

Playing for Keeps: The Value of Open-Ended Play

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TRAUMATIZED AND DEVELOPMENTALLY ARRESTED preschool children are often unable to play productively. Prior chapters have included discussion about the developmental evolution of play symbols and the need for play therapy when the language of play does not develop spontaneously. Yet the therapeutic preschool must go beyond the provision of play therapy as a form of individualized early intervention. Preschools that heal must allow a prominent role for play in the classroom.

Typically, high-quality preschool programs for healthy children encourage free play by providing motivating symbolic play materials and by allotting a portion of the day for open-ended activity. In spite of some parental fears about children “just playing” in school, developmentally oriented preschool programs protect the child’s right to learn through self-initiated exploration and collective experiences with peers.

Early childhood professionals have protected young children’s right to play for years based on their knowledge of child development and their own observations of children playing that have demonstrated its value. Recent research supports our clinical observations and shows that by playing, children activate synapses in their brains that allow them to think in increasingly sophisticated ways, thus improving their potential as learners (Greenspan & Wieder, 2006; Siegel, 1999). Indeed, there is evidence that play improves overall brain capacity in young mammals, who had larger and more developed brains if they played than their counterparts who did not play (Mann, 1996).

People who observe young children at play over time find that most children move through a sequence, initially characterized by isolated play, subsequently

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evolving to parallel play, and eventually moving toward more cooperative play. While the individual player must find a way to use toys to represent his inner world and his experiential reality if he is to move beyond the sensorimotor stage, the cooperative player must employ play metaphors that are meaningful to peers as well as to himself. The well-functioning child uses play as a way to interpret experiences and to integrate concepts, as well as to communicate his understanding to others. Children who lack play skills and play opportunities lack a crucial means of integrating their learning experiences. They are also at a loss for communicating their experiences to peers. Indeed, without play as a tool, these children may appear disorganized and without the capacity to interact constructively. There may be a temptation for the teacher to circumvent the play arena entirely and to develop a curriculum that relies heavily on teacher-directed activity, rote learning, and highly structured interaction routines. Sadly, children in these kinds of early childhood programs may not be able to compensate for their symbolic deficits without help. Integration and communication abilities may remain limited. Preschools that heal assume that play has the same value for traumatized, fragile, or arrested children as it has for healthy children. In fact, the development of symbolic play may be even more crucial for children whose life experience has been confusing and overwhelming, because these children need tools that will allow them to make sense of their experiences. Play becomes a primary avenue for helping these children to accomplish unfinished developmental tasks and to share their triumphs with others in social and growth-promoting ways.

CAUTION: CHILDREN AT PLAY

Teachers attempting to give play a more important role in their classrooms of young, emotionally needy children may want to proceed with caution. They can anticipate that children without well-developed play skills who are not used to open-ended activity may initially be wild, unfocused, or perhaps even destructive. Children who are unrelated or marginally verbal may initially use free playtime to withdraw or to engage in perseverative activity or to enact unusual rituals. Those children who do welcome play opportunities may seem driven to bring up frightening material that intimidates the other children and causes the teacher to watch the clock anxiously for cleanup time.

Certainly, helping nonplayers to play productively in a group requires low adult-child ratios. Children must be able to make contact with adults in order to feel more organized when difficult themes arise, and teachers must feel that they can use their usual management techniques in order to help children socialize and contain their play when necessary. Integrating the therapeutic techniques described in Chapter 6 may help teachers expand their resources and intervene effectively when play requires adult input. However, even when play and interaction are proceeding well, classroom staff are advised to remain present and available during

free-play periods. While it may seem tempting to attend to classroom tasks while the children are occupied with one another, the teacher's quiet presence during these times is at least as salient as her more active presence during teacher-directed activities. It is the child's feeling that he is being well cared for and well protected that ultimately allows play to occur (Winnicott, 1971/2005). The teacher's attention, accessibility, and scaffolding may increase the fragile child's potential to engage, stay focused, and develop her play symbols.

Given the difficulties that at-risk children are likely to have during free-play periods and the need for intensive teacher supervision and availability, some readers may wonder whether the value of the interactive play experience is worth the cost. To address that question, this chapter will present a series of play scenes that were documented during free-play hours in a therapeutic nursery serving the populations we have described. Many of the children featured were initially unable to elaborate in play or to sustain playful interactions with others. Their evolving play themes are described here, along with their teacher's interventions and their classmates' responses. Each play anecdote will be preceded by a brief description of the child featured and will be followed by an analysis of the play themes and interactions.

PLAY SCENES

Darryl's Wife

Darryl is a 4-year-old African American boy who lives with his young, single mother. The family lives in a project in a densely populated urban area known for street violence and drug activity. Darryl is an alert, sensitive child with many fears. He was initially unable to allow other children to touch "his" playthings. Therefore, early play sequences took place with teachers only.

SCENE ONE

Darryl, in oversize clothes, pretends to be a daddy.

DARRYL (*in a low voice, barely audible*): I'm the daddy. It's time to go to the corner. . . . Gotta get my jacket.

TEACHER: What should I do?

DARRYL: You the wife. You stay home. You hear? You stay home.

TEACHER: Is there a baby?

DARRYL: Yeah . . . there's a baby. Take care of the baby while I go pick up the package.

TEACHER: What kind of a package are you picking up?

DARRYL: Shut up and take care of the baby. It's none of your business. I got to go to the corner and get the package.

TEACHER: That sounds kind of scary. I wonder if the baby is scared as well. I'll stay here and keep him safe. *(Teacher cradles baby doll. Darryl becomes silent and gets absorbed in looking at his mirror image, which is dressed in the oversized clothes. He repeats his mission about the package over and over again to his mirror image.)*

DARRYL *(pretending that he is back from his errand, picks up the baby)*: Don't cry. Don't cry. *(He hugs the baby, then suddenly disengages from the play.)*

SCENE TWO

Darryl approaches the dress-up corner and puts on a policeman's shirt. He asks the teacher to help him button it.

DARRYL: I'm the cop and you be the boss.
 TEACHER: What does the boss do?
 DARRYL: You get the bad guys.
 TEACHER: Okay. Where are they?
 DARRYL: There! Over there! *(points)* They got drugs! Let's go! *(Teacher and Darryl walk over to where the "bad guys" are.)* Now we take 'em to jail. *(pulls out imaginary gun and aims at the bad guys)* You're under arrest. Let's go! Get in the cop car. They gotta put their head down! *(Darryl shoves imaginary perpetrator into car.)* We have to lock them up. Where's the key? *(At this moment, Cheneka, who has been watching the play, chimes in.)*

CHENEKA: I know where the key is at!
 TEACHER: Maybe Cheneka can be a cop, too, and help lock up the bad guys.
 DARRYL: Yeah! Come on. We got work to do.
 CHENEKA *(goes to a toy shelf and gets toy keys)*: Here. *(She and Darryl mime locking the jail doors.)*

DARRYL: C'mon! There's more bad guys! We got a get all of 'em.

SCENE THREE

With some prompting from the teacher, Darryl, Wendy, and Cheneka decide to play a game of house. Darryl is the daddy, Wendy is the mommy, and Cheneka wants to be the baby. Wendy spreads a blanket on the floor and sits there with Cheneka and a collection of baby dolls. Darryl pretends that he is going to work. He disappears for a few minutes and then returns with three bags stuffed with play clothing, jewelry, and plastic fruits and vegetables. Cheneka and Wendy look up at Darryl from their position on the blanket. At this point, Pierre wanders onto the blanket that has become "home." Pierre

is an autistic child with an infantile level of functioning, and he does not seem aware that he is disrupting something.

DARRYL: I have presents for everyone. . . . I did the shopping.
 TEACHER: It looks like Daddy is bringing lots of things for his family. He's taking care of them.
 DARRYL: I'm not the daddy—I'm Santa Claus!
 WENDY: Ooooh! Santa!
 DARRYL *(takes Pierre by the hand and sits him down on the blanket)*: He can be the baby, too.
 WENDY: Give the baby food!
(Darryl reaches into one of the bags and pulls out an apple and an orange. He hands one to Pierre and one to Cheneka. Cheneka pretends to eat, and Pierre sits holding his fruit and staring at Cheneka.)

TEACHER: Look! Santa is feeding the children. They're so happy to get something special from Santa.
(Darryl puts on a Santa hat from the dress-up corner and begins to give all of his goodies to Wendy, Cheneka, and Pierre. Darryl then carefully takes out the jewelry from his bag and fits necklaces over Wendy's head. She looks at him gleefully. Cheneka is gathering all of her presents into one big pile. Pierre, who seems oblivious to the proceedings at this point, walks away. A few minutes later, Wendy and Cheneka skip off and the play ends.)

SCENE FOUR

Darryl and Wendy are in the dress-up corner. Wendy dresses up in a silver dress, satin hair ribbons, and a wide, decorative belt. Darryl is watching her closely.

DARRYL *(approaching the teacher)*: I want to get married to Wendy.
 TEACHER: Did you tell her that?
 DARRYL: No, I can't. You tell her.
 TEACHER: I'll help you. Wendy! Come here. Darryl wants to play getting married, but he's shy about telling you. Do you want to get married to Darryl in this game? *(Wendy nods.)* Okay. What happens when you get married?
 DARRYL: You have to walk, hold hands, and then you kiss the bride.
 TEACHER: All right. You can walk down here. Do you want to wear something special? It looks like Wendy is all dressed up. *(Darryl nods, goes to the dress-up corner, and returns wearing a policeman shirt. He asks the teacher for help with buttoning.)* There. You're all ready.

(Darryl and Wendy run to the other side of the classroom and then walk slowly, holding hands, over to where the teacher is sitting.)

TEACHER: You two are special friends, and now you are married.

DARRYL: Can I kiss her?

TEACHER: You have to ask.

DARRYL: Can I kiss you? *(Wendy nods and Darryl kisses her on the cheek.)*

Darryl's play initially showed preoccupation with adult activity that he had observed but not understood emotionally. Indeed, the play indicates that Darryl's real-life experiences are difficult for him to sort out. His history includes information that several male relatives have been arrested and some imprisoned. Some of these men were present during Darryl's early life, and he felt attached to them. This gives Darryl the task of reconciling what he knows about "good" and "bad" with his need for identification with important people. Play helps Darryl to work on all of this. His ability to symbolize these experiences in play with peers is encouraged so that he does not remain isolated with his conflicts.

Darryl's Santa identity gave him a chance to take a giving, nurturing role that could be integrated with his image of what it is to be male. For a boy who frequently acts out the macho role and refers to himself as being "bad," seeing himself in a different light through play may be very powerful. After this, he is able to express age-appropriate Oedipal desires and "marries" Wendy.

Without the opportunity to engage in free play where these themes could be expressed, Darryl would probably be driven to act out his conflicts through aggressive and ambivalent behaviors toward others. Indeed, this sometimes occurred, but the information that Darryl gave through his play gave teachers valuable insights into the conflicts motivating his behaviors and, therefore, more tools for intervention.

Baby Wendy

Wendy is a 4-year-old foster child whose biological mother's rights have been terminated. Wendy's current foster mother is her third caregiver. Wendy has just been told that her teacher is pregnant and will stay at home to care for the baby when it is born. The teacher has made a book about the baby and the things that it will need as well as the children's possible reactions to the event. After this is discussed in a morning meeting and a group activity has been devoted to a "baby" curriculum, there is a period of free play, during which Wendy climbs up to reach an apron in the teacher's closet. She often likes to wear this to play the mommy.

TEACHER: Are you going to play Mommy today?

WENDY: No. You. *(She fits the apron over the teacher's head.)* I want to get in there *(pointing to the front pocket on the apron).*

TEACHER: Oh! It looks like you'd like to be like a baby inside of the mommy.

(Wendy nods. She silently evaluates the space in the pocket and concludes that she cannot fit. Then she realizes that she can crawl under the apron, making the apron protrude like it would if the teacher were pregnant with her.)

TEACHER: Oh, look! *(She is now seated in a rolling chair with Wendy in her lap under her apron.)* It looks like I will soon have a little baby! *(Wendy emerges, crying like an infant; she crawls up on the teacher's lap and lets herself be held like an infant.)*

WENDY: I want a bottle! I want a diaper!

TEACHER: You're thinking of all the things that the story said about what the baby will need when it comes out.

WENDY: I'm a baby, too.

TEACHER: You want to make sure that we take care of baby Wendy even after the new baby comes.

Open-ended play following the teacher's disclosure allowed Wendy to express her need for nurture as well as her competitive feelings about the teacher's baby. This opportunity was particularly important for Wendy, who had lost contact with her own mother and was often preoccupied by abandonment issues. The play about being inside and being born to someone responsive allowed Wendy to experience something precious even as she begins to deal with the loss of her departing teacher.

Bianca's Elevator

Bianca is a 4-year-old girl who is living in her second foster home. She has an ambivalent relationship with her second foster mother, who is a distant relative. The family lives in a crime-ridden and neglected housing project. Bianca often plays with her friend Juan at free playtime.

JUAN: Is this your house?

BIANCA: No, it's the elevator. Come in quick! The door is closing!

JUAN: We going up?

BIANCA: Oh, shit! We're stuck! Mommy's not here! We're stuck!

JUAN: Let's get out.

BIANCA: We can't. We're stuck. The door can't open and Mommy's not here! *(Bianca is becoming distressed.)*

TEACHER: That must be scary for you to be in a stuck elevator without Mommy! What can we do?

BIANCA: Get the firemen to fix it.

JUAN: Yeah! The firemen!

BIANCA: Get me the phone! (*Teacher hands it to her.*) Hello, fireman?
Help! We're stuck in the elevator!

TEACHER (*picks up other toy phone*): Hello! I'm the fireman. It must be scary for you to be stuck in the elevator without your mommy, but I'm coming to help you right now!

BIANCA (*smiles at Juan*): It's okay. The fireman is coming.
(*After the children are "rescued" from the elevator, they continue their play by pretending to be the firemen helping needy dolls.*)

Bianca independently initiated this dramatic play scenario during free play with the cooperation of Juan. He seemed to identify with Bianca's play theme. Bianca began to reenact a recent experience of being stuck in a broken elevator in her building while also addressing a general concern about "who is going to keep me safe." Bianca did not require teacher intervention to initiate or organize her play, although the teacher's presence and participation helped Bianca avoid traumatic play where she is driven to keep repeating the frightening event without resolution.

Peter's Job Search

Peter is a 3-year-old boy with a language disorder. His parents are both professionals, but his father has recently had a change in his employment status. Peter and Bianca have decided to play house; Peter is the daddy and Bianca is the mommy.

BIANCA: Let's make a house.

PETER: Okay. I can help.

BIANCA: I'm the mommy. Get the dress and the shoes.

PETER: I'm Daddy. (*He puts on the hat and the coat and sits in a corner of the classroom looking sad.*)

BIANCA: Why are you sad, Daddy?

PETER: Daddy sad. Daddy sad.

BIANCA: Did you get spanked?

PETER: No. My job is lost. I can't find it.

BIANCA: Your job is lost?

PETER: Yes. I'm sad. I lost my job.

BIANCA: Come on. I'll help you find it.

(*Both children go off hand in hand in search of the lost job. They look around the classroom.*)

BIANCA: I found it!

PETER: No. Not that one.

BIANCA (*smiling hopefully and holding up the doctor kit*): Is this your job?

PETER: Yeah! That's my job! Daddy's happy now.

Peter is able to use dramatic play to represent complex issues, such as unemployment and despondency, that had recently been part of his familial experience. His limited expressive language would have prevented him from exploring these issues if he had had to rely solely on verbal means. He required no adult intervention in this play but used the cooperation and support of a peer to help him bring the play to resolution.

Michael's Monster

Michael is a 4-year-old boy who was referred by his Head Start program because he alternately terrified other children or screamed in terror for no apparent reason. His early life was spent on the street with a drug-addicted parent. Michael currently lives with his great-grandmother, who lives in a community plagued by violence.

SCENE ONE

Michael is running around the room making monster noises and causing the other children to scream in terror. The teacher intervenes.

TEACHER: That's too scary, Michael!

MICHAEL: No it ain't. I'm Freddy Kruger.

TEACHER: Freddy Kruger is too scary for the children.

MICHAEL: You be Freddy. You chase me and I'll scream.

TEACHER: It would be really scary if I were Freddy.

MICHAEL: No, it won't. I'm not a baby.

TEACHER: No, you're 4 years old. Maybe you'd like to pretend to be a baby who is afraid of Freddy. I can be the teacher and tell Freddy to go away.

MICHAEL (*looks intrigued, then curls up in a ball near the doll bed*):

Waaaa! Waaa! Freddy's comin'!

TEACHER: It's okay, baby. I'm right here. I won't let Freddy Kruger hurt you.

MICHAEL: Say, "Go away!"

TEACHER: Go away, Freddy! Leave the baby alone. He's so little. He just wants to play!

MICHAEL: Give me somethin' to play with.

TEACHER: How about . . . this? (*hands Michael a set of nesting cups*)

MICHAEL: How about a gun?

TEACHER: No. That's too scary for a baby.

MICHAEL: All right. Give me those, then.

SCENE TWO

Michael, playing now with Adam, pretends that the "monster" has returned.

MICHAEL (*to Adam*): I think Freddy's comin' back.
 TEACHER: Are you two pretending to be babies who are scared of Freddy?
 MICHAEL: No. I'm Freddy. He goin' to be the baby.
 TEACHER: No. Children can't be Freddy at school. It's too scary.
 ADAM: We could be on television!
 MICHAEL: Okay.
 TEACHER: You could pretend to be on television but remember—no Freddy.
 MICHAEL: We on TV and we the TV babies. Come on, Adam. (*They hide under a blanket, giggling. Then they start screaming.*)
 TEACHER: What's happening to the TV babies?
 MICHAEL: They see Freddy Kruger comin'.
 TEACHER: Uh-oh. Who's gonna help them?
 ADAM: Just turn it off. They're on TV. Okay?
 MICHAEL: No! The TV lady has to come in and then take them away from here.
 TEACHER: Okay. I'll be the TV lady. Come on, babies. Let's go. This show is too scary. (*Michael and Adam crawl away, still under the blanket, giggling.*)

Michael's spontaneous play was aggressive and terrified the other children. The teacher's intervention helped him to abandon his identification with the aggressor and play out his own scared feelings, allowing him to receive comfort. Once the rules about monster play were set, Michael felt safe enough to include another child in his play. If monster play was simply outlawed, Michael might have lacked an avenue for symbolizing his inner terror, and wild, aggressive behavior might have continued to dominate peer interactions.

Ana's Doughnuts

Ana is a 3-year-old autistic girl whose play initially consisted of wandering around the room and dumping toys. She frequently stayed on the periphery of the room, tapping the wall with her fingers and repeating the names of television characters.

SCENE ONE

The teacher sits down at the playdough table in an effort to engage Ana in play.

ANA: That's Bert and Ernie. No, McDonald's. Later McDonald's . . . Bert and Ernie Good Night. No playdough.
 TEACHER (*continues to play with the playdough herself*): Ana says "no playdough," but Peggy wants playdough. Look, cookies!

ANA: No cookies. Dunkin' Donuts. Time to make the doughnuts.
 TEACHER: Okay. I'll make doughnuts with playdough. Look. (*Ana watches with interest as the teacher fashions the dough into doughnut shapes.*)
 ANA: Two Dunkin' Donuts.
 TEACHER (*makes another one*): See? I made two Dunkin' Donuts. We can make things with playdough. (*Ana giggles and skips away.*)

SCENE TWO

Ana is compulsively tapping shelves and walls and calling out in an unrelated manner. The teacher joins her in a reciprocal tapping game and then attempts to engage Ana.

TEACHER: Okay. Let's finish tapping and play with playdough. (*She gets the dough.*)
 ANA (*with excitement*): Time to make the doughnuts!
 TEACHER: Okay. I'll make doughnuts for Ana and doughnuts for Peggy.
 ANA: No Ana. Bert.
 TEACHER: Bert? Bert's not here.
 ANA: Bert and Ernie. No Ana.
 TEACHER: Okay. Let's make Bert and Ernie. Then we can give them doughnuts. (*She begins making Bert and Ernie from dough and articulates the process.*) Here's Bert's face, hair, . . . (*Ana watches, transfixed.*) There! That's Bert. Here's a doughnut for Bert. (*Ana silently hands teacher another clump of dough.*) What's that for?
 ANA: Ernie.

SCENE THREE

The teacher and Ana are playing with playdough and have made Bert and Ernie eating doughnuts at Ana's request.

TEACHER (*mimes feeding a doughnut to Bert*): Hey, this tastes yucky!
 ANA (*laughing*): Yucky!
 TEACHER (*repeats the mime with Ernie*): This tastes good!
 ANA: No good! Yucky!

SCENE FOUR

Ana is at the playdough table seated next to 4-year-old Raymond, a verbal and volatile child, and Jocelyn, a needy, demanding child. Jocelyn is trying to hoard all of the playdough, and Raymond is protesting loudly.

Ana is singing and tapping and seems oblivious to what's going on. The teacher intervenes and gives each child an equal amount of dough. Jocelyn begins eating pieces of the playdough.

RAYMOND (*pointing at Jocelyn*): Ewww! Look!

ANA (*looks and notices Jocelyn's activity; she becomes excited and animated*): Yucky! (*She begins flapping her hands.*)

JOCELYN AND RAYMOND (*laughing*): Yucky!

ANA: Yucky doughnuts!

JOCELYN: This ain't no doughnut. This is peanut butter.

ANA: No peanut butter. Doughnuts.

RAYMOND: I got doughnuts in mines. You want some?

ANA (*beaming*): Ernie! (*She calls out as if intending to engage the teacher, but the teacher is occupied elsewhere. Ana takes a clump of dough and presses it flat, pinching small pieces off and whispering.*)
Ernie's nose. Ernie's eyes. . . .

(*Jocelyn and Raymond look on with interest. Jocelyn finally grabs the clay and Ana runs to the other side of the room to play with the xylophone.*)

Ana's teacher used Ana's autistic interest in television characters to entice Ana into representational play with playdough. Her ability to develop a play routine with the dough allowed Ana to make a meaningful play connection with her peers.

Natalie's Rabbit

Natalie is an extremely intelligent 3-year-old child who has developed minimal social skills and rarely interacts with peers. She is fearful and frequently aggressive. One morning a visitor arrives at school to observe the class.

NATALIE: Get out of my class. (*She picks up a small doll house and tries to hurl it at the intruder.*)

TEACHER (*stopping her*): Maybe you're worried because there's a new person in the class today and you don't know her. It's okay. She's not going to hurt you.

NATALIE: I don't like her. I don't want her here. I'm going to cut her up with a scissors.

TEACHER: It's scary for you when someone new comes into the class. Maybe we could make something from playdough that also feels afraid when we have visitors.

NATALIE: Yes. I'm going to make a very scared rabbit. He is scared and doesn't like her either. Now she should leave our room.

TEACHER: It's scary for the rabbit to have a stranger in the classroom. What can we do to make him feel safe?

NATALIE: I'm going to build a safe house for him to hide in! (*She works intently on building a playdough house, intermittently looking over at the visitor. She places the rabbit carefully inside the house.*)

TEACHER: Maybe the rabbit can ask the visitor her name and what she is doing in our class.

NATALIE: I'll ask. (*looking at the visitor*) Why are you in my class?

VISITOR: I wanted to see what the children do in your school.

NATALIE (*continues putting finishing touches on the playdough house, then looks back to the visitor*): Do you like rabbits?

VISITOR: Yes! I like rabbits.

NATALIE (*brings dough over and gives the visitor a handful*): Make another one. (*Natalie retrieves her rabbit from the house and the two rabbits interact cautiously.*)

Natalie's overwhelming stranger anxiety and sense of vulnerability was masked by her aggressive behavior. Her teacher helped her to connect with and express her anxiety through play, lessening her need to attack the visitor and promoting a dialogue with her.

Peter's Crocodile

Peter is a 3-year-old boy with a developmental language disorder and difficulty with impulse control. This play took place following a 2-week school vacation, and began with Peter sitting at a table feeding the toy crocodile puppet a diet of assorted animals, wooden pegs, and playdough.

PETER: Yum!

TEACHER: It looks like the crocodile is hungry.

PETER (*in deep crocodile voice*): I want lots! (*Peter makes the crocodile gobble everything on the table and then come toward the teacher.*)

TEACHER: Uh-oh. He ate the pegs and the animals, and now he's eating me!

PETER: Yum yum. I'm gonna eat you up.

TEACHER: Maybe you want to make sure I'm inside you, crocodile. (*Peter makes the crocodile accelerate his eating behavior and become somewhat ferocious. He "bites" the teacher several times.*)

TEACHER: I think the crocodile is angry, too. Maybe you are thinking about the vacation. Maybe you wanted us to be here and we weren't and that made you angry and hungry!

PETER: You went to the doctor and you got a shot and you died.

TEACHER: You were worried that we died and could never come back?

PETER: Yes.

TEACHER: That must have made the vacation hard for you. Now you came back and we came back, too. That's what happens on vacations.
(*The crocodile stops eating and goes to sleep.*)

Peter's teacher recognized that his eating play was an important expression of his feelings regarding the break from school. She used therapeutic techniques that allowed Peter to communicate his worries and thus lessen the need to act out because of them.

Sarah's House

Sarah is a 3-year-old girl who has lived with her sisters and great-aunt for all of her life. The court has decided that she will be returned to the custody of her father and her sisters will remain with her great-aunt. During free playtime Sarah went to the toy shelves and pulled out a bin of miniature people. She then dragged a large, two-story doll house to the center of the room. She took dolls out of the bin and named them, using the names of her sisters, herself, her father, her father's girlfriend, her great-aunt, and her great-aunt's boyfriend. The teacher was setting up an easel nearby and heard the names; she decided to make herself available to Sarah by sitting close to her but not interfering.

SARAH: There's Daddy, Auntie, Kiki, Dee. . . . There's Auntie, Sarah, Dee, Daddy, Kiki. . . . There's Dee, Auntie, Sarah. . . . (*Suddenly, Sarah grabs handfuls of dolls and stuffs them into the dollhouse together.*)

TEACHER: It looks like you want all the people in the family to stay together.

SARAH (*sighing with relief and settling against the teacher*): Read me a story.

Sarah is powerless to change her family situation or make decisions about her living arrangements. However, her ability to use free playtime to represent her needs shows resilience, and her teacher's ability to validate her wishes promotes connection and receptivity.

Anita's Doctor

Anita is a 3½-year-old girl who is overidentified with fantasy characters but lacks the symbolic play skills necessary for elaborating her fantasy play. Peter is the 3-year-old boy who was described earlier. Their play started with Anita alone in the dress-up corner. She put on a gold lamé dress, high-heeled shoes, a shower

cap, and some beads. Then she wandered around the room with a distant look in her eyes, occasionally pausing to admire herself in the mirror.

TEACHER: Anita, who are you pretending to be?

ANITA: Cinderella!

TEACHER: Oh! I see you're wearing a beautiful dress.

ANITA: And shoes! (*She lifts her dress up to show the shoes.*)

TEACHER: And a necklace, too.

ANITA: I Cinderella. (*She wanders off, talking softly to herself. The teacher can hear fragments of a dialogue not meant to be shared. Some minutes later, the teacher notices Anita is still wandering and talking to herself.*)

TEACHER: Are you still being Cinderella? What is Cinderella doing?

ANITA: Go to the ball.

TEACHER: Okay. Should we make a castle for the ball? (*Anita does not reply.*) Anita?

ANITA: Shut up. Leave me alone. (*She walks off in a huff and resumes her wandering and mumbling.*)

PETER: I got no one to play with.

TEACHER: Maybe you could see what Anita is playing.

PETER (*joining Anita*): Hey. What you doing?

ANITA: Cinderella.

PETER: Oh, you are silly. (*He puts on some policeman clothes and sunglasses.*) Look. I'm police.

ANITA: You police? You silly. I wanna play police. (*She removes her outfit and puts on a jacket, hat, and sunglasses.*) Look, I police, too! (*The two children stand side by side and giggle as they watch themselves in the mirror. Peter notices the reflection of the doctor toys in the cubby behind him. He turns and exchanges the police hat for a white doctor hat and picks up the red doctor kit.*)

PETER: Now I the doctor. You be sick, Anita. Good idea! Cough!

ANITA (*complies*): I need a blanket! (*She is covered by the teacher. Peter carefully listens to Anita's heart and takes her blood pressure. He gives her some medicine as well.*) I better. Now the baby's sick.

PETER: Oh! The baby sick! He got to go to the hospital!

ANITA: Give him a shot!

PETER: Okay. I give the baby a big shot.

ANITA: Waaa! Waaa!

Both of these children have a limited play and language repertoire and need help to extend their play themes. When the teacher brings them together, they are able to help each other to develop themes at a level more typical for 2- to 3-year-olds.

Like younger children, they light on several themes before they can find one that is truly salient to them. Eventually, doctor play organizes them enough to develop a more elaborate play dialogue. This seems like a natural play theme for two children who still lack an age-appropriate sense of body integrity. This experience of developing and sharing play content with a peer promotes relatedness for these two children and allows them to build a foundation for more advanced play schemes.

CONCLUSION

A free-play period gives preschool children an opportunity to address developmental and experiential issues through their play themes. Children engaged in spontaneous play with peers and teachers are actively working on integrating experiences and communicating these experiences to others. By playing, the children increase their ability to connect and interact with one another and decrease their risk for remaining emotionally isolated with overwhelming emotional experience. Since many fragile children seem initially to be limited in their capacity to integrate and communicate, the evolution of these play capacities may greatly improve their prognosis for emotional well-being and learning potential.

Healthy children thrive if given the provision of time and space for open-ended play. However, the mere allotment of playtime is seldom enough to ensure productive play for emotionally fragile children. Teachers must make themselves available so that they can respond to children's play needs when appropriate, facilitate interactions with peers in play sequences, and help to organize children at times when they are unable to organize themselves. The reader will notice that the teachers described often used the therapeutic techniques explained in Chapter 6 in order to facilitate meaningful play. These techniques may help teachers feel more resourceful when children's play themes include drug pick-ups and police arrests, as well as job searches and doughnut making.

How can the reader analyze the learning that occurred in these play anecdotes? Indeed, the learning is not quantifiable and cannot be charted on a skill chart. Yet it is learning that can never be forgotten or discarded when the play period ends. Once children are able to use symbolic play as a means of representing their experiences and connecting with one another, their minds keep growing and are no longer completely reliant on an adult for moment-to-moment direction. Players develop their own learning agendas.

These themes that came from the children in the sequences above included themes born of their experiences as well as themes salient to developmental issues that still seemed to require negotiation. The themes that come from open-ended play must be noted by the preschool teacher, because they include the children's own learning agendas. These agendas constitute the basis for the development of the curricular themes elaborated in Chapter 8.

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