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Unexpected Blessings

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Unexpected Blessings

Angela M. Yoder, Ph.D., HSPP

As a young child, I watched my grandmother tirelessly volunteer to help others. She had a profound influence on me as a counselor and human being. I remember the way she communicated that she cared and understood and even as a child, I could see that she had time for me. Her pace of life was different and so were her priorities. She didn't just glance at me in a rush on her way somewhere else like many adults did. She really saw me. Years later, as I worked with at-risk children, I noticed how many, if not most of them, had no access to a grandparent figure. It made me ponder how robbed I would have felt without my grandmother's example, guidance, and wisdom. Mary Piper (1994), in her book *Reviving Ophelia*, notes how society separates its generations: little ones go to preschool, teens go to high school, elderly folks reside in separate homes and communities, and so on and so forth. This separation robs each of us of the wisdom, insight, and support of different generations with different perspectives. Today's retired senior citizens are active, gifted, talented, and ready to give back, finally having the time to pursue the volunteer work they couldn't manage with a full-time

job. Meanwhile, school counselors are overburdened with higher counselor to student ratios, with Illinois' ratio being 1:672. In 2010, I set out to see if senior citizen volunteers might be able to stand in the gap with school counselors and fill a crucial role by offering volunteer play sessions in the schools.

Given the strong empirical support for adaptations of filial models, including Child-Parent Relationship Therapy (Landreth & Bratton, 2006) for use with teachers, teacher's aides, and even high school students, I decided to adapt Landreth & Bratton's CPRT 10 session model

for use with senior citizen volunteers. The pilot study started out small, with only 4 volunteers and 4 children, growing to serve 20 children this past year. My research team and I were amazed at how well the volunteers caught on and the skill level they maintained throughout the project. In addition, we were delighted to notice downward trends in the children's internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems. The children loved working with the seniors and characterized their experiences best with pictures. The picture featured is from a biracial boy who was referred for non-compliance and aggressive

behavior. Racial tension was prevalent in both the home and in his classroom to the point where the client's self-esteem was really suffering. As he progressed in his sessions and changes were made in his classroom environment, he began to improve. This is the picture the boy made for his volunteer at the goodbye party following completion of the study. You will notice that he chose to color them both green and included an "A+" on his work. Previously the boy had reported that he was bad. As encouraging as this type of data were for us, perhaps what surprised us the most was how much the senior volunteers were positively impacted by working with the children.

Camelia reluctantly joined the CSRT group, worried that she would not be able to connect with American children having reported problems with this in the past. Initially, she was concerned that we were going to ask her to falsely praise the children in session so she was delighted to hear about encouraging the effort vs. praising the product. She also later reported that she agreed to participate because I told her she could withdraw her participation at any time. Camelia reported challenges connecting with and



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understanding her own daughter, having adopted her later in life. She was an eager student of CPRT and each week came back with success stories of how she had utilized these skills with her daughter. Like many retirees, she had a part-time job and worked as an adjunct faculty member at a nearby university. From time to time, she commented on her struggles working with the students. She was paired with Abby, a child referred for clinginess, loneliness, social problems/isolation, and anxiety. Prior to the referral, Abby's symptoms had worsened when she found out her mother was planning to remarry and have a baby. She was the only child, but seemed to have a need for attention and care that was like a black hole. Much to Camelia's surprise, Abby connected easily with her. In many sessions, they could both be heard giggling and genuinely enjoying the company of each other. Camelia began to look for Abby's feelings and reflect them, communicating Landreth's "Be with" attitudes of "I hear you. I'm here. I care. I understand." And Abby ate it up. Her symptoms began improving in the classroom with her teacher reporting less clinginess and whining and improved social skills. Abby learned to find her own voice and cope with her anxieties about the world. In fact, during one session, the lights in the school went out. Camelia skillfully attended to Abby's fears and they both worked to creatively problem solve by turning on the light in the dollhouse for comfort. On another day, Abby made Camelia a card and taped it on the wall. Camelia remembered to hang the card up each session just for Abby and Abby absolutely delighted in the fact that it was there each and every week. Abby finally felt seen and heard.

Perhaps what was most surprising was Camelia's disclosure at the end of CSRT group. She reported to the group that she had grown up in the Phillipines and at age 5 was responsible for watching out for her toddler brother. As many children do at that age, Camelia had become distracted and the boy had wandered off. Living near the water, her parents feared the worst, and having looked unsuccessfully for him for hours, Camelia was severely punished. She tearfully noted that although her brother was later found, it was at that time she knew she wasn't good with children. Her voice quivered as she continued and proudly exclaimed "Now I KNOW I am good with children!" She reported that she utilized the CSRT training beyond the study resulting not only in an improved relationship with her 12 year old daughter, but in improved communication with her students. Camelia noted that using the "be with" attitudes, along with skills of reflection and paraphrase had transformed her teaching and that her teaching evaluations were the best they had ever been, having struggled her entire professional life with being misunderstood and having low evaluations. As you might expect, there wasn't a dry eye in the group.

These unexpected blessings have continued to emerge from our senior volunteers with reports of improved communication skills with friends/family, the excitement of learning something new, a renewed purpose in life, satisfaction of helping others, increase in personal confidence, and the joy and healing which accompanies the unconditional positive regard the children gave to them. One woman put it best by stating "I'm old, white-haired, overweight, and creaky in the knees. But, to her it doesn't matter. To her, I'm just her friend."

IL-APT Website Update

One of the long range goals for IL-APT has been to develop a more professional web site. The Officers and Board reviewed many website providers and selected one who has been very helpful and cooperative, Leslie Caton. We have changed our website address to www.ila4pt.org. Check it out. It will be under construction for a short while but you will still be able to access the important information. Thanks for your patience during this long haul.

Want to get involved in IL-APT?

The IL-APT board is always happy to have our colleagues team with us to bring play therapy news and education to our state. If you are interested in participating, please contact president M.A. Wentling at mawentling@hotmail.com.

Have feedback, questions, and/or ideas about IL-APT's *On the Go* newsletter? Wish to contribute an article or other content to future additions? Contact the newsletter coordinator, Lisa Gassin, at lgassin@olivet.edu.