

Therapeutic Teacher, Therapeutic Classroom

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THE THERAPEUTIC CLASSROOM is a place where troubled children are helped to sort out their complicated experiences so that development can proceed. Here, children have opportunities to go back to earlier levels and accomplish developmental tasks they could never before accomplish. Here children are encouraged to explore their inner lives as well as their external environments to achieve learning.

The children who need therapeutic classrooms are not unique. There are many like them—in Head Start programs, day-care centers, and private nursery schools. Teachers and other early childhood professionals struggle to meet their needs, searching for ways to maintain a responsive but structured preschool environment. This chapter will describe essential components of a therapeutic classroom and will invite the reader to adapt suggested techniques to a variety of preschool situations.

EXTERNAL ORDER, INTERNAL FREEDOM: THE MEANING OF STRUCTURE IN THE THERAPEUTIC CLASSROOM

The therapeutic classroom maintains an external structure that helps children feel safe, contained, and organized in the context of a productive learning environment. Within this structure, the therapeutic classroom provides freedom for children to explore and develop their inner lives.

Historically, special education programs for emotionally fragile children went to great lengths to contain what they saw as the potentially disruptive emotional lives of their students. They created highly structured programs in which stimulation and emotionally charged situations were kept to a minimum. Shelves were often turned around, and materials were kept out of sight and out of reach. Children's

behavior was controlled through behavioral reinforcement and curriculum confined to the more neutral arenas of cognition and skill acquisition.

Undoubtedly, structure has great value in the therapeutic classroom. It is vital in maintaining an orderly and constructive learning environment. A classroom is not a therapy room where a child's agenda can be the sole determinant of process. If the whims of the children dictated the agenda of the therapeutic classroom, the result would be chaos. However, the developmental and emotional *needs* of children can and should be attended to in the therapeutic classroom. This is especially important in the preschool years, when children's intrinsic motivation for learning will help determine future success. A young child's cognitive and emotional development progress hand in hand. In order for a young child to find meaning in learning experiences, her whole being—including her emotional self—must be involved in the process.

The key to creating a therapeutic milieu lies in creating a balance. The therapeutic classroom is guided by a structure that gives permission for children to think and feel while providing them with the means to safely contain and organize powerful thoughts and feelings. Because it is consistent and meaningful, the structure of the therapeutic classroom is one that can be mastered and internalized by children. This mastery helps the children build the growing set of competencies required for the successful navigation of the world around them.

Several structural frameworks guide the process in the therapeutic classroom: the daily schedule and routines, the organization of the classroom environment, a consistent set of rules and limits, the cognitive framework of the curriculum, and the teacher-child relationship itself.

Physical Environment

One structure that allows for the exploration of emotional life in the therapeutic classroom is the organization of the physical environment. The classroom offers a rich array of materials, thoughtfully arranged according to use and theme. There are shelves full of brightly colored manipulative materials, such as duplo and bristle blocks, puzzles and stacking cups, as well as some developmentally younger toys, including a mirror, a soft ball, and a pop-up toy. There is a dress-up area and a play kitchen for dramatic play. There is a shelf full of wooden building blocks and nearby a variety of toys that lend themselves to representational play: a doll house; toy cars, animals, and people; and puppets. The bookshelf displays a variety of picture storybooks with developmentally salient themes. There is a cozy corner with a bed for baby dolls and, next to it, a menagerie of soft animals. There is playdough, sand, and a table for water play. Paper, markers, crayons, scissors, and collage materials are available on the art shelf; nearby is an easel for painting.

Many of these materials invite children to represent their experiences—to reach within themselves, explore, and express what they have internalized about these experiences. They are not designed to keep experiences outside the class-

room walls and feelings locked within each child. Rather, they are selected precisely for their ability to bring thoughts and feelings together. To this end, all the materials in the classroom are carefully chosen to reflect the real world in which the children live, including their urban environment and the racial and cultural diversity that surrounds them.

For children who have difficulty focusing, organizing their behavior, and controlling impulses, a classroom where such a collection of toys and materials is easily accessible might seem like an invitation for chaos. To be sure, children do sometimes become distracted and grab toys when it is not time to play. Rather than prevent these situations from occurring by removing the source of distraction or stimulation, the therapeutic teacher organizes the use and accessibility of materials within this environment. Children are encouraged to put away what they have used before using something else. Limits are placed on dumping. Children are not allowed to destroy materials or use them to hurt other children, and everything gets put away in its place at the end of free play.

The fact that everything has a place in the classroom reinforces the development of object permanence. A toy might leave its place, but it is always returned. During free play, the floor might be littered with blocks, legos, dolls, and the pieces of the doctor's kit, but at cleanup time, everything is neatly returned to the shelves before snack can begin. A toy will be in its place when a child looks for it. This is as important for a child who comes from a chaotic home and has had little stability in her life as it is for a child whose organic impediments to development have prevented her from acquiring a solid concept of object permanence.

The physical environment is one that is endowed, consistent, and cared for. Materials are kept clean and organized. If something is lost or broken, the loss or breakage is acknowledged and mourned. This is a new experience for children who have had extreme loss in their lives but never had the chance to experience their feelings about it. Children learn that adults will take care of their toys just as they will care for and protect children. This investment is transferred to the children, who become, in turn, more able to invest emotional energy in their learning environment.

Daily Schedule and Routine

The structure of the daily schedule is facilitating for children with emotional difficulties in many ways. By taking responsibility for determining the schedule and routines, adults convey to children that there is someone—larger and stronger than themselves—who will make sure their school world is a safe and predictable place where basic needs will be consistently met. Many of the children come from homes where life is chaotic and unpredictable, where they are sometimes left to fend for themselves. The consistency of the schoolday helps these children develop—in Erikson's terms—a certain level of "basic trust" in their environment (Erikson, 1950/1985). Knowing that they can always rely on certain things, such as the

presence of their teachers, the availability of food, and the repeated occurrence of certain activities each day, helps the children relax their emphasis on survival needs, diminish hypervigilance, and invest attention and energy in learning activities.

Although adults take responsibility for deciding the sequence of events during the day, children are still allowed room for feelings and choice. For example, the teachers determine that lunch will happen at the same time every day and that each child must wash hands before eating, sit at the table to eat, and eat at least some lunch before dessert. However, within this basic format, the children eat how and what they want to. One little boy expresses his dependency needs by sipping his juice with a spoon, like a baby. One girl, who is overfed by her mother in a rather intrusive way, never wants anyone to touch her lunch and chooses to eat only small portions of it.

By including long periods of open-ended playtime, the daily schedule offers children ample opportunity to explore their inner lives. While most regular, developmentally based preschool programs include playtime as an important part of the schoolday, many special education programs take pains to avoid such open-ended activity in the fear that bringing children's emotional concerns into the classroom will balloon the anxiety level and unleash unwanted behaviors. However, therapeutic classrooms that provide children with opportunities during the day to work through feelings actually reduce anxiety and the need to act out.

Although free play is open-ended and children can pick and choose materials and activities, teachers impose an invisible structure. By organizing and helping children to elaborate on play, teachers weave together the threads of activity into a constructive process. The therapeutic teacher helps children create a beginning, middle, and end to their activities.

For example, a child pulls the bin of duplo blocks off the shelf and dumps them on the floor. She begins to make something but quickly becomes frustrated, then distracted by another child's activity. She begins to walk away.

TEACHER: Krystal, it looks as if you were building something. What were you going to make?

KRYSTAL (*turning back to the duplos*): A train.

TEACHER: Come on, let's finish it. Do you want some help?

KRYSTAL: Yeah.

Child and teacher spend several minutes working on the train. Krystal becomes absorbed in making a compartment with a person inside on each of the train cars, designating the people as the members of her family. She drives the train around the room. After a few minutes, she leaves this and goes to the dress-up corner to play.

TEACHER: Krystal, are you finished with your train?

KRYSTAL: Yes.

TEACHER: Okay, before you play dress-up, let's put your train on the shelf and put away the rest of the duplos. (*Krystal hesitates.*) I'll help you.

Would you like to put your train away or clean up the duplos?

KRYSTAL: The duplos.

The activity is completed, and Krystal goes off happily to the dress-up corner.

A more emotionally charged topic can be handled in a similar way. Two children begin playing that there is a fire in the "house." In chorus, they yell "Fire! Fire!" and begin to run around the classroom, without direction.

TEACHER: Hold on. You need to stop running around, but we can think of something you can do. What happens next in your game? (*The children hesitate.*) Can you put the fire out? Is somebody going to be the firefighter? Should we build a firetruck?

TONY: Yeah! A firetruck—that's a good idea! (*He puts on a fire hat and begins lining up the chairs to make a firetruck.*)

JENNIFER: The babies! What about the babies? [Jennifer's apartment was burned down when she was 2 years old.]

TEACHER: Maybe you are remembering when there was a fire in your house. That must have been very scary. Should we find a safe place to put the babies?

JENNIFER: Yes. Let's get the babies. (*She begins rescuing the babies, pulling the doll bed to the other side of the room and carefully placing the babies in it, out of reach of the "fire."* She joins Tony in his firetruck. They arrive at their destination, get out, and begin running around again, wildly spraying invisible water all over the classroom.)

TEACHER: Slow down. If you want to put out the fire, you need to spray water on the fire. . . . Good work. . . . Is the fire almost out? It's almost cleanup time. Maybe you can finish putting out the fire and drive back to the fire station before we clean up.

TONY: Okay. Fire's out.

JENNIFER: Wait—the babies!

TEACHER: Let's all help put the babies back and then drive back.

Tony and Jennifer carry the doll bed back to its proper place, and the teacher replaces the babies. The children get back in the firetruck and pretend to drive back to the station. The activity is completed and the cleanup song is sung.

Rules and Limits

A consistent set of rules and limits helps to preserve a safe and orderly classroom environment. Limits are set for children in such a way as to safely contain disruptive

or dangerous behaviors while at the same time allowing for emotional response. Rather than rigidly controlling isolated behaviors through the use of behavior modification, the interventions employed in the therapeutic classroom help children understand the feelings that underlie their behavior and find alternate ways of coping with them.

Many of our children are impulsive and tend to act out feelings in the moment. They grab toys, break materials, hit, run out of the room, jump on furniture, and so forth. Secondary process is compromised, and primary process takes over during moments of emotional crisis. While the teacher will help stop a child from engaging in maladaptive behaviors, she will also help a child mediate between feeling and behavior by offering the child alternative strategies, such as using his words or redirecting the feeling into symbolic forms of expression.

This is done in many different ways. The teacher might use verbal reflection or interpretation. If a child continually jumps up and asks "Can I go with you?" when a teacher leaves the room, the teacher might interpret this to mean that perhaps the child is worried that the teacher will not come back—and will then reassure her. For other children, the teacher might draw a picture, or even make a book about an issue that is particularly pervasive and persistent for a child. The use of visual forms of reflection are used frequently with children who are less receptive to verbal input.

For example, during the transition from snack to meeting one day, a child jumps up on the table and dances around.

CHILD: Look at me!

TEACHER (*lifting the child down*): That's too dangerous. Maybe you were worried and wanted to make sure a grown-up would keep you safe.

I'm not going to let you jump on the table, but you can sit on my lap.

CHILD: I want to sit on your lap.

Another child, after being told it is time to stop playing, dumps a bin of toy cars and is about to knock over a shelf when a teacher catches her arm.

TEACHER: Pamela, I'm not going to let you knock the shelf over. That's dangerous. (*Child tries to hit teacher.*) I'm going to help you stop hitting, too. Hitting hurts. Did you get angry because we said it was time to clean up? (*Child nods.*) You can use your words and say, "That makes me angry. I don't want to clean up!"

PAMELA: I'm angry. I don't want to clean up.

TEACHER: Okay, I hear that you are angry, but we still need to clean up so we can have snack. Maybe you can take the baby doll you were playing with to the playroom later. We can put it right near the door so we remember.

For the child who is more receptive to visual input, the teacher might draw a picture afterwards of the child angry, with a simply worded caption: "Judy said, 'It's cleanup time.' That made Gail angry. She said, 'No cleanup.'"

Once a feeling has been expressed, the teacher can offer alternative ways of coping with it. Often, empathic response and reassurance is enough. Sometimes, a child needs more concrete help. A child who is angry, for example, might need to punch a punching bag, stamp his feet, or tear up paper. A child worried about being away from Mommy might need to carry around a transitional object, such as a soft toy from home, in order to feel reassured. A needy child who is grabbing food from other children's lunches might need a few extra crackers from the refrigerator in order to feel she has enough.

Because children are allowed to have their feelings even when the adult imposes a limit, a child can accede to a limit without compromising her integrity or losing self-esteem. By offering children some choice while remaining firm about setting a limit, the teacher affords children appropriate levels of autonomy. She might tell a child, for instance, "You can wash your hands in the bathroom or the classroom, but you need to wash your hands before lunch. Where would you like to wash them?" This is powerful for emotionally fragile children, many of whom come from chaotic homes where limits are set in rather arbitrary ways, where they are either excessively frustrated or excessively indulged. Insofar as the limits in the therapeutic classroom are meaningful and can be clearly explained to the children, they can be internalized and mastered, thus facilitating the development of greater frustration tolerance and impulse control.

Curriculum

Often it is helpful for children to deal with their feelings out of the moment, when needs are not so primary, the observing ego is stronger, and they can use cognition to make sense of experience. The curriculum in therapeutic classrooms provides for this by presenting a conceptual framework within which experiences and feelings can be symbolically represented and mastered. Because the curriculum is based on salient developmental issues, it is inherently compelling to the children. The curriculum consists of individually tailored play interventions as well as a thematically structured group curriculum.

Spontaneous play lends itself perfectly to the integration of cognition and affect. In their spontaneous play, children act out an endlessly imaginative collection of themes, including going away and coming back, caretaking experiences (both positive and negative), danger and protection, breaking and fixing, being big and being little, and countless others. Working within the child's metaphors, the teacher helps her to elaborate and make both cognitive and affective connections to the themes of the play. Sometimes the teacher will make a direct connection between what a child is representing in play or artwork and real-life experiences.

The following anecdote illustrates how a child's cognitive and emotional concerns are addressed simultaneously in the context of play. Nina is playing with water, emptying and filling bottles of various sizes.

TEACHER: You have some little bottles and some big bottles.

NINA: This one's little . . . it's a baby. (*She fills a bottle, then pours it into a bigger bottle.*) This one's big. It's a mommy. My mommy say I'm bigger.

TEACHER: Hmm . . . You are bigger than you were when you were a baby.

NINA: When I was a baby, I had a bottle. But now I'm big. Here, you stir this. My mommy stirs food.

TEACHER: Do you think I'm like a mommy?

NINA: Yeah, you like a mommy.

TEACHER: How about you? Are you like a baby, a little girl, or a mommy?

NINA (*Her face clouds.*): Mommy says I'm bigger!

TEACHER: Mm-hmm, you are bigger than you were when you were a baby, but you're not as big as a mommy yet. Sometimes I think you worry that you have to be like a grown-up. Sometimes your mommy wants you to do things like a grown-up, like clean the dishes. But it's okay to do things like a 4-year-old girl, too.

NINA: I'm 4. I had a birthday. See? (*She holds up three fingers.*)

TEACHER: Yes, you are 4 years old. Here, let's count four fingers together. One, two, three, four. (*She helps Nina hold up four fingers.*)

NINA (*smiling*): I'm four!

The group curriculum offers various conceptual structures that the children can use to symbolize and make meaning out of their experiences. The content is drawn directly from the themes children express in their play, language, drawing, and behavior, and it is shaped by our knowledge of child development. Themes are both conceptual and emotional in nature. Examples include going away and coming back, house and home, hiding and finding, hatching and growing, big and little, empty and full, messy and clean, and breaking and fixing.

After the teacher models different ways of representing the themes symbolically, the children then are helped to represent the themes themselves. Some activities are primarily conceptual in nature while some are more personally oriented. For example, when we implemented a "big and little" curriculum, the children used big and little bottles during water play, and they made collages out of big and little paper circles. Later in the week, they played dress-up—one day dressing up to be big, another day pretending to be little. There is always overlap, however: One little boy made his collage with one big circle and lots of little ones, thus turning it into a representation of his family constellation. Naturally, each child will bring something different to the curriculum. However, since the themes

are drawn from the children's real-life experiences and developmental issues, they are universal enough so that they are meaningful to all the children (see Part III).

The Missing Link: The Teacher-Child Relationship

It is the dialogue implicit in the child's relationship with her teacher that provides the mediating link between structure and freedom. Initially, the teacher acts as the child's auxiliary or observing ego. By engaging in a dialogue with the child, the teacher helps the child integrate and build her own mediational capacities. The teacher helps the child organize her cognition and behavior around the structure in the classroom and eventually internalize it herself. By providing direction and limits as well as offering empathic response, the teacher permits but helps contain feelings. She makes a child feel safe with her experiences and helps channel them in a productive fashion, that is, to express them symbolically. Therefore, the child's relationship with her teacher becomes a pivotal force in the therapeutic classroom. The following section elaborates on significant aspects of the teacher-child relationship in the therapeutic classroom.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIP: THE ROLE OF THE THERAPEUTIC TEACHER

Relationship is pivotal in the development of a young child. Cognitive and emotional development are intricately interwoven and bound up with a strong primary adult-child relationship. Often the relationships that emotionally fragile children have had have been problematic. Many children in a therapeutic nursery have not had the opportunity or the capacity to engage in a healthy primary relationship. As a result, no groundwork has been laid for healthy emotional and cognitive development. It is crucial that therapeutic teachers address the developmental requirements of these children in an integrated fashion and acknowledge the importance of their relationships in this process. Relationships must be the starting point and the context within which the work in the therapeutic classroom occurs.

To function successfully in a regular classroom setting, the young child must have achieved a certain level of emotional integration or ego strength. Some of the ego functions required for a successful preschool experience include a solidified sense of self and object constancy and the ability to organize and mediate experience through symbolic means (e.g., play and language). These ego functions must develop in the context of relationship. Behaviors rooted in basic ego functions cannot simply be taught in an isolated, external fashion, outside of a developmental context. When skills and behaviors are acquired by children in this manner, they are not integrated and quickly break down under stress. Often the children in the therapeutic nursery are missing the developmental precursors that underlie basic ego functions. These developmental precursors are rooted in the

child's relationship with the caregiver and therefore must be fostered within the context of relationship.

In order to be free to invest attention and emotional energy in learning activities, a child must have a sense of object constancy and know that if she separates from her caregiver, her caregiver will be there when she returns. In order to use symbols in a meaningful fashion (an important developmental task for the preschooler), a child must have a strong relationship on which to draw. Winnicott (1971/1999) has shown that a child's very first symbol—a transitional object such as a soft toy or blanket—is a symbol of the primary relationship. Moreover, symbol formation presupposes a shared reality, or a state of "intersubjectivity," as Stern (1985/2000) has called it, which only relationship can provide. Without relationship, symbols remain inaccessible, idiosyncratic, or devoid of meaning for the young child. Clearly, the importance of the teacher-child relationship for a needy child is paramount in effecting the development of cognition as well as emotional well-being.

The therapeutic teacher thus finds herself in the complex position of having to wear several hats at the same time. She is many things to the child, including teacher, surrogate caregiver, therapist, and limit setter. The many roles the teacher plays come together in the totality of her relationship with the child.

Teacher as Instructor

By accommodating the child's learning needs, the teacher satisfies the preschooler's natural drive toward autonomy and progress. Typically, 3- and 4-year-old children are still dependent on the adult but are increasingly able to move away in order to explore and master the world around them. They learn best when they learn actively, through a variety of hands-on experiences. They integrate what they learn by symbolically re-creating experiences in play, art, and language. Piaget (1952) calls this the "preoperational" phase of development. Greenspan (1981; Greenspan & Wieder, 2006) refers to the development of "representational capacities" during the preschool years.

The teacher therefore provides young children with developmentally appropriate learning tools, through which they can discover concepts, acquire new skills, and organize experiences symbolically. The teacher encourages questioning and problem solving, highlights basic concepts, makes connections, and guides the mastery of basic skills. Helping a child to complete a puzzle, cut paper with scissors, remember the name of an animal, count the right number of cups to pass out at snack, pour her own juice, mix a new color, build a bridge, or ride a tricycle affords a child opportunities to gain mastery and assert autonomy in developmentally appropriate ways. The teacher takes each child's level of cognitive development as her starting point and helps the child move forward from there. She facilitates the integration of cognition and emotion by relating a child's learning activities to the child's personal experiences.

In the following example, Paul sits on the floor attempting to build with the duplo blocks. He tries to put two pieces together, becomes frustrated, and gives up.

PAUL: I can't do it!

TEACHER: You seem frustrated, but I'll bet you can do it. Let me show you, and then let's see if you can do it by yourself. *(Paul watches, then successfully joins two pieces.)*

PAUL: I did it!

TEACHER: That made you happy. What are you going to make?

PAUL: A house. *(He works intently for several minutes and makes a house, muttering "red, red, red" as he selects only red pieces to use.)*

TEACHER: You made a red house.

PAUL: I'm gonna make another house.

TEACHER: What color are you going to make this one?

PAUL *(picking up a blue piece)*: Green.

TEACHER: Is that green? Let's see . . . it's the same color as your sneakers. Do you remember what that color is called? *(cuing)* That's bl . . .

PAUL: Blue! *(He smiles proudly. Paul completes the second house and puts a little boy in one of them, along with a mommy, a little girl, and a baby. In the other house he puts a daddy figure.)*

TEACHER: That's like your family. You live with Mommy, Veronica, and Shawna, and Daddy lives in a different house now.

Teacher as Surrogate Caregiver

In her role as teacher, by promoting the child's mastery of certain concepts and skills, the teacher fulfills the child's growing need for mastery and autonomy. However, sometimes a child must also regress in order to progress. She must return to earlier developmental levels in order to establish the missing developmental precursors that underpin the formation of later developmental gains. The therapeutic teacher helps the young child build a sound developmental foundation through the formation of a strong relationship. The therapeutic teacher not only attempts to strengthen the child's relationship with his caregiver, but she also makes herself available as a surrogate attachment figure.

Some children, due to an organic fragility, have had difficulty entering fully into relationship. The teacher actively attempts to bring such children into relationship by engaging them in activities such as reciprocal play, mirroring, peek-a-boo, and hide-and-seek. These are activities that children typically use at earlier developmental stages to develop a sense of self in the context of relationship with the other. Other children have the capacity but have not had available to them a stable or appropriate attachment figure. The teacher will offer such children permission to express their dependency needs and make herself available as a stable and nurturing attachment figure.

Within the context of the relationship with the therapeutic teacher, the child can do developmental work she was unable to do earlier. Often emotionally needy children must experience ways of relating to the adult that are more appropriate for a younger child because they have not had the opportunity to do so earlier. Many need help establishing trust in the consistent availability of an adult. The therapeutic teacher helps the child bridge the connection with her own caregiver through toddler-like "checking-in" behaviors, such as visits to the parents' room or telephone calls to Mommy. The teacher will also encourage the use of transitional objects, such as a soft toy from home or a photograph of Mommy. Within her own relationship with the child, the therapeutic teacher might indulge the child's dependency needs by carrying or holding the child on her lap, giving the child extra crackers if she needs them, allowing Band-Aids for imaginary boo-boos, or permitting the child to play baby. She will help the child solidify a sense of object constancy by playing peek-a-boo or hide-and-seek and remaining consistently available as the child moves away and comes back to her.

The therapeutic teacher provides a corrective experience to children who have been either overly frustrated or indulged by offering them appropriate levels of need gratification. She nurtures and accommodates need but at the same time sets limits and structures the experience for the child. She might, for example, address a child's preoccupation with hoarding crackers from the refrigerator first thing in the morning by allowing him to take two at a time, and two more if he is still hungry.

The following is an example of how a child was able to use her relationship with her teacher to work through important developmental processes. By age 4, Juanita had been in and out of three separate foster homes before she was finally placed in the care of her great-aunt. When Juanita first arrived in the nursery, she remained aloof but hypervigilant. Juanita's symbolic play was limited, but she found some comfort in water play. Often she would have her hands immersed in a bin of water while her gaze steadily followed the teachers as they moved around the classroom, as if she was trying to ward off the ever-present danger of abandonment. When a teacher went out of the room without her, Juanita would panic and cry inconsolably. During transitions, Juanita would become very anxious, run around the classroom, and climb on furniture as if testing to see if an adult would come protect her.

Interventions were employed that were designed to strengthen Juanita's relationship with her great-aunt and allow her to use her relationship with her teacher to foster a sense of basic security and reduce anxiety. Juanita's aunt was asked to send a photograph of herself, which the teachers hung on a string for Juanita to wear around her neck, as well as Juanita's favorite teddy bear for Juanita to carry back and forth to school each day. Juanita periodically called her aunt at home to "check in" and was allowed to visit her in the parents' room whenever she was at school.

In the classroom, the teachers helped Juanita learn that she could ask to sit on a lap when she was feeling worried. They played hide-and-seek and other ac-

tivities that involved "going away and coming back" in order to reinforce Juanita's sense of object constancy. Juanita began to use transitional objects to symbolize the relationship with her teacher and would sometimes ask to wear a teacher's watch or hold her keys when she was going out of the room.

Sometimes, Juanita would opt to play baby and regress to a developmental stage where she was more receptive to nurturing input. One day, she got into the doll bed and asked for a bottle.

JUANITA: Waaa! Waaa!

TEACHER: Baby needs something . . . what do you need, baby?

JUANITA: Ba-ba.

TEACHER: A bottle? Hang on . . . here you go.

JUANITA: Waaa! Waaa! The monsters!

TEACHER: The baby is scared. (*picking her up*) Don't worry, baby, I'm not going to let the monsters hurt you.

JUANITA: Don' leave me!

TEACHER: You're afraid I'm going to leave you. But I'm staying right here.

By acting as a nurturing and protective "mommy" to the frightened "baby," the therapeutic teacher helps Juanita relive old fears in a new and corrective way, thereby helping her to build the sense of basic security she was unable to build at the developmentally appropriate time.

Teachers are frequently worried that if they allow for such regression, they will soon have a classroom full of screaming infants to contend with. The therapeutic teacher, however, allows for regression but is also able to contain it. By allowing children to feel alternately "big and little," the therapeutic teacher facilitates movement back and forth and maintains the delicate balance between progress and regress. Within the schoolday, the children are allowed to play baby during open-ended play periods but are asked to be their 3- and 4-year-old selves during structured group activities. When free play is over, the teacher helps Juanita "grow up" again:

Okay, Juanita, it's time to clean up. You can play baby again later in the playroom. Now let's see if you can be 1 year old . . . now be 2 . . . now 3 . . . now be your 4-year-old self . . . are you ready to pass out the cups for snack?

By remaining consistently available to Juanita as she worked through these developmental processes, the teachers helped Juanita become more comfortable with her dependency needs and establish a sense of security and trust in the relationship. Eventually, Juanita became much less anxious, more autonomous, and able to invest more of her attention and energy in learning activities.

Teacher as Therapist

Helping the child to develop a significant relationship with an adult is one therapeutic function the teacher performs. Another is to act as an "interpreter of experience," to help children who have had traumatic or emotionally overwhelming experiences in their lives sort out what has happened to them. As children represent their experiences through play and art symbols, the therapeutic teacher will help a child elaborate and connect the experiences represented to real emotions and sometimes to real-life events. She thus enables the child to sort out confusing and powerful experiences. The therapeutic relationship safely contains these experiences and the child's powerful feelings around them.

Peter, a 4-year-old boy diagnosed with separation anxiety disorder, has been separated from his mother at 1 year and brought from Jamaica by his father to live in New York. In January, Peter learns that his father will be leaving shortly on a 2-month trip to Jamaica, without Peter. Peter begins to experience behavioral regressions. At the end of each day, he becomes highly anxious, screaming and crying in distress. Interventions are employed to address Peter's anxiety. During free play, Peter plays with the toy plane and people. Placing several people on the plane, including a daddy figure, Peter flies the plane away, leaving the little boy behind.

PETER (*sternly*): I'm leaving . . . I'm going away.

TEACHER (*playing the part of the boy*): Don't go, Daddy! Don't leave me! I want to go with you.

PETER: You shut up, you're not coming with me. Now don't be a baby.

TEACHER: But I'm afraid you won't come back.

PETER: Oh, all right . . . Wait, wait . . . I come back. (*Taking his time, Peter eventually flies the plane back to the little boy.*) See? I come back. Now don't you worry.

TEACHER: Maybe you are worrying about how your daddy is going to go away on a plane. But your daddy will come back, too.

Peter plays out similar scenarios for several days. His anxiety is reduced and behavioral regression diminishes.

The therapeutic teacher also "saves" experiences for children and helps them work through them out of the moment, when observing ego is stronger. By referring back to an upset that occurred previously, the therapeutic teacher reinforces the child's sense of object constancy, helps him bridge and integrate what might otherwise be isolated experiences, and establishes an emotional middle ground. A teacher might reflect to a child as follows:

TEACHER: Do you remember yesterday when you got really sad at goodbye time?

CHILD: I was crying.

TEACHER: Yes, you said that you didn't want to go home. But you came back to school today. Are you feeling a little better?

CHILD (*smiling*): Yes. I'm gonna come back tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.

By talking over with a teacher an incident that occurred earlier, children learn that they can have and express their feelings without becoming panicked or overwhelmed by them.

Teacher as Limit Setter

While there are many times when it is appropriate for the teacher to follow the child's agenda, the therapeutic teacher must also retain the role of limit setter and reality tester for the young child. Unlike the therapist, who sees the child in a uniquely removed situation, the therapeutic teacher is involved with the child for many hours per day and within the context of a group. Insofar as she must manage the needs of a group of children and maintain a certain degree of order in the classroom, the therapeutic teacher must make demands on the individual child to conform to certain routines and limits. In this way, she is responsible for enforcing a reality outside of that of the individual child. For children whose sense of self is fragile, this can be quite facilitating. Developmentally, children need to repeatedly come up against a parental "no" in order to establish themselves as separate, autonomous beings. By setting limits in a way that is firm and neutral but at the same time acknowledges the child's place within the situation, the therapeutic teacher helps the child delineate a sense of himself in relation to the other. When the teacher has access to her own feelings and is able to communicate them clearly, she offers children a non-threatening model for self-expression. Her display of genuine affect and her ability to articulate the source of her feeling gives children permission to connect with their own feelings and to expand their awareness of emotional cause and effect.

Limit setting, which is done within the context of a supportive relationship, can also be a corrective experience for children who come from homes where adults exert authority in ways that might be hurtful and frightening. Because they have been presented with overwhelming levels of frustration, these children often become enraged and are unable to stop themselves from acting out. Frequently, when an adult in the nursery attempts to set a limit with the child, the child becomes terrified, as if she is actually seeing a monster, and runs to the "good" teacher to save her.

One day in the playroom, Keith is hitting another child who is refusing to get off the tricycle he perceives as his. The teacher intervenes.

TEACHER (*holding Keith's arms*): I'm going to help you stop hitting.

Hitting hurts. Let's see if you can stop yourself and use your words instead of hitting. (*Keith becomes distressed.*)

KEITH: Get offa me! Get offa me! (*Breaking loose, he runs to the other side of the room and picks up a block to throw at the teacher. The teacher stops him and carries him to a chair at the side of the room.*)

TEACHER: Let's take some time out and talk about what's happening.

KEITH (*struggling to hit teacher*): Get offa me! Get offa me! (*calling to another teacher*) Chrissy, help!

TEACHER: You seem really scared. Are you afraid I'm going to hurt you?

KEITH (*yelling*): Yes! You're hurting me!

TEACHER: Maybe it feels as if I'm hurting you. I'm not going to hurt you, though. But I am going to help you stop hitting because hitting does hurt, and we need to make sure that everyone stays safe. (*Keith begins to relax in teacher's arms.*)

TEACHER: Okay, it seems as if you are ready to stop. Let's talk about what just happened.

When limits are set by the adult in a neutral, supportive, and meaningful manner, the child will come to trust that the adult can be authoritative without being hurtful. The teacher says "no" but continues to care for and be available to the child. In the service of the positive relationship with the therapeutic teacher, the child eventually comes to internalize the ability to adhere to limits and to tolerate frustration.

A COMMON WORLD, A COMMON LANGUAGE: THE CHILD WITHIN THE GROUP

A distinguishing feature of the therapeutic classroom setting is that it addresses the needs of individual children within the collective of the group. As the facilitator of this group, the teacher is faced with the challenge of balancing the needs of the individual with the needs of the group. Although the management of a group of young special-needs children is at times a difficult task, in the end the process of fostering group activity and interaction can be therapeutic and promote growth for the children.

One function the group serves is to diminish a child's sense of isolation. By participating in a curriculum that draws on universally relevant developmental themes, the children are enabled to share and compare their individual experiences with those of other children. Making an isolated trouble into a shared experience is powerful and healing for the young child.

In their spontaneous play, the children engage in a similar process. Very often, a group of children will join together in choreographing complex play scenarios where the collective imagination weaves together themes that are at once pro-

foundly individual and universal. The teacher can facilitate this process by helping to mediate conflict situations, delegating roles, and organizing themes. As facilitator, it is crucial that the teacher be able to assess when to get involved and when to step back and let group process proceed on its own.

By participating in the dialogue that is created in group dramatic play, children are intrinsically motivated to establish a shared reality—and with it a shared set of play symbols. They must agree implicitly that a plate full of playdough is a pizza or that a cylindrical block is a firehose. These play symbols become the basis for meaningful communication among the children. This is especially important for children who have language difficulties and for whom the development of other symbolic capacities is an important precursor to effective language use.

For children whose sense of self is underdeveloped, group interaction helps them differentiate between self and other. Children who are still locked within a symbiotic relationship with their caregivers and who are relatively undifferentiated are suddenly confronted with the fact that there are other children, different from them.

Working through conflict situations helps diminish each child's sense of egocentrism. Children are helped by the teacher to check destructive impulses and to communicate with each other instead. As children are led to examine how their behavior impacts on others, they gain a greater awareness of emotional cause and effect. The teacher guides children in recognizing and empathizing with each other's feelings, so that cooperation, rather than competition, will become attractive to them.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Creating a space for emotional life in the classroom is essential if troubled children are to realize their full developmental potential. Although it might be possible to manage a difficult child's behaviors without speaking to her emotional needs, in the long run this could be to the child's detriment. If this is not dealt with at this formative age, a child's emotional troubles may go underground but continue to interfere with optimal growth and psychological integration throughout the child's life.

Helping children cope with powerful emotions requires hard work, emotional strength, and ingenuity on the part of the teacher. Her multiple roles require the flexibility to move from instructional mode to caregiver mode to therapeutic mode in her relationships with children. A teacher who reaches out to embrace students on all of these levels gains access to children's energies for learning that may have previously been inaccessible. While the children's activity level may increase and the noise level may be higher at times, so will the level of spontaneous, constructive learning. That achievement is the therapeutic teacher's greatest reward.