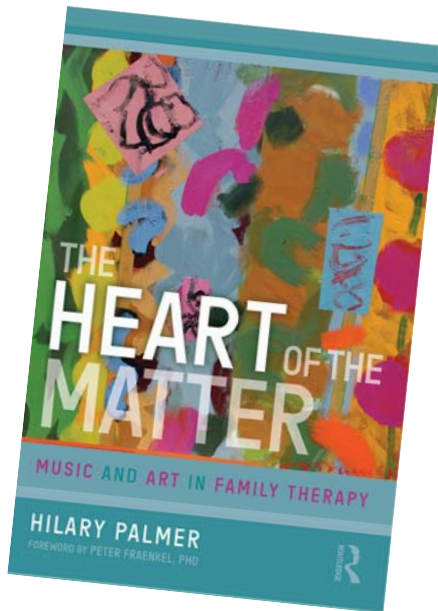


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The FUN Multi-group Family Therapy project



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The FUN (Families United in Nature) Multi-Family Therapy project was originally thought of as a series of four, one-day workshops (during half-terms) designed to provide a safe therapeutic space to a small closed group of adoptive families (4/6) in order to promote family attachments and identify strengths and sources of personal and family resilience.

This project was developed since my becoming an independent provider of therapeutic services for adoptive families in the last six years, and my learning from the clinical work carried out with this client group.

Given the difficulties in persuading local authority commissioners to invest in an 'outside the box' therapeutic intervention such as this, in November 2016 I made an application to The David Campbell Fund. The purpose of the fund is to "To drive creative and novel initiatives which support the welfare of families by strengthening and expanding family therapy and systemic practice, teaching, supervision and research projects in the UK".

I am grateful to the Campbell Fund for the funding approved (£1000) in June 2017, which allowed me to organise one family day as a pilot on 28 April 2018. The local authority adoption services helped with the recruitment of adoptive families who were interested in the project and were in the early stage of adoption; that is, within two years. These criteria were designed to make the selection easier and offer a preventative intervention for families with similar challenges (as required by the multi-group family therapy approach) and specific aims – early adoption to support the development of new family attachments and support networks.

The FUN Family Therapy project draws on existing evidence based in a relational systemic approach and multi-family therapy ideas, which consider the importance of safe and secure family relationships in addressing individual children's difficulties and parenting challenges and the importance of engaging a number of families at the same time in a mutually supportive environment.

It is not about doing art or music therapy, but the use of non-verbal engagement, allowing more noise and mess, in secure systemic hands. She knows it might be scary and feel impossible at first, but advises us to go back to our own learning experiences as a child, a therapist, a parent and dip our toes into newness, just as we invite families and individuals to do. This is an exploration of the safe unknown in times of constraint, which I believe can only add to our creativity and enable different ways of working.

Reference

Blow, A.J. & Sprenkle, D.H. (2001) Common factors across theories of marriage and family therapy: A modified Delphi study. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 27(3): 385-401.

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indoor and outdoor, family talks and shared reflections with other families.

The *FUN Family Day* on Saturday 28 April was planned over six months through regular meetings with three other family psychotherapists, Jess Morris, Janice Cusick and Belinda Giles, in collaboration with the director of a local charity who run a nature-based programme for adults with mental health difficulties. The *FUN Family Day* was run in an idyllic National Trust farm in the Downs hills, in Sussex, just outside Brighton. Four adoptive families with six children aged between four and seven attended.

As part of the planning, I met all parents (either in person or by Skype) to understand their motivation, to discuss their children's needs and complete a risk assessment. All parents filled a page with regards to the level of stress in the family and the reasons for wanting to attend the day and their expectations. The children were asked to make a drawing and bring it on the day. These were shown at the beginning and left in display in the indoor space.

The morning started with a ride on a tractor, which took families from a meeting point to the farm (ten minutes). The children loved it and it was hard to contain their excitement and get them focused on the first activity – a family collage! The indoor space, a cosy barn, was set up with four tables with some magazines and art and craft materials that each family used to put together a representation of their family. They then showed it to the other families.

After a hot drink, children played freely in the barn courtyard before lunch. Everybody brought their food and sat chatting away to each other. In the afternoon, our nature expert led the outdoor activity. We all walked to a nearby secluded quarry spot. The children ran ahead of everybody, the parents were mingling with each other in a relaxed atmosphere and beautiful scenery. Once we all arrived, the children started climbing over the steep edges.

Everybody was nervously encouraging children to explore but in a safe way. The focus of the afternoon became how to safely climb a tricky ridge. It turned out to be the highlight of the day for all children (as stated in their feedback). A careful planning did not predict this unexpected challenge, which became an example of parents and professionals working together with all the children in finding ways of taking risks safely.

The actual activity in nature which followed was to imagine a creature living



The project is specifically designed to offer a therapeutic intervention to the whole family rather than to children and parents

separately, to promote new ways of being with each other as a family whilst engaging in a variety of structured activities, both



in the woods, make it out of clay and find their home in the surroundings. Parents and children worked together in this task which they also enjoyed.

Back in the barn, we discussed how the day went. Children were helped to write down the best thing of the day on a leaf.

Parents were invited to write a praise to their children. These were read as part of our ending as well as a generous food ending, with tea and cakes brought to share. The parents were asked to fill in an evaluation form before leaving in order to give their feedback about the key aspects of the day as follows (in **bold**):

One parent wrote: *"A really enjoyable day – well organised, thoughtful, sensitive and supportive to the needs of the families attending. We all really enjoyed being in the countryside. Up until this point, we hadn't been out into the hills with our son but he really enjoyed it. We have since been up to the*

Downs with him after a very stressful weekend and he appeared to find it very calming and interesting".

Another comment was: *"We found the day to be extremely enjoyable and productive. It would have been helpful to know more about the other families in advance. Furthermore, our youngest son (aged 4) in the evening asked: 'Who is going to look after my animal in the hills?' It was an opportunity to reassure him and talk about his worry, which is relevant to being adopted".*

The evaluation should have been completed and expanded by interviewing each family after a month as agreed with all parents. However, it has been difficult to accomplish this due to lack of response, even when I sent a short questionnaire. Ethically, I felt unable to pursue this further knowing that the families who did not respond were under a lot of stress for various reasons.

All parents gave useful and encouraging feedback about the family day, which will be invaluable in trying to develop this further into a regular family therapy intervention for families at a time when thinking outside the box seems an unrealistic luxury in public services!

I am grateful to all the families who attended to make this pilot project possible, and my colleagues Jess, Linda and Janice for their passion, enthusiasm and invaluable contributions in time, ideas and managing the day. Here are some reflections on their experience of this project.

Jess wrote: *"What I really loved about the day was the informal conversation you could have with parents walking along and alongside playing games. This different context for conversations about hopes and expectations about what family life would be like, alongside the reality of it, provided a quality of openness that I don't think would have happened in 'the therapy room'. Being outside allowed me to feel more open in my body and I think supported engaging with families on multiple levels; which I really enjoyed."*

Janice wrote: *"It was pleasurable for me to be part of this creative endeavour in relation to the family fun day and how much enjoyment I got from working with Chiara, Jess, Belinda and Jo and the families that participated."*

	Poor 1	2	3	4	Excellent 5
Learning from other parents				3	2
Using nature as a therapeutic tool				1	4
Sense of being a family				2	3
Children's safety & enjoyment					5
Connecting with other parents and feeling understood				2	3
Professional input/support				2	3