



## DRAMA AND PLAY THERAPY WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

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Tom tied a kettle to the tail of a cat;  
Jill put a stone in the blind man's hat;  
Bob threw his grandmother down the stairs—  
And they all grew up ugly and nobody cares.

Nobody loves me,  
Everybody hates me,  
Going in the garden  
To-eat-worms.  
Big fat juicy ones,  
Little squiggly niggly ones.  
Going in the garden  
To-eat-worms.<sup>1</sup>

These rhymes are part of children's armory to cope with their world and perhaps tell us, the adults, what they really think and feel. What Iona Opie (1992) called "a declaration of a child's brave defiance in the face of daunting odds."

Play for children is the place where they can express their defiance and try to make sense of their own particular world and what it feels like to live there. They can play their world through making other worlds and in making sense of these created worlds come to terms with their own particular reality. This is the paradox of play; safe in the world of play we can declare:

Nobody loves me  
Everybody hates me,  
Going in the garden  
To-eat-worms.

and explore that loss of love in the safety of the playing space and the containment of the rhyme.

Donald, age 7, knew that feeling. He told me he was really pleased that he was going home to his mother who had been in the psychiatric hospital, but in his play and drawing he was able to tell this story:

This is a boy called Adam. He has got blood all over him because he was run down by a car. A man called Raymond ran him down. It was an accident.

He is going to die from the accident. He goes into a coma in the hospital then he dies a day later.

Everybody says 'Hip-hip-hooray' because nobody likes him and Raymond said 'Hip-hip-hooray' because he didn't like him and was glad he had killed him,

Everybody was putting knives into his dead body in the grave.

Even in the grave, Adam had blood all over him. Adam was alone in the world.

Donald could explore himself and his mother in his story. He described his own helplessness and his mother's talk about killing herself but both were contained by the story. The pain of Donald's life was held safe by the story of a boy called Adam.

### Play Therapy for Healing the Hurt Child

This paper describes the importance of play in the life of children and how the therapeutic use of play

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<sup>1</sup>All the children's rhymes quoted in this paper are from *I Saw Esau*, 1992 (T. & P. Opie, Eds.).

can help troubled children make some sense of their experience. The model of play therapy described is a drama and arts therapy model that emphasizes the centrality of play in children's lives and, furthermore, that play and playfulness are the ways we all begin to develop the whole of our cultural and creative life.

Huizinga (1949) suggested that in play there was something "at play" that transcended the immediate needs of life and imparted meaning to the action. It was a stepping out of "real life" into a temporary sphere of activity. At the same time there was an intensity and absorption in play. Play was distinct from ordinary life both as to its locality and duration. There were limits on play; it began, then it was over. Play assumed a fixed form as a cultural phenomenon. Once played, it endured as a newfound creation of the mind retained by the memory. It was transmitted; it became tradition.

This repetition, which develops into tradition and ritual, is an important process in play therapy. As children make a relationship with their therapists and begin to explore the toys and objects offered in the playing space, the style of play begins to emerge and stories and play are repeated, sometimes remaining the same, becoming part of a ritual or expanded and changed as the play gains in complexity. Then the play process has a cultural identity that becomes an important part of the relationship between children and therapists.

Sally used a drowning mermaid in all her play. Mary began each session by making food with Play-dough that we shared together. Nancy made up many stories about a pirate called Mr Beating Bad who hit people and John always enacted a scene with Punch and Judy puppets. I have played Captain Hook to Peter Pan in a continuous ritual to affirm in play the children's capacity to overcome the bullying Captain. The children knew the rituals and controlled the repetitions as part of the process of containment.

#### Four Concepts in the Use of Play Therapy

When play is used as a healing process to help troubled children it is important to facilitate their play and contain it in a healing environment. Through a multi-dimensional model of play therapy we recognize four basic concepts that facilitate the play and contain the process to keep the children safe:

1. the centrality of play as the children's way of understanding their world;

2. that play is a developmental process and, in therapy, the children move back and forth along a developmental continuum as a way of discovering and exploring aspects of identity;
3. that play is a symbolic process through which the children can experiment with imaginative choices aesthetically distanced by the creation of this other playing reality from the consequences of those choices in "real" life;
4. that play happens in its own special place and time, and this playing space is a physical space and a therapeutic space. This is the transitional space between children and therapists, the space to define what is "me" and "not me," the place where our creative life starts.

#### *The Centrality of Play*

Play is a unique experience in our lives that has a reality of its own, an activity in which human beings explore their worlds and their identity in relation to other worlds and other identities. Play is the place where children first recognize the separateness of the self from others and begin to develop a relationship with the world beyond the self.

Grainger (1990) wrote:

I select an object in the outside world and bestow an identity upon it, so that, despite being mine, it now belongs to itself, and this first and foremost is achieved by learning to play.

It is important that play therapists recognize the seriousness of play and enable children to feel free enough to play without feeling judged. Play is the children's world and therapists enter that world respectfully. The willingness of therapists to play as equal participants, entering into the world of the children while keeping the play safe, is the beginning of a trusting relationship and an expression of mutuality in the relationship.

There should be no sense that the adults are patronizing the children or that the adults re-constitute the play to give some adult meaning to the play. The solutions to problems presented by the children should be made within the play and imagery presented in play not connected to that other reality outside the play.

#### *Play as a Developmental Process*

The paradigm through which children develop creative expression in play consists of three stages: embodiment play, projective play and dramatic play.

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