



Neal Brodsky

SomaticPerspectives.com March 2016



Neal H. Brodsky, LMFT uses expressive therapies to help adults, young people, and families create lives they love. He is licensed in Marriage & Family Therapy and certified in both Core Energetics and Embodied Couples Work (Exceptional Marriage Approach.) Neal was originally trained in Film and Television and is particularly adept in helping clients visualize and create profound and lasting change in life. He is one of 10 therapists from around the world contributing a chapter to the 2015 book "Deep Play: Exploring the Use of Depth in Psychotherapy with Children" and his work supports the "inner children" of adult clients to resolve past family difficulty and allow the flourishing of life tasks and relationships. Neal's U.S. offices are in New York City and Connecticut and he works with expat couples and families around the world through video-assisted online sessions along with his wife Judy Gotlieb, LMFT.

The *Somatic Perspectives* podcast explores somatic psychology, relational therapies, mindfulness and trauma therapies. It is edited by Serge Prengel, LMHC, who is in private practice in New York City.

The following is a transcript of the original audio. Please note that this conversation was meant to be a spontaneous exchange. For better or worse, the transcript retains the unedited quality of the conversation.

Serge Prengel: Hi, Neal.

Neal Brodsky: Hi, Serge.

Serge: So, maybe a good way to start is to ask you how you started doing what you're doing.

Neal: So, I would say about ten years ago, I was in the final stage of my studies in marriage and family therapy, and I was working with parents who were in the midst of divorce. Children began to be sent to me. And... what to do with children? I was a divorced and remarried dad. I'd experienced the pain of my own children in divorce, and, certainly, I had read your book and been affected by it, and realized that there was a possibility for my helping, not only parents, but also kids. My supervisor at the time said, "Oh! Do you know about sand play?" I said, "No." And she said, "Oh. Well, why don't you read these things." It was about Jungian work and symbols and children working very somatically and viscerally with symbols in the sand. And, so, I brought into my office a small sandbox, and began bringing in figures – dragons, dinosaurs, bears, mother, kangaroos with their babies in their pouches – and kids began to play. And, so, that was my first experience with the somatic in therapy with children. Then, later, I was in the midst of training in Core Energetics, and the body-centered piece entered in a deeper way, which I can talk to you about further.

Serge: Yeah, so how does the somatic piece enter in that perspective?

Neal: So, in looking at the body, I first have to think about myself and how I was affected somatically by my own family experience. I grew up in a household where my mother was quite sad – quite

functional and brilliant, and, also, depressed – and I sensed that. And, so, I know now, through my own work as a client in somatic therapy, that certain parts of my body began to close down – my breath became very shallow, my body became, at its extremities – in my hands – at times, with fear, cold. And I would say that there was tendency to move towards the cognitive and away from the body.

Serge: Mhm. Mhm.

Neal: And, so, in a sense, this work in healing – in the healing of children – is about, on one level, the healing of the inner child in me.

Serge: Mhm.

Neal: And, so, I found that working with children, I noticed very early on, that in family difficulties – such as divorce – the kids were literally stumbling into the room. And, in a sense, very ungrounded. And how could I address this, not only as a family therapist, but also someone trained in Core Energetics? How could I adapt some of what I knew to pain in children? And, so, initially, the work became, first of all, fun. My supervisor in the kids' work is Dennis McCarthy. Dennis is the creator of Dynamic Play Therapy. He invented things like “the hitting contest” – which is working with a cube and a bataka – and kids just hitting – hitting away – moving energy with a lot of joy and getting pleasure in the fact that they can hit. Dennis, who is the editor of the book *Deep Play: Exploring the Use of Depth in Psychotherapy with Children* where I have a chapter, that recently came out – Dennis says, “When a kid hits three hundred times, his or her life changes.” And the reality is I've seen that – I've seen kids get much more grounded. So the somatic entered dramatically.

Serge: So when you're talking about three hundred times, three hundred times in a row or three hundred times over a session, or three hundred times over months – (laughing) you know what sort of – just so we have a sense of what you're talking about here!

Neal: That's funny because it depends on the kid. Certain kids are very competitive and so it's hitting in the same session. Other kids want to play with the rules...but the reality is that the current rule is, in the same session, and the leading kid right now has about twelve hundred hits.

Serge: Wow. But, so, it's very striking because we're talking about the kids coming into the room – and stumbling into the room – and that sense of, in a way, shutting down and being pushed and being constrained. And, in contrast, you talk about the joyful hitting and, you know, at least three hundred times, which is, in a visual way, the strongest form of engagement and expression that you could have. So, I could see the transformation you're talking about there.

Neal: Yes, and... a key part of the transformation is kids being able to feel their own bodies. You know the cube is used – the foam cube – is used in even a more dramatic way with kids – and, now, we do this with adults too – kids really sort of smashing their bodies against the cube, bouncing off it, climbing on it, experimenting with how big they can be when they're standing on top of a cube, and it's just a joy to see kids begin to open up using some of these approaches.

Serge: And, so, maybe in the practical – I have the before scene, which is the kid, you know, being shepherded there by parents who are worried about them, and, you know, a little shut down and so on, and kind of almost reluctantly entering the space, and I have the after scene of the kid jumping

around, bouncing off the cube, or, you know, beating on the cube joyfully. So, what happens in between? What's the transition?

Neal: So, first of all, let me just say that lately I've been really impressed and grateful to people like Jacquie Carleton, who's the long-time editor of The International Association of Body Psychotherapy journal, and she's introduced me to the work of Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar, who's working, in the relational sense, with families. And what I want to tell you is what happens in between is a relationship with parents. I mean structured into this, now, with the work with children is meeting every four to six sessions usually with parents. Because the family system is a limiting...almost a "brake" on energetic expression.

Serge: Mhm.

Neal: And, so, what I'm basically saying is one of the critical parts of this is seeing how a child can fit back into the family system and how you can move transference in a positive way back into the family where the kid can actually be an engine of healing in his or her family.

Serge: Well, I think it's good you're giving some background around that, but, in a way, my question is much more down to earth about, you know...session one – kid comes in... how do you actually introduce that relationality in a way that shifts the kid from that shut-down mode or identified-patient mode into the joyful expression? And does it happen in session one all the time? What's the transition? How do you lead the kid in where they come from as a product of that family system? Into that new space?

Neal: I think this involves a certain amount of tracking – what Marcia and Brian Gleason talk about as "leading by following" in their embodied couples' work. And, so, in a sense, it's matching my own pace to that of the child. If a kid comes in, and the kid is playful, I will be playful. If the child likes to speak in voices and accents, I'll match that. If a – And the magic of this, of course, is we're not just in a talk therapy room. We're in a room where kids have a chance to use the language of play and use things that they would use in play – whether it's sand or clay or a big exercise ball they can bounce on. In sessions with kids, the youngest I'm working with now is seven...and the oldest right now is just about sixteen now...Core Energetics people use rollers. With young people, you're better off with an exercise ball. Most of the kids love to bounce on the ball, and that begins to move energy. So that's often session one and the thing which begins to loosen things up, and then you begin to see the kid coming out more as themselves in session.

Serge: Right. So, the ball, in a way, is the invitation to play and to start moving energy and feeling the energy.

Neal: Correct.

Serge: And then you follow it.

Neal: Yeah, and not only are you following – you're following, also, the motion of the child. So, what you see often – and I talk about this in the chapter I wrote in *Deep Play* – is this real, strong, forward momentum. Kids – young people – have a lot of energy, and, so, the forward momentum – which, in some ways, is ungrounded and joyful – is something which can be balanced over time with some calming movement. Whether that's breathing... I'll often jump with a child in session, and that's

bringing the energy down as opposed to moving forward – which I’m not interested in stopping – I’m just interested in balancing.

Serge: So the child comes with a lot of energy, and that energy is gonna be bouncy, is gonna be moving forward, and, so of course, you’re going to want to tap into it, but you’re going to also do something more grounding like the jumping up and down. So that there is that sense of that energy settling.

Neal: Yes, yes... Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar, in speaking and writing about...resonance – you know, in a sense, what I’m looking for is kids beginning to – young people – beginning to resonate with themselves.

And, so, there’s the calming aspect and there’s the charge aspect. So, again, as you would with adults, the work is entrainment – for a young person – in what’s possible in noticing that energetic cycle. That’s a concept for adults – energetic cycle. Kids feel it on a more visceral and body level – they’re more in touch, I think, at first, than adults who come into the room.

Serge: So what’s it like – How does, say a ten-year-old, experience this energetic cycle? Or a seven-year-old? Or a thirteen-year-old? I mean just to pick an age and to see how you notice that experience?

Neal: First of all, let me just say that I’m not looking for one particular pattern in each session. So the charge aspect of things may go on for a long time before calming can enter the picture. Because young people are often...exploding in some ways – they could be exploding verbally at parents, they could be hitting other kids at school. And...those actions are often very sudden and frightening to the parents, and, often, people in the schools. So, what I’m looking to do in the sessions is actually extend the charge – allow for an extended expression of charge – before I think about calming. Because there’s so much effort the other way in society and in the interaction of the kid with family and school and social structures that I want to give the kid, first, the feeling of freedom. Freedom first, calming later.

Serge: Yeah, so freedom first, calming later. You’re saving the energy. You’re not trying to constrain it or contain it at that time – although there is some degree of containment inherent in the therapy room because there’s a sense of safety about it.

Neal: Yes, and I use the classic Core Energetics idea – as you say to clients, “Don’t hurt me, don’t hurt yourself, and don’t hurt the room.”

Serge: Yeah.

Neal: I also use boxing gloves and a shield – and young people are punching, often, which they have a lot of fun with. They’re not going above the shield to hit me in the face – that’s pretty clear – although they like to come around the side and aim for my belly.

Serge: (Laughs).

Neal: Yeah.

Serge: And, so, then there’s time for the calming down.

Neal: Yes, and the calming – Often, young people are not breathing into their bellies...so that's a skill. I had a young person who came in – and there were reports of this child fainting in school – as a way to manage anxiety. He wasn't doing well in school, and when he was confronted by teachers, he would faint. This is a young person, who, over the course of a year, had done a lot of physical work in my office, and we, literally, in a very calm way, talked about whether there were alternatives to fainting. What could he notice in himself, as cues, that his body was about to shut down, temporarily, in response to stress? What could he notice in terms of his breathing? And, so, even the interaction – interaction between this young client and myself – had a very calming, almost hypnotic quality to it. And it had to do, also, with the trust and the relationship we built over time. So, he doesn't faint anymore and is doing a lot better. And, so, the calming can, also, at a certain point, involve not only the somatic – we go back to the consciousness piece and speech and its use in calming.

Serge: And, as you mentioned with the relationship, that's building trust.

Neal: Yeah, and let me just say that the – what's really been moving me lately is the building back of the relationship between parent and child. A child may be seeing me an hour a week...they're with the family and parent much longer. And... to build back trust in the parent-child relationship – I've been bringing parents, at times now, into the session with their children. And this can have a very strong effect – I'll give you an example: children often express and somatize the attachment disorders of their parents. And, so, in divorce, as one example, there's a real loss, and, so, in session, I've had a young person working in the sand with a parent – in a Sandplay box. I've had a young person who really missed their parent touch the parent's nose in a – and touch their own nose – you know, in a very beautiful gesture of love.

Serge: Mhm.

Neal: And it can often be that simple. The trust and expression of trust and the building of trust can happen in a body-centered way and a very powerful way.

Serge; Yeah. Yeah. So that moment, for instance, when you were talking about the child touching the parent's nose and their own nose – was it a moment where the parent was in the session at the same time?

Neal: It was. It was a parent who had a lot of grief because of the divorce process, and a parent who had been very busy in the work world, and... and just the sending of the child to therapy – initially, the child was the identified patient – was an act of faith, and one, which I felt as a therapist, merited my own response, which was to bring the parent into session with the child, so they could work out, in a somatic sense – and work through the loss and reconnect.

Serge: And, so, in a nutshell, what was that working out in a somatic way?

Neal: The face is the seat, in my view, of a lot of expression. The eyes, the mouth, and the senses – a lot of the senses – are in that segment of the body. And, so... to relate – I'm going to bring it back to the infant for a moment. I've been touched here by Wilhelm Reich's speaking about infants. The work that's been done in attachment with really young children – the baby – the really young child – is – has operative senses like smell, touch, which are very... powerful, and, so, I guess in a nutshell,

here, this was the multisensory experience. This child was close – physically close – to the mother, in session, they were both seated, they were – And the touch... was only sort of the tip of the iceberg in the sense that, I think, there was overall...a stronger energetic connection...an energetic field connection between the parent and child.

Serge; So what I'm hearing, a bit – and I want to double check if that's what you're talking about – is that because of the difficulty of the divorce, they could be next to each other, but, in a way, not see each other. And the work that happened there was that they were able to see and sense each other in a way that was not possible otherwise.

Neal: Yes, and in a way which – with – as children get older, there's almost a reluctance – and maybe it's a cultural reluctance – to touch and to hold. And the need for parental love continues even as the child gets older. Physical connection.

Serge: Mhm. Mhm.

Neal: So, that's, in a sense, what we see. I remind parents all the time that their child is not going to be this age forever and they may not be as willing to connect in this loving, physical way, And, so, do it now.

Serge: Yeah, so, literally, in a very practical way, we're talking about a sense of connection, and it's not abstract. A sense of embodied connection that's going to include the touching, the looking, the paying attention. That this is very concrete and, at the same time, very concrete.


Neal: It is, and I'm gonna also take a moment just to tell you a quick story about a slightly older kid. What I was just talking about was an interaction with a seven-year-old. With a ten-year-old, there was a situation where this was a child having difficulty in school and was very upset and came in one day crying. And the mother was in the waiting room, and I asked the mother to come in. And she held her child. Immediately he went to her, went into her arms. And they had this extended moment of care, which, again, here, a child getting older, maybe a parent not as comfortable with the holding, and maybe the child less comfortable, as they get older, with the holding, and, again, touch and connection.

Serge; Mhm. Mhm. Yeah, yeah... touch and connection. And, so, Neal, as we're coming to the end, I wanna just see if it feels right to end on that note of touch and connection or whether you might want to add something.

Neal: Hm... What we're ultimately speaking about is the freedom of children. The freedom of children to explore who they can be in the world, what contribution they can make in the world, and whether they can live lives which are pleasurable, open, and that make a contribution. Children live with very powerful images drawn from their families. There are many expectations placed on them in a society that pushes them to occupy certain roles in making money, in living certain lives that may have been prescribed within a family. Children need to – as I have needed to – discover what is right for them and what will – as simple as – what will make them feel good: what they like and what they don't like. And, so, ultimately, the work is about returning choice to children. Returning choice so that they can interact with their families, take what they like from their families and move forward with something that's joyful and powerful and that expresses who they are in the world.

Serge: Thanks, Neal.

Neal: Thank you, Serge.

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