

## **What roles and functions does the calendar perform in the therapeutic relationship with children? Elizabeth Cohen**

This research focused on developing an understanding of the significance of the pictures and writing children put in calendar boxes to mark each session when they meet with a therapist or teacher, on the feelings evoked and the impact it had on their learning. The differences between educational and therapeutic sessions formed a particular focus. There is anecdotal evidence that children may enjoy the regularity and consistency of filling in the calendar. However, the functions a calendar holds for them in therapy and tutoring is not well understood and there is little research into the therapeutic use of the calendar and its effects.

The aim was to explore the use of the calendar in sessions by educational psychotherapists and by teachers, who may not use a calendar regularly, at all, or in the same way as therapists, when working with children who struggle with time, such as those with chaotic home lives. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three educational psychotherapists (one trainee, two with post-qualification experience of 2 and 20 years) and two teachers with 11-16 years' experience working in secondary schools with pupils with special needs. The researcher's own experiences of using calendars in therapy with children was included as data. The data from interviews and the researcher's experiences were analysed thematically and comparatively to understand the uses of the calendar and its functions.

All educational psychotherapists used the calendar. Teachers used calendars less regularly, although they often used similar items. Across the interviews it was found that the calendar in itself was not key in helping children to understand time but when used in relation to the therapist (or teacher) in a triangular relationship (Britton, 1989) it helped fulfil something of the mother's function for the infant '*as a need-fulfilling as well as a frustrating object*' (Hartocollis, 1983) and therefore instils in the child a sense of time as duration. Furthermore, the calendar seemed to serve as something akin to a transitional object, a way of monitoring, if not controlling, the presence or absence of the therapist, of representing the phases of time. '*...mother's presence represents present; her mental representation when apart becomes the past, and the anticipation of returning to her foreshadows the future.*' (Colarusso, 1979). Within the therapeutic relationship the calendar becomes a '*spatio-temporal bridge*' (Sabbadini, 2014), carrying both participants between time and space, helping to regulate the emotional and physical distance between them and enabling the process of individuation to take place.

This study highlights some of the benefits of using a calendar with children on a regular basis in order to help them understand time, deal with transitions, endings and loss and thereby promote emotional growth and learning.

### **References**

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