Playing for Their Lives

Perry The Volcano Maker

Dorothy Singer

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The Child of Chemical-Abusing Parents

Perry Begins Psychotherapy

A few days after his fifth birthday, Perry bounded into the playroom announcing proudly, "I can count to five—but I don't go to school anymore. I kicked a kid. I was bad." He then smiled at me, wiggled a loose tooth with his tongue, inspected the room, and donned a toy helmet and a bluejacket, pretending he was a "spaceman." Unfortunately, Perry was unable to sustain a story line. Within a couple of minutes, he took off the play clothes and, examining the cupboard where the art supplies are kept, sought a new activity.

I had met Perry's parents, Bill and Patty Donne, the week before in order to get a history of Perry and some sense of his problem. The parents were particularly concerned about his aggressive behavior at school.

Perry was a sturdy-looking boy, with sandy-colored hair, large blue eyes, an engaging smile, and a dimple in his chin. His angelic looks contrasted with his rambunctious behavior and energy level. His speech was clear, punctuated by a slight lisp, and his body movements suggested good large-motor coordination.

- Would you like to hear me count?
- Sure.

Perry did so, counting to five repeatedly, insisting that he could count to twenty, but only "if I want to."

- I guess you don't want to now.
- No, I don't, but I can.

- Perry, do you know why you are here and who I am?

- Sure, you're a nurse.

- No, I'm not a nurse, but I am someone who will listen to your problems, and I'll try to help you.

A long period of silence followed, and then Perry said softly, "I have a problem."

This unexpected statement was followed by another long silence. Perry then moved closer to me, kept his eyes averted, and again in a voice barely audible said, "I really have a problem."

- Do you want to tell me what your problem is?

- Well, my dad took a beer yesterday. He's not supposed to, you know. Maybe it was a soda with a beer label on the bottle. Do you think so?

- I don't know, Perry, but it seems you wanted it to be a soda, not beer.

- Yeah, I don't like him to drink beer. He gets real mad, grrr, grrr, grrr, like that!

I was surprised that Perry was so direct at this first meeting, but when I tried to pursue the subject, gently encouraging Perry to talk more about his feelings, he just made an angry face. He kept "growling" and then refused to expand on "his problem" for the remainder of our time. He continued to explore the playroom, however, more like his energetic self, and he talked more about school, avoiding any attempt on my part to return to his concern about his father and the beer episode.

- I'll go to kindergarten in September. No more nursery school for me.

- You sound eager to go to regular school.

- Yep. How far away is September?

- Not very far. You have four months to go. You said you were bad in nursery school. Do you want to tell me about it?

- No. Next time—or maybe never!

- Talking about things that bother you make you feel uncomfortable.

- It's none of your business!

With that retort, Perry took some Play-Doh cans from the cabinet and went to the table. He chose yellow and blue clay and proceeded to mix the colors with red while building a "volcano": "Fire comes out the middle, and brown rocks run down the sides. I saw an oil truck on fire on my way over here. I bet the TV news doesn't even know that yet."

Perry continued building his volcano, pounding the sides, adding small pieces of red clay for the "rocks." He was excited about his volcano project and kept making noises imitating loud eruptions as he added the rocks: "This explodes all over—just watch it go!"

I watched quietly. Perry had revealed all that he wanted to. It was too soon to press him. It was important for him to feel comfortable with me, and to understand that he could set the pace in sharing emotions and expressing anxieties. Perry's play with the volcano was his way of allowing some pent-up anger to emerge and, for the moment, was a good substitute for his usual outbursts of aggression at home and at school. I let Perry continue to play with the clay until clean-up time, my only comments referring to the mechanics of making the volcano, rather than to the feelings behind his intense behavior.

Time was up. Perry put the clay away, washed up, and seemed more relaxed and pleased with himself. He ran to his father, who was in the waiting room and, as he left, smiled and said, "Next time we'll play again."

Perry's Parents

"Our problems are Perry's problems, and I guess there have been a lot of problems in our marriage —starting way back when." Bill Donne took the initiative, blurting this out even before he sat down. It was obvious that he was eager to talk about his relationship with Patty, his wife, and about Perry.

The Donnes had been referred to me by a local pediatrician who was disturbed by Perry's disruptive behavior in the waiting room and during the frequent examinations necessitated by chronic ear infections. Perry's nursery school teacher had also suggested that the Donnes seek help for Perry because of his uncontrollable behavior at school. She could no longer manage Perry in her nursery group,

citing his aggressiveness, his destruction of toys, and his "sassy" attitude. Robert, Perry's three-year-old brother, attended the same school, and the rivalry was "intense" according to the school staff.

Bill and Patty gave details of Perry's negative behavior, focusing on his temper tantrums, his taunting of Robert, his lack of respect for rules, his willful destruction of their things as well as his own, and his failure to show them any affection. The list of his antisocial, aggressive characteristics seemed interminable.

When I inquired about Perry's good points, Patty told me that he was "bright," "creative," and fascinated by anything scientific or related to nature, "especially dinosaurs." "Perry is good at artwork, and loves to do things with his hands," she added. Bill explained that Perry was sensitive, and that what looked like "coldness" and "toughness" was really "Perry's way of hiding his craving for love. He's actually a good kid underneath, whose feelings are easily hurt. He doesn't want anyone to help him—being helped makes him feel as if he's not so tough." Bill was right. As I found out through my experiences with Perry, he needed to hide his vulnerability by acting independent and bossy.

The Donnes characterized their marriage as "shaky. " Perry had not been a planned baby, and the Donnes had decided to get married because of the pregnancy. Bill currently worked as a telephone repairman. He had succeeded in getting his first-ever steady job a year before. Until Perry was three, the family had lived in a rundown trailer, traveling all around the country while Bill worked at odd jobs.

Bill said, "We used all kinds of drugs for maybe four years or so, but only for recreational purposes. I guess we tried everything: coke, heroin, marijuana—coke only a half dozen times." Both parents admitted to drinking heavily in the evenings and on weekends, insisting that they had always been in control of their use of drugs and alcohol.

Patty claimed that she had tried to stay off drugs when she discovered she was pregnant with Robert but admitted that after he was born, she had begun abusing both drugs and alcohol again. When they came to see me, both parents were in counseling: Bill was attending Alcoholics Anonymous (AA); Patty, Narcotics Anonymous (NA). The Donnes were a tall, attractive, blond-haired couple in their early thirties. Patty was a licensed hairdresser and worked part time. When I met her for the first time, she was extremely thin and mousy-looking, but as the year progressed, she became quite heavy and increasingly

sloppy in dress and physical appearance. (Later, during the course of Perry's treatment, Patty hid the fact from Bill and from me that she had been skipping counseling sessions, and that she was again abusing drugs.)

I was sure that Perry perceived that something was amiss between his parents, but I believe he did not know it was rooted in Patty's abuse of drugs. Perry's destructive behavior in the playroom reflected his anxiety about his parents. In a way, Patty's distancing from Bill and from the children was more tragic than the physical punishment she had inflicted during Perry's early years as he was growing up in the trailer camps. Strange as it may seem, then there had at least been physical contact, and Perry had known, if only through pain, that Patty was aware of him.

Perry was further described by his parents as an unhappy, strong-willed child who "talked back" to the nursery school teacher, to them, to his uncle, and to adults in general. Bill said, "Perry is impatient and restless and likes to punch kids for no reason. He is very jealous of Robert, but he's protective of him, too."

"Perry often teases and provokes Robert," Patty added, "but he can be affectionate with Robert—and *only* with him."

Patty reluctantly told me some of her history: "I've had a lot of counseling—years of it—never regular—on and off. My own childhood was lousy. My parents were alcoholics. I saw my dad beat my mother, and he beat me, too. I never had a real childhood. I was always sad, unhappy. My folks divorced when I was a kid. I really don't want to talk about those days."

The Donnes admitted that they, too, frequently fought in front of their children, and that Bill had often "shoved" Patty, had hit her, and, when drunk, was sometimes violent toward her and the children.

In general, Bill appeared to be the more talkative parent, more open, more warm, and more involved with the children than his wife.

During our initial contact, and during many subsequent visits, Patty spoke very little, remained guarded, was strongly defensive, rarely looked at me, and wore a surly expression, projecting hostility

toward both Bill and me.

"Perry has seen violence in our house," Bill said. "We've had real fights, and ever since Perry was born, it's been a big problem. Perry's first three years were a bummer.

"Perry was lonely, I guess. He was practically isolated, had no friends, didn't know how to play, and even today is a kind of loner. He can't play in a nice way with other kids.

"I'm good with my hands (Perry gets that from me), so I took any job I could whenever we camped. Patty did ladies' haircuts and sets in the camps for a few dollars each. We drank up the money or spent it on drugs. A guy I met in one of the camps taught me about telephone wire repair, but I couldn't find work doing that until I got to Connecticut last year. My counselor helped me get more training and my job here. I'm good at it now. With Patty's part-time job in a beauty parlor, we're doing OK financially.

"We came to Connecticut because I have a brother who lives here. He's a decent guy. He's been helpful to both of us, and he loves the kids. Patty's family lives in Colorado, and she's cut off all ties with them. My family stinks. The only good person is my brother, Ed."

Patty listened to this, nodding her head on occasion to agree with Bill. She constantly plucked at her skirt, removing invisible lint it seemed, and dropped small pieces of wool on the floor when she actually found a tangle. She described Perry's early months as "difficult": "He was ill often and even now has constant nose and ear infections. Winters were and still are especially bad—Perry's sick a lot from November to February. He's solid-looking, but he always seems to have a runny nose."

Both parents continued to add to my picture of Perry: "He wants his own way" and "won't listen" to them but "gets mad and runs out of the room" when they try to reason with him. Bill and Patty admitted that their main method of discipline was a "spanking with a hairbrush" and "once in the camps, Bill fractured Perry's arm." Since they had been in counseling, they had been trying to control their tempers and were trying to use "time-out" techniques with Perry and Robert: When the boys were naughty, they sat in a chair until they calmed down, then Patty or Bill talked about the problem and tried to resolve it.

Perry was a good eater. He slept through the night and was an early riser, watching television as

soon as he got up. Because Patty slept late, Bill supervised breakfast and dressed the children, then drove Perry and Robert to school, at least until Perry was dismissed for his aggressive behavior.

Robert was described as the "quiet" child, although he sometimes got into mischief to get attention. He "worshipped" Perry, copied everything that Perry did, and followed him everywhere. According to the Donnes, Perry would try to get Robert into trouble by encouraging him to do "bad things" like "turning on the hose to soak the flowers, cutting his hair, spilling milk, and other things like that," but "like we said, Perry will also hug and kiss him." Perry loved to watch television with Robert. Because of Perry's obsession with television, the Donnes, acting on my advice, began to control the number of hours that the children were permitted to watch, as well as to monitor the kinds of programs the children selected.

"Perry likes our house and yard, and is always trying to plant things," commented Bill. "I feel good that we're in one place now. We have better food. I remember when we ate peanut butter sandwiches every lunch and suppertime, or spaghetti, or just lots of white bread. We never ate fruit or vegetables even when we had some money; the money bought us booze. We were kicked out of some trailer camps because we would fight, yell, throw things, make a racket. Robert's first year was hell, too. Maybe that's why we decided to settle down, because he was fretting and whining so much. Perry began to break things just the way we did, yell for no reason, and try to hit Robert and even us. One time when Patty and I had a fight, he got in the middle and just pounded me and pounded, pounded, until I broke down and cried and picked him up and hugged him. It was enough, enough. We both knew we had to settle down or we would lose the kids."

It was clear to me after my first meeting with Perry that he was reacting to his family's stressful history and to their current attempts to reconstitute their lives. Perry was a victim of chronic domestic violence and instability. His year-long therapy was like a roller coaster ride. Sometimes, when Bill and Patty were responding to their own treatment and were abstaining from drugs and alcohol, Perry was calmer, smiled more, did well in school, and teased Robert less frequently, and his play was more sustained and constructive. When his parents fought or lapsed into chemical abuse, Perry's play reflected this chaos through anger, turmoil, feelings of helplessness, and moments of withdrawal. Like other victims of violence, children who had experienced physical or sexual abuse, Perry showed difficulty with

trust and self-control, concern about his personal safety, and a fear of authority figures, and he was unable to develop appropriate relationships with children his own age. In the playroom, I attempted to teach Perry some skills that I hoped would enable him to survive in his fragile and confusing home environment.

A Question of Trust

In the first stage of therapy, a stage that would last for many meetings, Perry tested whether he could trust me. Within ten minutes of our first encounter, Perry had shared with me his anxiety about his father's alcoholism and the possibility that he might be drinking again after a long period of abstinence. But could Perry trust me with such an important disclosure? He wasn't sure. He felt more at ease when he used his hands and made clay volcanoes, expressing his own feelings through its eruptions and falling rocks.

During the many months of play therapy, Perry continued to test his trust in me. He needed reassurance that he could be angry, sad, even scared, and that I would listen, comfort him, and "keep" his secrets. His father's sobriety was of paramount importance to Perry. Although he was aware that both his parents attended "meetings" with their counselors, he felt burdened by a need to be his parents' watchdog.

Two major issues had emerged during our first session: Perry's concern about his father's drinking, along with the violent temper that accompanied a drunken episode, and Perry's own aggressive behavior or, as he put it, "I'm bad." The theme of aggression and its symbolic erupting volcano was repeated on numerous occasions and became an integral metaphor for Perry's emotions all during therapy. Later, Perry would express rage, helplessness, and guilt as his real world began to fall apart, just as the "rocks" came tumbling down in his imaginative play. Omens for Perry of possible catastrophe in his life came now, first in his dismissal from school, then in the beer episode suggesting that his father was breaking his pledge to stop drinking.

Later, as the weeks went by, Perry's play themes were filled with alien spaceships, "bad guys who killed the good guys," drawings, papier-mâché or Play-Doh volcanoes, and block buildings that were

erected as tall towers, only to be knocked down in a whirlwind of fury. Perry made numerous attempts to test my loyalty and caring by hitting me, by throwing objects, or by refusing to speak to me and hiding in a little place that became a safe "nest" for him.

I was a person who set limits and boundaries for Perry. Once, for example, Perry threw a block at a lamp before I could stop him. I told him that he must not throw objects: blocks were for building, or for any kind of play he chose, but not for throwing. Looking straight at me, Perry hurled the block again. I took him by the hand, and just as I had warned him, I led him to the waiting room: "Time is up, Perry. We end our play whenever you break a rule." Perry cried, asking for a second chance, and I agreed. He came back, settled down, and played constructively.

Perry needed to learn that he could vent his anger through words, play, or art forms, but that if he tried to hurt me or destroy property, our time would end for that day. My goal was to encourage Perry to express his needs in more appropriate ways than attacking objects or other people. But that took time: time for him to work through his powerful negative feelings; time to learn new ways of coping with frustration; time to learn how to play with his peers; time to learn how to deal with his parent's self-destructive tendencies as they affected him; and, finally, time to achieve a sense of self-esteem and autonomy, rather than the self-deprecating attitude and bossy, controlling stance he had brought to the play therapy process.

Perry's reaction to a household devoid of structure was to compensate by trying to take charge of every facet of his life. Changes were painful and fraught with anxiety, threatening his stability. Many changes were in store for Perry as the months wore on.

Understanding Aggression and Its Impact on Perry's Life

Perry's family history of violence, lack of routine, drinking, and drug abuse set the scene for his aggressive outbursts, reinforced by the example of his parents' behavior. Research has demonstrated that children learn to imitate aggressive behavior. In one study, children who saw a film in which a large plastic toy (a Bobo doll) was hit and knocked down by a teacher imitated these aggressive responses. Before they had seen the film, they were mildly frustrated as part of the experiment. Later, they accepted

the adult's behavior in the film as appropriate, as was evidenced by the way they pounded the doll in direct imitation of the teacher's methods, including using a toy hammer. Similarly, Perry had seen Bill strike Patty and Robert on numerous occasions and had himself been the victim of many of Bill's brutal attacks; as a result, Perry had tried to inflict the same pain on Robert and his school playmates. Perry's style was a carbon copy of Bill's: when angry and frustrated, he struck out, often using the same gestures and expletives.

When frustrated in attaining a goal, each of us reacts in a specific way, depending on our past experiences with obstacles, our own coping skills, our previous successes or failures in similar situations, and our knowledge of the particular obstacle and the reasons for it. If, for example, it involves an aggressive act or a threat of force (perhaps the threat of punishment by a parent, like Bill or Patty), we become more aggressive when frustrated than if the obstacle involves no threat and is merely difficult to overcome or ambiguous.

Frustration may also lead to regression. In a study done almost fifty years ago, young children were deprived of desirable toys, which they could see but could not reach because of a barrier. These children, being frustrated, became disorganized, banged objects, and moved aimlessly around the playroom; their play lacked organization and constructive goals. Often, Perry reacted as these children did. If he could not have his way, he would start to throw toys in the playroom, or his organized pretend story would deteriorate to talking gibberish, knocking down his block buildings, scattering his figures, and shouting at me. I needed to be alert and often found myself holding Perry's hands to prevent him from inflicting harm on me or damage on the toys.

It is important to differentiate between anger and aggression. Anger is a basic human emotion, and aggression is only one method of expressing our anger. Anger may also result in flight, anxiety, repression, depression, or even distraction by other activities (keeping our minds off the annoying stimulus). Aggression implies an intent to do harm to another person or to property. However, aggression may also occur in the absence of anger. There are two forms of aggression: angry aggression, which is intended to make the victim to suffer (the aggression Perry displayed), and instrumental aggression, which is the result of competition or of the desire for some reward, such as food, money, status, or military victory.

When does aggression begin in a child? We can't truly consider the behavior aggressive when an infant pushes its mother's arm out of the way while trying to feed itself or when, as a toddler, a child grabs another child's toy. An infant who bangs a toy against a table or tears a page in a magazine doesn't fully understand that he or she is causing minor harm to an object. It is only when a child grasps the notion of intent—that is, that one event can cause another, and that people are instrumental in causing events to happen—that we can label an act aggressive. Perry certainly acted with intent, wanting to destroy property or to harm his brother or other children.

When we hear two-year-old children yell, "Mine, mine, mine," in the playroom, we see the beginnings of involvement with possession, the beginning of children's sense of autonomy and clarification of their own identity, but we do not see these toddlers attacking or forcing each other to give up the desired toy. The struggle seems to focus on the toy itself, and there is no clear means of getting it except by grabbing. Only later, as children become three and four, do they try to attack the possessor of the toy and strike out at this obstacle to ownership, the other child.

As children become more mobile, they encounter restrictions imposed by their parents. "No" is frequently heard; certain areas are off-limits, and the rules that are imposed must be followed. The socialization of the child takes place with the parents' use of praise or punishment to reinforce desirable behavior. Unfortunately, Perry had received more punishment than praise during his young life.

In my many hours with Perry, I constantly tried to get him to use words, not his fists, and to restrain his desire to kick or throw things when he was angry or frustrated. Using words to express his feelings seemed alien to Perry at first, but gradually, as therapy progressed, he began to relinquish his physically aggressive means of self-assertion. He used arguments, bargaining, and even compromise or compliance to attain his goals. Usually, at the end of a session, the children I work with may pick out a charm or a sticker as a reward for cleaning up. Perry decided one day that he wanted two charms.

- How about I take two charms now so you won't give the ones I like away?
- Perry, you can have one now and tell me which one you like. I'll save it for next time.

Perry thought about this.

- I really want two now.

- I know you do, but we have a rule. I know it's hard to follow rules, but you're learning. Can you wait until our next playtime?

There was a long pause while he thought again.

- I guess so, but *don't you forget*.

- I won't.

Perry chose one charm.

Words were not the tools used to settle disputes in the Donne household. The parents' frustration was resolved by chemical abuse, which often resulted in violence directed at each other or at the children. This pattern of behavior was similar to Patty's and to Bill's own childhood experiences and hopefully would cease to be perpetuated by Perry.

Dan Olweus, a psychologist in Sweden, interviewed and observed hundreds of parents in order to ascertain the origins of aggressive behavior in their sons. He found that not only did these boys differ in temperament (their levels of activity and impulsivity from birth), but their mothers had been rejecting and negative toward them early in life. The mothers had also permitted these children to be aggressive. In addition, both the mothers and the fathers, like the Donnes, had used physical punishment and threats or violent outbursts as methods of control. Children reared in this kind of atmosphere were found to be bullies or consistent aggressors and to have few controls or inhibitions. Olweus followed these boys up to the ninth grade and found that they not only were aggressive but tended to initiate situations that would lead to fighting. For example, they would tease, poke, take another's possessions. Frequently, like the boys in this study, Perry provoked incidents that resulted in a physical fight.

There are incidents of violence within families that are acceptable to our society. If a child is doing wrong and won't listen to reason, hitting is thought to be justified. Until fairly recently, physical punishment was considered acceptable even in our schools. Many American families regard spankings as an obligation. The Donnes obviously accepted this premise.

The amount of violence considered excessive in a marriage or in the disciplining of children varies with the individual and with the subculture. Generally, Bill and Patty were drunk or under the influence of drugs when they fought with each other, or when they hit their children. But on many occasions when they were completely sober, they still physically abused the children. Bill's father had beaten Bill; both her father and her mother had beaten Patty. Much of the family violence in our society occurs because males are brought up to think that they have the right to the final say in family matters, and that the ultimate resource of physical force may be used to back up their authority. Certainly, physical violence had been an established pattern in both Bill's and Patty's families as they grew up. Unfortunately, they had learned that hitting solved problems. The Donnes' parents had suffered from chronic stress; similarly, Bill and Patty faced numerous crises in their marriage.

The notion of *family privacy* in our society, I am sure, had discouraged the Donnes' neighbors from complaining about them and perhaps about other families like them over the years. As media publicity has made us more aware of physical and sexual abuse in our society, there has been a greater willingness (in some states, it is a legal necessity) on the part of family members, teachers, neighbors, and physicians to report suspected child abuse. What was fascinating, although not unusual, was the Donnes' reluctance to recognize—and their need to deny—that they were indeed spouse batterers and child abusers. Raised in dysfunctional families themselves, they simply assumed that their methods of discipline were within normal limits. It was only through counseling that they began to accept their pathology and their need to change. When once they truly examined their style of interacting with each other and with their children, they were ready to begin the healing process. The turning point came when they recognized that Perry was disturbed, a victim of their disastrous relationship and in need of professional help.

The Therapy Process

Our second session began with Perry's desire to play "volcano" again. I asked him to draw some things: the simple House-Tree-Person Test. I felt that Perry would reveal feelings to me as I questioned him about his drawings. Perry drew a tall tree with one huge coconut: "Here's my tree. It's a coconut tree, and you know what? This coconut is going to fall and hit *you* on the head!"

He seemed delighted and tried to gauge my reaction to his aggressive remark.

- Well, you want to hurt me, I think.
- No, but I could.
- Why do you want that coconut to hit me?
- Because—oh, I'm only fooling. It would be an accident.

This term *accident* was one I would hear again and again over the year. Often, Perry's deliberate attempts to hit me or to drop something or throw an object or a toy were followed by "It's an accident. I'm sorry," as if that would excuse his behavior or make the act more acceptable to both the victim and himself. I speculated that Perry was often spanked for his outbursts and his destructive acts. His defense was the "accident" excuse. Was Perry afraid that I would hit him as Bill and Patty had? This second session came too early in our relationship for me to truly understand or to attempt an interpretation of his remark, and only later, as trust began to develop, was I able to explore the meaning of *accident* in Perry's mind.

Perry's "house" drawing was of a primitive, lopsided one with a huge door and one window. The door was almost as large as the whole house. Was he inviting me in to share his emotions? Or was he barring me out? The lack of any details on the house perhaps symbolized feelings of a lack of warmth or intimacy. Finally, Perry would not draw himself; the "person" he drew was me, a great big face with an open mouth: "This person is you, talking to me. " Often, children draw a significant other. At this point, that was what I was: a person entering Perry's life, someone whom he needed to trust, but of whom he was still leery.

Next, Perry gravitated toward the cabinet where the Play-Doh was kept.

- Okay, now I'm going to make more volcanoes. They'll explode.
- You sure like making volcanoes.
- Yep, I like explosions specially.
- How come?

Silence. My question was too direct. Perry worked diligently, lips pressed together, a frown on his

forehead, and made his volcano larger and larger, using four cans of clay. He finally broke the silence:

- Robert kicked me. I didn't do anything to him. He just kicked me.
- You felt bad, I guess, when he did that and maybe angry, too.
- Yep. I even kicked him back, and he cried.
- He's younger than you. Maybe you could tell your mom about it and try not to kick Robert.
- She won't believe me.
- How do you know?
- 'Cause. That's how!

Perry soon left the volcano and donned the space clothes. He took the miniature "space guys" from the box and, while dressed in his space outfit, constructed a "planet." Once all the "guys" were lined up, Perry knocked each one down with shouts of glee, until all the "good guys" were "dead."

- This bad guy, he's He-Man. He's going to knock down this girl—that's you, Dorothy. Then, Willy, that's the He-Man's name, is going to chop her up into pieces. That's 'cause she hit Willy.
- Well, Perry. Willy is sure mad at the lady. Why did she hit Willy?
- 'Cause she did. That's why. Into pieces she goes!

With that remark, Perry scattered the small space people all over the floor. I reminded him that we had only a few minutes left so that he could finish his game and clean up. It was clear to me that Perry was ambivalent about his feelings toward women: his mother, his teacher, and now me. This "chopped-up" girl could be "Mommy" perhaps, the person who hit "Willy," the substitute for Perry. We would return to this theme again.

As Perry cleaned up, he said, "I want an hour with you. I want to come a whole year—two—three years." A surprise to me! But I welcomed his willingness to come.

Our sessions were to be a half hour, twice a week. Perry obviously enjoyed our time together. He

needed to unleash his fury and eventually come to understand that he could do so through words, play, and art. But it was crucial for him to learn the difference between self-control, or autonomy, and controlling others. In the playroom, Perry tried at first to control me: he ordered me to do things and generally refused my help or suggestions. He tested the limits in many of our early meetings, but he slowly began to understand and comply with the rules, which I firmly delineated in the therapy sessions.

I also wanted Perry to know that I could accept his feelings and could help him develop a sense of independence, that he could ask for help and could rely on adults and trust them. We were making clay dinosaurs, for example, during one session, and Perry was having trouble with the shape of the *Tyrannosaurus rex*.

- May I help you with his face?
- No, don't touch it. You do yours.
- Well, Perry, I'm here if you need help.
- I don't need help. OK?
- OK.

Perry picked up his clay dinosaur and moved to the other end of the room with his back to me. My question "How are you doing?" was greeted with silence.

I tried to get his attention by saying, "I'm making a baby dinosaur. Do you want to see it?" He ignored me.

- I guess you like to do things yourself.
- Yes! (*He was still having trouble*.)
- That's good. But it's also OK to ask for help. Even grown-ups need help sometimes.

Perry glanced at me, too stubborn to accept my offer. We both worked quietly. He finished making his dinosaur, but the face was still a problem and he reluctantly came to my table. Perry didn't speak. He was too proud. I silently reached for his clay figure, and he gave it to me. I worked on it and, when I felt

the face was fairly complete, returned it to Perry for the finishing touches. He accepted it back.

There would be other times when Perry again refused my help, but gradually he began to see that I posed no threat to him, and that seeking help was not a sign of weakness. I understood why Perry needed his facade of bravado: Too many times he had been made to feel small, weak, and powerless.

Perry eventually began to understand that adults are not all abusive and that they may control and still love and accept. Perry would learn how to cope with the turmoil that his parents had imposed on him, and he would learn that he did not need to avoid closeness and intimacy.

Perry's comfort in working with various art forms triggered my decision to offer him art materials as part of each session. This decision was fortuitous. Generally, Perry shared his deepest feelings while engaged in drawing, building with clay, or using materials in an arts-and-crafts kit, such as beads, feathers, pipe cleaners, construction paper, flannel patches, wool, and small sticks.

I have found that when a child is blocked verbally, art often serves as an outlet for expression. It has been a useful adjunct in my work and certainly was successful with Perry. Specialists in art therapy conceive of artwork as supporting a child's ego, fostering a sense of identity, and encouraging steps toward maturation in general. Perry not only expressed his deepest feelings through art but was also intensely gratified by making his numerous products, often hanging pictures on my walls or taking them home as gifts for his parents and even for Robert.

Pioneering research with children seen in the psychiatric outpatient department of a hospital found that children's use of imagery and then later drawing the objects or people they had imagined helped them express their feelings in discussions with their therapist. When once I had found that Perry enjoyed artwork and seemed less defensive when he drew or constructed objects, I continued this approach. Sometimes Perry "drew" his "problem" instead of talking about it. Once, when angry, he drew a series of family pictures: Mother, Father, Robert, and Perry. All had large faces with big mouths and huge hands; they were monsterlike in appearance.

The theme of destruction continued to characterize our first six weeks of therapy. Perry like to play spaceman and frequently tested my response by deliberately turning the "space box" upside down and

scattering the "guys" all over the room. He administered "poison" to his guys, built "forts" that were demolished in a frenzy, gave "powerful" shots of "medicine" to a teddy bear, and used the dollhouse as a place to "punish" the "children." Perry would put "all the kids in one room. They must go there. They are all bad; they kick and punch. They are so bad."

Often, Perry would vacillate between saying to the teddy bear, "I love you" and "I hate you." One time, he administered "sixteen thousand shots" to the bear and shouted loud "ouches" as the bear received them.

- I'm only *playing* mad. I'm really not mad.
- You like to play "mad." I see you're mad at Teddy, at the space guys—anyone else?
- Tell my mom I can have TV all day. She won't let me now.
- So you're mad because you can't watch TV all day.
- Yep. I need to watch "Ghostbusters," "Masters of the Universe," even "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood."
- Well, maybe we can let you watch some TV. I'm glad you like Mister Rogers.
- I watch him and "Mr. Wizard."
- You seem to watch a lot of stuff.
- Yep. I want TV all day.

One of the subjects I had discussed with the Donnes was the amount of TV watched by both Perry and Robert. The chief source of entertainment in the Donne household was television, including the rental of movies several times a week. Bill and Patty exercised poor judgment about television. The children had unlimited access to the medium when they were home, and their parents had very little awareness of the programs they watched. Research by others and by my colleagues at Yale carried out since the early 1970s indicates that watching excessive violence on television and in the movies increases the likelihood that at least some viewers will behave more violently.

Perry was especially vulnerable to the negative portrayals on television. He watched approximately five hours of television a day, slightly more than the average American five-year-old, and the programs he favored were cartoons and action-adventure programs that contained many acts of physical aggression. Perry often used TV scenes as scripts for his own behavior. Television stories seen the night before our sessions were acted out through his use of the miniature characters, or through his attempts to "shoot" me or hit me with any object he imaged as a weapon. However, Perry's aggressive outbursts no longer depended on a particular TV scene. Because of his repeated exposure to television violence, his memory store provided cues to specific acts as well as a more generalized aggressive behavior pattern. In addition, Perry's current family life, dominated by arguments, physical aggression, and an absence of warmth and nurturing, exacerbated Perry's predisposition to aggressive behavior. Thus, a number of factors, including television, had led to Perry's use of aggression as a response to frustration and stress.

When his parents complied with my suggestion to limit the number of hours Perry watched television and to select programs suitable for a five-year-old, Perry was angry at first, as his behavior in the playroom showed, but he gradually accepted the rules imposed by his parents. He continued to watch "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" and "Mr. Wizard," but nighttime adult dramatic programs were off-limits.

After his access to violent programming was curtailed, a shift occurred in his play. The space theme faded and was replaced by a desire to play board games such as Candyland and Chutes and Ladders. This desire indicated that Perry was able to handle rules more easily and was more in control. His pretend play had unleashed strong emotions. Certainly the repetition of volcano and space play had afforded Perry ample opportunities to vent his anger and had evoked memories of unhappy experiences at home. Now I wondered if expressing this new preference was Perry's silent way of telling me he was ready for a more mature kind of play, or what Jean Piaget called the stage of "games with rules." Perry's attention span was also increasing, and he was able to concentrate more than in our early sessions. This shift in play was not so much a cognitive one (he was still quite young) as a recognition of his need for structure and organization.

The Game of Checkers

After two months in therapy, Perry was able to sustain a longer play theme. He had not completely relinquished his desire to knock down buildings, but the passion that had previously accompanied these displays was less intense. I met with the Donnes once a month and during one of these visits was updated on his progress.

Bill spoke first as usual: "Things are better at home. We're both still seeing our counselors. Perry still picks on Robert but not as often, and it's not as miserable as it used to be."

Patty nodded but didn't volunteer much during our sessions. She looked more vacant to me than usual, as if she were miles away. When I tried to get her to talk and describe a typical day with Perry and Robert, she was not particularly informative. She gave me the briefest of responses: "It's OK," "It's good," "We're doing OK." I suspected that all was not "OK," but neither parent offered any more elaboration on life at home.

In the playroom, Perry still called Robert "bad, bad," and when he played dollhouse, he "locked" Robert in his room. But a new element had entered into our sessions: Perry spotted the checkers set on a shelf and asked me to teach him the game. Checkers became an integral part of our time together. The need to focus on this activity enabled Perry to talk to me about his parents and himself. In addition, as we played this simple game, I was able to observe how Perry reacted to structure, rules, taking turns, and on occasion, his triumphal winning. I was able to talk with Perry about cheating when he did so; lying when he told me, "It's my turn, Dorothy—you moved"; and his capacity to delay his actions and use self-control. Richard Gardner, a psychiatrist who has successfully used checkers as a diagnostic and therapeutic tool, feels that checkers is particularly useful in helping a child gain a sense of mastery and competence.

Although checkers falls into the category of competitive games, I used it because the very nature of the game tapped into Perry's major behavior problems. In our early play, Perry did become anxious when he lost pieces to me, but we were able to confront this reaction immediately, within the framework of the game, without his previous use of dolls to enact a power struggle between him and his parents, or his use of "spacemen" to dole out punishment after he had lost a squabble with Robert, or his attacks on the teddy bear, a substitute for Robert. The game of checkers also provided a safe climate in which Perry

could allow his need to win and to be in control to emerge. For example, he thought of his black checkers as "soldiers" advancing, or when he crowned his kings, they were the "conquerors." Thus, Perry enjoyed his use of fantasy and his playful attitude in a structured game with a clear beginning and ending.

For a short time in August, my vacation suspended our checkers games. In September, we resumed our sessions and Perry was eager to come back to the playroom and also to demonstrate his progress in checkers. Bill had played checkers with him while I'd been away, and Perry had improved enough so that I knew he now genuinely understood the game. I played it straight, with no deliberate errors. On occasion, Perry would "forget" the rules, especially if he thought he was losing, but he also recovered quickly, and less sulking or weeping followed the loss of a piece or even a game.

His choice of checkers as the favorite game in September proved to be a good one. Perry was anxious about his new school but had repressed many of these feelings. He was more quiet than he had been during our sessions in the spring, needing to reassess our relationship after the August break. A brief vignette from one of our checkers games later in September illustrates how the game helped Perry to make his adjustment to school and to reestablish his trust in me:

- Dorothy, you be red. I'm always black, remember?
- I remember.
- (While moving a piece): Carl is a boy in my class. He throws things at me.
- What does the teacher do?
- She sends him to the principal.

Perry seemed more distant now and stopped moving his pieces.

- Perry, your turn to move.
- I'm stuck—no more places to go.
- You can move your men from your last row.
- I won't. If I do that, you'll get kings.

- Well, you can get kings, too.

- I guess so, but it's hard.

- Not if you concentrate and if you're careful.

- I can't win.

- That's not so. Remember, you beat me way back in July.

- I remember. I'll move this.

Perry made a bad move, and I was able to jump twice, landing in a place that made a king. Perry reluctantly crowned me and seemed weepy. He made another bad move, and I jumped him again. He reacted by throwing all the checkers on the floor and ran under the small slide to hide, watching me.

- Perry, that was not the way to end the game. I know you feel bad because you thought you were losing. Please come back. Pick up the pieces and put them away.

- No.

- Perry, one of our rules is that we don't deliberately throw things if we're angry. Come and talk about it with me.

No response. Perry's head was down, and he was feeling contrite.

Perry, let's pick these checkers up together. This is only a game. Sometimes I lose, sometimes you lose. Come, help me.

Perry came out from his "safe place," a label he had given this little boxlike spot weeks before when he crawled in after hitting me with a block. He now came to the table, picked up all the checkers himself, and set up the board.

- I'll leave this for next time, OK?

- Fine, Perry. I'm sorry that you threw the checkers, and I wonder why you crawled into your "safe place."

- Everyone is mad at me today. Dorothy, I told a lie. Carl didn't throw the block, I did.

- When you threw the checkers, I guess you remembered that you threw that block at Carl. Did you think I would punish you?

No response. Perry still couldn't tell me in words that he had been physically abused when he was "bad" at home; it is difficult for children to "tell tales" on their parents. What happened to Perry had taken place a long time before, in the days of the trailer camp, but perhaps those psychological scars had not yet completely healed and remained to haunt him. When he was disobedient, Perry's instinctive reaction was still to run and hide. However, I was pleased when he set the game up again. He was able to recover and restore, and through these positive steps, he had signaled to me his willingness to cope.

I wondered, however, if physical punishment was still occurring at home. When asked, the Donnes denied it, but I still felt that something was amiss. Patty's demeanor and lack of emotion conveyed negative messages to me.

We were moving into a new phase of therapy by November, approximately six months from my first contact with the Donnes and with Perry. Perry was able to accept me as a "friend" and seemed a relatively happier child. Instead of the volcanoes that he had drawn or sculpted out of clay or papier-mâché, Perry began to use watercolors and drew rainbows, and he constructed various gifts for his parents, such as a small "feather duster," a colorful horn made of a cardboard paper insert, and an Indian headdress. As he fashioned these objects, he talked to me more freely. He no longer called himself "bad," and I was gratified when he finally agreed to draw himself. The picture was a brightly colored portrait of a "happy" boy with a big smile, yellow hair, and blue eyes.

There were also some setbacks during the fall months. When Perry's teacher, who was pregnant, left her job in November, Perry was forced to make another new adjustment. And when his Uncle Ed moved to California at the end of the month, Perry felt abandoned by him, the only relative besides his parents whom he truly loved. These disappointments were reflected in Perry's regression early in December. Checker games were approached with hostility. "I'm going to beat you," Perry stated with a vengeance, or he would give up in the middle of a game if he appeared to be losing and flip the board over, causing the checkers to fall to the floor.

Many such "accidents" were occurring in school, at home, and in the playroom. Perry purposely

spilled water on the playroom floor, hit me with a spoon, and knocked over a chair. All were labeled "accidents" by him, and we were able to explore the meaning of "accidents" as intentional acts on Perry's part, a major step in his treatment. Perry gained some insight into why he struck out when angry instead of talking about his feelings. He confessed one day:

- I was bad in school, Dorothy.
- What happened?
- I punched a kid. He bothered me. I just wanted to be by myself.
- Why did you want to be alone?
- I don't know. I just did.
- What happened when you punched him?
- I went to the principal's office. The lunchroom lady sent me there. I had to stay all the time, the whole lunchtime.
- Did you try to tell that boy before you punched him that you wanted to be alone?
- No.
- You can do that, Perry. Use words to talk about your feelings. You don't have to punch him.
- He's a jerk!
- Well, maybe, but you can still use words.

Perry listened. He was still defensive, but the message "Use words" was penetrating, if slowly.

During this period, Perry began to draw numerous pictures of hurricanes, with such rage that the paper would tear. We talked about his missing his Uncle Ed and his disappointment concerning his teacher's leave of absence. Talking helped. Perry's outbursts were briefer than in his early days in therapy, but more important, he was struggling to find the words to tell me about his "hurt feelings."

The School Visit

Perry adjusted beautifully to his new teacher, Ms. Sheffield, and was proud of the stickers he was bringing home from school for good conduct and for good work. I thought it would be beneficial for Perry if I visited his school to seek his teacher's help in reinforcing the progress he had made in therapy.

Bill and Patty arranged for me to meet Ms. Sheffield and to obtain permission for a classroom and playground observation. Perry was delighted to have a "special" visitor and was on his best behavior during my stay. He volunteered for many activities; he asked the teacher if he could "read" out loud and if I could sit near him. On the playground, Perry was a natural leader; only once did he boss another boy. Most of the time, he played appropriately, unlike the child described to me so many months before.

At the end of my visit, Ms. Sheffield and I discussed Perry's academic and social development while an aide supervised her class. According to Ms. Sheffield, Perry had progressed "beautifully" but was still subject to "the whims of his parents' behavior." Although she seemed to have some knowledge of Perry's background, I felt that I could not breach the Donnes' confidence and refrained from the elaboration of details. Ms. Sheffield added that Perry responded well to praise, liked to have a "job" in the classroom, and "loves being the center of attention." His responsibility for the distribution of crayons, pencils, and papers made Perry feel "important." On days when he sulked or became obstreperous, these monitor privileges were withdrawn. The rewards for good behavior were stars, stickers, or "happy face" drawings, which Perry relished.

I supported Ms. Sheffield's approach and emphasized his continued craving for attention, praise, and warmth. I explained my handling of Perry's outbursts and my constant reminder to use words when he was angry, not his fists or the hurling of some accessible object. Ms. Sheffield was a sensitive, caring teacher, I felt, whose allegiance was imperative if Perry was to continue his strides in therapy.

Buddy Joins the Play

Perry often asked me if he would live in his house "forever" and if his parents would ever fight again. The future was a scary place for Perry, and as we moved into our last stage of therapy, he could share these concerns with me. I became Perry's friend, his support, his sounding board. Perry again took

a giant step when he began to use a large doll named Buddy as his alter ego to role-play scenes of sharing and taking turns, as well as to express his negative feelings. Perry called these scenes the "Buddy plays" using different "acts" for each segment of the playlets. One session we played "book":

- Buddy tried to tear Robert's book today, Dorothy.
- I guess he was real mad about something.
- Let's let Buddy pretend he's doing it.
- OK, Perry, you be Buddy. I'll be Robert.
- Buddy is watching TV, and Robert changes the channel. Boy, is Buddy mad! He grabs Robert's book.
- Where's Mommy?
- She's in the kitchen.
- Well, think about what Buddy could do instead of tearing the book.
- He could say, "Please put the channel back."
- Yes, that's good. What else?
- Well, OK, he can walk away and ask Mommy if he can see TV later after dinner.
- Perry, I like that. Would you like to try this out with Buddy?

We enacted this simple scene, using variations, until Perry felt comfortable with each resolution and had had enough. Generally, Perry drew a picture of Buddy doing some activity after we role-played. As he drew, Perry liked to listen to a recording of "Little Brave Sambo." This song, in which a child is empowered and conquers a tiger, seemed to have a special significance for Perry—perhaps the symbolism of the wilder side of one's nature, tamed and controlled at last.

Relapse

All that I had accomplished in therapy was about to come apart through Patty Donne's self-

destructiveness. Perry obviously sensed the strained relationship between his parents. One day, as he was drawing, Perry remarked:

- I don't like it when Mommy and Daddy fight.
- Are they fighting?
- Sometimes Mommy is sad. She promised me she wouldn't fight. She doesn't go to her meetings. I don't know what they are. She doesn't go.
- You sound worried about Mommy.
- I got stuff on my mind.
- What stuff?
- Just stuff.
- Can you tell me about the stuff?
- Don't ask questions, OK?
- OK.

Perry was angry, and I could see that he needed to talk but couldn't find the words to tell me what was bothering him. He continued to draw: "This is Mommy. Mommy's mouth is big, bigger—bigger. She's yelling at Daddy."

Perry then scribbled over the face. He crumpled the paper and began to cry.

- Perry, you're so upset, and you're angry, too. Can you talk to me? Tell me what you feel?
- I can do it!
- Do what?
- I can hold Mommy and Daddy. Mommy can't go away. I can hold them!
- No one is going away, Perry. What do you mean?

Perry was now sobbing and put his head down on the crumpled drawing. He was unable to talk to me.

- It's OK, Perry, you can cry. I know you're upset about Mommy and Daddy. I'll talk to Daddy and try to find out what's happening. OK?

Perry continued to cry for a while and then wiped his tears and sat quietly. He looked small and lost. He wanted so much to be powerful, to keep his family intact, to hold his parents together, but he couldn't—and I couldn't. At that moment, I felt as frustrated and helpless as Perry. I suspected that the Donnes had been arguing about their relationship and wondered if Perry had overheard a conversation about divorce. I wanted to cry, too, but all I could do now was try to comfort this heartbroken little boy. When Perry seemed calmer, we went to the waiting room, and I asked Bill to phone me that evening. It was important that we talk.

I discovered later that Patty had not been honest in her monthly contacts with me. She had stopped attending NA in October and, unbeknownst to both Bill and me, had begun using drugs again. By the end of December, the drug abuse had become more frequent, and Bill suspected it when Patty lost her job and slept most of the day. When Bill confronted Patty, she used foul language, threatened to leave him, and told him to "butt out." Bill was frantic, short-tempered, and out of control with the children, and although I tried to convince Bill to be open with me when I told him that the dips in Perry's behavior might be related to something going on at home, Bill refused to confide in me.

When I saw Patty at one of our last sessions in December, she had gained a good deal of weight in six weeks; her face was puffy, her clothes unkempt, and she seemed sullen and withdrawn. Patty was abusing not only drugs, as I found out later, but alcohol as well.

By the middle of February, Perry was regressing further, becoming more anxious, less in control, and my attempts to get Patty back into her NA counseling (Bill finally told me she had stopped going) were unsuccessful. Patty now refused to come to our sessions, and Perry's behavior was a reaction to the turmoil at home.

Once again, Perry made his volcanoes and often hid under the slide in his "safe place." He

appeared depressed and withdrawn and was reluctant to share his feelings. He announced, "I can get my own way at home. I can be boss and tell Mommy and Dad what to do."

Bill was now cooking, shopping, and struggling to maintain a sense of family, while Patty become more slovenly, more irritable, and less involved with the children. Finally, one night in late spring, Patty "short-circuited," as Bill put it. She left the house, managed to find drugs on the street, came home late in the evening, and "tried to tear the house apart." Bill called Patty's NA support person, who took her to the local hospital.

I saw Perry the next day. A neighbor was helping out at home while Bill tried to get some more permanent arrangement for the children's care. Perry came into the playroom like a cyclone. He would not talk but roamed around the room. He grabbed some crayons and drew himself with a large, open mouth and great big teeth. It was like the picture he had first made of Patty. He ignored my attempts to comfort him and hid behind a couch. I waited. He finally came out and sat near me. He then ran out into the waiting room and threw himself on the floor, sobbing. Bill and I tried to comfort him. Finally, he sat on my lap, asking if he could "play," and we went back to the playroom.

We tried to play checkers, but Perry dumped them on the floor, although he picked them up without my asking him to. He then built a "house." He put all the plastic dinosaurs inside and then attacked them all, knocking everything over. In response to my reflections about his anger, Perry simply ignored me and hid his face under a cushion. He then came out, found Buddy, and hid Buddy under the cushions, saying, "I want to lock up everybody. I don't like this family." He hit Buddy with a tambourine.

- Buddy is crying. (Pointing to the doll's freckles.) See his tears?
- Buddy is crying because you hit him, and maybe because the family is locked up.
- (Through a torrent of tears): The family is gone, gone, gone. Mommy is gone, gone in the hospital—forever. I want my Mommy. She won't be home for my birthday party.
- Perry, you can have two parties: one on your real birthday and one when Mommy comes home. If you like, I'll ask your dad about that.

Perry seemed to accept this suggestion, calmed down, and sat near me. I didn't want our session to

end with such despair, and I offered to help Perry make a get-well card for Patty. Cheering up, he took the construction paper and crayons and accepted my help (a big concession for him) in spelling some of the words. He then decorated the card and made an "envelope" for it. By the end of our time, Perry's mood was lighter, but I knew that the next six weeks (the length of Patty's hospitalization) would be especially painful for Perry.

Indeed, they were. Our next two sessions were pivotal in Perry's therapy. Through words and actions, he unleashed all the mental and physical suffering that he had endured in his five and a half years. When he came into the playroom, I asked him how he was feeling.

- Two hundred!
- What does that mean?
- Two hundred means good, better than one hundred. Daddy says that when Mommy comes home we can have a party—one big one for me and Mommy.

My relief in hearing this was quickly dispelled by what happened next. Announcing that he was "baking pies," Perry took the Play-Doh out of the can. Then he aimed one pie at me, threatening to "throw it in your face," and I knew that Perry thought I must have failed him in some way: How could I, his friend, the one he had come to trust, let bad things happen to him? Perry felt betrayed by adults yet again.

After the pie threat, Perry was upset and withdrew, sniveling, to his "safe place" under the slide. Eventually, he came out and yelled at the top of his lungs, "It's my fault that Mommy went away. I was bad."

I tried to reassure Perry, but he put his head on the table.

- Perry, you weren't responsible. You didn't do anything that put Mommy in the hospital.
- Dad says I didn't do it, but I know I did. I was bad.

Perry crawled into a large cardboard box and repeated, "It's my fault." Finally, he came out, and we were able to talk about being "bad." Perry confided that once Patty had told him he caused all her problems and "drives" her nuts." Perry rejected all my attempts to ease his guilt and pain, and our

session ended with discomfort on both our parts. When Perry and I entered the waiting room, Bill sensed that something was amiss. I phoned him that evening, and he told me that Perry was withdrawn and weepy, and that he, too, was having difficulty reassuring Perry about his role in Patty's illness.

Our next session took place two days later, and I knew it would again be a difficult one. Perry ran into the room and hid behind a chair: silence. I waited and waited. He finally emerged with a shout.

- Did I scare you?
- Were you trying to?
- Yes.
- Why?
- For fun.

Perry was restless, and I knew that he could relate his deepest troubles when he was using his hands. He spotted a large cardboard box and asked if he could make a "caterpillar house" out of it. When I assented, he took the scissors, started to cut out a window, and, as he did so, said in a flat voice, "Mommy is dead!"

- Perry, Mommy's not dead, she's just ill. Why do you say she's dead?
- I know. You go to a hospital only when you're dead.
- No, Perry, you go there to get well.
- No, she's dead. I made her go!

Perry got angry at me. Why didn't I understand? he seemed to be saying. He tried to throw the box at me, yelling again at the top of his lungs, "I want my mommy." Perry ran out of the room to his dad, and I followed as he hollered, "Tell Dorothy there was a fight at school. Tell her how I scratched a kid. Tell her, tell her!"

Perry was now out of control and ran back into the room. Bill asked if he could come, too. We

followed Perry, who now tried to throw a large plastic toy at me. Bill tried to hold Perry. I put my hands on Perry's shoulders and asked him to look at me. I told him that I knew he was unhappy and angry, but that he could not hit me; he could use the box to let the anger out. Perry struggled out of Bill's arms, and we both watched as he ripped, pounded, stepped on the box and tore it. Like this cardboard box, Perry's world was falling apart.

We watched until Perry had had enough. Crawling like a baby, he went to the slide and sat under it. I waited a few minutes and then went to his "safe place" and reached out to him. Perry came out, put his head on my lap, and let out a sob like a wounded animal. Bill was crying softly, telling Perry how much he loved him, and that he, too, was sad about Mommy, but that no one was to blame for Mommy's illness—not Perry, not Robert, not Daddy. Perry hugged his father and seemed more composed. I spoke to Perry: "It's OK, Perry. We know you're angry and you miss Mommy, but Mommy will come home when she's feeling better. None of this is your fault."

I felt we needed to repair the box. Our session could not end with the "caterpillar house" in a shambles. Bill watched as Perry and I mended the box with tape. Perry agreed that we could leave it for our next session, when we would paint it.

- It will be for Mommy. A surprise for her when she gets home.
- Yes, I like that idea.

That evening, I called Bill, urging him to get the hospital staff's permission for Patty to talk to Perry; he needed to hear her voice to confirm that she was truly alive. Perry felt reassured after Patty spoke to him, and in his next session with me, the healing process began again.

Termination

During Patty's hospitalization, my work with Perry focused on helping him relieve his guilt, and on building up his self-esteem. Perry was able to talk about his mother and to recognize that what she did was not his fault. At first, Perry labeled his mother "bad"; then, gradually, he understood that she was unhappy and sick. He knew that drugs were involved but could not, of course, fully comprehend the implications of drug abuse.

Just before Patty was to return home, Perry announced once again, "I put Mommy in the hospital, Robert did, and Daddy did." Once again, he needed reaffirmation and tried to throw a toy stethoscope at me. I warned him that he would have to leave if he did so, and he settled down.

- Remember, I threw a pie at you.
- I remember. You were angry and sad, angry at Mommy because she had to go away, and angry at me because you thought I could help her stay home.
- Yes, and when she comes home, I'll put her in the timeout chair.
- Why?
- 'Cause she went away.
- I guess you want to punish her.
- Maybe. Will she go away again?
- No. I don't think so. I hope not.
- Will she be the same when she comes back?
- Yes, Perry, she will be the same mommy, only she will be well again, like before, when she went to her meetings.
- Will she fight with Daddy?
- Perry, Daddy and Mommy will try to get along. I'm sure they will try hard.
- Dorothy, when do I stop coming here?
- Are you worried about that?
- A little.
- Well, you can still come for a while, until you feel really ready to stop.
- OK.

Perry needed reassurance that our relationship would continue after Patty returned; he needed to

know that there would be a safe place for him. He still required support, and it was important to maintain therapy after Patty's return until the family readjusted. Yet, I felt it was time to begin thinking of reducing our sessions to test whether Perry could begin to handle difficulties on his own. Bill and I agreed that the twice-weekly sessions should continue for another month or two, and then, gradually, we would reduce our visits, depending on Patty's progress and Perry's reactions.

After six weeks, Patty came home. She joined her support group again and was on a strict regimen of diet, exercise, and therapy. The roller-coaster ride of Perry's family situation was on an uphill turn. Bill evidenced great strength throughout the ordeal, faithfully bringing Perry to play therapy, and continuing in AA. He offered Patty his own strength now, and he no longer behaved toward her in a brutal, macho way. A sweetness emerged that I would not have predicted from my early encounters with him, nor from the history of physical abuse in the family. I can only surmise that Bill had profited from his counseling, gaining insight concerning his role as father.

Perry had learned alternatives to aggressive responses and, if he lapsed, recovered quickly. I began to phase out the therapy in late spring, almost one year after we had begun. Perry announced, half-joking and half-earnest, that he would "be bad so that I can come forever." Although Perry was making preparations to end our sessions as well, his reluctance was evidenced in his alternating between minor regressive behavior and a bravado stance: "I don't need to come. I have no troubles."

One day, Perry announced he had a secret that he could now share with me. He told me that he had been sucking his thumb at night and rubbing his blanket: "Now, Dorothy, I stopped—just like that!" He was very proud, and I realized that he was also telling me that he was better, more grown-up. Shortly after, Perry asked if he could take some of his drawings down from the bulletin board and walls. Again, he was letting me know that he was ready to leave me and this room, where so many outbursts of anger, tears of sadness, and also funny things had taken place. Perry left me one picture, a drawing of himself with a big smile, two missing teeth, and his arm raised in the air.

- Perry, what are you doing in the picture?
- I'm saying, "good-bye."

And we did say good-bye soon after that. I met with the Donnes several times as I ended the therapy with Perry. Patty was also conscientious about attending her own therapy sessions. She was on a strict diet, had begun to dress more neatly, had a new hairdo, and seemed more comfortable with me than she had been over the past year. At this point, I was seeing Perry only once a month. He would still announce that he had "talked out in school," hit Robert, or messed up his room—all said in a teasing way, and always followed by "I'm kidding. I just miss this room."

By summer, Perry and I had said our final good-byes. He brought me a photo of himself: a big grin, missing upper front teeth, and holding a small plant I had given him. I thought all was well: his report card was excellent. Patty and Bill were both keeping away from alcohol and drugs, and discipline was no longer a beating, but a time-out or the denial of TV or a treat. I told the Donnes that if ever Perry needed me, I would be here for them.

Unfortunately, in October, the phone rang. It was Bill: "Patty left me. The marriage is over. Can Perry come to see you?"

Perry came. He said, "I miss you." He had the beginnings of one new front tooth, but the smile was gone. He looked like a bent old man, his spirit and vitality diminished. We talked about Patty and Perry's sadness. He told me that he "never wants to see Mommy again." Perry was building up his defenses. He wanted to come back to see me, but that never happened: Perry did not come for his next appointment. When I phoned, Bill told me they were moving to California to join his brother Ed, and that eventually he would divorce Patty and start a new life again. Perry was lost. I fretted about his vulnerability. My reaction to Perry and Robert's loss was one of frustration. I felt once again as helpless as Perry did, but I hoped that whatever strength Perry had found through play therapy would enable him to deal with his new life without his mother.