Displacement Techniques

Indirect forms of communication; such as puppets, dolls and dollhouses, action figures and drawing; can be used to display one’s emotions. A story that is tailor-made for a particular child can also be read.

1. Represent the observable signs of emotional distress. This can be crying, fighting, refusing favorite foods, being uncooperative at home, having trouble with schoolwork, demeaning or avoiding a parent, and so forth.
2. Comment about how upsetting the observable behavior is to the displacement figure which is used to represent the child.
3. Represent and verbalize the underlying emotional pain or internal distress that the displacement figure is experiencing.
4. Correct verbally by demonstrating in the displacement any misperceptions or misunderstandings (based on fantasies, beliefs, or internal conflicts) the child may have that could be contributing to the child’s emotional distress.
5. Represent the conflicted feelings as acceptable.
6. Portray alternative ways of expressing and coping with conflict.

Do this at times when the child is not upset and keep doing it several times a week.

Example:

Johnny’s parents are divorced and do not get along at all. There is a lot of arguing and fighting. Johnny is wetting his pants at school and bed at night, picking fights with other youngsters and having nightmares for nearly four months.
Johnny’s mother decided to use toy soldiers. She picked out three figures – two of them were generals and one was a sergeant, all in the same army.
1. Generals argued over what the sergeant should do (one told him to go and march, the other said to be on the lookout for the enemy. She had them argue back and forth).
2. Mother said “the sergeant got so upset about the arguing that he wet his pants.” Then she had the sergeant push the generals around and comment on how upset he was about his own behavior. “The sergeant felt awful about wetting his pants and picking on his own men. Big guys fell terrible when they do those things.”
3. Mother said, “the sergeant is mad at his generals for fighting and is also scared that they may get so angry that they will start beating each other up and hurting each other. Sometimes he even worries that he started getting them mad at each other because they’re arguing about what he should do.”
4. Mother then said, “Generals are sort of like parents. Sometimes they get along and sometimes they don’t. When generals fight it isn’t because of the soldiers and when parents fight, it isn’t because of their kids. Even when parents yell and get real mad at one another, no one really gets hurt. Everyone is very safe. After awhile, the fighting stops.”
5. She ended by saying, “all boys, even five and six year olds who are big and brave, get very scared when their parents fight. They worry about someone getting hurt and feel bad because maybe they caused the fighting. But boys don’t cause the fights between grownups and no one will get hurt.”