

live

Explaining the nuts and bolts of play therapy

QUESTION:

I'm concerned about how my seven-year-old is reacting to our divorce. Can play therapy help her? I don't know anything about it.

Answer:

Divorce can be particularly stressful for children and can bring up a multitude of conflicting feelings which the child may not be consciously aware of or cannot express and acts out in their behaviour. Playing provides children with a language for expressing and accepting these feelings.

Children who see and hear their parents in conflict become very anxious about their own safety, and will try to mediate or in some way care for the parents in an effort to create a safer environment for themselves. Even if the divorce is relatively peaceful, children worry about whether their own behaviour may have caused the divorce. They are



faced with various degrees of disruption associated with the period before and after parents separate. Children often feel a sense of loss of one parent. They are sometimes faced with changes in residence and school, resulting in loss of friends and support systems. They worry about very practical things like what will happen to their pet, their toys, continuity of activities they enjoy and how they will get there. They may experience

loss of material benefits due to downward economic mobility. Their mother may have to increase her workload or return to work. Depression and self-absorption in one or both parents can leave a child feeling abandoned emotionally. And later, children may have to contend with parental dating, remarriage, and step family relationships.

Very strong feelings are attached to these experiences, while at the same time, children are not equipped to understand and verbalize all the dimensions of what these experiences mean for them. This is where play therapy can be very helpful.

Children are capable of expressing and coming to terms with these kinds of experiences in the safe, free environment of the playroom with a therapist they have come to trust. In the playroom, children speak symbolically as well as directly about their experiences,

using sandplay, art, and clay work, theatrical play, games, dollhouse play, music and story-making. Their play speaks about where and how they feel unhappy, insecure, and afraid, or competent and strong. In play, children experiment, improvise and work through their problems, while getting to know their strengths and abilities, with the help of the therapist who supports the child's process by being unconditional, non-judgmental, and offering acceptance with a playful, caring attitude.

At the same time, the therapist is a psychologically attentive and active presence,

guiding and taking careful note of all aspects of the child's play and using her observations and understanding to help the child experience herself as having what she needs to cope with changes and enjoy life.

If you are concerned about your child's emotional well-being, play therapy can be a consistent, reliable source of support during the emotional ups and downs that are part of a divorce process. Play therapists cannot be involved in the divorce process itself, or any discussions about custody and access, but they can help the child in the ways

noted above, and can help parents understand the impact on their child of the divorce and their own behaviour.

Hopefully, this leads to consideration of the child's experience as more important than the adult disputes that need to be settled outside the child's world as much as possible.

Bea Donald, M.A., R.C.C., B.C.A.M.F.T., is a program manager and clinical supervisor of the Family Counselling/Employee Assistance Program at Family Services of the North Shore. Questions? Write onthecouch@familyservices.bc.ca or call 604-988-5281.

Bowen Island's Beau Cote Centre hosting prevention symposium

ON Tuesday, Aug. 12, staff of Bowen Island's Beau Cote Centre, a leading, medically guided, therapeutically grounded residential program for those suffering from eating disorders, are marking their one-year year anniversary by hosting a symposium focusing on prevention.

According to a written statement, the forum is intent on revealing the dangers of eating disorders with a special focus on the effects of pop culture on body image and self-esteem.

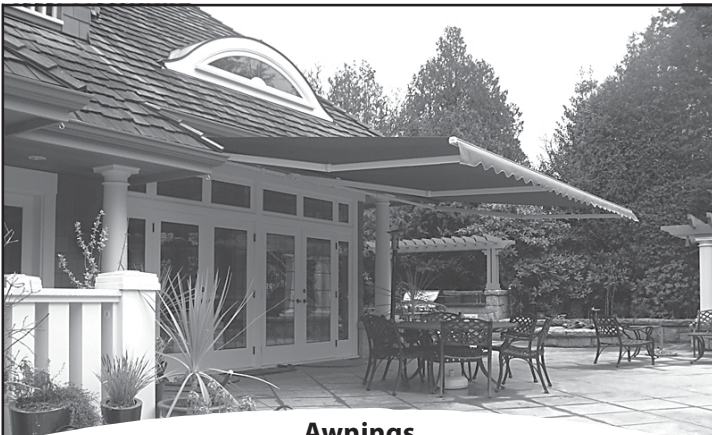
The conference, which is open to the public, includes two screenings of the award-winning documentary *America the Beautiful*, a town hall forum for local teenagers to talk about their ex-

periences with pop culture and body image, and a panel of top clinical experts who will discuss the subject of eating disorder prevention.

America the Beautiful will be shown at Vancouver's Fifth Avenue Theatre at 2 and 5 p.m.

The town hall forum, hosted by Beau Cote founder Dr. Beverley Richardson and director Darryl Roberts, will begin the matinee screening, getting underway at 3:40 p.m., at the theatre. Immediately following the evening screening of the film, Beau Cote is hosting a panel with the top clinical experts on eating disorders in North America.

Tickets are \$11 for the matinee and \$35 for the evening screening which includes a reception. Fifty per cent of net proceeds will be donated to the B.C. Children's Foundation. For tickets or more information, visit www.beaucote.ca.



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