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How is a fruit tree like you? Using artistic metaphors to explore and develop

emotional competence in children

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RUNNING HEAD: Metaphors and emotional competence in children

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Abstract

Counselling children often requires the use of supplementary strategies in order to interest and engage the child in the therapeutic process. One such strategy is the Metaphorical Fruit Tree (MFT); an art metaphor suited to exploring and developing self-concept. Quantitative and qualitative data was used to explore the relationships between children's ability to use metaphor, age, gender, and level of emotional competence (*N*=58). Quantitative and qualitative analyses revealed a significant negative relationship between self-reported emotional competence and ability to use the MFT. It is proposed that children rely on different processes to understand self and as children's ability to cognitively report on their emotional capabilities via the Emotional Competence Questionnaire (ECQ) increases, their ability to report creatively on those capabilities via the MFT is undermined. It is suggested that the MFT may be used, via creative processes and as an alternative to cognitive processes, to increase understanding and awareness of intrapersonal and interpersonal concepts of self in the child during counselling.

How is a Fruit Tree Like You? Using artistic metaphors to explore and develop

emotional competence with children

The general aim of counselling children is to help the child change, and feel better, by working through their issues to achieve adaptive functioning (Geldard & Geldard, 2008). This may include helping the child to explore and develop a self-concept which is positive and preferred. Often, in addition to the use of verbal counselling skills, supplementary strategies are required to engage the child in the therapeutic process. These strategies include play, art, and storytelling (Burns, 2005; Geldard & Geldard, 2008; Haen, 2005; Oaklander, 1988). Different types of metaphor (client- or therapist-generated) have been used in counselling in a variety of modalities (stories, art, objects, or tasks) to help address many issues, including dealing with family conflict and behavioural symptoms. Geldard and Geldard (2008) suggest using a drawing activity based on a metaphor called the Metaphorical Fruit Tree (MFT) when counselling children to enable children to develop a concept of self which is positive and preferred. It can be argued that in order to apply this metaphor to self, one requires a competent level of insight and knowledge into self and others; an insight which reflects the skills of emotional competence.

Metaphor

Metaphor can be defined as one thing becoming a symbol for another (Lackoff & Johnson, 1980). When using metaphor there is an underlying assumption that if some aspects of the metaphor agree with aspects of reality, then other aspects will also be consistent (Meier, 1989). The usefulness of therapeutic art metaphor relies on the user being able to connect with, and personally relate to, the metaphorical picture. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that we have a metaphorical conceptual system. Of

particular interest to this paper, are ontological metaphors as the MFT used in this study is an ontological metaphor which relies on the user's ability to anchor to and personify the metaphor. Ontological metaphors are ways of thinking of a concept in terms of an entity or substance. For example, 'personification' provides a concept of human characteristics, and can be thought of in terms of a tree with the tree's branches as arms and ascribing the tree with thoughts, feelings and behaviours. From an ontological view, the ability to understand and produce metaphor is linked to cognitive development (Gardner & Winner, 1978).

The Use of Therapeutic Metaphors in Counselling

The meanings conveyed through children's metaphors can have an important influence on developmental change processes in counselling. These processes include building relationships, facilitating awareness of emotions and unconscious beliefs, and introducing new perspectives and possibilities (Lyddon, Clay & Sparks, 2001). Many authors routinely draw a parallel between a metaphor and a child's life to offer insight to the child (Van Velsor, 2004). It has been suggested that learning in the metaphoric experience transfers to the client's practical reality without the need for explanatory verbal discussion (Ablon, 1996; Ariel, 1992; Close, 1998). However, whether or not a counsellor chooses to interpret meaning to the child is dependent on their theoretical orientation. Brems (2001) argues that the counsellor who has established a positive relationship with the child is able to use interpretations which can contribute to the child's self-knowledge by using statements which help facilitate the child's contribution to the interpretation, for example "I wondered if...". In this way the counsellor's statement allows for further exploration.

The use of metaphors in counselling generally follows a flexible sequence of stages. Once rapport is established, the first step is to introduce a therapist-generated

metaphor or notice a client-generated metaphor. Secondly, exploration occurs by first validating, then expanding the metaphor. Thirdly, transformation or reframing of the metaphor begins by encouraging a change in meaning of the metaphor that is more positive and preferred. Finally, connection of the metaphor to the real world is encouraged through an associative process of linking the metaphor to possible interpretations and future outcomes (Barker, 1996; Sims & Whynot, 1997).

Metaphor to explore self

When counselling children pictorial metaphors can be those drawn spontaneously (client-generated) or something the child has been invited to draw by the therapist (Heffernan, 1985; Manicom & Boronska, 2003; Newton, 1985; Oaklander, 1988). One example of a therapist generated metaphor, which encourages the child to explore their inner world, is the MFT. The MFT is a pictorial metaphor which expands the child's exploration of their inner self to include not only the intrapersonal dimensions of the child but also, interpersonal and environmental relationships. Children's expression of a fruit tree through drawing has been found to reflect their long term (cultural) and short term experiences (Adler, 1967, 1989), therefore the MFT lends itself to full exploration of the child's internal and external worlds. The MFT is a pictorial metaphor of self, which is explored and interpreted with the child using a series of questions eliciting responses that reflect aspects of self. It explores intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects of self as well as behaviours which have been described in the literature as aspects of emotional intelligence (Mayer, 2006; Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

Rather than representing a single construct, there is much evidence to suggest that intelligence has multiple components. In particular, Gardner (2004) proposed a theory of multiple intelligences which includes the intrapersonal and interpersonal

intelligences. Intrapersonal intelligence is the ability to distinguish between feelings and use this ability to guide behaviour. Interpersonal intelligence is the ability to distinguish between the feelings of others, infer motivations and intentions, and to act on this knowledge. Since additions of these dimensions to Gardner's model, much interest has been devoted to emotional intelligence.

Emotional Intelligence and Emotional Competence

Emotional intelligence has been described as a set of mental abilities which requires processing of emotional information (Mayer, 2006; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). A distinction has been drawn between emotional intelligence and emotional competence (Buckley & Saarni, 2006; Saarni, 2000). While emotional intelligence is conceptualised as a mental capacity, emotional competence refers to a set of skills. These skills enable the individual to adapt to and cope with their social environment.

The skills of emotional competence fall into three categories: emotional expression, emotional understanding, and emotional regulation. Emotional expression refers to skills involving the verbal and non-verbal communication of emotion to others. Emotional understanding incorporates the knowledge gained from self and others' emotional experiences. Finally, emotional regulation includes skills required to manage emotions to allow for effective social engagement and coping (Buckley & Saarni, 2006; Saarni, 2000). Programs have been developed and designed to enhance and teach emotional competencies mainly through social skills strategies focussing on cognitive techniques in the context of relating to others. For example programs such as Friends for Life, (Barrett, 2004), Second Step, (Fitzgerald, & Edstrom, 2006) and Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS; Greenberg, & Kusche, 2006).

Gender differences in emotional intelligence and/or competence in adults have been found in many studies, over diverse samples (Balswick & Avertt, 1977; Beyer &

Bowden, 1997; Brody, 1985; Ciarrochi, Deane, Wilson, & Rickwood, 2002). Brody (1985) has proposed that gender differences in emotional intelligence emerge during development, with boys learning to inhibit all emotions and girls only inhibiting socially unacceptable emotions, such as anger. Generally however, it is unclear when gender differences in emotional competence become evident in childhood.

Development of Emotional Competence

General trends of the development of emotional competence indicate that as children age, they become more able to self-regulate emotions, increase their understanding of emotions, and refine their expression of emotions (Buckley & Saarni, 2006; Saarni, 2000). While internal factors such as temperament and cognitive development impact on the development of emotional competence, development also requires interactions with other individuals and situations (Buckley & Saarni, 2006; Colwell & Hart, 2006).

Benefits of developing emotional competence.

Many behavioural problems have been linked to underdeveloped emotional competence. For example, children more likely to be bullies have been found to devalue the victims, reflecting underdeveloped skills in emotional understanding and empathy. In addition, they are less able to regulate emotions resulting in overly aggressive responses. Interventions focusing on social skills training have been found to decrease the prevalence of bullying in school (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Hanish & Guerra, 2000; Olweus, 1994; Peterson & Skiba, 2000). Further, high emotional intelligence has been associated with teacher's perceptions of behaviours reflecting emotional competence such as co-operation and leadership, while low emotional intelligence is associated with teacher's perceptions of the absence of emotionally competent behaviours such as disruption and aggression (Petrides et al., 2006). These

studies suggest that children with low emotional intelligence are more likely to exhibit maladaptive behavioural and emotional issues increasing the likelihood that they will present for counselling.

The Research

Cognitive and creative skills are required to make a conceptual link between the metaphor and self (Barker, 1996; Power et al., 2001). Throughout middle childhood, the ability to use metaphor (Gardner & Winner, 1978) and emotional competence skills (Buckley & Saarni, 2006) are developing. The current study aimed to explore whether emotional competence is positively related to children's ability to use therapeutic art metaphor that explores concepts of self. The study used a mixed-method approach using both quantitative and qualitative data to validate, by triangulation, the conclusions drawn. Quantitative data was used to investigate the relationships of gender, age, and emotional competence with ability to use metaphor in relation to self. These results were supplemented using qualitative data that focused on understanding children's ability to use metaphor. The aim of the qualitative analysis was two-fold. The first was to explore the ability of children to use metaphor to describe self and their ability to both connect with, and personify, the metaphor. Secondly, because inquiry into the use of art metaphor in child counselling is sparse, using qualitative data was aimed at generating further hypotheses surrounding the use of the MFT which explores the intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of the child and their relationship with the environment. It was expected that the results of this study would provide support for, and inform the use of, the MFT when counselling children between the ages of 8 and 11 years with regard to discovering, exploring and developing emotional competencies.

Method

Participants

Twenty-nine 3rd to 6th grade students from a suburban primary school and their parents (*N=58*) participated in this study. The children ranged in age from 8 years, 5 months to 11 years, 2 months (*M* = 9 years, 9 months, *SD* = 10.64 months).

Measures

The Metaphorical fruit tree (MFT) (Geldard & Geldard, 2008) is a drawing activity used in therapy to help the child explore concepts of self, particularly aspects relating to emotional competence. Three sets of questions reflecting aspects of self were used to measure the child's ability to use the MFT: intrapersonal knowledge (Set 1), interpersonal knowledge (Set 2), and self-knowledge with regard to environmental challenges and strengths (Set 3). The responses of the child were coded on two dimensions using *a priori* content analysis (Mayring, 2000; Stemler, 2001). The first category comprised responses reflecting the degree of anchoring to the metaphor (Anchoring Score). Scoring was based on the number of new 'I' statements made in each set, for example *"I have lots of leaves and fruit..."* The second category comprised responses reflecting the degree of personification (Personification Score) based on the number of new responses giving the tree feelings, speech or thought in each set for example, *"I feel frightened when the lightening strikes..."* The total score for ability to use metaphor is based on the sum of the Anchoring and Personification scores. Table 1 contains the question sets, for the MFT.

PLEASE INSERT TABLE 1 APPROXIMATELY HERE

The Emotional Competence Questionnaire (ECQ) is a 33-item, self-report measure of emotional competence for adults (Schutte et al., 1998). The ECQ has been used successfully with young adolescents between the ages of 13 and 15 years (Ciarrochi, Chan, & Bajgar, 2001). The ECQ has a Cronbach's alpha of .90 and a two week test-retest of .78, which are higher than similar self-report scales such as the Meta-Mood Scale for Elementary School Children (TMMS-C, Rockhill & Greener, 1999, 2007) and the Emotion Expression Scale for Children (EESC, Penza-Clyve & Zeman, 2002). Evidence of validity focuses on expected correlations with measures of alexithymia, attention to feelings, clarity of feelings, mood repair, optimism, and impulse control.

Due to limitations of existing self-report measures of emotional competence for children, the Emotional Competence Questionnaire *(ECQ)* for adults (Schutte et al., 1998) was adapted to produce two new scales and then used in this study: the child- and parent-report ECQ. The adapted 23-item child-report ECQ required participants to rate how true each statement was for them on a scale from 'not at all true' to 'always true' by placing a cross over the smiley face associated with their answer. Responses on the adapted 23-item parent-report ECQ were rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). For both scales, the total ECQ score is the sum of the responses to all items, with a maximum score of 115 possible.

Procedure

Initially, Year 3, 4, and 5 teachers were approached in a staff meeting and invited to hand out an information pack containing participant information, a parent and child consent form, and the parent-report Emotional Competence questionnaire (ECQ) to their class. Participants were asked to return both the signed consent form and completed parent-report ECQ within two weeks. Those children with parental

permission were invited to participate in this study. All testing was completed during school hours in a quiet common area of a suburban primary school. Each student completed the tasks individually with the researcher. Children were invited to complete the child-report ECQ questionnaire and the MFT activity with the instructions to imagine that they were a tree and to *"Draw a tree which is just like you"*. Minimal responses, reflective communication skills and some open questions were used with all participants to ensure that they felt understood and to enhance more explicit discussion and elaboration. The order of the two tasks was counter-balanced to control for potential order effects. It is possible that completing the ECQ first would prime the participants for the MFT activity, elevating performance, or vice versa.

<div align="center">

Results

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Quantitative Results

Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 15). Two t-tests were performed to ensure there were no effects of counterbalancing on MFT or child-report ECQ scores. When the MFT was administered first, there was a trend for the MFT scores to be lower than the ECQ scores (MFT $M = 68.27$, $SD = 28.82$; ECQ $M = 86.36$, $SD = 21.64$) but the difference was not significant $t(27) = 1.90$, $p = .07$. Likewise, the mean ECQ score ($M = 84.79$, $SD = 11.64$) was lower when the ECQ was administered first than when the MFT was administered first ($M = 89.67$, $SD = 10.94$) but was not significantly different $t(27) = 1.16$, $p = .25$.

Internal reliability of both the child- and parent-report ECQ was strong ($\alpha = .86$ and .89 respectively). The child- and parent-report ECQ scores were significantly positively correlated ($r = .43$, $p < .05$). This suggests that there is a significant

relationship between the way parents rate their children's emotional competence and the way children rate their own levels of emotional competence.

Ten percent of the MFT transcripts (providing a comparison of 60 scores) were coded by a second rater in order to calculate a measure of inter-rater reliability. The intraclass correlation was found to be .80. In addition, both the anchoring and personification subscale scores were significantly positively correlated with the total MFT score ($r = .90$, $p < .01$ and $r = .84$, $p < .01$ respectively). Although the subscale scores were significantly correlated with each other (r = .52, $p < .01$), this correlation was not as strong as the correlation between each subscale score with the total MFT. This lends validity to the scoring system, indicating that while both the anchoring and personification scores are highly correlated with the total score, they are measuring different aspects of metaphor use, as they are not as strongly correlated with each other.

There were no significant gender differences found on either the child-report ECQ, $t(27)=.76$, $p=.46$, the parent-report ECQ, $t(27)=.84$, $p=.41$, or the MFT measures, $t(27)=1.28$, $p=.21$. Further, age was not significantly correlated with either the ECQ or MFT measures. However, scores on the child ECQ was significantly negatively correlated with the MFT scores ($r=-.39$, $p<.05$).

Qualitative results

Qualitative results support the quantitative findings with regard to differences in ECQ and MFT scores. For example, minimal responses reflective communication skills and some open questions were used with all participants to ensure that they felt understood and to enhance more explicit discussion and elaboration. As a result, the following responses from participants were noticed. When interviewing a participant with a low ECQ score, the reflection '*so it sounds like you're pretty close with that*

group of trees' enabled the respondent to elaborate further on the metaphor illustrated by the following response 'Y*ep, and we can sort of like drop some fruit at the same time.'* However, other participants (high EC score) when invited to explore their initial response "*Is there anything you'd like to say to the insects when they come?*" resulted in the respondent providing only the bare minimum required to answer the question, '*no, not really.'*

Similarly, qualitative results support the quantitative findings with regard to differences in ECQ and MFT scores with more participants with low self-reported emotional competence describing the tree using more complex descriptions compared to those recording high levels of emotional competence. For example, participant 2 (low self-report EC) gave a very in-depth description of where he lived: *'there is a fence, but there's sort of like a door, two doors. Like I'm in the middle of an island . . . and there's two bridges . . .it's sort of like I'm in a big national park or something like that so people can't throw stuff into the water and make it go bad'*. Whereas, participant 8 (high self-report EC) simply stated *'in a forest'* when describing where she grew. Similarly participant 28 (low self-report EC) responded to what it would be like in the sun by stating *'I'd be really hot and sweaty and . . but . . . when the other trees and myself grow heaps of leaves again like then it could be a bit shady and it would be cooler'* and Participant 26 (low self-report EC) by explaining: *'It's good because then it's like, not dark and boring and like you can have more fun'*. Growing in familiar places led to complete descriptions of the participant's surroundings, for example, participant 16 (low self-report EC) gave a detailed description of the trees growing around her: *'There are three trees out the front and I'm next to another small tree with the termites and after that there's another few but they're baby ones'*. Conversely, participants with high ECQ scores used as many *'yes'* and *'no'* answers

as possible and seemed unable to expand their descriptions or offer explanations.

Response to more direct prompts was sparse. For example, in response to the question

about what it would be like in the sun, participant 7 simply replied *'good'*.

Children scoring low on the self-report ECQ, were able to creativity describe the

concepts tapped in the ECQ using the MFT. For example, participant 2 described

how he would help people by letting them sit under him so that *'When it rains they*

won't get wet and when it's really sunny they won't get sun burnt'. This consideration

for others is reflected in items on the ECQ tapping aspects of interpersonal

dimensions such as: *'When my friends come over, I make sure we do things they like*

to do' and *'I help my friends feel better when they feel sad.' S*imilarly the following

example of an item on the ECQ tapping intrapersonal dimensions: *'I expect good*

things to happen' is illustrated by Participant 22 when she explains as the fruit tree

her response to inclement weather *'I just hope for the best'*. Participant 4 stated *'some*

of them feel the same way as me' when he was asked what is was like seeing other

trees around which reflected items on the ECQ tapping aspects of interpersonal

dimensions for example *I can tell what other people are feeling just by looking at*

their faces. Similarly participant 28 stated that if her fruit had worms in it *'the people*

would be like disappointed and stuff'.

Discussion

The results of the study provide support for the adaptation of the ECQ so that

it can be used with young children. In this study it was necessary to adapt an adult

measure of emotional competence, as existing self-report measures of emotional

competence for children were not reliable, with little evidence of validity. The

adapted Emotional Competence Questionnaire (ECQ, Schutte et al., 1998) is a

promising alternative child-report emotional competence scale. In this study the child-report ECQ had high internal reliability and was significantly correlated with parent-report ECQ scores. A major limitation of self-report scales is the influence of social desirability. As such, it is possible that self-report measures are not a true reflection of the construct being measured but rather represents what the participants perceive as a socially desirable response (Ciarrochi et al., 2001). The fact that child- and parent-report ECQ scores were significantly correlated in this study, lends validity to the participants responses, indicating that participants were reporting on their perceived level of emotional competence, and not responding in a socially desirable manner.

With regard to gender differences because the activity was presented as a drawing activity, it is possible that only highly creative children, and more specifically creative boys, would have volunteered to participate, decreasing the chance of finding a gender difference in ability to use metaphor. In addition, the participants in this study had similar levels of emotional competence, reflected in the low standard deviation of ECQ scores. Therefore, the probability of finding a significant difference regarding gender in emotional competence in the current study was less likely. Although gender differences in emotional competence are evident in adults, it is unclear when this difference emerges in childhood. Indeed, other studies have also been unable to discover a difference in emotional competence between boys and girls (Colwell & Hart, 2006; Petrides et al., 2006).

Cognition versus creativity

Previous research shows that greater awareness of emotional competence and understanding of metaphor increases with age. However in this study, children with high self reported emotional competence showed limited ability to use metaphor to describe themselves with regard to emotional competence. Results indicate that

children with low self report emotional competence are more able to use metaphor to describe themselves using the MFT which is designed to reflect theoretical concepts of emotional competence than to report cognitively on their skills of emotional competence. It could be argued that a cognitive process is used when thinking about concepts of self and when self reporting emotional competence while a creative or imaginative process is used when describing self concepts reflecting emotional competence using metaphor.

Although both the ECQ and the MFT are designed to measure the same concepts (intrapersonal and interpersonal understanding of self) it is proposed they draw on two different processes to do so. The child-report ECQ requires the cognitive ability to reflect on and understand self in a logical or rational way. Although metaphor can be linked to increased cognitive development (Power et al., 2001), it can also be a purely creative activity (Barker, 1996). It is proposed that as children develop the cognitive ability to accurately report on concepts of self, their creativity is undermined, causing a decrease in performance when using metaphor to describe aspects of self. In fact, this negative relationship between cognition and creativity has been extensively researched (Beghetto, 2005; Beghetto & Plucker, 2006; Fasko, 2000-2001; Paris et al., 2006). The focus of previous research has surrounded the context of the classroom. Generally, it has been found that classroom environments which are teacher-centred, or impart knowledge via passive reception, tend to discourage creativity. Extended schooling in such an environment emphasises efficient cognitive operations, teaching children that high academic performance is expected and valued, while creative responses are seen as deviant and to be avoided (Beghetto, 2005; Beghetto & Plucker, 2006; Fasko, 2000-2001; Paris et al., 2006). In this way, the child's creativity can be undermined. Qualitative results in this study

noted that although some children were unable to cognitively report on their level of emotional competence via the child-report ECQ, they were able to creatively describe such competencies using the MFT activity. This suggests that the MFT is a useful technique for increasing understanding and awareness of emotional competence in children who may not yet have developed the ability to cognitively report on their capabilities or who may be developmentally immature.

Finally, the current study achieved the aim of generating further hypotheses surrounding the use of the MFT. Because the MFT and ECQ are significantly related, and even though children scoring low on self-report EC were able to tap the theoretical concepts of EC in their metaphorical descriptions the results indicate that the MFT may be a reliable tool to measure the child's ability to discover, and explore their perceptions of self with regard to emotional competence. The use of the MFT in this study is, as far is known, the first attempt to standardise the use of a pictorial metaphorical technique to explore emotional competence. The evidence of the reliability of this measure is promising, with a strong inter-rater reliability. In addition, the Anchoring and Personification scores were shown to be measuring unique aspects of ability to use metaphor. The findings support the literature with regard to the processes involved when using metaphor such as accessing the creative or unconscious mind which bypasses the cognitive, logical or rational mind and the defence mechanisms which client's may have in place. The results support the use of metaphors in situations where direct communication is ineffective. As such, the therapeutic art metaphor of the MFT allows the client to explore and discover parts of themselves including emotions, thoughts and behaviours which may have gone unnoticed.

The results of this study have implications for the use of metaphor to explore and develop self-concept with regard to emotional competence. The appropriateness of cognitively based programs for children have been questioned, especially for younger children (Grave & Blissett, 2004). Although cognitive-based programs have been found to be effective for a number of emotional issues (especially anxiety and depression) 40-20% of children do not respond (Barrett, Duffy, Dadds, & Rapee, 2001; Kendall, 1994). The results of this study suggest that an alternative to training in emotional competence using a cognitive approach is the use of the creative MFT task. In particular, early intervention programs to increase emotional competencies in young children may benefit from programs which focus on creative, metaphorical processes rather than purely cognitive processes. The MFT could be used to develop and increase understanding and awareness of emotional competence in children who may not yet have developed the ability to cognitively report on their capabilities. Further research to measure children's ability to develop emotional competence using programs based on metaphorical approaches compared with cognitive-based approaches could provide opportunities for those children experiencing difficulties with behaviour and social relationships.

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Table 1

Questions Reflecting Theoretical Aspects of Emotional Competence

Question Set 1: Intrapersonal Knowledge	Question Set 2: Interpersonal Knowledge	Question Set 3: Self-knowledge based on Environmental Challenges and Strengths
What can you tell me about this tree?	Where do you grow?	What do you look like in the winter?
What happens to your fruit?	Do you grow next to other trees, or are you on your own?	When the wind blows, and the lightning strikes and then it rains hard what happens to you?
What's it like for you when insects eat your fruit or when people pick the fruit you grow or when your fruit falls to the ground?	How big are the other trees around you?	When the sun shines and the weather is warm what happens to you?