those who are very new to narrative ideas, and also when teaching in simultaneous translation.

- <sup>5</sup> For a description of an exercise which focuses on second story development when working with groups of vulnerable children see the Tree of Life Project (Ncube 2006) which describes work in Southern Africa which has an emphasis on creating safety for orphans and vulnerable children prior to having them talk about their experiences of parental death and suffering due to HIV/AIDS.
- <sup>6</sup> Asking about where children seek safety touches on the ideas of 'considerations of place'. 'Place' is not usually included in the broader explorations of the thinking that informs narrative therapy. This is an area that I look forward to exploring and considering with respect to children who have experienced trauma, and particularly the places where they may seek refuge or find sanctuary. For a complete exploration of the relationship of 'place' to identity see Trudinger (2006).
- <sup>7</sup> Billy's story was presented as a keynote address at the 3rd International Summer School of narrative practice in Adelaide, Australia (Yuen, 2007). I would like to acknowledge Billy and his family's contribution to this paper by sharing their story. Most of all, I am thankful to Billy for teaching me so much about children and personal agency.
- <sup>8</sup> For a description and illustration of externalising practices and conversations, see Russell and Carey (2004).
- <sup>9</sup> For a description and illustration of re-membering practices and conversations see Russell and Carey (2004).
- <sup>10</sup> For more on memory theory and systems in relation to a narrative approach to the consequences of trauma see White (2006b, pp. 67-81).
- <sup>11</sup> Michael White's notion of therapists' responsibility to 'scaffold' conversations (see White 2007, Hayward, 2006) has been helpful to me in developing this guide. While the metaphor of 'scaffolding' is not one that I readily relate to, the idea that it is therapists' responsibility to ask questions that children can answer has been extremely helpful and has led me to develop the four levels of questions that are included in this guide.

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