

Mothers' Perceptions of their Relationship with their Children Following Dyadic Art Therapy

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines mothers' perceptions of their relationship with their children following dyadic therapy through plastic art, and the significance of plastic art as a tool of intervention in dyadic therapy. Ten mothers, who received dyadic therapy through plastic art, participated in the research, along with their children. The findings were divided in two: 1) The characteristics of the mothers' perception of the relationship with their children changed following the dyadic treatment. The mother perceives the relationship as dependent on separation within the dyad, the maintaining interpersonal communication within the dyad, the ability to maintain intimacy and closeness, regulation of feelings in the dyad, and understanding the inner world of the child. 2) Plastic art as an instrument of intervention in dyadic treatment. The findings portray that, for the mothers, plastic art is a non-verbal instrument of communication that intensifies intimacy and promotes understanding of the child's inner-world.

Theoretical Background Mother's Perception Formation

A mother's perception of her relationship with her child takes shape through perceiving her own motherhood, and through her perception of her child. These perceptions are affected by mental self-representations of the mother, before taking the role of a parent

(Bowlby 1969, 1988; George & Solomon 1996, 2006), and later on affected by the relationship with her child formed during postnatal care (Manzeno, Asfasa & Zilka, 2003). Among the characteristics that affect the development of the mother's representation as a nurturer are her

childhood and adolescence experiences, studying and imitation of her mother, the transformation to motherhood and the encounter with her baby (George & Solomon 1996, 2005, 2006; Palgi- Hecker, 2005).

The mother's perception of the child in the first months plays an important part in the shaping of the true self of the baby, and provides meaning to his unbearable feelings which characterize his being (Bion 1962, 1967). Furthermore, the developmental processes and challenges that the children present before their mothers, their temper and difficulty in self- regulation (Cohen, 2007; Kaplan, H., Harel, J. & Avimeir-Patt, R., 2010), the transference and projection mechanisms of their mothers, along with their mothers' reflective abilities (Fongy & Target, 1997; Stern, 1995), are all additional characteristics which affect children's perceptions. **Treatment with Plastic Art**

The therapeutic work with plastic art engages with emotions in an essentially non-verbal way. The treatment uses metaphors brought up through the creative process, and

also the reactions of the patient, which is also the creator, regarding the product. Naumburg (1966) emphasizes the issue of metaphor, and according to her the art therapy process is based on the conviction that the patient's most basic thoughts and emotions, anchored in the unconscious, are expressed through metaphors and not words. According to Naumburg, for the creator, art enables a connection between the conscious and the unconscious. The encounter between external materials and inner-metaphors enables patients (creators) to see how the world engulfs and sees them, and how they feel in relation to it. Furthermore, it enables them to understand the deep meaning of the emotion experienced through the creative activity, and to receive a visual confirmation of the process (Betensky, 1995; Moon, 1998).

Ball (2002) said that plastic art therapy provides patients with the opportunity of expressing, in a non-verbal way, their inner world - emotions and both latent and overt thoughts regarding themselves and the world. The patients' perceptions of the self, the other,

and their relationship with the world, are possible to understand through the visual metaphors apparent in the creation, for these represent perceptions.

Dyadic Treatment

At the core of the dyadic treatment is the child-parent relationship, which rests on the assumption that the child-parent interaction is meaningful for the optimal development of the child. Support for this can be found in Sigal's *Interpersonal Neuroscience* (2001). Sigal counts five elements that characterize the relationship between child and parent, and offer the mind and personality optimal development. These are collaboration between child and parent, reflective dialogue, the ability to fix mistakes and harms, creating coherent narratives, and emotional communication. Interventions in dyadic treatment (which are the treatment's goals) are aimed at developing these elements, and they include the establishment of a self-regulation model for the child and mother, improving their reflective processes, increasing their playfulness ability, strengthening their ability

to focus on each other, and encouraging the process of separation while assisting in the differentiation between the partners in the dyad (Bleiberg, Fongy & Target, 1997; Harel in Kaplan, Harel & Avimeir-Patt, 2010).

The goal of the dyadic model is to encourage change in the experiences within the dyad and in the interaction patterns, which are typical to it and are based on the existing representations. The assumption is that changes in the interactions will lead to changes in the representations of the self, the other, and the relationships of the parent and the child (Ben-Aaron, Harel, Kaplan & Patt, 2001; Kaplan et al., 2010). Examining the apparent behaviors of the mother and her representations as a parent, along with the changes as expressed in the treatment and in the actual interactions between her and the child, might contribute to understanding her perception of the child and the change in perceptions regarding their relations.

Dyadic Treatment with Plastic Art

Winnicott (2009) emphasizes the importance of play as an instrument for

understanding the inner-world of the child, and in doing so he paved the road to including games in the treatment and following it - art. The importance of the game in the dyadic treatment is emphasized here due to the fact that the creative process is a form of a game. The parent and child play with materials, and so an interaction between them is enabled, and the observation of the interaction can commence.

Kaplan et al. (2010) add that the goal of a “playful” atmosphere, which is customary in dyadic treatment, is to build confidence in the parent, which will enable him to listen to the child’s world. The parents generally find it hard to act in a playful manner, and have difficulties in observing the mental states of their children. The therapist’s role is to encourage playfulness, to tie between the worlds (inner and external) of the child, and yet to maintain the difference between them.

Support for the importance of the non-verbal communication can be found in Solan (2007), which emphasizes the importance of this communication in the early relations

between mother and child. Solan claims that the dialogue in the mother-child interaction takes place through ‘media’, that is non-verbal sensory communication, which is intermediate between two partners, like drawing, music and breast-feeding. This dialogue enables a stepping out into the shared space, while listening to the other’s communicated messages. The ‘third’ (Benjamin, 2005; Solan, 2007) is a term which emphasizes this space as pre-symbolic, and as having to do with touch, rhythm and movement between them. This reflects a transitional subjective phenomenon, in which two partners maintain a mutual interaction. Playing with symbols widens the transitional space limits into the realm of imagination, and so a creative transitional space is made. This space is an intermediate phenomenon between the personal space of the parent and the personal space of the child. The creation of a dialogue between the dyad partners enables the development of a shared language, through which the partners communicate, broadcast and perceive closeness or remoteness,

vulnerability or resilience, frustration or satisfaction. This dialogue is called 'jointness' (Solan, 2007). The use of plastic art enables this dialogue in the dyad, and also the observing of the symbolic language through which it emerges.

Dyadic treatment with plastic art uses a variety of materials, artistic techniques and creative processes that enable a non-verbal relationship between the parent and the child, a relationship that is initially established through experimenting and touching the materials. Raising visual metaphors through the creation, enables the meeting of unconscious contents and even treats earlier interactions. The product of the creative process through the dyadic treatment with plastic art is the plastic representation of the dyadic relation. It includes the subjective lives of the child and the parent, and the mutual experience. Observing the plastic representation of the child and parent, and verbally relating to it, enables them to see the other as a separate subject and develops their ability to deal with mental processes. It also

enables the feelings of being constructed and visible, and sharpens the child and parent's reflective capabilities. The therapist verbalizes and reflects, and so enables the parent to organize the experience, and he himself becomes a model for using mentalization, a primary instrument in parent-child treatment (Gavron in Kaplan et al., 2010). Greenberg (2001) emphasizes the ability to reflect on an experience as significant in order to enable the creation of a new meaning.

In Ponteri's study (2001) it was found that mothers perceived themselves in a more positive way following a dyadic treatment with art, although only half of the participants related the improvement in their self-esteem to the behavior towards, and interaction with, their children. It is possible to say that allowing games to enter the treatment room provided for the inclusion of art in general, and plastic art in particular.

Plastic art is an instrument of intervention in the dyadic treatment model, and it is also an evaluative instrument in parent-child therapy. The process of creation and

plastic representation enables the emergence of unconscious contents which express representation of the self, the other and the relationship, through metaphors and symbols which visually arise. The joint creation, and the tangible product which accompanies it, are an expression of the relationship between the parent and child. This is a significant instrument for understanding the mother's perception of the relationship with her child.

The Aim of the Study

The aim of the study is to learn about the mother's perception of her relationship with her child, following a dyadic treatment with plastic art. The study also examines the effectiveness of plastic art as an instrument of intervention in the dyadic treatment, from the mother's point of view.

Hypotheses

1. How do mothers characterize their relationship with their child, and what change takes place in the relationship following a dyadic treatment with plastic art?
2. How do mothers perceive the

unique function of plastic art as an instrument of intervention in dyadic treatment?

Method

Participants

Ten mothers participated in this study, each undergoing a dyadic treatment with plastic art with her child, during the years of 2009-2011. The average age of the mothers was 30.3 (standard deviation 3.288) and the average age of the children was 5.9 (standard deviation 0.7). Some of the mothers had 12 years of education, and as for education some were academics.

The mothers came for treatment through their own initiative, or because they were directed to as a result of their children's performance difficulties in kindergarten, school and/or at home. Following an evaluative session, they were recommended for a dyadic treatment. Most of the treatments lasted between one and two years. It is important to add that in these treatments the fathers also had a role to play.

Research Instruments

1. Relational Anecdote Paradigm (RAP)

Interview. Consisted of an interpersonal episodes interview, evaluated by the Core Conflictual Relationship Theme (CCRT) method (Luborsky, 1977). This method is used to evaluate the main conflictual themes in relationships, and enables one to evaluate the self's wishes, the other's response and the self's response through interpersonal narratives.

2. Semi-Constructed Interview. Evaluates the mother's experience of the dyadic treatment with plastic art. The interview included pre-written questions, with few additions that were brought up during the interview itself, according to the level of exposure and the details provided by the interviewees. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.
3. Mother-Child Drawing (Gillespie, 1994). Drawing was used as an intervention method for evaluating the interaction between mother and child. The evaluation of the drawing was

based on the narrative which was told about the drawing.

Data Analysis

The RAP Interactions Analysis. The interactions that were collected through the RAP (appendix B) were analyzed by mapping the interaction described by the mother to the three CCRT factors (Luborsky, 1977). This analysis enables one to understand the major theme of the relationship in a dyadic treatment with plastic art. Categorization of the major themes which were found in the interactions analysis was conducted, and titles were given to the different themes that emerged.

Semi-Constructed Interviews Analysis. At the core of the semi-constructed interviews analysis were the Emic approach and the Etic approach, as an interpretive approach for the subjects' behavior explanations (Headlands & Thomas, 1990).

Analysis of the semi-constructed interviews (appendix c) was conducted through content and subject analysis, which relates to words and descriptions of the mothers as

reflecting their experience of the dyadic treatment with plastic art (Shakedi, 2003). First, categories were produced according to the Emic approach, and afterward a comparison was made with different approaches and theories, according to the Etic approach. Shared categories were constructed according to the results.

Drawing Analysis. The mothers' narrative analysis was conducted following the drawing questions regarding the "me and my child" drawing (appendix d) and according to the content of the drawing. Subject analysis was conducted, in relation to words and descriptions of the participants as reflecting their thoughts, emotions, beliefs and knowledge, and major categories were constructed (Shakedi, 2003).

Summary of Data Analysis. The different data produced by the analysis greatly correlated each other and were unified to main categories.

The first stage involved contacting, by telephone, plastic art therapists who use dyadic therapy and explaining the study. Following the

conversation, an electronic mail was sent to the therapists with written explanations. The therapists contacted the mothers by phone, and provided them with information regarding the research and its aim. The mothers were emailed with an Agreement of Participation Form, and a time and place for the interview were scheduled according to the mother's preference. The third and last stage involved transcribing and analyzing the interviews.

Ethical Aspects

The participants signed an agreement of participation in the research form which also details the required anonymity and immunity, and authorizes their anonymous participation in the drawing study and its publication.

Results

Characteristics of the Mother's Perception of the Relationship with her Child in which a Change Occurred Following the Dyadic Treatment with Plastic Art

Separation. Separation is described by most mothers in terms of their need for self-definition which is separated and distinguished from that of the child. This separation, as it was

expressed in the findings, resulted in the following changes taking place in the mother's perception of herself:

1. The Mother as an Authoritative Parent

Figure Separated from her Child by

Role – The mothers describe that a

significant change occurred in their

relationship with their child, that they

were able to be viewed as an

authoritative figure by the child, and

perceived themselves as an

authoritative parental figure. As a result,

they were in a better position to set

limits for their child when needed. For

example, Nava recounts her presence in

the framework of her family by stating

that “*within the familial context I have*

a lot of presence...” and she perceives

herself as “*strong and assertive...*”.

This helps her place limits for her child

–“*I place more limitations which are*

clear.”

2. The Mother as an Autonomous Entity:

With her Own Emotions, Thoughts,

Yearnings

and Needs – The way in which the

mothers perceive themselves as

autonomous entities is expressed

through their verbal explanations of the

creation in the treatment. The style and

technique, in which the dyad works,

along with the end product, illustrated to

some mothers the relationship pattern

which is typical of the dyad. For

example, while drawing during the

treatments, the mothers insisted on

maintaining their own section of

the page and required the child to respect this as their space. Ravit, for example, said how important it is for her to define the limit between herself and her child, and expressed her desire for her child to respect her personal space and not invade it:

She invaded my side of the page... And we constantly talk about not invading personal space... She needs to understand that there's a limit which we do not cross, each has her own space.

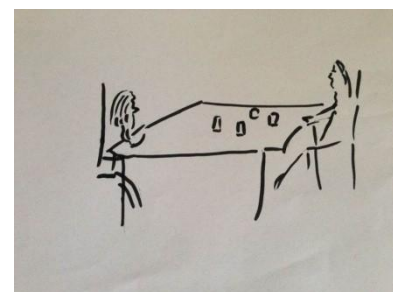
Interpersonal Communication

The ability to maintain interpersonal communication between mother and child was expressed in the interviews through the mother's perception of herself as an attentive figure. The mother perceives that her ability to listen was strengthened, as well as her ability to maintain a dialogue with her child. Mirit recounted how, prior to the treatment, she had great difficulties speaking with her daughter – *“Before, I don't think I knew how to handle this very well”*. The treatment helped her find more suitable ways to maintain a

much better communication – *“The therapist taught me many ways to approach her, to handle her, what is right to say and what is wrong...”*

The interpersonal communication of the dyad, which characterizes the mother's perception of her relationship with her child following the treatment, was expressed in the narrative which the mothers told following the “me and my child” drawing. The mothers describe how they now find quality time for their children, sitting or playing with them, which enables them to listen better to their children's needs. The mothers further describe how mutual listening takes place and is enabled when they spend more time with their children, allowing them to have conversations with emotional value.

Drawing 1: Heli's Drawing



Heli explains how she manages to find time to play with her child, time which she now considers as quality time with mutual enjoyment - "...it is quality time... *Enjoyment and pleasant communication, during play time with her, were not present before (the treatment)...*" **Intimacy and Closeness.** Intimacy and closeness in the dyad were expressed by most of the mothers. In their descriptions, they stated their own satisfaction with the relationship and their children's newfound satisfaction, as they witnessed their children returning the same emotions. The findings show that the intimacy and closeness were expressed in three ways:

1. Feeling appreciated – The ability to feel close and intimate in the relationship with the child, for some mothers, is bound with the feeling that the child appreciates them. Heli said that her child said to her - "*you are a good mother,*" and this made her feel "*a kind of appreciation from her...Before [the treatment]*", Heli added, "*there*

was no chance that she would say something so intimate..."

2. Expressions of Physical and Verbal Closeness – Heli spoke of one of the changes that occurred in the dyad relationship, namely, the way in which her child shows closeness to her. She said that before the treatment "*there was no hugging or anything else... she didn't let anybody touch her*", and added that "*after a year, suddenly, she asked for it, she asked for a hug, and I have no doubt that it is a result of the treatment. I have no doubt.*"

3. Closeness through Mutual Time Spending – The mothers recount how now, after the treatment, they feel closer to their child, through mutual time spending, conversation and sharing thoughts and emotions.

4. Drawing 2: Tali's Drawing



Tali says that after the treatment, she and her child used to “*cuddle in bed together, hugging and talking about various things, on something, on many things...*” She related to these mutual moments as moments of togetherness, “*together is when she is with me in every sense...*”, and describes them as ‘real moments’, in which it “*is just me and her... nothing else at the background*”.

Emotional Regulation

The ability to develop and apply new strategies for emotional regulation during dyadic interaction is described in the interviews as a major factor in the mother-child relationship. The mothers describe that now, post therapy, the way in which they are able to self-regulate their emotions and respond in a calmer manner during interaction, enables them to help their child in self-regulation, self-moderation and controlling their responses during distress. Some of the mothers describe that the change in their ability to control moments of anger occurred parallel to an improvement in their children’s ability to control their emotions during conflict. One mother describes how “*... [in the past] the pieces [of the game] were thrown, and she*

would run away... I would raise my voice... let’s say that it wasn’t relaxed and pleasant, ... it would take me more time to think about what I should do in order to get her out of it...”, but she adds in relief that “*[now] it is much more pleasant for me to spend time with her, and for her with me...*”

Understanding the Child’s Inner-World

Understanding the child's inner-world, as an additional characteristic of the mother's perception of the relationship with her child following the treatment, was expressed in moments of creation during the treatment. Some of the mothers expressed the need to understand the mental state of their child, his thoughts and needs. They describe the manner in which they are capable of identifying the child's mental state, to attach meaning and understand it. This enables them to strengthen both their and their child's emotional regulation. It also provides them with insight into how they should act afterwards. The need to understand what stands behind the child's behavior and the emotional expression that accompany this behavior, and how this provides the mothers with meaning regarding the relationship itself. Nava describes how she is more successful now than in the past in understanding what is at the root of her son's behavior. She recounts that she didn't understand why her son approached her, "*I thought that he came to me because he had a fight with his father, I didn't know if he had an actual fight and it was a manipulative attempt or if he really wanted to approach his*

mother". She also explained how she was able to provide meaning to her son's behavior, how she understood that his actions expresses his need of being close to her: "*And then I understood that it is something he has against me. This is what was on my mind.*" She strengthens her containing role as a mother, "*I also thought, and it was also on my mind that I had to contain him. Now I am more able to understand that.*"

The mothers shared stories about the unconscious contents which came up during the art work, which turned into conscious content that they could observe. The unconscious content was given meaning during the treatment, and so it helped the mothers understand the reasons behind their children's behavior. Furthermore, they describe the way in which they can identify and understand the mental state of their children, which enable them to strengthen the emotional self-regulation of both themselves and their children, and also to know how to act later on. Heli states how she is now better able to understand what stands behind her child's

behavior, she says that “...*(the child) used to draw herself in me for a long period, and at a certain stage the separation which you are talking about occurred, and she started drawing us as different characters*”. Heli said that this helped her “*to understand what is going on with her during that period and to relate in a more understanding manner...*”

The Importance of Plastic Art as an Instrument of Intervention in Dyadic Treatment from the Point of View of the Mother

This part of the results chapter will describe the importance of plastic art as an instrument of intervention in the dyadic treatment, from the mother’s perspective. In the interviews, the mothers were asked to describe their perspectives regarding the significance of using plastic art in the dyadic treatment, and if, according to their beliefs, art advanced the therapeutic process. In support of their claims, the mothers were asked to provide recommendations to other mothers for dyadic treatment with plastic art.

Plastic Art as a Non-Verbal Communication Instrument

Plastic art was described by the mothers as a non-verbal instrument of communication, which assists children to express their emotions and thoughts without words. There was a significant reference to children who have difficulties in expressing themselves verbally, due to Specific Language Impairment (SLI) or due to introversion. Nava, for example, said that when her child expressed his inner world with the art materials, she was better able to understanding his thoughts and feelings, “...*things that were hard for him to express, his weak side, this is his language and you can see his unconscious and understand the things that happen*”.

Furthermore, the mothers claimed that when their children expressed their inner-world through the art materials, they succeeded in better understanding their children’s thoughts and emotions. Prior to the treatment, Heli’s child was emotionally avoidant and hardly spoke, but after the treatment her verbal expression was greatly improved and she

initiated talks: *"There's no comparison between before the treatment and after the treatment... Two different girls... In the first few meetings she didn't say a word".* Furthermore, this mother emphasized the power of art to enable the child to express what she thinks and feel without using words, which eventually leads to better verbal expression, as she added that she tries *"to think, if not for the art how would she express herself..."*

Plastic Art as Strengthening Intimacy

According to some of the mothers, the dyadic treatment with plastic art enabled them and their child to create something together using different art materials. For the dyad, thinking and deciding how to work with the materials, and then creating based upon their agreed upon plan, is described in the interviews as a way of intensifying their togetherness and as a way of getting closer. Art enabled intimacy, some of the mothers said, and one described it as *"the togetherness. To create together, to collaborate..."*

Plastic Art in Dyadic Treatment as an

Instrument for the Parent to Understand the Inner-World of the Child

The process of creating with art materials along with the artistic product were described by most of the mothers as instruments that enabled the expression of the inner-world of the child. In dyadic treatment, the mothers' encounter with the creative expression of the child or the dyad, the witnessing of it and the providing of verbal expression to this experience, enabled them to intensify their awareness of their child's emotions, and following this, to understand their child's needs, and sometimes even to understand the essence of the relationship within the dyad.

The mothers saw the plastic art as a part of the therapeutic process, and also as an instrument for learning and understanding what is going on in their child's inner-emotional- world, how their child feels and thinks. Michal was able to become aware of her daughter's emotions through the art, *"You can understand what she feels toward that subject... it was great for me to understand what is important to her...So, it is as if the art*

was part of the entire process...”, and art enabled the expression of emotions, which enabled her to better understand her child. “Inside that process emotions, angers, were expressed... to learn what she feels ... part of art is to understand what exactly is going on with her.”

The encounter with the child’s product, or the joint product of the dyad, and the observation of it, enabled some of the mothers in a tangible way, in the “here and now,” to understand their children’s self-perception, their children’s perception of them and their relationship. Heli describes how her daughter drew herself inside of her mother’s belly, “...There were things that really moved me, like that she placed herself within me [in the drawing], which is very exciting...” Her daughter also “sees me as an erupting volcano” within the drawing, “it is not pleasant for a parent to encounter such a metaphor, but I understood it...”

Art is described by some of the mothers as an instrument that enables non-verbal emotional expression, and through its non-verbal aspects it seems to enable the

mothers with an understanding of the child’s emotions and thoughts. Ravit explains that “*in this way (through art) they express all of their emotions, what go through their soul, everything ...and this is also a way... in which the parents can see what goes over their child, without him needing to speak with them*”. She tells of her daughter’s difficulty in expressing her emotions in words, “*for example, when we drew she didn’t speak*”, how art provided space for self-expression, “*The drawing expressed everything she thought*”, and how through it she could better understand her child’s inner world – “*I could better understand her*”.

The Mother’s Recommendation

All of the mothers recommend the dyadic treatment with plastic art. In most of their recommendations there was an emphasis on the importance of the parents’ presence in the treatment, as art reflects the dyadic interaction, both during the treatment and during the parents’ guidance. Some of the mothers also said that they think that the treatment is more suitable for children who have a connection with the art instrument. As

for the mothers, it did not seem important to them if they connect with the artistic instrument. A few of the mothers marked that even though they did not connect to the art, they would still recommend the dyadic treatment.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to learn about the mother's perception of her relationship with her child, following a dyadic treatment with plastic art. This subject, as well as the significance of using plastic art with dyadic treatment from the point of view of the mother, has hardly been explored.

The results of this study show that there are significant changes in the mothers' perception of her relationship with her children, and highlight the unique importance of plastic art in this process from their point of view. These results will be henceforth discussed.

The Characteristics of the Mother's Perception of the Relationship with Her Child Following a Dyadic Treatment with Plastic Art

The first hypothesis of the study dealt with the mother's perception of the

relationship with her child, and the change that occurred in the relationship following dyadic treatment. The results of the study show that following the dyadic treatment with plastic art, there were changes in the mother's perception of her child: Feeling of separation, interpersonal communication, closeness and intimacy, emotional regulation, and understanding the inner- world of the child.

The characteristic of **separation** of the mother in the dyadic relations correlates with Cohen (2007), who claims that assertive parental responses, with independent discretion and free-will, are important because they create the framework of the feel of separation.

The separation is also expressed in the descriptions of concrete moments of creation. Some of the mothers describe how, during the initial stages of the treatment, each part of the dyad created separately and with no relation to the other, or together but with no mutual understanding or feeling of togetherness. During later stages of the treatment, the joint creations they made reflected for them a new space in the relationship. Kaplan et al. (2010) claims that one of the aims of dyadic

treatment is to create “thirdness”, in which the dyad achieves mutual recognition.

The manner in which mothers insist on their needs and wishes, and at the same time emphasize their wish for mutuality during the joint creation in plastic art treatment, correlates with Gavron (in Kaplan et al., 2010), who relates to the plastic art process which takes place in the dyadic treatment through plastic art. Gavron claims that the creation enables each of the participants to grasp the other as having his own will and needs.

The **interpersonal communication** characteristic is related in this study to the mother's growing ability to listen to her child following the treatment, which also leads to a more calm and pleasant communication. This characteristic was connected by the mothers to the growing ability of attentiveness in various circumstances.

This study also shows that the mothers place great importance on the time spent together which they successfully actualize, following insights which were acquired in the treatment. One might ask, what is that “quality time” for the mothers and their children? What

is it that enables that kind of communication?

This “quality time”, which is described in the findings as a time in which the mother successfully responds in an attentive manner to her child, calls into our discussion the concept of containment. According to the mothers, it seems that when they describe their attentiveness to the child they also mean their will to contain the child in these moments. That is expressed only in narratives about the “me and my child” drawing, and the narratives about “quality time”. In these narratives, the mothers' tuning toward their children is expressed, and they are attentive and containing. Ofarim (2002) relates to the term “attentiveness”, which is being explored in this study. According to her, the manner in which the mother is attentive, not necessarily just through listening but through her senses, affects her success in containing her child's projections and mental secretions. By being attentive, she provides meaning to the different elements that attack her child's very being, which he has no power in providing meaning to, and so she enables him to attend to his life. This kind of communication Ofarim

calls “subsisting attentiveness”. It is therefore possible to say that optimal communication includes mutual dialogue, “quality time” and emotional availability, which also create closeness in the dyad.

The **closeness and intimacy** characteristic is expressed in every research instrument. The findings show that when the mother feels appreciated by her child, and/or when verbal and physical expressions of love and affection exist, and/or when the mother and child spend time together, the closeness and intimacy are significantly expressed in the dyad.

Physical contact and verbal expressions of closeness appeared in the description of the interactions. It was possible to see how the child positively responds to the mother’s attempts of closeness, and how the mother, in reply, provides him with another expression of closeness, such as loving words or a hug. According to Solan (1992), closeness and intimacy in a mother- child dyad are achieved through mutual satisfaction between the two.

Closeness between the mother and child is dependent on the mother’s ability to be ready

and available for the child, and also in her creating for him a secure space (Bowlby, 1973; Winnicot, 1965). The mother’s readiness and availability for the child, when they are spending time together, are expressed in all of the ten narratives told by the mothers following the “me and my child” drawing. When the mother is available for the child, and maintains “quality time” in the dyad, she succeeds in feeling close to the child and in feeling his closeness to her.

Expressions of closeness also appeared in physical ways, through a loving touch (hug, kiss), in the narratives, along with verbal expressions. When the mothers described this, a sense of the dyad was conveyed, a dyad in which special moments are shared and in which each individual in the dyad can experience enjoyment and contentment alone, as well as together. These moments, according to Solan (1992), are described as moments in which borders are blurred. This is a kind of non-verbal communication within the space of the “togetherness”, which enables each individual

to feel his and the other's readiness for closeness and intimacy.

The **emotional regulation** characteristic relates to the inner regulation of emotional moments and behavioral expressions. It seems that the mother's successful regulation of her own emotions contributes to the child's emotional regulation. Therefore, a better dyad depends on mutual regulation, which affects the quality of the relationship. Cohen (2007) claims that the term "regulation" is maintained when there is balance between two contradicting factors, and not when one of the factors cancels another. It is important to note that one of the goals of dyadic treatment deals with developing the ability of emotional regulation within the dyad (Fongy & Target, 1997). Siegel (2004) writes on the importance of the ability of regulation, and emphasizes the mental and cerebral regulation processes, which occur during the communication between the parent and child, as primary processes that promote emotional and social development.

In the description of the interactions, it is possible to trace certain strategies that the

mothers use in self-regulation, such as thinking ahead or evaluating the situation before any response on their part is expressed. According to Dix (1991), it is possible to explain strategies of self-regulation in parenting, which relates to emotional regulation in general. According to him, emotional regulation is based on three factors:

1. The ability to identify emotional moments and their origin,
2. The ability to assess the result of expressing a certain emotion, and
3. The ability to self-regulate. The ability of self-regulation is acquired through the mother's ability to operate mental processes before she responds to the child. This ability is related to the cognitive ability of the parent to understand the inner-world of the child (Siegel 2003, 2004).

The **understanding the inner-world of the child** characteristic, as it appears in this study, is related to the concept of mentalizing, which appears in literature that deals with mother-child relationships (Allen & Fongay, 2006; Midgley & Vroua, 2012). The operational definition of this term is called

“the relative function”, and it is described as a therapeutic aim at dyadic therapy (Kaplan et al., 2010). The mother’s abilities to observe and reflect on the emotional and behavioral experiences of the child during treatment, and to understand these, are explored in this study mainly through the interactions described by the mothers. The themes in the relationships mostly expressed the mother’s wish to understand the actions and emotions of her child, and accordingly, her reaction was mostly to accept and contain the child.

It is possible to relate to this process, according to Bion (1962), in the context of the mother as a container. According to him, in the process of containment the mother provides meaning to the child’s experience, and so this experience becomes understandable. When the mother is having a hard time reflecting and observing the child’s mental state, she creates a delay in the reflective function’s development. It is possible to hypothesize that the mother’s reflection on the child, before providing a response, contributes to her ability to understand the rationale for his behavior.

Therefore, her attitude toward him is softer, in comparison with a situation in which she would have responded in a more impulsive manner that lacks prior thought.

It is interesting to see how, from these interactions, the reflective function, which is acquired through the treatment, contributed to the mothers’ emotional regulation. Siegel (2004, 2003) emphasizes the use of reflective ability as an important factor in regulating negative emotions that surface during parenthood. According to him, exercising and developing the self- awareness of the parents, through guidance and treatment of their emotional responses and their causes, provide a mental activity that might assist the parents in understanding their own sensitivities. Furthermore, this can help their children in their own process of self-regulation. This study shows that when the mother understands why the child felt or acted in a certain manner, she is able to provide a more suitable meaning to the dyadic interaction, and through that the process of mutual regulation takes place.

Fongy & Target (1997) also relate the

reflective function to mutual regulation in the dyad. The parents' reflective function is their ability to think. A parent, who can think in an open and non-defensive manner about the child's mental states, can also adapt a parental response which will be emotionally suitable and containing when needed. In doing so, the parent enables the child to organize his emotions in a coherent and effective manner. Lack of reflective function, might lead to insensitive and emotionally unregulated parenting, which might distort the child's ability to organize his thoughts in a coherent and effective manner. In the descriptions of the interactions between the mother and child, it was possible to see how the other's reaction, which is the child's reaction in a certain situation, is regulated by the mother's prior ability of self-regulation. This is possible due to the use of reflective function by the mother. Slade (2001) claims, in this regard, that using mentalization is essential for regulation and interpersonal communication.

The ability to understand the inner-world of the child, through the process of creation and observation, is expressed in the

description of concrete moments during the treatment. Creation might be used as a motivating instrument for the development of mentalization, as can be learned from this study. The mothers' descriptions of moments of creation in the treatment showed how sometimes the mother could provide meaning to the way in which the relationship is perceived by her child, and even to understand the various meanings of the intersubjective experience and the dyadic interaction. From these, it is possible to see the importance of plastic art as something which enables the connection between the inner-world and the external expression and promotes insight. This is discussed further in the chapter that focuses on the meaning of plastic art.

The Meaning of Plastic Art as an Instrument of intervention in the Dyadic Treatment, from the Mother's Perspective

The second hypothesis of this study deals with the manner in which mothers perceive the unique meaning of plastic art as an instrument of intervention in dyadic treatment.

The plastic art in this study is being examined, according to the mothers' perception,

as an instrument of intervention that enables **non-verbal communication**. This communication assists the child in expressing his inner-world in a non-verbal way. The first reference of the mothers to plastic art, as a non-verbal instrument of interpersonal communication, was in the way in which this instrument assists children in expressing their feelings and emotions without using words (*“another language”* as one of the mothers put it). Noy (1999), for example, claims that art is a language of its own, which is capable of transmitting a message. Scaverien (1992) emphasizes that there is no need for words in order to maintain inner or interpersonal communication. Plastic art, as described by some of the mothers, is an instrument that enables non-verbal emotional expression, especially amongst children who find it hard to express themselves in words. A drawing might be used as a mediating instrument for children who have verbal difficulties. This finding correlates with the study of Lev-Wiesel & Liraz (2007), in which it was found that narratives which were told post-drawing, regarding children aged 9-14 who were asked

to draw their life, were more detailed and included more emotions in comparison with children who were asked to describe their life only in a verbal way. In an additional study that examined the position and role of art in therapy, art therapists that were interviewed emphasized the qualities that can be expressed in the creative process in cases where verbal expression is limited (Avidan, 2011).

Plastic art in this study is also examined, according to the mothers' perceptions, as an instrument of intervention, which strengthens the **mother-child relationship**. The mothers that related to this aspect of closeness marked that the nature of the work, together with the collaboration and the discussion that accompanied it, created a feeling of closeness in the dyad. Snir (2009) mentions in her research, which deals with the technique of joint drawing, that certain behaviors during joint drawing, such as cooperation and reciprocity between the drawing partners or similarity in work style, are major expressions of the aspect of closeness (Hazut, 2001 in Snir, 2009). During

the creation in plastic art therapy, one can relate to the other's work while being attentive to his actions and needs. Therefore, it is possible to say that during joint creation, as is sometimes customary in dyadic treatment with plastic art, the very attempt at building joint elements, through drawing or sculpting, might invoke intimacy and strengthen the closeness in the dyad. It is an attempt which provides an opportunity for one's encounter with the other's feelings. In relation to this, in an additional study (Hosea, 2006), mothers who experimented in joint drawing with their children, marked that the very activity drew them closer to one another, both physically and emotionally.

In addition, the plastic art in this study is being examined, according to the mothers' perceptions, as an instrument of intervention which provides the child with a way of **expressing his inner-world**. Treatment with plastic art enables unconscious content to become conscious, by using the creative process (for example Gilroy & McKinley, 2010; Malchiodi, 2004; Wadeson, 1080). It is possible to say that the very presence of

the mothers in the treatment contributed to their ability to understand better what their child thinks or feels while looking at a creation or in the interventions made by the therapist. Wix (1997) finds importance in the creative process and the observation of the creation as a promoter of insight regarding the inner-world of the creator. In this relation, it seems that not only does the creator benefits from these insights, but also, according to the mothers, the observer-partner, who gains insight regarding himself and his partner. This insight might bring change to different aspects of the relationship, such as communication and closeness. In addition, it is claimed that art might lead to conflicts and invoke certain communication patterns of the dyad (Proulx, 2005). Therefore, in the examples provided by the mothers with regards to the importance of plastic art in the treatment, conflicts and communication patterns of the mother-child were expressed, and also the way in which the child perceives these, through the use of metaphors or work techniques in plastic art.

Conclusion

It is possible to say that this study has a

unique value in grasping the mother's perception of her child, and the change that occurs in the characteristics of this perception – in separation, interpersonal communication, closeness, emotional regulation, and understanding the inner-world of the child – following a dyadic treatment with plastic art. Furthermore, this study has great value in emphasizing the importance of plastic art as an effective intervention method in dyadic treatment.

The findings of this study seem to have high relevance for understanding the essence and uniqueness of the dyadic treatment in general, and the dyadic treatment with plastic art in particular, and also for the community of therapists that work in these areas of psychotherapy. **Limitations and Further**

Research

This study was limited in size with only ten mothers as participants. Therefore, it requires a wider examination for its conclusions to be better supported. The research dealt with the mother's perception looking backward upon the therapeutic process. This could cause biases which are hard to

evaluate. Therefore, there is a need for further research in which mothers would be interviewed before and after treatment, and even during the treatment itself.

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