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A Resource to Help Children Cope with Difficult Situations: Review of *A Journey in the Moon Balloon: When Images Speak Louder than Words*

Marcia R. Gardner

The first edition of the beautifully illustrated, imagery-rich, imagination-promoting story *The Moon Balloon* was published in 1995; it has been expanded with additional commentary and directions, and published in its current configuration in 2015. Joan Drescher, the author and illustrator, who is a fellow at the Lesley University Institute for Body, Mind, and Spirituality, describes herself as "an artist and a healer." The author emphasizes the importance and value of art, pictures, and imagery to help children express their feelings, share their thoughts with others, move toward healing and a sense of health, and re-gain a developmentally appropriate sense of control. She notes that the Moon Balloon story with related activities, together called the 'Moon Balloon Process,' has been used as an intervention with children and families in the context of pediatric chronic illness, and also with children and families who experienced emotional or other traumas induced by acts of violence, such as those at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, and Sandy Hook Elementary School on December 14, 2012, in Newtown, Connecticut. Research findings that support the effectiveness of this intervention to promote expression of feelings and reduce experiences of distress in children have been published (Rollins, Drescher, & Kelleheer, 2010, 2012).

This lovely book has four parts, clearly outlined in a detailed table of contents. Part I is the illustrated story, *The Moon Balloon*, that encourages children to use imagination and art to deal constructively with their fears, concerns, worries, wishes, and hopes. The author introduces and expands on nine feelings/experiences, which she conceptualizes as hot air balloons, beautifully and whimsically illustrated: butterfly, star, angry, tear, sun, peace, giggle, stress, and love balloons. Each balloon is associated with a set of labels to help children identify their feelings and with strategies to help children address them. For example, the butterfly balloon includes the labels "butterflies in your stomach," "anxious feelings," "fear," "throw out worry," and provides a place to write in "wishes" (Drescher, 2015, p. 14). Children are invited to consider some or all of the balloons (feelings): "You can choose to visit whichever balloon you like, depending on how you feel. Visit them again and again whenever you like" (Drescher, 2015, p. 15).

In addition to offering labels for feelings, pages in the story portion of the book provide for active involvement by the child. There are spaces for children to describe or draw about their thoughts and feelings. The Moon Balloon story itself is oriented to school-aged children who can understand the feeling concepts and related word labels. Some of the vocabulary used (e.g., anxiety, messenger, disappointment, permission) might be slightly sophisticated for younger school-aged children and will perhaps require additional explanation by the involved adult. Young teens might also benefit from the imagery and feeling label opportunities this story offers; development rather than age should be considered when determining how appropriate and useful an intervention the story would be for any individual child.

In Part II, *When Images Speak Louder than Words*, Ms. Drescher describes a variety of clinical cases from her professional experiences as Artist in Residence at Massachusetts General Hospital for Children ("Stories from the Kart"). In brief but compelling narratives, she offers multiple examples of the ways ill children (and their loved ones) benefited profoundly from opportunities provided by the author to marry art and imagination together: "For that very moment, all the worry and pain in the waiting room seems to be transformed by the power of a small boy who created art and believed in wishes" (p. 43).

Part III, *Sharing Art Activities*, offers directions for simple, relatively non-messy art activities for caregivers, parents, or others, and provides a list of supplies for each activity. Some of these activities are described in the case exemplars and are possible in clinical practice settings, such as...
clinics, day procedure units, or acute pediatric units. An example is the “Pain-Free Hat. . . used in procedures that you know will be painful. Focus on the stars or items hanging down from the bill of the hat.” (p. 63). The book ends with Part IV, Outreach and Resources, summarizing the use of the Moon Balloon process in a variety of contexts and listing additional resources related to art as intervention with children and families.

Pediatric nurses and other health care providers concerned about helping school-aged children cope with difficult situations, such as illness, pain, loss, grief, disappointment, or other challenge, will find this book valuable. It offers clinicians, as well as health professions students, a developmentally appropriate and evidence-grounded intervention to provide to children and to parents who yearn to help their children. It belongs on the bookshelf in every pediatric health care setting.

References

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