

The Many Meanings of Play

From Enactment to Play to Discussion

The Analysis of a Young Girl

Steven Marans

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From Enactment to Play to Discussion: The Analysis of a Young Girl

Steven Marans, M.S.W.

With an increasing capacity to test and suspend reality, children in the oedipal phase of development are able to use imaginative play as a means of creating an illusion of wish fulfillment and invincible mastery. Children at this age can move fluidly through a range of themes in play that are determined by the urgency of what is uppermost in their minds, whether exciting, pleasurable, or fearful. The push toward mastery combines with curiosity to arrive at solutions in play in which theories about themselves in relation to others may be tested and explored.

The suspension of reality that is essential for imaginative play presupposes a child's ability to tolerate substitutions for more direct and immediate gratification of wishes and to rely instead on symbolic representations of impulses, affects, and fantasies. Although children recognize that reality may not yield to their wishes and aspirations, in the suspension of reality they do not need completely to relinquish their exploration either. In the domain of play—between fantasy and enactment—wishes and their consequences, conflicts and their solutions, can be manipulated or tried in multiple forms and configurations. When children are able to direct scenarios involving the displacements of their wishes and fears, they are no longer simply the passive victim of the attendant dangers and disappointing confrontation with reality. The experience of mastery in this transitional phenomenon of play allows the child to titrate fantasy and real life—wishes can be modified while reality limitations and age-appropriate capabilities can be better tolerated and appreciated.

Our assumption that imaginative play reflects and serves adaptation to inner fantasy and external reality is based in part on observations of young children in psychoanalytic treatment. The play activities, narratives, associated affects, and uses of the analyst are the data we employ in our attempts to understand the child's experiences and to facilitate new solutions to his or her conflicts. This process is by no means a simple one, and our task is even more complicated when the young

patient steadfastly refuses to yield to a reality in which instinctual wishes will not be gratified immediately and is unable to play. When this occurs, there are few if any acceptable substitutes for or modification of the aims of instinctual urges. In this situation, the *suspension* of reality appears to be an inadequate substitute for the realization of intensely felt longings. Rather than pretending about wishes and consequences, conflicts and solutions, the child enacts them with the determination that the *real* objects of these longings will submit to his or her requirements. In the case of a child who cannot play we need first to understand why not and then to facilitate a move from enactment to pretend and from pretend to self-observation and perhaps discussion. These were the challenges when I began work with Emma.

Case Presentation

Background

At the time of referral Emma R. was four years eight months old. Mrs. R. complained that Emma was becoming “uncontrollably angry” and that every day began with a battle over the clothes she would wear and the food she would eat. She criticized almost everything her mother did and alternated between shouting that she hated Mother and that Mother hated her. She could not bear to see her sister, Sara, who was seven years older, talking with her mother and insisted bitterly that Sara was the favorite and had the best of everything. Emma’s provocative behavior extended to peeling wallpaper and paint in the house, stealing, and swearing. In addition, although she achieved bowel control at two years, Emma was not dry during the day until she was three and a half and was still in diapers at night when referred for treatment. She was afraid to go to the bathroom on her own and frequently stained her underpants. Emma was also fearful of walking unaccompanied from room to room in the house, had difficulty getting to sleep, and had frequent nightmares. According to her mother, when Emma was not battling, she demanded close physical attention and was at peace only when curled up in her mother’s lap, sucking her thumb. The mother was at her wit’s end, feeling that there was little she could do to please her daughter.

Emma’s parents separated when she was four years old. Mrs. R. had been desperate to have this second child “before it was too late” and gave birth to Emma when she was forty years old. Mrs.

R. described the wish for this child both as an attempt to save her failing marriage and as a “selfish act,” independent of the status of the marriage. At the time she became pregnant, Mrs. R. claimed, her husband was drinking heavily and they argued frequently. According to her account, when she announced the pregnancy, Mr. R. encouraged her to terminate it. Subsequently, Mrs. R. felt she received no emotional support from her husband. She became depressed and withdrawn during Emma’s second year and relied on a series of au pair girls to take over much of her care. Despite Mr. R.’s earlier attitudes to the pregnancy and early infancy, both parents reported that around the time of Mrs. R.’s depression, the father became very involved with Emma.

As the marriage deteriorated, Mr. R.’s devotion to Emma increased. The mother described father and Emma as “inseparable.” The father was indulgent with Emma, but his handling was inconsistent. Mrs. R. claimed that Emma had rarely heard the word “no” in her first four years. Discipline, she said, was the exclusive domain of her husband, as she had hoped this would reduce the ever-increasing marital battles. Mr. R.’s reprimands, however, invariably dealt with Emma’s messiness, and at these times he could be harsh, sometimes shaking her violently. For example, it was common at mealtimes for Emma to sit on her father’s lap and eat off his plate. When she spilled something onto him, however, Mr. R. would become enraged, shout at her, and put her down roughly. In addition, Mr. R. became especially distressed when the family dog urinated or defecated indoors. On such occasions he shouted and kicked the dog while Emma cowered, in tears. The mother claimed that these outbursts became more frequent as his drinking increased. While acknowledging his tendency toward fastidiousness, Mr. R. reported that tension in the home resulted from his withdrawal from the marriage and denied he had a drinking problem.

Following the separation, Mr. R. saw his children almost every week during the acrimonious separation and porce. They frequently spent time with his steady girlfriend whom he subsequently married.

Emma’s relationship with Sara was fraught with jealousy and insecurity. The rivalry went both ways. Sara resented the fact that Emma was their father’s favorite and complained of being left out and ignored during their visits. The father readily acknowledged his preference for Emma, describing her as the “perfect companion” whom he loved to “cuddle and pamper.” Sara taunted

and denigrated Emma, viciously parading her own closeness with their mother and teasing her with her superior sexual knowledge. Although the mother accepted that Emma's feeling of being left out was justified, she persisted in demonstrating to Emma that her older sister was preferred.

At the start of the treatment, Mrs. R.'s attempts to set limits with Emma took the form of polite, restrained appeals to this five-year-old's sense of decency and propriety. Emma's responses to these appeals were anything but proper. At mealtimes, a request from the mother to sit at the table was often met with an angry "No!" and a piece of food being hurled at her. Mrs. R. tried to mollify her younger daughter by acceding to her demands. In one instance, Emma came down to breakfast and complained that she wanted butter on her toast. The mother sensed her battling mood and immediately buttered the toast. Emma threw the toast down and yelled that there was not enough butter. She then told her mother that there was not enough cereal in her bowl. When Mrs. R. put in a little more, Emma bitterly complained that there was now too much.

Treatment

When Emma and I met in the waiting room on the day of our first session, she peered at me from behind her mother's skirt. Her thick, long, dark hair framed bright brown eyes, a pert nose, and an impish smile. Her small but sturdy-looking body was dressed neatly in a school uniform. She shyly insisted on her mother's presence in the room on the first day and remained in her lap for most of the hour. She responded to questions about school and favorite playthings by nestling further into mother's bosom and demanding, "You tell him, Mommy." Mrs. R. told me about Emma's favorite doll at home and in a quiet exasperated voice tried to coax her daughter to speak for herself. With every angry refusal, Emma gave me a sidelong glance, sucked her thumb, and pushed against her mother's body as she maneuvered for maximum contact. I introduced two animal puppets and began a discussion between them about how hard it is to talk with someone you do not know and how much nicer it feels to make sure that the mommy stays close. Emma looked up at her mother and smiled, but she refused to take either of the offered puppets and again turned away. I began drawing and Emma joined me at the table. After many kisses and hugs she allowed her mother to leave the room.

As Emma drew a picture of her sister, mother, and herself, she calmly told me about seeing her

dog, Sally, run over by a truck; about a cat that had just died; and about her grandfather who had died as well. She pointed out that the mother figure in her drawing was missing hands: “They were chopped off.” She quickly left the table and pulled open the door of a closet that housed a water tank. Emma exclaimed that the room might be flooded and then raced to the window; she told me with considerable anxiety that it was dark outside and that she hated nighttime because that was “when the witches try to kill me.” I commented that she might be trying to figure out whether or not she was safe in the room when her mother was not with her. Emma began jumping and said, “I can jump very high. How high can you jump? I can jump higher than you.” When I announced that we would be stopping, Emma grabbed a small girl doll figure and tore its clothes off, complaining that the underpants would not come off. I told her that we would be able to play more the following day, and Emma raced out of the room.

Enactment. The next day, leading the way, Emma confidently climbed the stairs up to our room and announced with a smile, “I don’t need Mommy to come any more ‘cause now I know you.” She immediately returned to drawing “nighttime” by covering a sheet of paper with black crayon and told me again about the witches that wanted to kill her. Rather than elaborate on this idea, she grabbed a pencil, sprang to her feet, giggled, and drew a “bottom” on the wall. She crossed it out and then erased it, saying that someone might beat her up if they saw it. I commented that she might be afraid that I would be angry and Emma agreed. I added that it seemed as though she was having worries about people becoming angry with her and about being safe. Instead of drawing on the walls, I suggested that we talk and play about her thoughts and feelings. With nonchalance Emma informed me that she had come to see me for her worries and that her worry was that she hated herself. “Everybody hates me . . . because I’m bad.” For a moment she was subdued and nodded to my comment about how awful this must feel.

Her frenetic activity returned quickly, however, and she crumpled the drawing of nighttime and kicked it along the floor. Gleeefully she described how she enjoyed getting her mother angry by calling her a fat pig so that her mother would chase her. “I like saying fuckee, fuckit, and stuff it up your nose. Sometimes I punch her boosies [breasts]—that’s what Sally calls them.” I replied that I thought she was trying to figure out whether I too would get mad and have scary chasing games with her. At the end of this hour, Emma told me that I did not need to clean up and that I should rest. As

she put the paper and crayons away, she turned to me and dreamily said, “You smell like my daddy.”

In the waiting room Emma’s angry attacks on her mother were prominent. She often delayed coming to the playroom with tirades against Mrs. R. for not providing after-school treats, for not holding her coat properly (placing it on a chair instead of keeping it in her lap), or for failing to agree to buy a special gift on the way home from the clinic. These scenes often ended with a haggard, resigned expression on the mother’s face and a softly spoken agreement to “discuss it later.” In the consulting room, Emma’s frenetic pace continued as she alternated between drawing pictures of ghosts and witches, describing nightmares about monsters that attacked her, and demanding to take playroom materials home with her. In addition, she attempted to engage me in exciting activities and quickly became enraged and frightened when I continued to suggest that words take the place of actions.

In a typical early session, Emma giggled when she told me her secret of “pooping on the back steps [of her house]. Mommy thinks it’s a dog. . . . You won’t tell, will you?” Before I could respond, Emma raced to the other side of the room and began peeling paint from the wall while looking at me with defiance and pleasure. I reminded her of the rule about peeling paint, adding that she seemed to need to find out if her worry about my getting angry with her would come true. This oft-repeated response to her provocations again had little effect on her actions. Emma ran across the room and poked me gently and repeatedly in the chest. As I moved away, she protested, “But I can touch you, I can!” Words and attempts to introduce play with puppets or family doll figures were no substitute for the exciting physical contact Emma sought in “real” action. Every intervention was met with an escalation in her provocative behavior and angry demands that I “shut up”—until finally Emma’s fury turned to fear and she ran out of the room in search of her mother. The ghosts, witches, and monsters that had filled her drawings had now filled the room, and she again refused to return to her sessions without her mother.

For over a week, Emma used her mother as a haven that enabled her to continue to make provocative bids for intimate contact from me and to express her rage and frustration when these were not reciprocated. During one hour Emma again tried to make physical contact with me. When

she approached with a felt pen poised for marking me, I stopped her, and she burst into tears, yelling, "That's all you say is No, No, No! You're horrid; everybody hates me!" She climbed into her mother's lap and sucked her thumb. While glaring at me, she asked if her mother would go with her to the waiting room to return a glass. Mrs. R. suggested that she wait, and with that Emma flew out of her mother's arms onto the floor where she wept. I commented on how awful she felt and added that even when she was very angry with me, I still wanted to be her friend and help her with her worries. Emma looked up at her mother and quietly said, "I want to be his friend." She insisted that we play a "happy game" to get rid of the bad feelings and taught me how to play her version of hide-and-seek.

This game was to be Emma's first play sequence of the treatment. But as I was to learn, what was play for Emma was never fully pretend but rather a mode of substituting an unwanted aspect of reality with a slightly recrafted version. In each of our games of hide-and-seek, Emma instructed me to become upset about not finding her and to become ecstatic when she finally announced where she was hiding. With this response, Emma beamed, delighted with this momentary proof that I liked her; I could again become the "good" man who smelled and looked like a daddy.

The reality this particular game sought to reshape had to do with the comings and goings of Emma's father, which were experienced by her as manifestations of his indifference and rejection. But hide-and-seek could not undo for very long the sadness and rage Emma felt about her father. In the transference, her buoyant response to the game was easily marred by the real interruptions of what Emma called "coming together as friends again." Following one of our early hide-and-seek games, I reminded Emma that the following day was a day that we did not meet. She exploded and yelled, "You're a daddy! Your stupid girlfriend. I'm not going to be your girlfriend and neither is Mommy!"

In spite of the ease with which she became enraged by the father-therapist who defied her wishes, Emma's longing for proofs of his love were powerful enough for her to persevere in treatment. In addition to frequent comments about her anger with me and worries about ghosts seeking revenge, Emma's powerful wish for an exclusive intimate relationship with the father in the transference prompted her to dismiss mother from the treatment room once and for all. The game of

hide-and-seek was Emma's way of repairing the damage attendant to her rage when I would not allow both exciting bodily contact and an alternative but equally *real* form of gratification—proof that her longings and love were reciprocated. In the hours that followed, peaceful moments occurred when we played the game of hide-and-seek, when she sought my praise for drawings, or when she leaned up against me while reporting something of her day in school. In one such session, when I agreed to remove a splinter from her finger, Emma asked me to guess what it was thinking. I variously guessed, "It's angry; it's sad; it's scared." She quickly corrected me. "It loves you." Emma looked away smiling and said, "You're my daddy." Just as there was little pretend in the play about her loving feelings, Emma's aggression was as directly felt and expressed. When I announced the end of this particular session, Emma staggered around the room banging into me and, with a scowl, tore pieces of foam padding from under the rug and threw them in my face.

The brief play scenarios portraying separations could not contain the wishes or yield the gratification that Emma demanded in reality. Her separations from her father were a major source of pain and anxiety because they raised for her a crucial question that expressed the vulnerability of her self-esteem: how could she feel sufficiently valued and value herself when her objects found it so easy to turn from her? Her father's hellos and goodbyes were out of her control, just as her mother's withdrawal had been, and Emma was enraged by her helplessness and sadness. The transference of these feelings onto me was swift, and she saw the interruptions in our contact as rejections. She returned from any separation, whether Wednesdays, weekends, or holidays, in a foul mood.

In a session following a vacation during the latter part of the first year of treatment, Emma entered the room with a scowl on her face and imperiously commanded me to get things from her locker. When I wondered about a possible connection between her anger and our time apart, Emma told me to shut up. She continued her tirade by telling me how much she hated me and wished she could get a gun so that she could kill me and everyone else that I saw. After threatening to kick and punch me, she stood by the window glaring at me until she wrote me a note that she crumpled and threw at me. It said, "I hate you ... I like you." I joined her at the window where we watched the birds outside. Emma said that she wished that a bird would land and that if we made sure it got enough food, it would stay forever and eat. "Does this bird have a name?" I asked. "Yes. Happy Bird."

Emma continued to leave the treatment room in a mess but also began to elaborate on her concerns about separations in play; in this particular area words could begin to accompany and, in time, replace enactments. She initiated a series of games about sleeping that typically followed weekend breaks. Emma instructed me to be a “grumpy daddy” who repeatedly woke her with his snoring. In turn, she scolded me and finally threatened to punch me if I woke her again. “I’ll show you. You kept me up all the other night!” In a rare moment, Emma allowed a comment “outside of the game” about how awful it felt when we did not meet. “Yes, I’ll show you how it feels. See if you like it!” As Emma was able to express her frustration in the words, “I’m getting even,” she could also occasionally talk directly about her unhappiness about difficult weekends and her wish for “affinity” (her word for *infinity*) days together. In fact, it was only in the context of turning passive into active and seeking revenge within the play that the longings and hurt feelings could emerge so clearly. After one holiday Emma became the therapist, and I was the child. I was kicked out of our room for “a very long time” and was instructed to feel very sad. But then I looked into the room and discovered that over the holiday the therapist was feeding other children. “And then you cried and got really angry,” Emma exclaimed. Later in the same session, Emma became a wolf who wanted to eat me up, keep me inside, and take me home with her.

Although Emma could briefly take on a fantasy role, her play did not afford her any distance from the intensity of her need for real excitement and gratification involving her body and physical contact with me. In fact, the limited number of characters she began to introduce served the function of enactment. In turn, these scenarios were short-lived; Emma would quickly discard the assumed role but not the action. She was unable to relinquish the excitement of a more direct expression of her fantasies and was infuriated when I limited her activities. Emma’s immersion in her fantasies, however, also made her feel vulnerable to the retaliation she expected from me as the object (in the transference) of both her excited, loving wishes and her enraged, aggressive ones. Emma could experience little if there was any distance between reality and fantasy or between her longings and fears. In time, it became more apparent that her sexually provocative behavior simultaneously served as an enactment of wishes and as a defense against their dangerous consequences.

Emma began initiating her sessions by sitting in a chair opposite me, momentarily lifting her skirt and giggling or pointing out the latest bruises and scrapes on her legs. She often responded to

sympathetic comments about her having some concerns about her body by dancing a jig or drawing pictures of “beautiful women.” With either activity, Emma repeatedly asked if I liked what she had done. Anything short of a direct exclamation of my admiration was met with an angry, “Just tell me!” or a sullen, “Never mind.” In one such session, however, Emma became Godzilla, the giant who kills monsters. She tore paper into small pieces and threw them on the floor and then suddenly turned toward me and spat. I was stunned and angry, and attempted to control my voice as I told her that spitting was not acceptable. I quickly added that I thought she was again trying to make me angry. I had in mind continuing by saying that she needed to see what would happen, but Emma interrupted and yelled, “I want you to get mad at me and hurt me because you are awful!” She quickly emptied the contents of the trash can and climbed in to protect herself from being bitten by the angry snakes that now surrounded me. She sat in the trash can breathing heavily, looking both frightened and furious. I reminded her that I wanted to be her friend even when she was angry and said that she had been so worried that her scary thoughts about being hurt would come true that she had to find out. As I began to clean up the room, Emma got out of the trash can and on one of the rare occasions in this first year of treatment began to help.

In the next hour, Emma again began Godzilla’s rampage in the room. I said that she was again showing me her anger, but that sometimes it was hard for her to remember that they were *her* angry feelings and not mine. Without a word, she abandoned Godzilla, and the exciting wish behind the fear of attack became clearer. She built a house out of chairs, pretended to go to sleep, and then awoke with a start, saying that she had had a bad dream. “I dreamed that I married you and kissed you on the lips.” As she lay by the heating vent, Emma quickly changed her story, and now it was the heating vent that kissed her. “It put its tongue in my mouth and sent fire through my body which came out of my bottom.” When I suggested that this was both an exciting and scary dream, Emma leaped to her feet and reached her hand inside the back of her skirt and rubbed her anus. She extended her finger toward my face and with a smile insisted that I smell it. When I declined, Emma pleaded, “Please, it smells very, very nice.” As she began to cry, she added, “And it’s *so* important.” I told her that I could see how important it was to her and that it was as if she wanted to know whether I could really like her. In comparison to the intensity of her feelings, this response seemed to miss the poignancy of the moment. In retrospect, it seemed that Emma was at once trying to seduce

me with the essence of how she felt about herself and perhaps trying to recapture a kind of intimacy that she knew from an earlier time in her life when the parents' care of her body and the exciting physical contact with her father were experienced as expressions of their love.

As treatment proceeded, the openness of Emma's wishes for physical intimacy and sexual excitement became a gauge of her feelings of worthlessness and reflected her attempts to undo the accompanying expectation of being unloved and rejected. A history of inappropriate limit setting in the home and overstimulation in the form of exposure to parental nudity and her father's seductive handling and open-door policy with his girlfriend seemed to have set the stage for this form of compensation. Although work with the parents during the first eighteen months of treatment significantly decreased their contributions to her overstimulation, the urgency of Emma's attempts to engage me in sexually exciting contact did not. She frequently invited me to look at her underpants, openly masturbated, and talked excitedly about "boosies," "hairy bottoms," and "men's things." Emma responded with disappointment and rage to my comments about her wish to have exciting times with me in order to feel that I liked her. A pattern began to emerge, however. When she stopped yelling at me to shut up and removed her hands from her ears, Emma frequently turned to brief play scenarios in which the characters' excited sexual activities were followed by frightening themes of bodily damage. For several months a game involving turtles made out of Plasticine was typical. In this game Emma expressed her fantasy of sadistic intercourse as she placed the boy on top of the girl. Amid excited laughter, she quickly began bashing the two together, careful that only the girl turtle "lost its body." Emma's laughter turned into nervous giggles as tail, legs, and then eyes went flying in pieces across the room. The boy turtle remained intact. Instead of commenting on the link between her excited, exhibitionistic, masturbatory behavior and her longings for closeness, I began pointing out how frightened she became when she grew too excited. Highlighting this dilemma, in addition to the frustration that I would not respond to her seductive behavior, heightened Emma's conflicts about the direct expression and enactment of sexual impulses. Enactment did not disappear entirely, but by the end of the second year of treatment, the sessions became dominated by elaborate, imaginative play.

Playing. In a move from direct action and immediate gratification, Emma could now introduce sustained and elaborate play scenarios. While she was capable of using displacement to express

wishes and fears, Emma's control of the script and of our respective roles was absolute. Where she had previously pinned her self-worth on the direct enactment of sexual and aggressive urges, Emma now immersed herself in the wish fulfillment and reversal of fortunes possible only in play. Her angry demands that I "shut up and get back in the game" reflected both her wish to control me in reality and her fear that anything I might introduce would contaminate the suspension of reality in which she now sought gratification and refuge from disappointment.

Concerns about her "castrated state" illustrated Emma's worries about the consequences of her exciting sexual wishes for intimacy and served as an explanation for her feelings of inadequacy and failure in procuring the object's love. Having a penis was a symbol of strength and control that would protect her from attack and damage. In one game Emma became a puppy who closely guarded a pencil, which she referred to as her "special thing." I was instructed to make repeated attempts to steal this special thing as she slept, but each time the puppy awoke, growled, and frightened me away. Emma finally thwarted my attempts by placing the pencil between her legs, telling me she was hiding the special thing inside.

As Emma equated the penis with strength, we frequently played at being big, strong horses. Emma was not sure whether she wanted to be a girl or boy horse, but knew that she wanted to be the stronger of the two. I commented on the sexual differences, adding that sometimes girl horses feel awful that they don't have what boys have and are sad and angry. Emma asked me to repeat this and then gave an emphatic whinny and nod of her head. Just after this, the Emma horse had a fall in which her leg was cut and bled. Emma quickly gave up her role of injured horse and instead became Popeye, the strongest man in the world. At this time Mrs. R. reported that Emma was stealing pens and pencils, both at school and at home. Emma believed that somebody had stolen the one body part that would make her safe and whole and was determined to steal it back. Eventually she became able to express her feelings about her own body more directly. In one session, as she tried to hold water in her hands, Emma explained that it was escaping through gaps. I asked about these gaps, and Emma replied, "You know, where something's missing, like here." She pointed to her genitals. In other sessions I was instructed to steal pencils. I was always caught, however, and was sent to prison. Emma's explanation for the stealing was simple: in a whispered aside in the game, she said, "You don't have one, and you want it so badly!" When she understood the link between her wish to repair

the “gap” and the games of stealing pencils, thefts outside the session stopped.

Emma’s fear of being attacked and damaged continued as a central theme in her play, but she was no longer the helpless victim—I was. As the younger brother, I was fed and protected from snakes, lions, and tigers that wanted to eat us. Emma carried a big gun and was fearless as we made forays into the dangerous woods. In this game I learned that if only I were bigger and had a gun like her, I needn’t be afraid.

Emma’s conviction that she would be safer and preferred if only she possessed a penis became an essential aspect of the transference when she learned that her father was going to remarry. Her wish for an exclusive intimate relationship with him was intensified, as were her fears of the consequences. In addition, concerns that she might also lose mother’s affection to another set the stage for defensive regression. These dilemmas were most apparent when Emma was scheduled to attend a party following our session. Here, though the enactment was not as dramatic, the intensity of her wishes and anxiety could not be contained in fantasy play alone. When she entered the consulting room, Emma announced that she was going to change into her party dress. After removing her school clothes, she looked down at her underpants and smiled at me anxiously. With her party dress on, Emma launched into a tirade about how silly boys are. She asked me to admire her dress but before I could say a word, angrily stated, “You don’t know about girls; you think they’re not as good as boys.” Just as suddenly, Emma announced that the dress made her look like a prince. I suggested that she had become excited when she had taken off her other clothes and then worried that being a girl was more dangerous than being a boy. “Boys and princes have arrows that they shoot and they have snakes,” she replied. She made thrusting motions with her arms to show me what arrows do. “Older girls know how to get away from the arrows which go inside and hurt.” If she could not be a safe prince, Emma preferred to be a baby, avoiding danger because “they lie close to the ground and their mothers protect them.”

The sexual fantasies and associated fears about her father became increasingly clear in Emma’s developing story about a puppy. She invented a game in which I was the owner who took the puppy (Emma) on walks in the park. As I talked to strangers in the park, the puppy pulled at the leash and threatened to run away. Emma asked me to repeat my comments about the puppy feeling left out

and unlovable. Over the course of this game, the stranger with whom I talked became more specific. "Who is it?" I asked. "A man." "Is he safe?" "Yes, I mean no!" she replied. "He's going to kidnap me and use his knife. He'll put it in my, um, stomach!" The puppy then scurried off, and I was to lock all the doors to keep the man out. This evolved into a story about a servant girl who felt left out as she listened at the door of the king and queen's bedroom. The servant girl heard screaming and then announced that the queen had died after being stabbed and that now she and the king would live happily ever after.

Although Emma did not make an explicit connection between the themes in her imaginative play and her longings for her father, she did begin to monitor her own levels of excitement in an attempt to forestall anxiety. In a departure from stories about kings and queens, she ran around the bases inducing me to tag her out. Suddenly she stopped and said, "I'm getting too excited. I'd better stop before I get worried." At home, she no longer engaged her mother in battles; she had stopped having daytime fears and nightmares; and her bed-wetting had ceased. The school reported Emma's greater ability to concentrate; they were pleased with her progress.

Her father's remarriage exacerbated Emma's feelings of being rejected and unlovable, but she was able to distance herself from these feelings. She sadly acknowledged that she could never marry her father because "I'm too young, and anyway, I'm his daughter." She spoke in philosophical terms about her parents' porce, recognizing that it had not occurred because of her: "Sometimes people can't get along with each other and they porce." Although she spoke with relative neutrality about her longings for her father, her wish to "grow up quickly" in order to marry me was intense.

In her third year of treatment Emma's oedipal fantasies in the transference began to flourish, as did their elaboration in sustained play. We started to take many trips together to exotic foreign countries. During one of these trips, Emma explained that babies come from eating special food and that girls can have them only after they become seventeen years old. Predictably, Emma became the seventeen-year-old who prepared special meals on our vacations. In other games, I was the king who admired the servant's prettier dress and her ability to jump higher than the queen. In the end, the queen died or "just went away somewhere." The king and servant girl lived happily ever after.

Emma began to woo me outside of games as well and wanted to show me all of the big-girl things that she could do. She dreamily talked about how nice it would be to get bigger so that we could be the same age. At the same time, Emma repeatedly asked if I was married and complained that I never took her anywhere nice. On several occasions she exclaimed bitterly that I had not attended a school event with her because “you were with your stupid girlfriend.” She could begin to accept comments about how difficult it was waiting to grow up, but continued to associate the frustration of current wishes with her intrinsic belief that she was inadequate and unlovable. In a characteristic attempt to fend off or reverse these feelings, Emma introduced a school game in which she was, again, seventeen years old, the best at everything, and the teacher’s favorite. The younger, stupid student was ignored by the teacher and was very upset when the older student announced that she was getting married the following day. As the older student, Emma teased the younger one about being too young to marry and about “not knowing what love is anyway.” Emma instructed me as the younger child to become sad because “God made it so that you won’t grow up and won’t marry because you were bad! You’ll be left by your mommy and daddy all alone.” The older girl had never been bad and God rewarded her with “marriage, sex, and a baby nine months later.” When this game was over, Emma was suddenly furious and stormed out of the room, exclaiming, “And you know *why* I’m angry with you!”

Outside of these games Emma asked many questions about other children I saw and worried that I might prefer them to her. She was steadfast in her conviction that there was nothing worthwhile about a girl her age when compared to the seventeen-year-old who could marry and have babies.

In spite of Emma’s sensible views about her father’s remarriage, it seemed that the only proof of being valued and loved would be found in a real proposal of marriage. The profound hurt that Emma experienced when this proof was not forthcoming from me was, for a long while, expressed in her frequent irritability and domineering in the sessions. During this phase of the treatment, Emma’s intense criticism of me served to reverse her feeling that in refusing her wishes, I was criticizing her. In Emma’s mind, I would not marry her because she was not “good enough,” old enough, clean enough. In a further effort to compensate for this belief, she began to insist that I had neither a wife nor a girlfriend. In play Emma alone continued to be chosen as “the best and favorite.” Outside of

these games, she was highly critical of any of her real achievements, alternating between condemning her art, schoolwork, or athletic feats and deciding that it was I who thought they were “no good.” The mother noted that Emma rarely showed her anything that she had made or spoke of what she had accomplished.

Play and Talk. In spite of her intensified feelings of frustration, Emma did not return to provocative enactment as a means of counterattacking or preempting expected retaliation. Instead, she could better tolerate the underlying affects that she expressed within the transference and her elaborate, imaginative play. Following a game involving the “best and favorite student,” Emma again complained that it was not fair that I never took her anywhere nice. Her pain broke through in tears when I pointed out that her need to be the only “best” person in my life was the result of her never feeling sure that anyone could love her at all. She sat quietly during the remaining minutes of the hour, demanding that I stop looking at her.

In the following session, however, Emma initiated a new game about a time machine. In our multiple travels into the past, she set the stage in which a two-year-old girl was ignored repeatedly by her parents until she became messy. They would then yell at her, deprive her of toys as punishment, or simply kick her out of the family. The game abruptly ended as we returned to “now.” In other games, the girl was now eight years old (Emma’s age at the time) and got angry every time she was excluded from the activities of others. With a knowing look, Emma reminded me of the time machine but insisted that as a toddler the girl had been left out *because* she was messy and bad. That is, Emma’s view was that the girl got what she deserved.

Although at first discounting my sympathetic questions about the girl’s feelings, Emma began to make specific links between the game and her memories. In asides, she talked about her father’s volatile response to her dogs and herself. She described how frightening it was to see him so angry when she or the dogs were “messy” and added with conviction, “It wasn’t fair!” When creating the role of the inattentive mother in the game, she commented on the similarities to her own mother. In one session, as the two-year-old was again ignored, Emma suddenly departed from the play. “You know, I think my mommy used to get very unhappy about daddy and porce and all that stuff.” Returning to the game, she portrayed the toddler as confused and worried when the mother was

unavailable. In subsequent time-machine games over a three-month period, the baby could be depicted in more sympathetic terms; she was sad and felt helpless, but was not necessarily bad and unlovable. Referring directly to herself, Emma pointed out that as a two-year-old she could only assume that her mother's lack of attention and her father's anger were in response to something deficient in her.

When Emma no longer took full responsibility for her father's departure from home, she was able to put her sadness and disappointment into words. She described feeling "very sad and angry" in her memory of father packing his bags and leaving. She said that she would always wish that her parents had not parted but could enjoy time spent with both of them. The parents' relationship also grew more cordial, and Emma's sense of this helped diminish the intense loyalty conflict that she had felt in the past as well.

As Emma relaxed her critical view of herself from the past, she began to silence the "mean voice inside" that operated in the present. No longer needing to disavow painful feelings as "babyish" or automatically externalize self-criticism, Emma turned to me almost as a scientific colleague with whom she would check out new discoveries. Her imaginative play did not suddenly disappear in the last months of her treatment, but Emma spent more time with daily reports of "real" events. She was particularly interested in analyzing difficult or upsetting interactions with others, always checking her tendency toward self-criticism and resulting hypersensitivity. Her capacity for self-observation could be used to appraise situations that would have been very painful previously. She recognized, for example, that her sister's teasing, her mother's periodic inattention, or her father's sporadic irritability were not always the result of her behavior or a reflection of her work but were often due to "their own bad moods." She reported her sister's trying to frighten her with taunts about ghosts and witches. Emma replied, "You're just trying to worry me because you're worried! Well, we're different people, and I'm going to my room to read a book." When she had finished telling me the story, Emma beamed and said, "I really had her number, didn't I?"

Emma began to use this newfound insight in a variety of situations. When she became frustrated in her schoolwork, drawings, or games, she would nod her head, smile, and say, "I was needing to be perfect just then," or "I got so worried about being best, I couldn't practice." Although

she still did not like her older sister's being allowed to stay up later, Emma no longer experienced this rule as mother's rejection of *her*. In a game, Emma, as the maternal figure, firmly but gently handled the young child's demands to stay up late: "You know that when you don't get enough sleep, you feel cranky and unhappy all the next day."

Having changed from a girl whose early sessions had been filled with provocative, overexcited, and obstinate behavior, Emma now preferred telling me riddles she had learned at school, practicing her italic writing, and occasionally describing incidents that made her angry. She now was established firmly in latency and, to use her words, wanted to "get on with it." Where separation once had spelled rejection and confirmed feelings of inadequacy, Emma now requested more time to spend with friends after school. She hesitated in asking to cut back the number of sessions, fearing that I would ask "all those questions about feelings and stuff," and was relieved to discover that I, too, recognized that "too many questions" were inappropriate. She was ready, indeed, to "get on with it."

Discussion

Over the course of treatment it became clear that the special attention Emma received from her father was not enough to sustain good feelings about herself. A history of confusing parental responses made it impossible for Emma to rely on a consistent internal source of positive regard. In the first instance, her mother's depression and emotional withdrawal during Emma's second year made it difficult for the child to feel adequately valued by her. Although the father stepped in at this point as an alternative source of affection and care, his inconsistent handling presented Emma with an equally confusing model for self-evaluation. His mercurial shifts in mood left Emma feeling valued and loved *only* when he overindulged her. When he became harsh and violent over messy play or eating, Emma felt bad and unlovable. The mother was unavailable to modulate these extremes, and, in the end, Emma never was quite sure that she was worthwhile or worthy of love. In the absence of consistent, appropriate parental demands and praise for the *delay* of gratification, Emma sought proof of love from her objects in their *immediate* gratification of wishes.

As a result, there was an open, insistent quality in her expression of wishes from each developmental phase. For a long while, to relinquish these wishes and their enactment was to give

up hope of securing the proof of love she required so desperately. It was not until the third year of treatment that Emma could begin to recognize that her harsh criticism of herself interfered with her ability to take pride in her real achievements and to enjoy the pleasure of the praise that was available to her from external sources. It was only when fantasies could find representation in play that Emma could begin to recognize the fact that the objects' refusal to accede to every wish did *not* mean that she was worthless and unloved. The transitions that Emma achieved from enactment to play and from play to talk were especially evident in a comment she made toward the end of her analysis. She reflected on how much she used to wish that she could marry her father and me and said, "I know I'll have a husband someday . . . but it's very hard to wait!"

During the analysis, Emma's ego capacities and their development were reflected in the move from (1) enactment or immediate gratification of impulses on her own body and in interactions with others; (2) to the development of a narrative in which the same impulses were given expression via other-than-self characters; and (3) to verbalization of self-observations both within the play and in discussions with the analyst. In her imaginative play the site of the discharge was no longer on her own body but on the bodies and activities of the characters in the story. The suspension of reality was required, as was an increased capacity to tolerate frustration, in order for Emma to elaborate and sustain narratives and central themes in play or in direct discussions. Over the course of her treatment Emma's inability to play could give way to her reliance on play as a replacement for reality, and finally to her ability to use play to express and work on the things she wanted and feared the most.