

Child's Play

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My 15 years of social work in England and Canada included five with the local authority Community Support Team here in North Devon that were theoretically intended to inform and support a change of direction for me into psychotherapy, but which turned out in practice more like the other way round. My training therapy was example and proof of the immense value of safe, focused and totally accepting one-to-one relationships (rarely, if ever, found in our client families): enough indeed for a change in direction, though down a quite new and different path.

My work today is with 'referred' children who come to my house in the country five days a week: not all at once, not all for the same hours, but all with regular and predictable times of their own. They come and play with toys and puzzles and my two obliging cats. They bake bread and pies and biscuits to take home to their families, and make amazing things with hammer and nails and scraps of wood in the shed. They go with binoculars for walks in fields and lanes, and for picnics by streams they can paddle and splash about in and pelt with stones.

The idea is a stitch-in-time one: early help for children in trouble ('difficult', 'challenging' children with parents at

their wits' end), while there is still time to avoid the often too late last resort of residential care.

While the value of play for 'normal' healthy child development is gaining public recognition, play therapy, of course, has long been in practice for the damaged and deprived. What is fundamental to my work, though, is not the play itself, but its opportunities for children to try all sorts of things, to learn all sorts of lessons, to succeed — or safely fail — with lots of recognition, occasional sympathy and firmly spelled-out boundaries of what it is and is not acceptable to do. Choices, achievements, attention, recognition, space and limits, more or less lacking in these children's experience, provide the conditions in which they can begin to find the confidence and self-esteem that lead, eventually, to concern for other people and control of themselves.

'Eventually' meaning sometimes several years. Like four, for the very bright six-year-old boy whose sexual obscenities and random destructiveness defied both home and school control. Years of discovering that activities stop when things get thrown about, that certain parts of the house are out of bounds, that nice things happen not 'if' but (subtle distinction understood about control) 'when' efforts

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are made. This child reminds himself from time to time about 'abusing it and losing it', and 'how would you like it yourself?', and counts each step on my stairs a birthday milestone — the last few in one triumphant stride to the top with good enough family life and mainstream school well in sight.

Two years for the 17-stone 12-year-old school refuser with dangerous sexual preoccupations, an old stuffed toy that had to be given a place at table and a temper beyond parental endurance. Sex was talked out over the cooking and eating of many a meal in company of toy 'Alf', red ribbon in the hedge marked each week's progress up a steep hill in the interest of losing weight, greatly helped by love — and consideration (hers) — for a horse who gradually took the place in her affections, of Alf. Twelve stone now, in full-time education, a pride and quite often a joy to her family.

Only one year for the eight-year-old bully, excluded from three schools, who spent an hour one day punishing, with every kitchen utensil, a bread dough figure of a 'very naughty boy', before shaping it into a perfect loaf that was going to be 'something very nice to take home'. Told by the stream, at the end of another day, that time goes fast for those enjoying themselves, he played out his last minutes muttering how horrid it all was, in the hope of holding back the clock. Not enough time that day, or in fact that starting-out year, for results to justify more funds. This boy is now in a hugely expen-

sive 'special' school.

How long for the latest, angry, nine-year-old who wasn't going to come to my 'shit house' until I had been to his with boxes and bags of things to make and do for almost three months. Too soon to tell still after a year of quite willing visits, gradually less testing (in every sense of the word) behaviour, and success in activities occasionally conceded to be 'cool'. At least by now the powers that be are prepared to think long term.

Colleagues reading of my experience with damaged children will realise that success does not depend on the animals, the rivers, farms and fields I have at my disposal. This is just one context where I feel at home and can take advantage of its resources, as others — whoever they are and wherever they live — can take advantage of theirs. And those who understand the underlying causes, neglect, abuse, too much or too little control, will be prepared for the wariness, the defiance and the lack of trust and confidence that often mask or impede progress and change. They won't need telling that trust and confidence grow in a safe environment; one that is physically safe from indoor and outdoor hazards, personally safe from rejection and humiliation, and structurally safe in terms of familiar routines, consistent expectations and reliable responses of, and to, behaviour. And those who are familiar with psychotherapy will, I think, recognise how much my own experience of it has informed the theory and practice of my work.