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**Mediators in psychoanalytic family and couple therapy:
strategies, techniques and processes**

**Giving a form to the unspeakable:
the psychoanalytic work of figurability**

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Summary

Through the presentation of a clinical case, of a family fostering seven-year-old twin brothers with a difficult history, we can observe the importance of the use of symbolic instruments in a therapeutic process involving children. These can consist of drawings and spontaneous games which the child plays, and which can be positively received, not only to make the child feel welcomed and valued, but also because they represent new and valid material for comments and free associations of the family, thus offering the possibility of new narratives and different perspectives from which to look at family reality. The same process can be activated through offering graphic-symbolic tools - in this case three at different times during the therapeutic process - which involve the whole family both in the choice of the content and in the execution of the drawing, while at the same time providing the opportunity to build new thoughts together and discover new possibilities in their relationships. A reflection on the psychoanalytic task of favouring the process of symbolisation and “figurability” with respect to the most emotionally significant issues precedes the illustration of the clinical case.

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Keywords: loss and absence, multiple separations, family history, symbolic tools, symbolisation.

Résumé. *Donner une image à l'indicible: le travail psychanalytique de la figurabilité*

À travers la présentation d'un cas clinique, d'une famille accueillant des frères jumeaux de sept ans avec une histoire difficile, on peut observer comment dans un processus thérapeutique impliquant des enfants l'utilisation d'instruments symboliques est précieuse. Ils peuvent être constitués par les dessins et les jeux spontanés que le mineur met en œuvre, qui peuvent être valorisés, non seulement pour que l'enfant se sente accueilli et estimé, mais aussi parce qu'ils représentent un matériau nouveau et précieux pour les commentaires et les associations libres des membres de la famille, offrant ainsi la possibilité de nouvelles narrations et de perspectives différentes à partir desquelles regarder la réalité familiale. Le même processus peut être activé par la proposition d'outils graphiques-symboliques – dans ce cas trois à différents moments du parcours thérapeutique – qui impliquent toute la famille aussi bien dans le choix du contenu que dans l'exécution du dessin et qui donnent ainsi l'occasion de construire ensemble de nouvelles pensées et de découvrir de nouvelles possibilités de relations. Une réflexion sur la tâche psychanalytique consistant à favoriser le processus de symbolisation et de figurabilité des thèmes les plus significatifs sur le plan émotionnel précède l'illustration du cas clinique.

Mots-clés: perte, séparations multiples, histoire familiale, outils symboliques, processus de symbolisation.

Resumen. *Dar una imagen a lo indecible: el trabajo psicoanalítico de la figurabilidad*

A través de la presentación de un caso clínico de una familia que acoge a dos hermanos gemelos de siete años con una historia difícil, se puede observar cómo en un proceso terapéutico que involucra a los niños el uso de instrumentos simbólicos es valioso. Pueden estar constituidos por dibujos y juegos espontáneos que el menor pone en acción, los cuales pueden ser valorados, no sólo para que el niño se sienta acogido y estimado, sino también porque representan un nuevo y precioso material para comentarios y asociaciones libres de la familia, ofreciendo así la posibilidad de nuevas narraciones y diferentes perspectivas desde donde mirar la realidad familiar. El mismo proceso puede activarse a través de la propuesta de técnicas gráfico-simbólicas - en este caso tres en diferentes momentos del recorrido - que involucran a toda la familia tanto en la elección del contenido como en la ejecución del dibujo y, del mismo modo, proporcionan la oportunidad de construir juntos nuevos pensamientos y descubrir nuevas posibilidades de relación. Una reflexión sobre la tarea psicoanalítica de favorecer el proceso de simbolización y figuración respecto de los temas más significativos emocionalmente precede a la ilustración del caso clínico.

Palabras clave: pérdida, múltiples separaciones, historia familiar, técnicas simbólicas, proceso de simbolización.



Introduction

Working with children and adults about the traumatic events of their family history involves issues of loss and abandonment. Such work connects the subjects with a powerful web of emotions and is therefore a very delicate task.

Symbolic tools can provide the involved subjects with metaphors for representing deep-seated feelings, allowing the expression of their deepest emotions and thoughts that would otherwise be difficult to translate into words.

Brun (2010) calls these techniques therapeutic mediations, because they allow patients to access the processes of symbolization involving sensoriality.

Through the presentation of a case study in which the clinical use of different symbolic tools, focused on specific clinical needs, is described, it will be possible to better understand how this type of tools can offer significant insights both to the clinician and the patients for clinical work. Such drawings can guide therapeutic conversations related to the child's and adults' self-image and their representation of their own place in the family.

The ability of the clinician to move easily not only from the verbal to the interactive emotional level, including recognition of transference and counter-transference processes, but also to the symbolic one - to which not only dreams, but also play, spontaneous drawings and targeted symbolic tools, both graphic and involving the body, provide access - makes it possible both to welcome the symbolic productions of the child and the adolescent, and to give cues that offer adults unforeseen possibilities of figuration of unconscious and preconscious elements. Sometimes, in fact, the creation of metaphors both by patients and therapist helps in representing what is unapproachable at a verbal level - because of anguish surplus at that moment - through an allusive technique.

The psychoanalytic task of facilitating the process of symbolisation

The process of symbolisation has always been at the heart of psychoanalytic thought since Freud (1900) first raised the issue of the symbolic content of symptoms and then the symbolic content of dreams. If psychoanalytic work consists of retracing the process of symbolisation in order to reveal the symbolic "shift" from the original unconscious content, starting from free associations and dreams, the development of psychoanalysis in the field of children makes it essential to creatively elaborate a different technique, centred on play, free drawing, storytelling, etc. (Klein, 1926; 1929; Winnicott, 1968; Bettelheim, 2001). These instruments, having the same value as free associations within the analytical setting, allow the creation of a symbolic environment in which emotions and thoughts can begin to express themselves in language. Thus we begin to see play for children as the most direct form of expression of their original conflicts: play is not only important because it



offers a means of expression to those who are unable to verbally communicate conflictual contents of the moment, but above all because it introduces the symbolic dimension, in which the child can actively recall unpleasant experiences, thus allowing negative emotions and anxiety to be released.

Both reading and creating fairy tales and playing and drawing are therefore expressions of the symbolisation process, which evolves in the child's interaction with caregivers and, in analytical work, with the analyst. In fact, the therapist, on the basis of his own transference and counter-transference sensitivity, is called upon to intuit and explain the meaning of the metaphors used by the child. Furthermore, in psychoanalytic family therapy, the therapist calls upon the parents to involve themselves in the work of listening and understanding what their children express symbolically, helping them to welcome this expression in daily life.

Moreover, the therapist, by listening to the modulations of his own counter-transference, can in turn activate his own capacity to create metaphors, presenting to the family members an emotional content that is present and powerful but at the moment unspeakable. It is then possible for the therapist also to offer symbolic tools that can illuminate aspects that are presently underground in the here and now dialogue.

Indeed, it is possible to hypothesize that the use of symbolic mediation tools may offer cues for associative processes, such as dream telling (Kaës, 2016), encouraging the process of constructing symbols.

Since his beginnings in the 1950s, using psychodrama, Lebovici (2000) has been able to put his intuition and empathy into play for the psychic evolution of his patients. By using Moreno's psychodrama (1946) and by making it a real psychoanalytical instrument, he was able to improve the analyst's capacity to create new representations, new metaphors, where the patient's psyche is in difficulty. According to this author, the aim of psychoanalytic psychodrama is to allow a defective mental functioning to recover or create representations, when the psychic process is blocked, because psychoanalysis works with whatever facilitates the play of representations. The presence of the child in the sessions stimulated the therapist's metaphorical function, which he used to understand the roots of the mother's and child's problems (Lebovici, 2000).

More recently, Benghozi (2014) describes his Spatiogramme as a mediator of group and genealogical "visual thinking" (Freud, 1900). This tool is «a mediation for the work of figurability of the family group space, in particular that of the home. The Spatiogramme gives access to pathologies of psychic figurability in relation to violated containers» (Benghozi, 2014, p. 147).

In this perspective, the therapist can be seen as a "mediator" who offers his patients a place and a time where they can feel safe and so can express thoughts, images, dreams, fantasies, and the therapist is a mediator as he encourages improvement also through technical resources (Morosini, 2020).



When the therapeutic work is blocked in an impasse, the therapist can offer a different way to the couple or the family, inviting them to move into a different dimension, a symbolic one, which puts recurring thoughts and words in brackets for a moment, in order to generate a new possibility of reading and understanding what is at work *in* and *among* family members. The choice of the most adequate mediation tool among many expressive instruments, including spontaneous drawing, thematic drawing, or tools involving the body, such as Psychodrama or Family Sculpture, or again the various graphic projective tools, depends on the accuracy of the clinical analysis and on the counter-transferential sensitivity that guides the therapist to move in the direction of a particular theme among several possible ones, in respect of the current clinical moment.

Mediation Tools in Family Therapy: Four Examples

The Kinetic Family Drawing

KFD (Burns and Kaufman, 1970; 1972) asks the child to draw family members engaging in an activity together, and it is useful to reflect children's perceived family dynamics and boundaries within the family system (Bannon, Tirella, Miller, 2016), especially when the children had undergone a recent change in their family situation. Through this request, the child has the possibility of choosing with whom to represent himself, indicating someone belonging to his family (or to which of the families involved, for example for an adopted or fostered child) or, on the contrary, drawing himself alone, or with people outside the strict family, such as playmates or teachers. When the child has finished his drawing, the therapist comments on his production together with the child, also asking him whether he likes it or would like to change something, in order to better understand his emotional experience and intentions.

This tool was initially directed at the child, but clinical experience has shown how significant the use of it is even with all family members together.

Very often family member residence (i.e., who lives in the same household) and biological relatedness (Dunn *et al.*, 2002) are important criteria used by children and adults to define their families, and also family representation in children's and family's drawings might provide insights on their adjustment and functioning in response to stressful family events.



The House Plan Drawing

Silva (2018) introduces the new tool *The houses of my life*, working with adopted adolescents, as a help to their construction of their life narrative. In the co-construction of the past experiences between the child and the therapist emerges a new narrative, facilitating the child to be available to new relationships in the current adoptive context. In my opinion it is possible to extend this tool to different situations, such as foster care, as in the case study presented here, in which the complexity and tortuousness of the family history can generate cognitive confusion and an emotional blockage in the children.

The idea of proposing the drawing of one's house as long been present in literature. Berenstein (1976) considered the space of the home as the place where relationships crystallise and suggested that the spatial distance and the distribution of rooms in the family house drawing would be a sign of the link between the interlocutors and would refer to the unconscious structure of the group. The absence and the empty space could be interpreted as unspoken, unthinkable family secrets. Eiguer (2013) thought of the question of the "inner habitat" as consolidated skin, reminiscent of body image, when the family group can be considered as a family body. And this belonging to the inner habitat refers to family identity.

Cuynet (1996) takes up the idea of diagram of the plan of the house proposed by Berenstein, but develops a reflection on the ego-habitat derived from the ego-skin (Anzieu, 1990). According to the author, the way family members represent themselves in a collective drawing in their living space reveals the unconscious image of the family body (Cuynet *et al.*, 2016). This drawing would capture the unconscious structure of the family, determining the places and functions involved in relationships, but it can also be used as a mediating lever for speech or thought in the therapeutic neo-group. More recently, other authors, including, in addition to the aforementioned Benghozi, Jaitin (2003) have used the idea of place of living in different ways.

The Double Moon Drawing

The Double Moon Drawing (Greco, 1999; 2006; Greco *et al.*, 2020) is a tool specific to situations with a high degree of structural complexity, as for example divorced families, stepfamilies, ethnic and immigrant families, adoptive and foster families...

From a clinical point of view, the complexity in these family situations can be described as the consequence of the family's enduring critical events: a transformation in its inherent structure with a beginning, a fracture and the beginning of a new phase, in which the distances between the different members of the family are transformed, with new proximities and unexpected distances.



In this type of situation, the first crucial clinical aspect refers to the dialectic process between the elements that are close and present and those distant or absent in terms of the factual reality. In fact, each subject entertains a relationship with both the present elements and the remote or absent ones, facing the conflict of loyalty that the double or multiple belonging to different family systems can cause. The second crucial aspect is the process of the re-definition of family boundaries, regarding the representation about who belongs to and who, instead, is excluded or even isolated from one or more families. The subject is asked to draw, in a rectangular field representing his world, himself, his significant others - whether near or far - and then is asked to enclose in a circle the elements drawn that according to him belong to the same family. The subject can use one or more circles, as he feels true to himself. Then he is asked if anyone is missing from his drawing and if he wants to change anything with his magic wand. As with all graphic projective instruments, it is clinically very useful to observe how family members comment on their own and others' drawings, using them for free associations that can evoke new thoughts and express new emotions.

Spontaneous Drawings

Spontaneous drawings are a way for children to participate in the common dialogue during the family session, as it will be possible to see in the following case study. The content of the spontaneous drawing is never casual, but it is always related to the current context of the session, and often it reveals crucial aspects of the theme being worked on in a more direct and transparent way. During family psychotherapy sessions, it is possible to involve parents and other family members in what has been drawn by the child, for example by asking what the drawing makes them think of, or by asking them to construct together a story from the drawing. So, it is possible for children's spontaneous drawings to become a source of free associations for family group.

A case study: the fostered twin children

A couple of parents, with the agreement of their supervising social worker, turn to a therapist because the 7-year-old twin brothers, Teodoro and Sandro, they have in foster care refuse to meet their biological mother and grandparents, and go into crisis when they have to, manifesting their restlessness especially at their school. So, family psychotherapy with the twins and their foster parents starts, and the two children alternate between moments of genuine joy and moments of great restlessness during the sessions. The latter, on a counter-transferential level, solicited my desire to help them express the anguish they were experiencing. The



aim of the psychological path with the foster family was on the one hand to observe the emotional situation of the two children and their relationship with their foster parents, and on the other hand to offer them a space in which positive and negative emotions, questions and possible doubts could be expressed. The therapeutic process, as always happens when children are involved, immediately used mediation means such as drawings, which Teo and Sandro proved to love very much from the very beginning. Thus, the proposal of three graphic-symbolic tools, whose themes adhered to the content of the family dialogue at a given time, represented a significant opportunity to put into words aspects that could not be reached in any other way. It was very interesting to observe how even when the proposal was picked up by just one of the brothers, the other one listened, observed and seized the opportunity of a possible explanation of a difficult topic to face and of the emotions connected to it.

During the meetings, Sandro and Teodoro appear to be very open with their foster parents, who are both called by their first names - Piera and Giorgio. There is a very lively dialogue between the children and their foster parents, both in terms of concrete needs (request for a biscuit, water...) and of their daily experiences at school and at home. The foster carers, in particular Mrs. Piera, immediately appear to be very involved in the children's school experience, but both parents intervene on the subject by showing their knowledge of what happens at their fostered children's school.

Mr. Giorgio, on the other hand, seems to be the main interlocutor for the motor and sports activities in which the children participate at the weekend with great pleasure. Sandro, Teodoro and Giorgio laughingly recount their cycling exploits. Giorgio is a person able to talk about the current experience in a simple and cheerful way.

The children are immediately attracted to the large sheets of flipchart paper and the markers and sensing the conflict the children experience by feeling caught between two families, I seek a mediation tool to help them to talk about the problem. So I propose a graphic-projective tool, the *Kinetic Family Drawing* (Burns and Kaufman, 1972): "I ask you to draw your family while you are all doing something together".

Immediately foster carers and children engaged in choosing a theme, and in the end they all converge on Teodoro's idea of drawing their seventh birthday party, in the garden of the foster carers' home. The subjects depicted are only the two brothers, but the scenery of the drawing concerns the garden of the foster parents' house. The absence of adults, both foster parents and biological relatives can be read as a way of not making the conflict of loyalties explicit. The children enjoy drawing, and their caregivers, who help them to reconstruct the memory of the party, colour the lawn towards the end of the drawing, remaining in the background (Fig. 1). Sandro seems more restless, going back and forth, but anyway he participates in the drawing and seems to enjoy it as much as his brother.



Fig. 1

During the interviews, it emerges that the children's relationship with their foster carers is very positive, but it is the complex history they experienced before fostering and the legal obligation of maintaining relationship with their biological family, which reactivated this history, that is the cause of their pain and problems. However, it is impossible for them to deal directly with the events they experienced with their biological family, as any mention of it causes great restlessness in the children, who move around the room, throwing markers and Lego pieces.

So, when the interviews show that a positive relationship has been built up with me, I decide to propose a second projective graphic instrument: "Draw the houses in which you have lived" (Silva, 2018). This tool sees Sandro much more in difficulty than his brother. In fact, while Teodoro starts to draw and slowly names and draws all the houses where they have lived, writing inside the name of those who were present (Fig. 2), Sandro goes around the room and refuses to draw with his brother. At a certain point the foster mother says that Teodoro has drawn one community too many, but the child neither answers nor modifies the drawing (in the following session, Piera will say that Teodoro was right). The drawing shows the tormented story experienced by the children, who in their seven years of life have changed their home five times, and therefore their relationships and points of reference. Particularly significant is what Teo writes in the last empty space: "It's over".

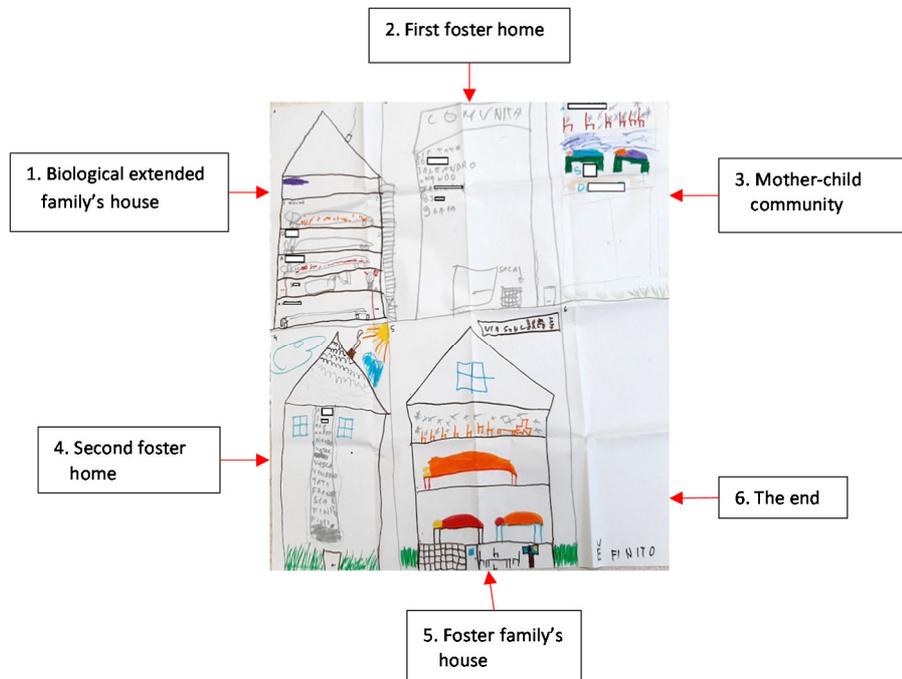


Fig. 2

In the same session, Sandro gets up and goes to the flip chart and draws a hotel where he places Jole, the maternal foster grandmother who had just died (Fig. 3), so showing his emotional attention to the theme of absence and abandonment, theme that the child seems able to express by referring to the lack of his foster grandmother, while it seems too painful for him to revisit the tormented story he lived through with his brother.



Fig. 3

Commenting together on Teo's drawing, the children only want to talk about the last house he drew - the one they live in with their foster parents - and tell me that they are building a tree house in the garden with Giorgio, to play with their friends. They are willing to talk about the present, which is fortunately warm and full of affection, but not about the past. The difficulty in meeting their biological relatives and talking with them, recalling the multiple abandonments they experienced - in sequence, by their father, mother and grandparents - is perhaps also linked to anger that is difficult for them to express.

In a later interview, Mrs. Piera informs me that the twins will have to meet their natural mother, and in the dialogue Teodoro at a certain point says: "I want to go to the judge and tell him that I want to stay here". In the last session before the holidays, Piera tries in vain to make the children tell me about the meeting they had the day before with their biological mother, grand-father and great-grandparents. Both Teodoro and Sandro reply several times that they do not remember, and when Piera explains what it was about, it is possible for me to help them read this "forgetfulness" as the sign of a difficult subject to deal with, perhaps also because they were very angry with their mother and biological relatives. Sandro mumbles "Dora (their biological mother) is out of her mind", immediately taken up by Piera, who explains for the umpteenth time that it is the judge who decides on these meetings. Still mumbling, Sandro tells me "Mothers take care of their children. Dora is not my mother, she is", hinting with his chin to Piera.



In a later session, to help the twins recognise and articulate the image of the family they want and compare it with that of their foster parents, an individual and parallel version of the graphical-projective tool “The double moon” (Greco, 1999; 2006; 2020), relating to the representation of belonging and family boundaries, is proposed to all (Fig. 4, 5, 6, 7). Sandro seems to be in great difficulty right from the start: even if invited to find his own space, he stays close to Piera and watches what she does, says several times that he is not able to do it, asks insistently how he has to do it, continually disturbs Teodoro to get new felt-tip pens. Then he seems to defend himself from the restlessness through laughter and joking: he insists on telling Giorgio and Teodoro that he wants to draw them in a skirt. At the end of the drawing, however, it will be seen that Teo has manifested the same difficulty regarding his own family image in a different way, creating a scenario in which classmates, teachers, foster carers and recently deceased foster grandparents are confusedly mixed up.

The four subjects - who likewise did not indicate anyone from the children’s biological family - at the specific question of the tool “is someone missing from your drawing?” respond that no one is missing, nor do they want to use the magic wand. Indeed Sandro reacts defiantly: “the magic wand doesn’t exist!”.

Sandro’s drawing shows the foster family, where - in order - he marks himself, his recently deceased foster grandparents, his foster parents Piera and Giorgio and lastly his brother Teodoro (T), all enclosed in a single circle (Fig. 4).

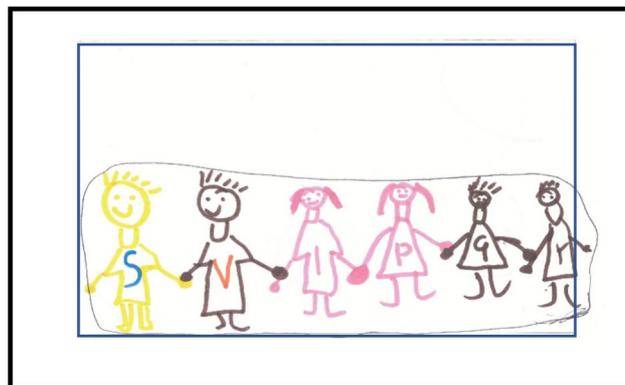


Fig. 4

Teodoro seems calmer, starts to draw on the carpet and marks himself, his grandparents who have just died - in a yellow circle (Velio and Jole) - above him, then Piera and Giorgio (Fig. 5). Then he starts to ask if he can mark the teachers, and writes down the names of two teachers, many school friends and his girlfriend Matilde. Teodoro continues to add people even when the others have already finished and urge him to finish, but it seems that the child is busy covering the possible gaps, filling part of the space with symbols. With regard to the families



represented, Teodoro says that he will put each teacher alone, because he does not know their families. As for himself, he puts himself in the family with his grandparents and with Giorgio. Only later does he murmur “I am lost” and tries to enclose Piera’s symbol in the circle. The symbol of his brother Sandro does not appear in Teo’s drawing.

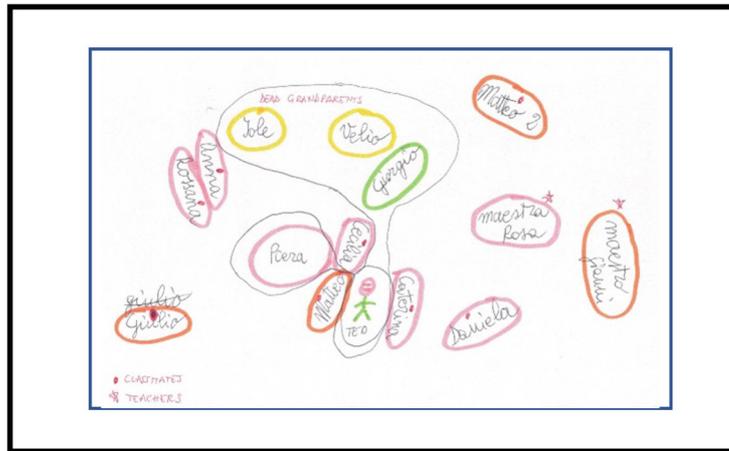


Fig. 5

The drawing of the foster mother is simple and clear: she draws herself with her husband and the twins and comments: “this is my family” (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6

Giorgio explains that he drew himself and then his loved ones: in the first circle, his parents, even though his father died thirty years ago; in the second circle, his nuclear family with his wife and the twins, to whom he signals his belonging through the



same number 2; in the third circle, he encloses his three sisters and in the last circle, finally, his dead in-laws (Fig. 7).

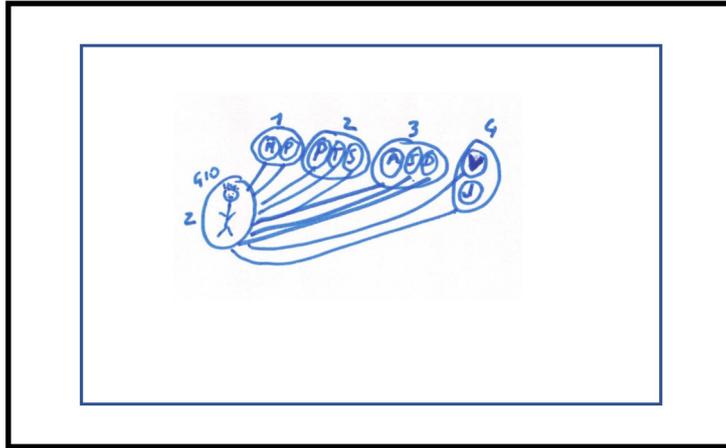


Fig. 7

Commenting together on everyone's drawings, Sandro asks his foster mother to repeat if she thinks what she drew is really their family, and both brothers seem pleased to see that for their foster carers they are now part of their family.

In one of the last sessions, the twins explain to me that there will be a hearing of the judge the following week, they both say they want to stay in the family with Piera and Giorgio.

While we are talking together, Sandro draws a picture, but folds up the paper and says he doesn't want anyone to see it, then says he wants to give it to his mother (Piera), who shows it to all. The drawing (Fig. 8) shows a house with the following heading: "*Piera Giorgio Teo Bob Blacky (the two dogs in the family) Sandro*".

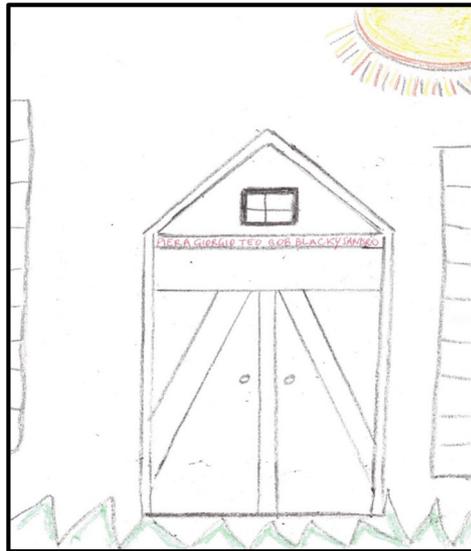


Fig. 8

During the interviews, it became clear that both children feel an intense need to be rooted in the foster family; in fact, everything that brings up the relationship with their biological mother and grandparents seems to be a source of intense anxiety, to which Sandro and Teodoro react in different ways but with the same deep uneasiness. Now the children can talk about it and are reassured by the explicit intention of the foster carers to keep them with themselves. The judge's decision to formalize an indefinite custody for the two children, a prerequisite for a future open adoption - that is, without severing the relationship with their biological family - gradually makes the children feel safer and more serene, even if the complexity of the situation does not exclude that, during their growth, the twins can change position in the delicate balance between their two families...

Conclusion

The presented case study shows how sometimes the proposal of tools that can mediate distressing pre-conscious contents, that cannot be addressed directly, can advance clinical work, which risks getting stuck in the repetition of identical dynamics. The choice of such tools, from the child's spontaneous play and drawings to multidimensional symbolic tools, which may focus the non-verbal level of body involvement or the graphic level, depends on the clinician's sensitivity in reading both the subjects' transference and his own counter-transference. This sensitivity will guide the therapist in listening to the most pregnant emotional and relational theme at that moment of the psychotherapeutic pathway. The use of symbolic tools, whether spontaneous or formalised, only takes on meaning when what has been



experienced with the body or produced in the drawings becomes the object of comment and free association for all family, thus offering an unforeseen opportunity to express thoughts and emotions not directly accessible through the usual verbal register. The dimension of creativity that such symbolic tools open up both for the clinician and for the subject or subjects involved can give rise to an experience of relief and to the possibility of a new beginning, which make the clinical process more lively and effective.

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