

## Using PhotoTherapy To Help— A Study of Debbie



Photo by Brian Maluta.

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How people respond to photographs, or what and how they choose to photograph, can tell us as much about individuals as what they are looking at. This is a fundamental premise of PhotoTherapy—a set of techniques that helping-professionals can use in therapeutic work with clients.

Obviously, therapy is serious business; however, many concepts can be borrowed and applied in more casual settings, such as educational and social situations. For example, in the following study, aspects of PhotoTherapy play an important role in helping Debbie (a pseudonym), whose program was developed in concert with her school teachers and counselors. Programs like Debbie's could well be generalized to benefit many types of children with various difficulties, as long as the borderline between helping and therapy is respected.

Debbie is a young native Indian who, because of her special needs,

has spent most of her life in Vancouver in a Caucasian foster home. She was born deaf, and her parents could not cope with her numerous medical problems which resulted from burns suffered in a house fire when she was two years old. The emotional trauma of separation and hospitalization was so severe that Debbie would not trust or relate to anyone for years, and even today she is extremely cautious when demonstrating her feelings or forming relationships. Not only is she caught between Indian and Caucasian cultures, but also, because of her increasing ability in speech and speech reading, she is in a state of transition between the deaf and hearing world.

Moreover, she is often confused by differing realities and the expectations of those around her, especially those coming through nonverbal channels. She has trouble showing proper emotional affect in some situations and has difficulty communicating to others. All in all, she is acutely aware of being different no matter where she goes.

I have been using photography with her to try to help. Taking my 35 mm camera, I go with her for camaraderie and comparisons (when desired).

We have gone out to explore the world around us through *her* eyes. Then we have examined the prints she has made with her simple camera, and discuss why she chose to take the pictures she did. We have known each other for several years, and the projects described below have been carried out at different stages in our work. Their results have helped her immensely, due to her own hard work as well as mine. Most important, she has commented lately that she feels more like a "whole, single person, not five or ten different people" and likes being with others a lot more than in the past.

We have done many projects, sometimes overlapping or interweaving them. Occasionally we

match her photos with mine on the same subject. This helps her understand graphically the concepts of selective perception, ethnocentrism, and personal filters—things like, "People can see the same thing differently; there may be more than one 'right or wrong'; and someone can be different and still be O.K." These are concepts that I would have had no way of telling her in words or sign language, because her level of abstract thinking simply could not grasp them.

Many exercises have helped her show me the world as she perceives it. Others have focused on exploring such topics as sex roles, emotional affect, and so forth. Activities have ranged from photographing things and people we encountered, to having her pose (or tell me how to 'properly' pose) into 'appropriate' faces and body postures to fit words we wrote on cards such as 'happy,' 'nervous,' 'good mother,' and so on. The way she picked to demonstrate such things provided rich information about her inner self, and revealed ideas we never could have arrived at through conversation.

In returning to her village for the first time in years, she put together an album of her life in the city. This served many purposes. It conveyed information about her well-being to her parents, gave them a beginning for communication by her pointing to pictures and then things in the immediate environment while she visited, and, most importantly, gave her a sense of pride and identity with which to meet them.

Also, she came back from that visit with photos of village life that were added to her book—photos of her relatives and their world, which help her weave together her present life with her past and her roots—photos which also help her explain in tangible form to others (and herself) her complicated family relationships.

Her snapshots offer frozen moments with her family that she can study in



manageable amounts and in private. The pictures can help her form attitudes and feelings about her folks. Also, the images help her comprehend that people and places exist concurrently in time and space, and how to grasp her position in relation to each.

By bridging the gap between worlds and assisting the communication process, PhotoTherapy has given Debbie more of a hold on who she is. By analyzing pictures and their implications, she can see her own role and responsibilities in the process of events, and that analysis can help her learn how to change any parts she does not like.

These are but a few examples of my work with one child. There are many techniques of PhotoTherapy across varied applications. They are special lessons in interactive communication—an attempt to notice cultural consensus as to what is being expressed, what is going on, and how to notice it all 'correctly' ... lessons in learning how oneself and others perceive, judge, and try to represent things for understanding. Persons of any age will be much less defensive discussing a neutral object, such as a photograph, while leaving themselves somewhat more protected until they feel comfortable enough to open up further. But the learning does inexorably take place as perceptions are molded *IF* that is the goal (one should be very careful about this), through more directed assignments.

Photographs of Debbie have helped her get an external correlation of her



self-image. As she simplifies by placing a frame around things, she can slow the busy world around her into manageable segments, stilling them for deeper analysis. She has honed her concentration and sensitivities by practicing seeing the usual things in unusual ways, expanding her creativity by tying her photographs together for visual story, fantasy, and personal meanings. The added confidence and improved self-perception has spread to her schoolwork and interpersonal communica-

tion. She is feeling for the first time that she is an integral part of the world.

*Pictures accompanying this article were taken by Judy Weiser, except as noted.*