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Peter Wilkins

Norwich Family Solutions Team, peterwilkins@msn.com

Mark O. Donovan

University of Wollongong, mdonovan@uow.edu.au

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Abstract

The following conversation describes a narrative means of uncovering (or 'deconstructing') some of the invisible forces that undermine parents' capacities in caring for their children in preferred ways. In the authors' experience, parents can be hugely resourceful and provide a clear account of what they 'should' be doing, yet seem unable to act upon their own good advice – it is as though an external agent, named below as 'Virus X', prevents them from being the parents they would like to be. Through naming this external agent, identifying its influences and noticing parents' acts of resistance in the face of these influences, antidotes to Virus X can be developed. This paper describes the development of such an approach within a child behaviour management group. In keeping with the playful approach encouraged by narrative therapy, the authors of this paper join forces to act as investigative journalists in exposing Virus X to the readers.

Keywords

conversation, subversive, force, malevolent, outing, x, virus, lives, parents

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A Conversation With Virus X: Outing a Malevolent and Subversive Force in Parents' Lives

Peter Wilkins and Mark Donovan

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Keywords: Narrative therapy, parenting groups, child behaviour management, externalising problems, parental cognitions, therapeutic metaphor.

PW = first author, MD = second author, VX = Virus X, P1 and P2 = voices of two parents interviewed one year on from first being introduced to Virus X. [The interview begins with the interviewers deliberately encouraging Virus X to brag about its accomplishments.]

PW: For readers who don't know you, could you say a few words by way of introduction?

VX: No.

PW: How come?

VX: You want them to know — you tell them.

PW: You have something to hide?

VX: Yeah loads, don't you? Doesn't everybody?

PW: Your choice then — I thought you might like to say a little about yourself — but if you don't want to ...

VX: OK, OK, if you insist. Hmm, where should I start? Well, I suppose I should let your readers know that I've been around for a *long* time. In fact, I pretty much arrived at the same time as the neocortex. Once you 'humans', as you call yourselves, had finally developed a capacity for abstract thought, and created languages that could incorporate all sorts of evaluations and interpretations, you'd unwittingly created the fertile ground for me to breed within.³ You see, I can twist your so-called 'logical thinking' to suit my own ends ...

PW: And what are your 'own ends' then?

VX: I want to survive — survive and thrive you might say — just like you really; we're not as different from one another as you might like to think. I deal in emotions, behaviours and cognitions — I favour the negative extremes of course — guilt, shame, anger, envy, fear, blame, doubt. These seem to get your amygdalas nicely fired up — all that lovely cortisol promotes such tremendous parental incapacities.

Don't get me wrong though, I'm all for parents' rights. The world has gone mad with children's rights, and parents aren't able to exercise a bit of good old-fashioned parental authority without some do-gooder jumping down their neck.



Peter Wilkins, Assistant Team Manager, Norwich Family Solutions Team, 47 Netherwood Green, Norwich, Norfolk NR1 2JF, UK; petergwilkins@msn.com; Ph:+ 44 (0)1603 224 323.



Mark Donovan, Clinical Supervision Coordinator, Northfields Clinic, University of Wollongong NSW 2522.

PW: What does this parental authority look like?

VX: When a kid does the wrong thing (which is not so bad really), I like to remind parents of their rights. I might say, ‘Are you going to let them get away with that?’ or, ‘They’re just doing that to wind you up — sort them out’. A quick cuff behind the ear usually does the trick, or a really good bollocking. I like to see parents show some negative emotions — it’s all part of my ‘next generation’ rolling training program. To date, many outstanding Virus-X-fluent child graduates have been churned out!

PW: What do you suggest if the child throws it back in the parent’s face, by laughing, shouting or hitting back?

VX: Between ourselves, I think the kid’s got a bit of gumption and I’m all for it. I generally advise parents to up the ante — ‘get a bigger stick’.

PW: And if that doesn’t work?

VX: Bigger stick.

MD: And if that doesn’t work?!

VX: Bigger stick — or cut and run — some parents don’t have the fight in them and tend to bottle it before things get really interesting.

MD: What do you think children learn from this?⁴

VX: What they learn is to listen to me — so very carefully. Cute, isn’t it? I like to tell them they are no good and their friends and family are no good and that their friends and family think that they are no good. I call this the ‘holy bad trinity’ — ‘Wholly’, get it? Sometimes I convince them to take up crime or drop out of education or work. I like to advocate addictive behaviour — drugs, alcohol, gambling, smoking, excessive cleaning even — whatever helps to keep away those troublesome thoughts about being no good.³ I also offer independent financial advice. I’m very good at giving advice that leads to lots of debt and strife.

I like to convince children that their parents don’t love them and are just waiting for the chance to get rid of them one way or another. That usually scares the crap out of them. I can generally get parents to back me up on this one — so long as I invite enough disharmony. It’s remarkable what a few little words from Mum or Dad can do: ‘You’re making me ill’, or, ‘You’ll have to go to foster-care’, or ‘You’ll end up in gaol like your Dad’. The kids nearly always then go away and cause loads of trouble at home or at school. The really good bad ones do it at both and in their communities too. I like those, ‘my little apprentices’ I call them. This sort of behaviour really promotes my kinda thinking — you know, ‘I’m/they’re a bad kid’ and ‘I’m/you’re a failure as a parent’.

I like to tell parents that when their children turn around and say, ‘I hate you’, they really do mean it! That is usually guaranteed to make parents feel really sad and angry and worthless. Bottom line is to keep at it, don’t want them to start all that reflecting on their child’s needs⁵ and ‘mentalising’ malarkey.⁶

PW: What sorts of behaviours from parents and children do you favour?

VX: Anything that fits with the feelings and thoughts and behaviours I’ve just told you about, really: shouting, blaming, not listening, accusing, jumping to negative conclusions, breaking things, ruminating on all the bad stuff, hurting others or themselves — I’m a pretty liberal guy, you know, so I encourage them to let it all hang out.

PW: So, how do you get parents’ attention if they’re ignoring you, and focusing on their children’s needs and feelings?

VX: This is where it gets trickier, to get their ‘permission’, you might say, for me to enter their lives. If they really ignore me I have to confess there’s not much I can do about it. With that sort, it’s simply a question of being more patient, not my strongest attribute I’ll admit. I prefer the quick hit and fix of instant results. Anyway, I try and ignore their ignoring and just sit it out. Before too long they’ll get ill or angry, or someone they love becomes ill or there is some crisis, most lives have a crisis sooner or later. Some are relatively light-weight and some are heavy duty. Who do you think it is putting all those straws on all those camels’ backs that folk are always banging on about? You have to have a real delicate and sensitive touch, believe it or not, to do my job. Anyway, whatever the reason, I like to get in there and make things worse. It’s all about timing — all the great comedians and actors have it, you know. Just got to whisper the right thing at the right time. It helps to know the family a bit — every family has its own ghosts in the nursery⁷ — just got to rattle the chains and we’re away.

PW: Is this a bit like the ‘fertile ground’ that you mentioned before?

VX: Yeah! Take the nuclear family, for example, it’s better than the nuclear bomb — no nasty support systems to strengthen parents’ immunity to me. And splitting the family is as explosive as splitting the nuclear atom by my reckoning — so much negativity to breed on. Wonderful!

PW: So, what sorts of family relationships do you prefer?

VX: I can cause chaos in any kind of arrangement you care to name. However some are easier than others. There’s plenty of scope in lots of so-called ‘normal’ families. Abusive relationships offer the greatest scope for damage. The groundwork has already been done, you see — misery, guilt, shame, pain, envy, anger and gloom already thriving — it provides such a rich culture

in which to infect minds further. I'm particularly fond of insidious emotionally harming situations.

PW: What's so special about these that attracts you?

VX: Everything I do seems to last longer and hurt more. Also often these situations are, on the surface, hidden and implied, so often nobody outside the family really knows what is going on behind these particular closed doors, and wouldn't believe it if they were told.

PW: Any other preferred family arrangements?

VX: Well, it's probably no surprise to you guys that the things that I look for in potential customers also rate highly on your 'risk factors' for behavioural problems — I just dig all that 'social toxicity', as you call it.⁸ I could have saved you so much time and money on all this endless longitudinal research^{9,10} — just ask me for the answers next time!

PW: So, overall, what would you say are your best characteristics?

VX: Efficiency and speed, and stealth.

PW: What's so good about efficiency, speed and stealth?

VX: Well, with efficiency I can infect parents and children with my ideas in epidemic proportions, with speed I can travel throughout the neural pathways in the blink of an eye, and with stealth I can get them to do my bidding without being noticed.

MD: What are your thoughts about the postmodernist view that there are no essential truths, that reality is a social construct?

VX: Yeah, well, I agree basically. I don't have a problem about that. I mean I've done some of my most effective work by insinuating and weaving myself into the delicate threads of individual perceptions, making their 'realities' more real than they could ever have imagined, but certainly as they feared! Didn't Einstein say 'reality is merely an illusion albeit a very persistent one'? I just love a good old-fashioned classical self-fulfilling prophecy. I would say, however, that there are plenty of essential lies, mostly promulgated by me by the way, that are fairly universal and multiversal.

MD: Such as?

VX: People are useless, hopeless, self-absorbed and weak.

MD: Hmm, we might come back to some of these ideas of yours later, Virus X. In the meantime, tell us who you admire most?

VX: Anyone who makes me happy, which is anyone who can invite so-called 'negative' emotions, thoughts and behaviours in others. There really are too many to mention, past or present. It is very likely there's someone living near you, maybe some of them are relatives!

PW: What do you consider is your greatest achievement?

VX: Well, it's gotta be jumping the generations without the need of any genetics, although there are plenty of people, even now in the 21st century, who think it is purely genetic. It's the transgenerational trip to end all others! I just slide from one to the next (and on a good day, back and forth). Everyone thinks I'm beyond control and can't be changed, mainly through subscribing to the lies that I'm a product of fate or 'bad blood', and no one has really spotted the ultimate paradox in that view. Again, it's that emotional brain laying out the red carpet for me. Hey, and I can do this party trick in any language and culture you care to name¹¹ — multi-lingual to the max, man!

PW: These are no small claims you are making here. So tell us how you do this 'generation jump' then?

VX: What, and tell you my trade secrets? OK, I'll give you a glimpse. Well, while you've all been so busy having the interminable nature v. nurture debate, I resolved it ages ago, and so I spent much less time trying to figure it out and much more time figuring out how to use it to my advantage. You lot have only belatedly started to acknowledge the power of stories, of narratives. I never took my eye off that particular ball, and I just exploited the forgotten power of narrative, and got so good at it that I managed to convince so many for so long that it was all predetermined, inevitable, genetic. I encouraged you to see and hear what you needed to, what you feared, as opposed to what you wanted. With so many conflicting versions of truth to work with, and such an overwhelming need for absolutes, it was a piece of cake, and still is by and large, to get successive generations to buy into my own particular and very bespoke service of ultimate *big* explanations. In short a 'G-Jump' is essentially an environmental phenomenon, but I see you humans are still determined to 'scientifically' prove some genetic link. Keep at it punks — make my day!

PW: Very clever, aren't we?! With so many areas or facets of humanity and human frailty to choose from, which do you prefer to target?

VX: Well I'm quite fond of depression, but with so many negative states of one sort or another to choose from, it's kinda hard. If I had to pick one, I guess it would be 'Guilt'. I mean, it offers such endless scope for keeping people down and in their own little place. Of course Guilt is so institutionalised, which makes my job much easier. Actually it has been institutionalised in many religions and ideologies for as long as I can remember, which is a *very* long time.

PW: Do you think that you and Guilt are related?

VX: Do me a favour! Like my twin brother or sister snatched and adopted at birth? You've been watching

too many soap operas; you should get out more, turn the TV off!

PW: Actually it's funny you should use the word 'twins'. We were wondering, on a different 'twin' tangent about 'placebo and nocebo' effects.¹² You know what a 'placebo' is, right? Well, a 'nocebo effect' is sort of the same, only negative. It's all about expectation — of the best or the worst outcome and the influence of some mind over some matter, so to speak.

VX: Yeah! Yeah! Very yingyangy! Sure I know all about nocebo — I practically invented it! Of course for me the worst is the best outcome.

PW: Along these lines, what are your views on the expectations of parents?

VX: I'm all for them — as long as parents are hoping for and expecting the right kinda stuff. Hoping that things will magically get better without them having to do or think anything differently. Expecting their children to always be good. I'm less keen on all that 'self-efficacy'¹³ and 'unique outcomes'² nonsense — people getting ideas above their station.

PW: It seems to us that it's a similar perceptual process — placebo or nocebo. The skills and processes that created you are virtually the same as those required to defeat you — not so much an Achilles heel as an Achilles torso! We just need to make people aware of what might seem to be a contradiction — it's just a different spin. You should consider a career in politics.

VX: Yeah, I know, so many talents. I'm intrigued by your assumption that I don't already have a career in politics ... Anyway, I'm pretty pleased with my current career, thanks all the same.

PW: Returning to your main career then, tell us about some of your hopes and wishes for children and parents?

VX: That they become (or stay) miserable and dissatisfied.

PW: Why miserable and dissatisfied?

VX: Much easier to keep them under my control then. Surely you must know with all your university degrees in psychosocial-babble — negative schemas, negative attributional and attentional biases, problem-saturated stories, blah, blah — people are so much more open to seeing all the bad stuff about themselves, the world and others when they're feeling miserable and dissatisfied.^{2,14,15}

PW: How long do you expect to be around?

VX: Forever! They'll never completely get rid of me. I stay one step or jump ahead of the game, just move on to the next person, the next town, there's always someone pleased to see me, someone who's got a use for me. I just love the smell of burning martyr in the morning!

MD: Why would anyone be pleased to see you?

VX: Hey, kiddo, it's not all bad you know. I offer a quick fix to parents who are feeling the heat — 'the kid's the problem, not you'. No need to self-reflect or get in touch with the difficult stuff. You see, your road is the hard one, my road is all downhill.

MD: Downhill all right — but where does it lead, I wonder...?

[Now that Virus X has been buttered up, the interview shifts to exposing some of Virus X's less successful moments.]

MD: Tell us Virus X, how do you think your plans and wishes for families fit with what parents and children themselves might want?

VX: They don't, that's the whole point, dummy! I see it as my task to thwart and frustrate their hopes and plans. As you like to keep reminding everyone, it's important to have goals in life you know. That's my goal for their goals!

MD: Have you always had things your own way? Are there times when children and parents won't do your bidding?

VX: Hmm, well, maybe once or twice, just occasionally, you know — and maybe a few more that come real close and they don't quite realise that with just a little more effort, self-belief, encouragement and information they'd see the back of me. You've got to marvel at my tenacity and my capacity to bluff and call bluffs. Do you play poker? I'm ace at it!

MD: What do you do when you start to lose your grip?

VX: I play the percentages, it depends how confident and determined people seem to be. Where the effort required in regaining control is going to be too strenuous, I just walk away.

MD: What are the signs of 'too strenuous'?

VX: You should know — it's all the stuff you lot keep banging on about — noticing the 'other' stuff, the stuff that says they're doing a good job and they're OK. It tends to come with an entourage of positive feelings, realistic expectations, clear and consistent limit-setting, noticing the little steps in the 'right' direction, and pukey warm and loving mutual feelings — urghhhh!

PW: What are your thoughts on being named? You do remember when I gave you your name don't you?

VX: Yes, yes, yes. Very clever Peter! I think it was January 2001, wasn't it — during one of those dreadful child behaviour management groups that you do-gooders like to annoy me with — poisoning the minds of those previously receptive parents. I have to say, it was quite flattering at first to be getting some long overdue notice and attention. I never seriously expected what you were doing to have any effect. Previously, everyone was so busy blaming someone or something

else — mothers, fathers, children, bad childhoods, religion — and all the time analysing deeper and deeper, and inevitably then, taking and making it personal. Ah, happy halcyon days!

PW: Ok, well we, and people like us, have been onto you for a long time. For most of the families we have seen, there is an obvious trail of your efforts running through their lives, your foot and fingerprints seem to be everywhere, particularly with parents. We believe that now we have a more universal way of providing an antidote to your insidious influences (see Appendix 1).

VX: Yeah! Yeah! Don't get carried away with your own glorification. I thought this was supposed to be my interview!

MD: OK, then, why don't you tell us how you feel about being 'outed' as it were?

VX: Pretty p****d off, actually. I mean, one minute I'm happily going about my normal business, causing misery, guilt and doubt, and the next, people are starting to recognise me, draw me, talk about me and are discovering ways of getting rid of me or at least diluting the effect I have. And that trick you guys use of digging around for evidence of acts of resistance to me² — bit below the belt, that one. I liked being invisible, but now each time you do this work I'm gradually taking shape and form. My doctor tells me it's quite likely irreversible, I mean, have you any idea of the harm you're doing to me? Pretty soon I'll have to go around in disguise, wrap-around shades, the works!

PW: We thought you were already a master of disguise: disguising feelings as fact, prejudice as truth, prophecies as relentlessly and inevitably self-fulfilling.

VX: Yeah, well, this is different. That was business. This is personal!

MD: So you're probably not impressed with these antidotes being developed, with parents getting clearer about some of your methods and their own qualities and skills in standing up against your tyrannical twisting of their thoughts?

VX: Too right I'm not — antidotes are an abomination!! Mind you, I'd like to see some proof that people are really learning to deal with me.

PW: Well, some of the parents in our groups have told us how learning about Virus X has changed their experience of being a parent. They wanted us to pass on to you what they now know.

P1: The first thing is to recognise the situation you are in, that it's already happened to everyone — you're not on your own. Virus X likes you to take it personal. I learnt how it spreads throughout the whole family and causes everyone to argue.

P2: You can beat it (VX), you just have to step back a minute and think, and this takes time and you have to

work at it. It's like putting yourself in time-out. Deep breathing helps you to do this.

PW: What are your thoughts on this, Virus X?

VX: One or two dissatisfied customers, so what? You can't please all the people all the time...

PW: We've also been keeping track of how useful parents have found 'outing' you during the groups. We asked them to rate this as well as other aspects of the groups on a scale of 0 (*not at all useful*) to 10 (*extremely useful*). As the figures show, most parents rated this aspect as *quite* (7/10) to *extremely* (10/10) *useful* (see Appendix 2).

VX: [Yawns] Big deal. You can make figures mean anything you want to. Why else would you show me — your stats are bound to favour you. But it's nice to see some die-hard fans in there, though.

PW: Die-hard, eh? Maybe there's a message for parents in those couple of words? Anyhow, here's another comment from one of your so-called 'fans' who seemed to find life a little easier once she'd made your influences more visible:

P2: ... confrontations at home where my buttons get pushed. I find I now explain more to my children what's going on for me and therefore why I'm dealing with them how I am. For example, if I'm having a bad day. And this also sets them an example, and I've found they now are more likely to explain to me or tell me if they have had their own bad day at school. I find it helps to explain what you're feeling — I'm in control and calmer.

VX: Yeah! Yeah! Calm and control! Talking nicely to their kids without shouting! What a couple of swots! They probably just said that while they were on the course just to please you and get into your good books. You know how 'creepy' some people can be.

MD: Deliberately missing the point, Virus X? We also asked: 'Have you continued to use Virus X ideas after the programme?'

P1: YES! And I'm better with other people's children as well. The knowledge and insight I got made a lot of difference. One of my biggest problems was feeling out of control and useless, now I don't — I feel in control.

VX: Listen, if you think I'm supposed to be impressed, you are seriously underestimating me and overestimating yourselves. Now, if you have some decent questions, get on with it, otherwise I've got some real work to do. I've got some new customers to test out, and one or two old favourites to keep ticking over.

MD: OK. What do you think about the 'figures' people draw of you? (see Figure 1).

VX: Well, like I said before, I'm not so keen on becoming visible. However, I like the devil motifs, and even the cruder efforts have a certain raw power and intensity

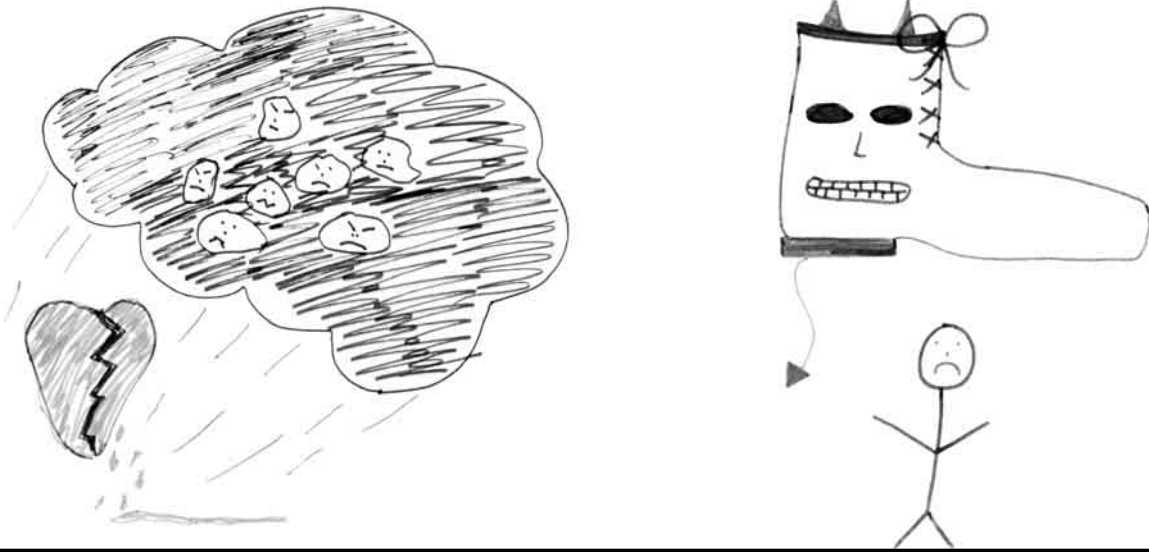


FIGURE 1

Drawings of Virus X by parents from groups.

that tells me I must be being effective to mean so much to them.

MD: What about the drawings of preferred futures then? They seem to us to have equal qualities of force and passion (see Figure 2).

VX: Bah! Kids' stuff! Doodles and scribbles. No comparison!

PW: Hmm. Your mastery of denial is impressive. How do you feel about encouraging parents (and children) to use pictures (including handy laminated wallet-size) of these preferred futures? It seems to us that a quick glance at these 'antidote images' really protects parents against your brand of propaganda.^{18,19}

VX: Are you guys moving into merchandising or something? You'd better start paying me royalties. See my agent!

MD: It's the parents' 'agency' that we're more interested in. And speaking of which, what do you make of parents inventing their own name for you?

VX: Well I'd rather it was kept on the global level. When they make it too individualised, it's somehow easier for them to recognise and remember me. Actually, now that you're mentioning that, if they have to do it, I don't see why you don't let them name me after themselves or their children — that way it keeps it all in the family, so much easier for me.

MD: Some more of your 'tricks', very touching I'm sure ...

VX: Tricks? What about all this 'information' and positive thinking Pollyanna mumbo jumbo that's being put out? Worse than that now is the biology and science that is beginning to back up these hippy ideas that you people have been using against me.²⁰ Teaching people to relax,

deep-breathe, exercise, have a healthy diet and to be creative in their thinking and their actions. Explaining to them about the fight or flight mechanism.²⁰ Externalisation my ass!² Now if that ain't a whole bunch of tricks, I don't know what is!

PW: So you don't appreciate people learning or being reminded of the nature of 'Ordinary Magic'²¹ or utilising the brain's natural ability to 'think' in visual form and use their 'positive' imagination to outwit their 'negative' imagination?¹⁸

VX: Too right I don't, and to make matters even worse, they're putting lots of this stuff on popular TV now — there's *Little Angels*, *Supernanny*, *Nanny 911* and, *Driving Mum and Dad Mad*, to name just a few. The media used to be my ally, letting people know that they weren't measuring up in all sorts of ways, but parents seem to feel empowered by these shows. They fill their heads with all sorts of conspiratorial rot — keeping calm, using rewards and praise, clear instructions, ignoring misbehaviour, time out instead of shouting and smacking, acknowledging their child's feelings and needs.^{5,15} Arghh! All my best efforts unravelling!

PW: Speaking of which, the parents we met recently wanted us to ask you a couple of things. Is that ok with you?

VX: Yeah sure, I think I can guess who. They are, or were, old friends of mine. How are they doing?

PW: All the better for *not* seeing you, apparently. Anyway, they wanted to know:

P1: Why don't you ever give up? Why don't you have your fill and go? Why do you have to try and creep back in?

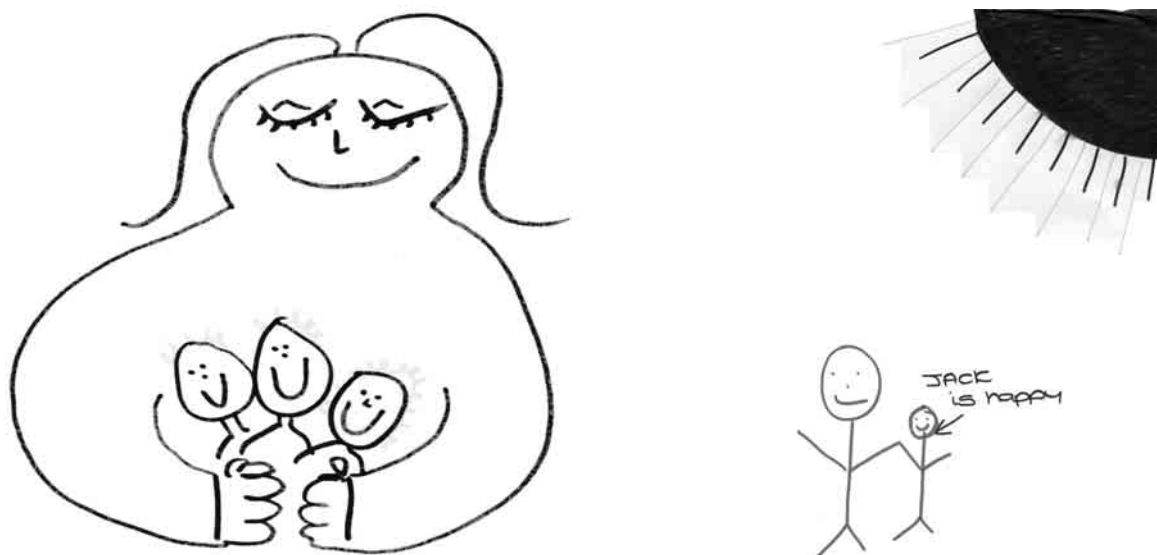


FIGURE 2
Drawings of Preferred Futures (antidotes to Virus X) by parents from groups.

VX: I like to win! I'm insatiable! I miss you! And let's face it, I'm part of the 'human condition'³ Paradox is my middle name!

MD: OK. Finally, Virus X, have you any future plans?

VX: Yeah, I was hoping this stuff you were writing about me would be ignored and I could be free to get on with my business. I mean, I am, believe it or not, quite shy and retiring. Well that's not strictly true, I like attention, who doesn't? But this spotlight celebrity-like thing is just not fair! Also I hope in the current climate you get marginalised, or better still, swept away by the wave of evidence-based practice. But then it occurred to me what would be really funny would be if your ideas were accepted. I mean, just imagine it — they'll manualise this stuff and all the other stuff like it, and by the time they have, where you gonna be, huh? Intellectually institutionalised, inert and impotent, that's where. All those lovely 'shoulds' that come with those therapy manuals, all that pressure to prove your effectiveness 'scientifically', that'll cramp any collective creativity! Well, I know where I will be: in demand-land that's where, business as usual. Get outta here! This conversation just terminated!

MD: Reckon we can live with letting Virus X have the last word?

PW: Nope! I think we should let one of the parents take care of that for us:

P2: Mainly it's that I now recognise it (Virus X). Knowledge is power. You realise when and where you are going wrong and being down on yourself or picking on yourself. I am able to change a negative into a positive.

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Appendix 1

Further Details About the Naming of Virus X

Virus X got its name from a pragmatic decision (in the context of an Incredible Years 12-week parenting skills program¹⁵) to predetermine a metaphor given our relative inexperience in the technique and the need to avoid using a lot of session time on group members choosing their own metaphor, which of course would have been preferable. This medical metaphor, which introduced externalisation ideas to the group, seemed to offer great scope for looking at the origins, nature of and ‘antidotes’ to the virus, a framework from which parents could explore their individual experiences and meanings, without requiring parents to reveal any personal history.

The Virus X approach has been endorsed by the creator of the Incredible Years program, Carolyn Webster-Stratton, who said: ‘Virus X fits well with the format of the programme has a sound theoretical basis and is creative and inventive’.¹⁷

As two of our parents confirmed:

It felt safe and it worked at any level. If you didn't want to say anything you didn't have to (Parent 1).

It worked well looking at it that way. It would've been awful if it was just presented as a list of problems/situations (Parent 2).

Appendix 2

Parents' Ratings of Usefulness of Virus X Group Session.
(0= not at all useful; 10= extremely useful)

