

Providing Psychological Assessment Feedback to Children Through Individualized Fables

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We present an extensive rationale for why it is important that children receive feedback from a psychological assessment and how feedback can be provided in a developmentally appropriate and therapeutic way. We propose providing such feedback to children through individualized, original fables that are based on the assessment findings and tailored to the emotional capacities of the child and family. Stories and fables have long been utilized in psychotherapy with children but are fairly new in assessment. We review the history of fables and provide a rationale for the benefits of using them as a way to share assessment findings with children. A case study is used to illustrate how to develop a fable from test data, information provided from parents, and one's empathic understanding of a child. We then outline and illustrate a method—using the same case study—for presenting the fable to the child and parents together. Finally, we briefly provide four additional examples of fable construction. We hope that psychologists will be inspired to consider using fables to provide assessment feedback to children and their parents.

Keywords: psychological assessment, feedback, children, fables, parents

As psychologists who practice psychological assessment with children, we are committed to working in ways that children experience as respectful and responsive. In our minds, this in-

volves helping the child to understand the goals and nature of the assessment, inviting the child to ask questions that will be focused on during the assessment, and providing feedback to the child

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about the results of the assessment. With rare exceptions, we share results from the assessment with the child's parents and often provide mental health professionals and school personnel with a record of the pertinent results to guide decision making and inform subsequent interventions. We are responsive to the American Psychological Association's (2002) Ethical Standard 9.10 that "psychologists take reasonable steps to ensure that explanations of results are given to the individual or designated representative" (p. 1072). However, this admonition can seemingly be met by providing an explanation of results to a child's parents. Such an approach misses an important opportunity. Through experience and research, we have come to see the significant benefit of sharing some results from the assessment with a child. We maintain that this practice can be very therapeutic for children and that it enhances the positive changes that can follow an evaluation. In addition, in our experience with children (in contrast to adolescents), we have found that it is almost always beneficial to include parents or other primary caregivers in a child's feedback (discussed more fully below). In this way, feedback to the child also serves the parents and fosters family awareness and change.

Providing assessment feedback to a child is substantially different from providing feedback to the child's parents or teachers and is equally if not more difficult. Part of the challenge is that many of us feel unprepared to discuss test results with children because of a lack of training and a dearth of publications in this area, be they conceptual, empirical, or pragmatic. The discomfort many psychologists feel attempting child-directed feedback may also be related to a paucity of positive experiences providing feedback to children, as described by Becker, Yehia, Donatelli, and Santiago (2002):

When the psychologist conducts feedback interviews with the child . . . a certain discomfort and difficulty . . . often occurs . . . it is not rare to note that while the psychologist speaks, the child seems uninterested . . . Something important is being said about him that he nevertheless seems to ignore or deny, making the psychologist/client relationship seem nearly meaningless. (p. 119)

To the extent that such experiences are common, assessment professionals may have been left feeling ineffective and vulnerable in their relationship with the child and may have curtailed or eliminated altogether the practice of telling children about assessment results (focusing only on parent-directed feedback). Although the experiences described by Becker et al. (2002) can be very frustrating for assessors, we believe they reflect the underdeveloped emotional capacities and limited personal and systemic resources of many of the children who are brought for assessment. Most of these children have problems processing emotionally laden material in general, and when an assessor tries to talk to them directly about their problems and feelings, they are overwhelmed and tend to shut down or act out. This is not surprising given that even adult clients report that receiving assessment feedback is highly anxiety provoking (Finn, 1996a).

Given this practical dilemma—of wanting to give children feedback but their being easily overwhelmed—assessors need creative options. In this article, we describe a method of providing children with meaningful and developmentally appropriate feedback through the medium of an individualized fable written for the child, building upon the conceptualization presented in Tharinger et al. (in press).

Why Fables?

Myth, metaphors, fables, and fairy tales have long been used to communicate, construct meaning, and record culturally important messages. There is a long tradition of using fables to teach life's lessons (Schank, 1990). In addition, stories and fables have been used as an intervention or treatment technique in counseling and therapy with children for decades (Gardner, 1993; Mutchnick & Handler, 2002). Gardner developed the mutual storytelling technique as a way for children to reveal their emotional life through a self-created story and for the therapist to impart a symbolic message by adapting and resolving that story. Structured approaches such as Brooks' (1993) creative characters technique rely on metaphor to invent characters as a foundation for interactively creating and elaborating a story over time. In addition, professionally written published stories also have been used for therapeutic treatment in children. In this method, referred to as bibliotherapy, a story is chosen for a given child to foster self-awareness and insight into his or her individual circumstance or problem (Pehrsson & McMillen, 2005). For example, a young child with frequent temper tantrums might be presented with the book, *The Chocolate-Covered-Cookie Tantrum* (Blumenthal & Stevenson, 1997). Fables can be used in similar ways to communicate to children about assessment findings.

As far as we know, Fischer (1985/1994) published the first example of an individualized fable used to give assessment feedback to a child, drawn from an assessment of a six-year-old boy conducted by two of her graduate students. Fischer made the following comments about the fable, which was entitled, "The Jabby Jungle":

The fable . . . served many functions. It is not just a simplified report for a child, but also is a compact vivid reminder for adults of the report's themes. Experienced from a fresh perspective, those themes strengthen and enrich readers' [of the formal psychological report] understandings. The playful literary device . . . helps readers to appreciate [the child's and mother's] circumstances, without holding either to blame. In the fable each can see his or her responsibility for future comportment. The condensation provided by the fable encourages focused reflection and planning, while the imaginary quality encourages affective recognition. (p. 211)

This single example seems to have inspired a number of individuals to try this technique. Finn (1996b) reported that he adopted Fischer's approach after reading her book in the late 1980s, and by the early 1990s stories were routinely being written under his supervision for children receiving assessments at the Center for Therapeutic Assessment in Austin, Texas. Schuler (1997) participated in trainings at the Center for Therapeutic Assessment and also began using this technique. Purves (2005) began using feedback stories with children about the same time, inspired by both Fischer and Finn. Also, Fischer traveled to Brazil several times in the 1990s to do presentations on collaborative/phenomenological assessment. While there, she shared her and Finn's work with feedback stories. This led another group of assessors to begin using feedback stories for children, which they reported in a recent article (Becker et al., 2002). Finally, Tharinger learned of Finn's and Fischer's use of fables, and she and her graduate students started experimenting with this and other methods of giving written assessment feedback to children who were assessed in the

public schools and community agencies (Saunders & Tharinger, 2000). Thus, there is a little known 20-year history of using fables with children for feedback within the collaborative assessment paradigm. Yet another recent development is the use of feedback stories with adolescents and even adults (Engelman & Allyn, 2007).

Benefits of Using Fables to Provide Feedback

Our general rationale for providing feedback to parents and children has been outlined by Tharinger et al. (in press). In summary, we propose that parents can usually be assisted in constructing a new “story” about their child through a collaborative assessment that includes well-planned and sensitively organized feedback. This new way of viewing the child and his or her problems leads parents and others to respond to the child in more appropriate and compassionate ways, which in turn has a positive affect on children.

We also propose that children can be given a new story through developmentally appropriate, well-executed feedback. However, as discussed earlier, children often are overwhelmed by direct feedback, and particularly by feedback about their own and their family’s emotional and behavioral functioning. Using the realm of fable and fantasy can assist children in taking in the new story without overtaxing their mental and emotional capabilities or raising their defenses. Winnicott’s (1971) concept of “potential space” proposes that through fantasy and play, a child can try out new conceptions of the self without being overwhelmed.

We have also found that the use of fables helps children feel validated and understood, and that a successful fable seems to provide children with an intense experience of positive accurate mirroring. Our observations fit well with the theoretical underpinnings of narrative development through attachment experiences.

We have also seen that children are surprised and pleased that the assessor has written the fable just for them and are touched that the assessor knows them so well and is hopeful for their future. This reaction reflects the alliance between the child and the assessor, which as indicated earlier, helps create the space for the child being open to a new self-story. As discussed more fully below, parents are often invited to help write or revise the fable. This inclusion extends the child–assessor alliance to the parents. In almost all cases, the parents accompany the child to the session where the fable is shared and, as will be seen in the upcoming case example, may be chosen by the child to read the fable to the child, which also may have additional benefits.

Communication with children through fables can also diminish their shame. This is likely a result of the child’s being provided with a more compassionate and systemic new story explaining his or her feelings and actions (e.g., portraying the child character as unhappy, not “bad,” or as dyslexic, not “dumb”). The fable also can serve as a transitional object for the child to retain after the feedback session (Winnicott, 1953). The child may read the fable numerous times, allowing the child to better internalize the story and be soothed by it over time.

In our experience, many parents also find the fable to be a lasting, positive product from the assessment. The child may request that the parent read the story to them again and again, thus promoting the parent and child working together. We have also found that parents are grateful to have the story to refer to, as it

reminds them of the changes to which they have committed. And finally, children who enter therapy following the assessment may bring the fable to their therapist and utilize its message in their ongoing treatment, perhaps by even writing the next chapter that includes the therapist as a character in the story.

Constructing Fables for Children

Constructing a fable may seem like a daunting task for a psychologist, but we have found that it is not all that hard to accomplish. It is, however, both a clinical and a creative undertaking. Clinically, the assessor must understand and translate aspects of the assessment findings that are central to the parents and child’s concerns, are accessible to the child, are supported by the parents, and have the potential to move the family forward. This process involves both the science and the art of assessment. The assessor has many choices when developing the fable, including which issues to include, what metaphors will speak best to the child and family, and how to depict the next steps or solutions to the family’s problems and how simple or complex the fable can be. These choices are informed by the original reasons for the assessment; the developmental level of the child; selected assessment findings; and the assessor’s evaluation of the parents’ capacity to respond in a supportive, empathic manner to the child through the fable.

To be creative, assessors must free themselves from the ways of formal professional writing and access their imagination and resourcefulness. We have found that once the desire is there, fables flow quite easily and are enjoyable to construct. Inspired ideas about characters, setting, themes, and conflicts present themselves throughout the assessment sessions. We have found that children’s play and responses to projective tasks often are very rich sources. All is grist for the mill. Familiarity with children’s literature (e.g., fairy tales and novels about the character Harry Potter) is quite useful. The ability to write on a level that appeals to children in the age range from 5 to 11 years, adjusted yet for the individual cognitive and emotional capacities of the specific child, is needed. It is also helpful to create illustrations by drawing or using clip art from the Internet (although another productive option is to ask the child to illustrate the fable). The addition of images can be especially valuable for young children with limited attention, although in our experience the use of illustrations is experienced positively by children of all ages.

Constructing an individualized fable has the benefit of overcoming cultural impediments that may arise if generic fables are used. As highlighted by Kilpatrick, Wolf, and Wolf (1994), narratives and fables play an integral role in communicating and reinforcing cultural norms and values. It has been found that the cultural background of clients can affect their comprehension and interpretation of prefabricated fables and stories (Navarez, Bentley, & Samuels, 1998). Studies have shown that readers apply culture-based knowledge when recalling or reinterpreting prefabricated stories (Harris, Lee, Hensley, & Shoen, 1988; R. E. Reynolds, Taylor, Steffensen, Shirey, & Anderson, 1982). As a result, children from nontraditional Anglo-Saxon backgrounds may have difficulties understanding the intended message of generic fables.

Guides for Constructing Fables

From our collective clinical practice experience and the knowledge we gained using fables in a recent research study on the efficacy of therapeutic assessment with children (Tharinger, Finn, Wilkinson & Schaber, 2007), we have derived guides for constructing therapeutic fables. The following concrete suggestions and examples should be helpful to the assessor who is starting to construct therapeutic fables.

Create the individualized storyboard. The introduction of a fable typically incorporates elements of the child's and family's development and culture. The goal is to bring the story alive with details the child will recognize and be drawn to, thus enlisting the child's attention and imagination, and to create a somewhat veiled connection with the child's everyday reality. The child is the main character in the fable, often represented as an animal or a mythical creature that the child has identified as being his or her favorite or one he or she wishes to be. Important family members are included as additional characters (for example, the child unicorn lives in the forest with the mother and father unicorn and her big brother unicorn). The main character is usually given a name similar to the child's name (e.g., Marsha becomes Martha), a name that fits the animal depicted (e.g., Kobe the Koala Bear, Priscilla the Penguin), or a name for which the child has indicated a fondness (e.g., Emma may have told a story to a Thematic Apperception Test card about a young girl named Olympia who was kind and courageous, so the unicorn—Emma's favorite animal—in her story is named Olympia).

The setting for the fable is congruent with where the main character would live in reality or fantasy, such as animals in the forest or jungle, performing monkeys in the circus, or a pet dog with a family of humans. Cultural characteristics are integrated in the choice of characters and setting. For example, in a fable developed for a Native American boy, the main character was an eagle—a totem of his tribe—and another character was a horse—the boy's personal totem. In addition, the assessor typically is included in the fable and represented as a figure of wisdom and kindness (e.g., as a wise owl, sage, or respected tree in the forest). The parent characters usually seek assistance from the wise character (as occurred during the assessment).

Introduce the challenge. Following the introduction that sets up the scenario, the child's character is typically confronted with a challenge or conflict that is quite similar to one in the child's past or recent experience, and that in real life has been somewhat overwhelming. For example, in the fable, "*Kobe the Koala Bear*," Kobe experiences an unexpected separation and divorce in his koala family and feels angry and sad by the sudden demand to go back and forth between two trees instead of living in one. The focus of the challenge is based on one of the presenting concerns for the assessment, on the obtained findings, and on the level of change the family appears to be ready for at the time. The goal of a fable is to model a successful step or steps toward constructive change. The steps usually are suggested by the wise character in the story but are carried out by the parental characters.

Maximize effectiveness through awareness and collaboration. As previously mentioned, prior to completing the fable for the child, the assessor typically has provided feedback to the child's parents and has noted shifts the parents have made or are ready to make that indicate new support and understanding of their child. The

assessor's judgment of how able parents are to make such shifts is central in how big or little a challenge and step toward a solution is represented in the fable. The assessor also usually has a sense of how ready the child is to accept a new response from his or her parents. The parents' new understanding and renewed energy for their child and the child's new openness is subsequently conveyed in the fable. The response from the parent characters helps the child to see that he or she is not alone in the change process.

For example, during the parent feedback session the week before, "Kobe's" parents had agreed that the communication between their homes was not very good and had committed to put new methods in place. Thus in the fable, the koala parents work with Kobe to set up a communication system between the two tree homes so Kobe can check in with and talk to the parent he is not with at the time. This part of the fable was important because the assessment revealed that a major contributor to this child's being mad and sad was his despair at missing the other parent. In the fable, the koala family also agreed to work hard to ensure that the system would always be in good repair.

In some cases, the parents are invited to assist in writing the fable itself, thus enhancing the collaborative nature of the assessment. For example, "Kobe's" parents, upon reading the first draft of the story, had great ideas of what kind of system they would set up—and these details were incorporated into the story before it was presented to "Kobe." Thus, a fable can serve as an intervention for the parents as well, as it invites their participation and tries to incorporate key change mechanisms for the whole family. Parent input also maximizes acceptance of the story by the child as it helps the child not feel alone in the solution to his or her challenges.

Stay within the constraints of the real context and possibilities. It is important to emphasize that if parents are not capable of or willing to implement certain solutions, they should not be incorporated into a fable for the child. In cases where the next steps are unclear by the time the child receives feedback, the fable should indicate that the next steps and solutions are to be worked out, and (if it is true) that the parents have committed to work toward change. In an instance where the parents reject the suggestions coming from the assessment, the resulting fable likely will not reflect any changes in the family, but may indicate that the central character will learn new ways to handle challenges by drawing on new internal resources or by seeking support outside the family. This more autonomous solution must carefully take into account the developmental features of the child and be careful not to overestimate what the character in the story should be taking on (and thus the child). Finally, the outcome of the assessment of a child, and thus the story, may not centrally involve the parents. The child may have a newly discovered learning disability and most of the changes will be occurring at school (although the parents certainly have a role in integrating this new awareness and responding accordingly). Whatever the changes may be, they can be represented metaphorically in the story. By the end of the assessment, the assessor should have some idea of what shifts are hoped for in the weeks and months to come. With a little creativity, just about any situation can be incorporated. For example, a foster home can be portrayed as a safe haven on a frightening journey, and a new medication for inattention can be written as a magic potion that helps the child focus. What is important is to write the

fable in a way that reflects the child's reality, engenders hope, and provides direction about next steps.

Case Example

Caleb was a 9-year-old Caucasian boy referred by a local child guidance center for a psychological assessment. His mother and father had never been married but had co-parented throughout Caleb's life and currently were experiencing significant conflict about how to raise him. In addition, Caleb's father had recently married and had a 1-year-old daughter. Caleb's mother was single, and Caleb's primary residence had always been with her.

The questions that Caleb's parents posed in the initial meeting, which provided the principal focus for the assessment, reflected their disagreements about whether Caleb had an attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and would benefit from medication, and whether his increasingly frequent aggression toward other children was intentional or out of his control (e.g., Does Caleb have ADHD or is it something else? Why does he find it difficult to sit still? What can we do to help Caleb focus more at school? What makes Caleb angry?) These questions guided the choice of assessment tools and served as an organizing structure for eventual feedback to the parents.

Caleb took part in an extensive assessment that included neuropsychological testing (especially in the area of attention and memory), as well as self-report and performance-based measures of anxiety, depression, affective management, and self-esteem. The integration of all these measures strongly suggested that Caleb did not have a neurologically based attention deficit disorder. He could become disorganized and impulsive at times, but this behavior coincided strikingly during the assessment with his reflecting on his family situation and how he felt about his relationships with his parents. In conjunction, the testing and our observations suggested that Caleb was experiencing significant sadness and stress and that he had extremely low self-esteem. Additionally, Caleb's ability to name, manage, and contain strong feelings did not appear to be as well-developed as it should have been for his age, with the result that he became easily overwhelmed when emotionally aroused. When affectively aroused Caleb would fidget, have problems concentrating, and/or become angry and aggressive. These findings indicated that Caleb's attention and behavioral difficulties were mainly accounted for by intrapsychic and interpersonal factors.

Throughout the assessment and multiple meetings with the family, the problematic nature of Caleb's relationships with his parents became highly apparent. Caleb's father was emotionally constricted in his interactions with Caleb. He became obviously uncomfortable with and thus avoided any discussions of emotions. Caleb's mother, in contrast, was emotionally demanding and extremely intrusive in her interactions with him. It also became apparent that his mother was moderately depressed and substantially unresolved about her relationship with Caleb's father. She also was struggling with a recent ending of a significant relationship. She consistently insisted on telling Caleb how his misbehavior hurt her feelings, inevitably contributing to his becoming emotionally overwhelmed. By the end of the assessment, it had become clear to us that Caleb's parents had limited emotional capacity to respond to his needs for affective mirroring and support.

Various pieces of information from Caleb's assessment were woven together to construct a feedback fable that was personally relevant and informative and that gave an accurate and compassionate depiction of why Caleb struggled as he did. The resulting story, "Cameron the Camel," included a title character that was based on one of Caleb's drawings during the assessment. Caleb had sketched a one-of-a-kind five-humped camel who always wore running shoes. When asked about his drawing, Caleb said that the camel lived in the desert all alone and was always running. The camel did not have any friends and only talked with the cacti. Caleb also spontaneously mentioned that he was unsure how the camel would put on his running shoes without any help, which seemed to be a depiction of his own longing for more support.

In our fable, "Cameron the Camel," the humps in Caleb's original story were used to depict Caleb's being flooded with feelings, but the symbolism for being overwhelmed was changed from extra humps to "big, heavy" humps that were overly full of emotions. In the fable, all camels used their humps as a place to store their light and happy feelings as well as their heavy feelings, such as sadness and worry. Cameron the Camel would become uncomfortable when his humps became full and heavy, leading him to fidget and move around excessively. Also, as in Caleb's real life, Cameron the Camel had two families. Cameron's mother lived at the Watering Hole, which was symbolic of Caleb's mother being his primary caretaker. Cameron's father lived at the Great Cactus, which was intended to depict the father as impressive and strong but not an obvious source of comfort or nurturance. The following excerpt from "Cameron the Camel" contains the introduction to Caleb's feedback fable:

Once there was a young camel named Cameron who lived in the desert. Cameron was a kind-hearted camel and was very funny. He was also one of the strongest and fastest of all the young animals. Many of the desert animals only had one family, but Cameron the Camel had two families. Cameron's mom lived by the Watering Hole and Cameron's dad lived by the Great Cactus. Cameron loved his two families, and he loved spending time at the Watering Hole and at the Great Cactus.

Because Caleb was active in basketball and because he often referred to basketball during the assessment, Cameron the Camel was presented as an active young camel that enjoyed playing camel-ball. In the story, Cameron also had difficulties completing his reading and math assignments at school (Caleb had recently been losing his recess time at school due to not completing these assignments). Losing recess time was presented in the story as one of the challenges that Cameron the Camel faced that made his humps feel heavy.

To address Caleb's anger and aggression, which surfaced consistently in his test responses, the feedback fable included themes of Cameron the Camel becoming unintentionally destructive (e.g., accidentally breaking a lamp) when his heavy humps caused him to fidget. This type of benign physicality rather than overt aggression was included in the fable because Caleb had a tendency to become emotionally overwhelmed when confronted directly with his own propensity for aggression. For example, he became distressed and overwhelmed during the assessment while telling a story of a boy who became aggressive because of having "a bad day at school." The following excerpt illustrates how these themes were incorporated:

One day at the Great Sahara Elementary School, Cameron was worried about his math test. Cameron was so worried that his humps felt very, very heavy. He tried to concentrate but the heaviness in his humps was making them very sore. He fidgeted around and tried to get comfortable but they kept bothering him. Cameron had a hard time sitting in his chair. He didn't finish the test in time so his teacher made him stay inside during recess. Cameron felt sad and his humps felt even heavier.

When he got back to the Watering Hole after school, Cameron was exhausted from carrying around heavy humps all day. He was playing in his room when his mom came in and asked him to clean up his room before dinner. Cameron tried to clean but he couldn't concentrate because his humps were heavy and sore and itchy. Cameron was playing camel-ball in his room trying to distract himself from his humps . . . and he accidentally knocked over his lamp.

His mom came in and saw the lamp and the mess. She said, "Cameron, why are you playing camel-ball? I asked you to clean your room and now you broke the lamp I gave you." Cameron said, "I'm sorry, Mom. I didn't mean to." He really meant it. He felt so bad that he disappointed his mom, and his humps grew heavier still.

In order to create a resolution in the story that would provide Caleb and his family with a sense of hope, a wise character was introduced. Its purpose was to provide empathic understanding and guidance and was symbolic of the role that the assessor played in helping the family. This character was named the Understanding Tree and was based upon a tree that Caleb had drawn during the assessment.

The parents in the fable were each advised by the Understanding Tree to behave in ways that would decrease Caleb's emotional overwhelm and provide support for him. The mother camel was advised not to add to his heavy feelings by forcing Cameron to deal with hers (i.e., telling him that breaking the lamp hurt her feelings) and instead to spend time with Cameron and praise him in a way that was nonthreatening and nonintrusive. The father camel was instructed to spend time with Cameron and to provide praise and encouragement more consistently. The parents were each given an opportunity through the fable to experience how they might help Caleb by relating with him in a more compassionate, empathic manner. The following excerpt depicts the advice that was directed at the mother.

When Cameron was at the Watering Hole that week, his mom again asked him to clean up his room before dinner. Cameron's humps were heavy and sore and again he couldn't concentrate on cleaning. He ran around and played camel-ball in his room trying to distract himself from his sore humps. His mom came to check on him and saw him playing.

She was just about to tell Cameron that she was upset with him when she remembered what the Understanding Tree had told her. It had said that Cameron might sometimes have a hard time paying attention and following directions if his humps were too full of unhappy feelings and that he might need some time when he didn't have to think about feelings at all. She realized that if she got upset it would only make Cameron's humps heavier. She said, "Cameron, why don't we go outside for a few minutes and play camel-ball together before dinner?" Cameron loved camel-ball and he said "Okay!" Cameron and his mom played camel-ball and his mom tried her best to help Cameron get his mind off of great big heavy feelings. She talked about how good he was at camel-ball and smiled every time he scored. Cameron felt better after their game and his humps felt a lot lighter.

After dinner he cleaned his room and his humps didn't distract him as much as they had before.

The next excerpt depicts the advice that was directed to the father, as well as the fable's resolution:

Cameron went to the Great Cactus to visit his dad that weekend. Cameron was in the living room running around again. He yelled to his dad, "Hey dad, watch how fast I can run!" Cameron's dad was just about to tell Cameron to finish his reading and then go outside and run, when he remembered what the Understanding Tree had told him. It had said that he could help Cameron get rid of some of his great big heavy feelings just by spending time with him and letting Cameron know how proud he was. Cameron's dad said, "You're a super-fast runner, Cameron! Let's go outside and run together!" Cameron and his dad ran around outside and his dad told Cameron what a great camel he was. Cameron felt happy and his humps felt a lot lighter. When they went inside, Cameron's dad helped him with his reading. Cameron was a great reader. His dad thought so, too.

That night as Cameron was falling asleep, he thought about the reading test he would have at school on Monday. He was a little bit worried about the test, but his humps were only a little heavy. He thought about how his parents had helped him by understanding how sometimes his humps were bothered by unhappy feelings. They helped him learn how to get his mind off of great big heavy feelings and they gave him some happier, lighter feelings to fill his humps with. Cameron imagined himself doing well on his reading test and finishing in time to go to recess with all the other animals. And his humps felt better.

Presenting the Fable

General Suggestions

We suggest that the assessor start by thanking the child for participating in the assessment and summarizing the child's strengths. Next, it is time to introduce the fable and emphasize how special it is. The child is told that the assessor—together with the parents, if that is the case—wrote the fable particularly for the child. The child is then invited to choose who will read the fable: the assessor, a parent, or the child. The choice of reader often is significant, as illustrated below with Caleb.

As the fable is read, it is important for the assessor to monitor the child's reactions as well as those of the parents. Hopefully, the child will react with interest and excitement and the parents with support. However, the assessor also should be prepared for a less ideal response. Although a rare occurrence, and even though the fable was thoughtfully constructed to prevent such a reaction, the child may react negatively or become overwhelmed. In that case, we suggest that the assessor take a break from the fable, explore the basis for the child's reaction, and enlist the parents' help in calming the child before proceeding. The assessor can use the information he or she has learned about the child and the parents through the assessment to identify what is upsetting the child and to guide the parents in comforting their child.

After the fable has been read and reactions expressed, we suggest that the assessor invite the child to modify it if he or she wishes. This gives the child an active role with the fable and a chance to impart his or her own sense of what is needed. Many children like the story just the way it was written, but others may choose to change some details such as the name of a character, or the color of an animal's fur. We suggest always asking if the child

likes the ending (i.e., the resolution) of the story. In our experience it is unusual for a child to ask for major changes but if that occurs, it is very instructive. (The few times this has happened, a child had a different idea of how the fable should end.) The presentation of the fable typically concludes the assessment process with the child and the parents (although in many cases we suggest a follow-up check-in 3 months later). Because the fable may serve as a transitional object, the assessor may wish to remind the child that he or she can read it, or ask the parents to read it, whenever he or she wishes.

Case Example

In the case of Caleb and his family, the parents were not asked to collaborate in the creation of the story. This was due mostly to logistical constraints, as communicating with the two parents was difficult given their very conflictual relationship. Caleb was presented with the story and the assessor explained its creation and purpose. Caleb was told that the story was created just for him and he chose his father to read the fable. The assessment team was impressed with the father's engagement in and obvious enjoyment of the story. He was animated while he read it and looked up regularly to see Caleb's reaction. Caleb paid close attention to the story and smiled while it was being read. His mother also smiled often at Caleb when she recognized parts of the story that referred to specific events from their life together. When his father read a part about the camel having trouble finishing a test and having to stay inside at recess, Caleb whispered to his mom, "That sounds familiar!" After the story was read, Caleb's mother asked him if he liked it. He smiled and enthusiastically nodded his head *yes*. When given the opportunity to change parts of the story, Caleb declined to change anything. He also said that he intended to illustrate the story when he got home.

The fable was received positively by Caleb and his mother. Furthermore, it was important that his father read it to him. The experience of reading the fable gave the father an opportunity to understand Caleb's experience in a more tangible way than if someone had simply explained to him what Caleb was feeling and why he engaged in certain problem behaviors. The story provided the father with the opportunity to experience things from Caleb's perspective, which in this case appeared to lead to an increased understanding and empathy for Caleb's behaviors. Likewise, Caleb had the opportunity to experience his father as an empathic and understanding figure by hearing him read aloud this compassionate interpretation of the causes underlying Caleb's behaviors.

Although we could not assess the impact of the fable separate from the complete assessment and other events that may have occurred concurrently with the timing of the assessment, we can provide some data on how Caleb viewed his own functioning prior to the assessment and one week after receiving feedback with the fable. On the Behavior Assessment System for Children, Second Edition, Self-Report of Personality—Child (C. R. Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2004), Caleb reported a decrease in symptoms that averaged an effect size of .6 across the four clinical composites (Inattention/Hyperactivity, Internalizing Problems, School Problems, and Emotional Symptoms Index) and an increase of .5 effect size on the composite that measures adaptive functioning (Personal Adjustment). In terms of family changes, the father let us know

that he and Caleb had started doing activities together, such as going fishing and attending a baseball game.

Additional Examples of Fable Construction

In Table 1 we have provided four additional summaries of child fables. We have also briefly described the initial presenting concerns and assessment findings.

Summary and Conclusions

Discussing the results of a psychological assessment directly with young children can be a daunting and often unsuccessful process. Direct feedback can be emotionally overwhelming for many children, and little has been published about how to provide assessment information to children in ways that are developmentally appropriate and that can help children understand their own and their families' problems in living. Through our experience, we have found that individualized fables can be a useful and powerful method for providing assessment feedback to children, and we have provided assessors with a framework from which to develop fables. As discussed, fables and other forms of metaphors and storytelling have a long history in psychological work with children and appear in most cultures. They are used as an indirect but extremely effective method for delivering messages and fostering change and hope. In addition, play therapy techniques often incorporate metaphors as a method of communicating complex psychological concepts to children. Thus, the incorporation of fables into the assessment feedback process seems a very natural fit.

Fables provide a safe and supportive modality for a child and family to consider new ways of being and to further the new understanding that has been revealed through the assessment. Although written as a metaphor, most children readily recognize that the fable is written about them. Using a combination of clinical skills and creativity, the fable incorporates elements from the assessment provided or inspired by the child and portrays the family in a hopeful light. Therefore, the fable allows the child to feel that he or she has been heard and understood through the assessment and presents the child and the family with new ways of viewing their situation as well as possible next steps to be taken. By incorporating elements from the child's life and culture, with the parents as collaborators, the fable serves simultaneously as a feedback mechanism, an agent of change, and a transitional object. These benefits apply to the child and, in many instances, to the parents as well.

We encourage assessment professionals to try their hands at writing fables for children by using the guide we have provided and our examples as inspiration. With a bit of imagination any child, family, and life situation can be conveyed in a compassionate and optimistic manner. Further, the process of writing the fable and presenting it to the child can be incredibly rewarding. Students and other professionals trying this method for the first time have reported that they have never understood the results of a psychological assessment as well as when they tried to summarize it in a meaningful fable. Writing a successful fable requires assessors to "get in the shoes" (Finn, 2007) of a child and family and to integrate what they have learned about the dilemmas of change faced by the family and what next steps would be feasible and useful at a particular point in time.

Table 1
Examples of Child Fable Construction

Parents' assessment questions	Assessment findings	Child fable
How can we help Nate so his ups and downs aren't so extreme? Should we take his threats of suicide seriously? Why is he so despairing? What is going on when he is defiant about going to his medical exams?	Nate has been traumatized by some of the invasive medical procedures used to treat his cancer. He easily gets flooded by emotion and re-traumatized. Nick's parents are uncomfortable with his feelings because of their own associated trauma.	<i>Nick and the Magic Saucer</i> Nick's mother presents him with a magic cup, into which he can pour his frustration, anger, and strong feelings. When he voices his concern about the cup not being large enough for all of his feelings, his parents let him in on their secret: a magic expanding saucer (their support), designed to hold any feelings that overflow out of the cup (to contain Nick's emotions).
Why is Allen having anger outbursts? How can we diffuse them and ward off his impulsive thoughts?	Allen is emotionally constricted and his poor coping skills lead to impulsivity. His eruptions of anger spread to the whole family, which then overwhelms him more.	<i>Alex the Angry Shark</i> Alex furiously storms into his room after being teased by bully sharks on his walk home from school. By responding to his anger with understanding and a game of sharkball, Alex's parents are able to avoid an escalation of heated feelings throughout the household and provide the support Alex needs to manage future teasing.
Does Casey feel like a part of a family? Does Casey feel that he fits in? Does Casey feel that we put too much pressure on him? Is what we're doing helping him? If not, what can we do differently?	Casey feels inadequate and has low self-esteem. Additionally, his long-term depression and internalization of previous negative experiences make him overly worried about disappointing others.	<i>Chris and the Foggy Glasses</i> Chris' wizard robes are weighed down because even when something goes right, he can only see what goes wrong through his glasses, which have been cursed by the Foggy Spell. His parents seek advice from the headmaster wizard, who discovers the spell and provides the secret to breaking it: reflective and empathetic "special magic words."
Why can't Walter concentrate on his school work? Why doesn't he obey us? Why can't he sit still for even 5 minutes? Should we put him on medication like his teachers want?	Neuropsychological testing shows moderate ADHD, deficits in executive functioning, and mild fine motor problems. Personality testing shows Walter is experiencing lots of frustration and feels badly about himself.	<i>Wally, the Wiggly Wallaby</i> Wally's parents and teachers are frustrated because he can never sit still, doesn't do his home work, and is always wiggling and jumping around. They consult a medicine man, who advises them and gives Wally a special medicine that helps him be calmer. Wally's parents apologize that they thought he was willfully defying them, rather than having a problem he couldn't control.

As we continue to refine and research this method, we hope other assessors and researchers will do so as well. The usefulness and potential of these techniques are limited only by the skills and talents of those who employ them. For example, several of Tharinger's students wrote rap songs and poems in addition to stories, and these were well received by the children they assessed. Finn and a colleague once wrote a simple play to give feedback to a developmentally disabled girl and then engaged the family and child in acting out the story at the end of the assessment. The family later reported that the girl was delighted with the play and often asked the family to re-enact it. In fact, the possible ways of giving meaningful, empathically attuned feedback to our clients are endless.

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