

*The Many Meanings of Play*

**The Developmental  
Dimensions of Play  
During Treatment**

**Conceptual Overview**

**Samuel Abrams**

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## The Developmental Dimensions of Play during Treatment: Conceptual Overview

Samuel Abrams, M.D.

The developmental process may be described as an emerging sequence of progressively differentiated, hierarchical organizations that lead to progressive changes in behavior. The sequence, driven by an underlying maturational program, unfolds in steps or phases, each evolving within a limited time frame, each characterized by a transient disequilibrium or crisis, each to a greater or lesser degree reorganizing antecedent phases, and each yielding novelties. The appearance of the novel suggests transformations or qualitative alterations in underlying structures. Each step requires experiences to concretize the interaction between the underlying program and the surround, thereby providing nuclei for the nascent structures. Play promotes the developmental process since it is one source of those experiences.

The analytic process may be described as a sequence of steps designed to induce progressive changes in behavior by integrating unrecognized entrapped pathogens into the more mature organizations. The pathogens, residues of antecedent developmental periods embedded by defense, remain entrapped until they are freed by the tool of interpretation and the effect of insight. Once freed, they can be brought into the more mature psychological organizations. The steps in the analytic process include resistances of character, of transference, and of the affective past. The appearance of insights implies success in the integration of pathological aspects of past developmental organizations into the more mature hierarchies. Play promotes the analytic process by facilitating access to the unrecognized pathogens.

Play, therefore, serves both developmental and analytic goals. It serves the former best when it is allowed free reign to proceed toward consolidation, and it serves the latter best when the activity of play can be converted into verbal channels. As a consequence, the child clinician is often confronted with the task of determining when to sustain play as play in order to provide the necessary concrete experiences that establish nuclei for the emerging hierarchies and when to shift

play into words to facilitate access to the unconscious. The pacing is not inconsequential, since new hierarchies bring new psychological capacities into existence; some of the capacities enhance access (for example, during the oedipal organization), whereas others usher in features that abet the repressing forces (for example, during latency). Such actualities intensify the dilemmas of the clinician.

The focus of this chapter is on play during the emerging oedipal organization, a period between the ages of four and seven when the foundation for the subsequent, mature, psychological structures is established. It is an especially felicitous time to study the relationship between the developmental and analytic processes and the effect of play upon both. It is a time when children's play becomes strikingly distinctive, assuming the form of imaginative dramas, different from the somewhat more unidimensional playing that has preceded and the play with games defined by rules that will follow.

### **Play and Oedipal Organization**

The oedipal organization is a broader concept than the oedipal phase and the oedipal conflict. The oedipal phase highlights the fate of the instinctual drive derivatives; the oedipal conflict describes the psychological nucleus that is at the phase's center. The oedipal organization contains both the phase and the conflict, but, like all developmental organizations, it also describes a specific plateau during the progression when instinctual drive derivatives are integrated with the emerging self and object representations and the ego and its equipment.

The oedipal organization provides the foundation for the personality as a whole. It, too, is characterized by novel yields. One structural novelty is the consolidation of the superego; one functional novelty is the appearance of a new regulator of behavior, guilt. Antecedent developmental organizations provide the necessary building blocks for the foundation as well as such precursors of conscience as pleasure and pain, power and helplessness. The play of younger children often betrays the shape and character of these emerging building blocks and precursors and also provides necessary experiences for them to consolidate. The integrity of the antecedent building blocks will be one of the influences that effects the degree of success of the assembling of the

foundation during the oedipal period.

Clinical observations of play during the emergence of the oedipal organization can reveal the status of the drive components, ego functions, ego apparatuses, the residual consequences of antecedent and ongoing object relationships, potential growth disparities, and the effectiveness of the new assembling. The play is also a window upon the formative unconscious fantasies that are achieving ascendancy during that time. The play, however, is more than simply evidence of the various ongoing psychological activities; it also provides experiences, necessary nuclei for consolidating components of the emerging oedipal organization—structural components such as the superego and functional components such as guilt—as new regulators of behavior. In this sense, play is an intermediary between meaning and structure. Therefore, interventions that aim at prematurely converting play into words to facilitate understanding may interfere with the requirements of the developmental process, whereas those that facilitate the consolidation of ongoing roles and dramas through play may promote and help shape it.

The example that follows is an attempt to describe how play may be used to enhance the mutual relationship between the developmental and the analytic processes.

### **Clinical Illustration**

Leslie came for treatment when he was three. He was difficult to control at home and had trouble establishing limits to his behavior while interacting with adults or other children. In addition, he often insisted that he was a girl.

He was the second child of ambitious parents who feared at first that treatment might injure his self-esteem. This led them to defer therapy for a time until his imperiousness became unbearable and his gender confusion too worrisome. He increasingly preferred wearing girls' clothing and playing with dolls and was attracted to television and comic-book female superheroines.

Soon after the treatment got under way, Leslie became involved with puppet play. The puppet expressed aspects of the way he represented himself, features of his past life, and components of his relationship with me. Play, therefore, provided access to the status of his self representation, his ego

functions, ongoing unconscious conflicts, and the integrity of the existing developmental organization. After a time, however, I began to view some of his play as ways in which Leslie shaped and engaged experiences needed for his growth, in addition to its representing how that growth was proceeding.

Initially, he practiced constraints and limits through the puppet. He would caution it that it could not do certain things. To reinforce the injunctions, Leslie often treated the puppet in a punitive manner, spanking it or constraining it or threatening it in ways never experienced at home. These isolated moments of play led to interpretations of his own impulsiveness and the extent of his rage expressed both in the impulsiveness and in the controls. He accepted the comments and sometimes modified the play action, making it less cruel. But it also occurred to me that the play was providing experiences for Leslie to establish the necessary internal structures to exercise restraint over his own behavior; what seemed worrisome was the sadistic quality of these budding repressive structures. While attempting to have him understand what he was doing, I also hoped to convey the impression that constraint could be achieved by less cruel means, an idea that was often implemented by a change in the way he taught constraints to his puppet.

At other times Leslie would play at engaging in housekeeping chores— sweeping floors, washing dishes, cooking meals. I recognized that he was also moving toward consolidating stereotyped female roles through this play. I noted that this provided an area to express some of his “girl” feelings. I also tried to follow the relationship between the cruelty and the female behavior as each appeared in his hours. There was a crude linkage between sadism and masculinity, on the one hand, and slavish submission and femininity, on the other. Being a girl was one way to control his cruel feelings.

After a while, the play became elaborated into more extensive dramas, often with a compelling quality. At these times, he would brush aside explanatory comments in a determined attempt to carry the play forward toward some specific outcome. At those moments it seemed as if the experience of engaging in these dramas was more vital than access to their multiple meanings. I restrained myself from interpreting them and watched them consolidate instead.

A rescue theme became evident between the ages of four and six. Three figures were assigned changing roles in his drama—I, the puppet, and Leslie himself. One role was that of a girl or woman who had been stolen away by a second character, a monster, who intended to devour her. The third participant was a heroic rescuer whose aggressiveness was ultimately inflicted upon the villainous monster. Leslie repeated the drama many times, frequently changing parts. Was the rescuer to be male or female? He often used a twig to implement the rescue, pausing briefly to decide whether he was a good witch on a twig-broomstick or Robin Hood brandishing a twig- sword. I recognized the overlap of antecedent libidinal phases, the oral in the devouring, the phallic in the twig, and the surfacing oedipal in the form of the rescue of a damsel in distress. In terms of ego development, the capacity for differentiation had improved during treatment, but a fluidity still persisted in the ease of his shifting roles and in the uncertain gender of the rescuer. He moved too readily between active and passive, rescuer and being rescued, monster, damsel, and hero, while expressing manifest pleasure in each role. He threatened to devour with sadistic glee, anticipated attack with anxious excitement, and enjoyed the heroic rescue with exuberance.

For the most part I chose to allow the drama to consolidate, while pointing out the changing roles and themes. I participated as he directed, although through activities and comments I tried to promote differentiation, mute the aggressiveness, and reinforce the pleasures of the rescuer as contrasted with those of the villain or the victim. Despite the manifest oedipal theme, I did not choose to interpret desire or competitiveness; rather, by promoting these features of the play, I hoped to have desire and competitiveness consolidate within settings that were more felicitous for further growth. I especially had in mind the nature of the superego that might precipitate out of all of this, his available defensive repertoire, his gender preference, and the regulators of his self-esteem.

After some time, despite some residual leaning toward Leslie's interest in being the monster, the drama increasingly consolidated around his choosing to be a heroic male rescuer. Also promoted was differentiation between male and female, sadism and assertiveness, good and evil.

The dangers that he perceived and that required protection also overlapped from different time periods and underwent further differentiation. The rescue of the girl enhanced him as did the



successful vanquishing of the monster, although there were brief times when he called up the old feelings of being enhanced as the monster or the damsel in distress. From the standpoint of regulation of self-esteem, the fact that he felt enhanced by doing good through rescuing rather than exerting power through imperiousness seemed to bode well for his progress.

After some time and following some cautious interventions about the dangers faced in rescuing, the drama became somewhat stereotyped along expectable lines. This coincided with a diminished interest in dolls and television heroines and an increased interest in wearing clothing that was clearly boyish. He began to deny that there had ever been a time when he had said he was a girl, and he denied it with the vigor that had characterized his early imperiousness. I understood this change to reflect shifts in internalized structures as a result of the mutual relationship between the analytic and developmental processes; the analytic work had used the play to gain access to understanding pathogenic elements, which in turn modified the play, leading him toward play actions that permitted his consolidating more differentiated structures and more adaptive strategies for his ongoing and future development. Superego development could be inferred, and guilt and shame emerged as more obvious regulators of behavior within the play setting.

The compelling quality of these new restraints soon revealed itself in his real life as well. In school he began participating more actively with classmates. Despite minor displays of imperiousness at home, his deportment at school was exemplary, although learning difficulties (suspected earlier because of his many deficiencies in ego functions) surfaced. His parents became concerned about this new threat to his self-esteem as he was increasingly relegated to a group of less competent students.

Reflecting the difficulties at school, his play underwent some change. Leslie became a tyrannical ruler of his puppet, cruel in his judgment and decisive in implementing punishment for transgressions. The transgressions, however, became academic failures. The puppet was asked questions, often simple questions such as guessing a number between 1 and 100. When the puppet's answer was incorrect (it almost always was), some cruel punishment was implemented. The puppet was cut into pieces, despite its objections about the unfairness of the penalty. In asides, Leslie and I agreed that such cruel punishment for not knowing answers was patently unfair. For some time,

however, this recognition did little to modify the penalty because the pleasure in cruelty had once again become more compelling partly because the pleasure of achievement had become more elusive. The cutting apart of the puppet usually began or ended with castration, apparently the harshest of the actions and the unfairest of them all.

As tyrannical judge, Leslie periodically tossed protestations aside, taking a certain pride in his renewed capacity for sadism. In a flash of inventiveness, he looked to devise more unreasonable penalties. After some time he introduced what he and the puppet agreed was the weirdest. When the puppet failed to answer correctly or misbehaved in any way, a live snake was inserted into his bottom. As it writhed about inside, the puppet emitted agonized screams.

I recognized the further consolidation of moral values influenced by the earlier gender disturbance and the intense aggressiveness now fused with libidinal aims. The latent wish to receive the brutalizing penis was obvious, as was the fact that this wish—enacted in play—was an intermediary between unconscious fantasy and the consolidation of the potentially sadistic superego. Since the crimes that induced such punishment included giving wrong answers to questions, there was the threat that Leslie might pull his deficiency of ego apparatus into the meaning of an offense. His being a learning-disabled boy could be converted into his being a bad boy. Furthermore, homosexual desire was being realized in the form of the punishment. Leslie might be tempted to retain the disability to serve that desire in its new form. It was a demonstration of a form of moral masochism in the state of being born. Leslie was assembling his drive development, features of his ego development, and his self-regulating functions into a firm organizational climax, and he was bringing all these components together in a very specific way. The assembly was producing a coherent foundation for new psychological structures, but the way some of the components were pulled together still seemed problematic for future development.

I intervened in this with interpretive efforts. I tried to distinguish a learning disability from a criminal act in the play. I called attention to the harshness of his punishment and connected it to his earlier imperiousness and interest in the power of hurting others. I even tried to suggest that the snake-in-the-bottom punishment was related to his view of how a girl might feel when making love and, by inference, to his own girl feelings. Over time, clinical improvement was heralded by the

appearance of a state of fearfulness. He became worried that one of his parents might be killed by a robber or mugger and, for a while, needed to be with them to feel reassured about their safety. This further internalization of the various conflicting elements seemed more manageable by the customary therapeutic techniques alone.

### Discussion

The therapeutic efforts aside, the illustration indicates the interaction of the different areas of discontinuous growth—drives, ego, and object relationships—as they emerge and are assembled during the oedipal period. The specific illustration is one of a child whose developmental process is characterized by a degree of dominance of drives over a relatively less endowed ego and a somewhat limited success in the expectable achievement of object relations. The drive endowment is high—both libidinal and aggressive trends are of a high order and each poorly distinguished from the other; the ego is somewhat deficient in capacities for differentiation and quite limited in some of its apparatuses; and the definition of self and objects is faulty, while the acquisition of self-esteem is excessively invaded by drive influences. The pull forward into the expectable oedipal organization occurs in the midst of these disparities in the development of drives, ego, and object relations; consequently, drive expression has a greater influence upon shaping the character of development than might be the case with children having more evenness. This kind of inherent disparity between drive endowment as contrasted with the other subordinate discontinuities may be one of the sources for psychopathological disorders of the kind that Leslie displayed.

The shifts in his constructed dramas can be understood as not only providing access to understanding but also creating experiential nuclei to consolidate an ongoing developmental organization in a more felicitous way, one with greater differentiation and more adaptive regulators of behavior.

### Summary

I presented a clinical illustration of play in the process of development, especially in helping create nuclei for consolidating the foundation of the mind. There is an overall sequence of developmental organizations that is useful to follow clinically, as is the expectable progression within three areas

subordinate to the larger developmental organizations: drives, ego functions and apparatuses, and the representational consequences of object relationships.

I contrasted the use of play in aiding the developmental process and the use of play in promoting the analytic process. The child clinician is often confronted with these different aspects of play within the treatment setting. In the clinical example, focused on a child during the oedipal period, I illustrated how it is possible to shift between these various uses of play to facilitate the mutual interaction between the developmental and the analytic processes.

The play of children between the ages of four and seven provides necessary experiences to actualize the potential for the oedipal organization. In the play, the intensity of the pull forward can be observed, as can disparities between subordinate areas that influence the nature of the superego as it evolves, one of the novel yields of this developmental hierarchy. I also illustrated a technical approach that induces changes within a sustained play action, as contrasted with shifts into a verbal channel to facilitate interpretation and the acquisition of insights.

Children require play to promote the developmental process. Clinicians generally use the multiple windows available during play to evaluate underlying psychological activities in order to propose more accurate interventions and interpretations to profitably propel the treatment forward. Interventions that hold a child within the play action, however, may serve treatment needs equally well without compromising developmental ones.