

# Chapter 10

## Therapeutic Photography

**Megan Ribbens**

*Through Their Eyes, South Africa*

### ABSTRACT

*As the child life profession extends beyond the hospital setting, new opportunities unfold to utilize the profession's strengths of empowering children and families through stressful life experiences. This chapter proposes that therapeutic photography is a fitting and effective tool to be used in any child life setting to promote well-being and describes Through Their Eyes, a child life practice centered on therapeutic photography in a non-traditional setting in South Africa. Differentiations are made between therapeutic photography and phototherapy and therapeutic photography is expounded. The underpinning framework of therapeutic photography with a child life scope of practice is outlined and the therapeutic photography program, Through Their Eyes, is explained. Outcomes give evidence of the ways therapeutic photography programs can connect us to ourselves and to each other, strengthening sense of self, relationships, and family function.*

### INTRODUCTION

Newly arrived to Abuja, Nigeria in 2007, it was clear, for numerous reasons, this was not the time to engage traditional Child Life work in a medical setting. And yet, the author wasn't at ease simply hanging up her Child Life that she had come to love while working in the specialty clinics at Helen DeVos Children's Hospital in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Curiously engaging her new context, the author reflected on the essence of who Child Life Specialists (CLS) are and what they have to offer. Both within and beyond the hospital, CLS are champions for children and families. Through their understanding of child development, family-centered care, and expressive play, CLS offer ways to help children and families stay connected to themselves and each other through stressful, challenging life events, create opportunities for expression, and teach coping skills in order to mitigate the long-term effects of stress and trauma. Children, in and out of the hospital setting, need safe spaces to play, reflect, strengthen sense of self, develop emotional literacy, and learn coping skills in order to foster healthy development within challenging life experiences.

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There was a lot of trial and error implementing different programs in community settings before the author found her niche. In 2011, a Nigerian woman literally knocked on the author's door. "I've had a dream for four years," she explained. "I know adults underestimate what children can contribute to our society. I want to give children a camera so we can literally see what they see. I want to call it 'Through Their Eyes'. The problem is - I'm not a teacher and I'm not a photographer, but my friend told me you could possibly help." Elated to see the Child Life profession fused with the author's favorite hobby of photography, a new journey began to unfold.

In this chapter, the author will define therapeutic photography, outline the underpinnings used for Through Their Eyes therapeutic photography programs, and describe how therapeutic photography aligns within the Child Life scope of practice. The author will explain the current setting in which the program is used, what a Through Their Eyes program entails, and outcomes of the program. Additionally, challenges and future aspirations for therapeutic photography within Child Life will be explored.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Therapeutic Photography vs. PhotoTherapy**

While one aspect of a CLS's role is to develop and implement expressive, playful activities that are therapeutic in nature to promote healthy development and healing, it is important to distinguish that CLS do not do therapy. Similarly, therapeutic photography and therapy using photography are on opposite sides of a continuum and require important distinctions. PhotoTherapy, as defined by Judy Weiser, is a tool used by trained professionals in formal counseling settings that takes clients through "guided unconscious process work" (Gibson, 2018; Weiser, 2004, p. 35). PhotoTherapy in a counseling setting can include using photos taken by a client, photos taken of a client, self-portraits, family photographs, and "photo-projectives" which involve creating meaning out of taking or viewing photographs (Weiser, 2004). Therapeutic photography does not require a trained counselor or therapist, but it does require clearly defined outcomes for it to be considered therapeutic (Gibson, 2018; Weiser, 2004). These outcomes can promote change and growth at the individual, community, and broader social levels.

### **Essential Elements of Therapeutic Photography**

It is essential to develop a therapeutic relationship with children and their families when working in traditional and non-traditional Child Life settings. Using therapeutic photography as a Child Life practice in a multi-cultural setting within schools, NGOs, and churches has required an emphasis on developing therapeutic relationships. Hallmarks of a therapeutic relationship include building trust and rapport, showing respect, establishing physical and emotional safety, and maintaining healthy boundaries (Association of Child Life Professionals, 2001; Association of Child Life Professionals, 2019). When a safe holding space is created, as described by Winnicott, participants feel safe to explore and express thoughts and feelings (Gibson, 2018).

Therapeutic relationships also require facilitators to align interventions with developmental considerations which honor development levels, emotional states, and cultural beliefs and preferences (Association of Child Life Professionals, 2001; Association of Child Life Professionals, 2020). Additionally, developing

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