

Bringing In The Baby

by Sara Crane

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This is the story of a psychodrama group to which a young woman brought her baby boy. At the beginning of the group he was just five weeks old – beginning on the huge task of making sense of the world. By the end of the group, eleven weeks later, he was in the world of the here and now – making eye contact and smiling.

I wanted to write about this particular group because I gained so much from the baby's presence. I became more thoughtful about what was happening in the group and I found that I had more capacity to delight in the small changes that I noticed.

One of my clients had just had a baby and the week before he was born her mother had died. She had attended two groups previously from which she had benefited enormously. I wanted to offer her the opportunity to do another group, but this would mean that this very young baby would be coming too. I went with my strongly held belief that a psychodrama group has the structure and capacity with which to hold the unexpected. And a desire to honour this young woman's struggle to be an adequate parent while

attending to her own needs.

I remembered a long time ago running a group to which a colleague had referred a woman

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who was dying and my unpreparedness for the issues her situation would inevitably raise. I had felt disappointed in myself.

This time, instead of worrying and hypothesising about what a baby might do to the group, I decided to warm myself up to a true state of spontaneity so that I could respond to the group in an authentic

way and work towards making the most of whatever the baby might bring.

The principle which assists me most to enable the group to move forward is my understanding of the focal conflict model. I would often spend time in supervision unravelling this in order to prepare for the next session.

In any group at any time there will be opposing forces at work. These are described as the disturbing motive versus the reactive fear. When I started learning about this theory of group work I found the language difficult and I would describe them to myself as the desire which moves me forward versus the fear which holds me back.

Now I will introduce you to the setting and the people in this particular group. This is a women's psychodrama group that I run weekly from 4.00 to 6.30pm. It's a closed group that I run on a term by term basis, usually for about ten weeks. The group room is an attractive airy room right next door to my office. The floor is carpeted, there are chairs, big cushions and a basket of lengths of coloured fabric. There are psychodrama lights and a whiteboard.

This term there are eight women, and the baby. If they are not my clients, I have had an assessment time with each of them before the group. I have let them all know that there will be a young baby present.

My plan for the first session is to assist these women to get on board with each other, to start relating to each other in a meaningful way. I want to take into account their responses to each other and maybe to the presence of the baby which may be positive, negative or neutral. I want to provide a strong warm up to themselves and each other. The

area I decide to focus on is 'revealing yourself'.

As the women arrive I greet them warmly from the role of the 'welcoming host'. When we are gathered together in the group room I become an 'inviting organiser' as I let them in on my plan.

The women are alert and receptive, both anxiety and expectation are present, and they want to find out what will happen next. As an 'encouraging coach' I ask them to introduce themselves by name and then direct them to make a sculpture which reveals something of themselves to the others.

"I feel like my childhood happened to someone else, I want to get it back," she says.

Sasha uses chairs and fabric to make a colourful structure. "That's my creative side and my loving side and I want it to grow," she announces to the others.

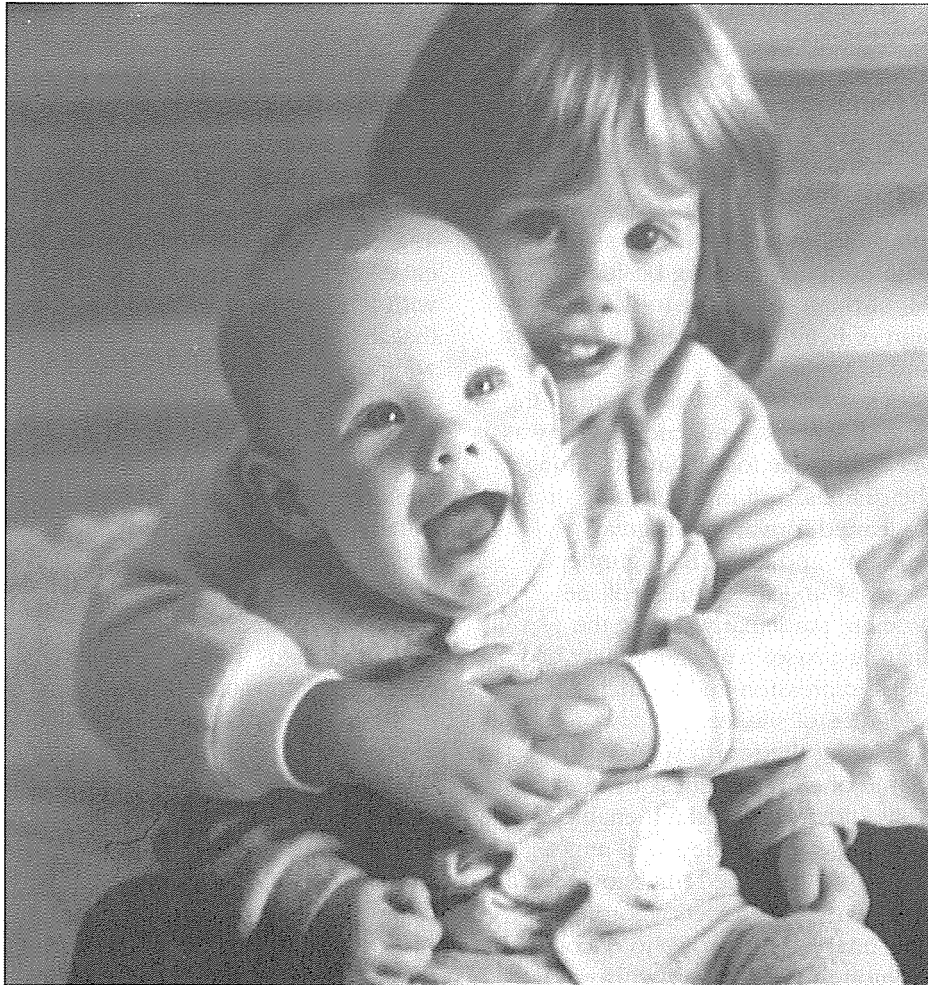
"Anything else?" I ask.

She goes and sits down and looks at what she's made.

"I want to be more real," she states quietly.

As the group progresses the women accept the idea of revealing themselves. Moira takes up a leadership role to ask Alice what it's like bringing in the baby. Alice says she was terrified he would cry and she'd have to leave. She sets out her conflict surrounding this fear. On one hand the 'compliant pleaser' would go as quickly and quietly as possible so as not to upset anyone else, on the other hand the 'determined self-nurturer' would try to find a way to stay. I asked everyone to respond directly to Alice.

In amongst the practical suggestions it was clear that there was a unanimous agreement that we work with Alice to assist her to stay



and we don't exclude her or the baby. Also that we don't allow the presence of the baby to interfere with the work of the group. (Inside I'm thinking "I hope this works," and I'm a bit scared.) At this point the focal conflict in the group was alive in me. I named it later as 'the desire to move forward' versus 'the fear of annihilation'.

The baby slept or sucked through the whole of the first session, he occasionally made tiny bird-like sounds and looked around wide-eyed at the group.

In the second session I warmed the group up to the notion of working with the fear which holds

us back versus the energy which impels us forward. What emerged was 'the desire to express myself' versus 'the fear of upsetting people' or 'losing myself'. The baby was quiet and alert. Jane brought out that she hadn't wanted to tell Alice how she felt about him. Seeing the baby had reminded her of the ritual abuse she had suffered as a child and the babies who had been hurt. Kelly and Barbara both talked about feeling too inadequate as a person to even consider being able to parent.

The dramas were around the theme of 'speaking out loud'.

During the third session I introduced the idea of curiosity.

What do you want to know about each other? Various themes emerged from the dramas to do with coping with change, keeping myself safe and expressing my creativity. As a closure I instructed the group to remember a time when they each felt fully listened to and to share with the person sitting beside them. All of them were able to do this, a sign of health both in the individuals and in the group.

The baby was awake more of the time this week, I noticed that he was very quiet. He looked awed during the dramas, and in the sharing time he leaned forward with great attention and made little gurgley noises. I noticed in many of the women, particularly during the sharing phase, a greater vitality of facial expression and an increased tolerance of silence.

During the fourth session the theme of expressiveness deepened. Kelly did a drama which enabled her to express her sadness and anger. When she screamed the baby gave a little start and suckled vigorously. This enabled the group to become a lot more boisterous. I had been unaware of the extent to which those around had been held in, I was now able to notice when to maximise vocal expression.

About half-way through the group Jane expressed her discomfort with Moira that she and Sandy were having a relationship outside of the group. She felt that they were bringing their personal tensions in and not expressing them. Sasha agreed. Moira said she was jealous of Sandy's friendship with another friend. I asked Sandy and Moira to get up and stand facing each other. I instructed them to speak one at a time and to stand still while they were speaking. The listener was to move closer or further away in

response. They needed little coaching to use 'I' statements and stay in the present. I took up the role of 'respectful witness' as they dialogued for nearly a quarter of an hour. The other women were totally involved as they expressed hurt, anger, guilt, and wonder towards each other. The conversation ended with tenderness and the realisation that they could be vulnerable without being shamed.

I then asked the other women to get up and place themselves in relation to the friendship which had been expressed in terms of wanting to be closer or further away. Then to make a statement from that position. A new theme emerged around issues of intimacy, 'the desire to be intimate' versus 'the fear of intimacy' or 'the urge to move away'.

In group five I worked with 'what assists me to be close, to build relationships' versus 'what gets in the

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way'. The dramas which unfolded were painful and the outcomes were restricted. The group avoided expressing strong feelings. Near the end of the group the baby became more vocal and we all had to raise our voices. This had the effect of

raising the energy level.

By the sixth session the group was less dependent on my leadership and some strong relationships had developed. However there was a strong interest in the theme which I had worked with the previous week. Movement from one theme to another is

Then the baby started to cry, Alice hastily moved away from the enactment space rocking and attempting to soothe him. Barbara started to cry too, all the suppressed grief for her dog's death, the loss of her father, and the rejection by her mother came to the surface. Now she was able to talk to her father and let him know how much she had missed him.

unlikely to occur unless an enabling solution is established which then allows a new disturbing motive to be expressed.

Barbara put herself forward as a protagonist with the purpose of developing her ability to express herself to her father. She had previously set out her family system and had realised how lonely and isolated she had felt growing up. This was a courageous next step. Her drama started off quiet and restrained. I wondered if I was going to be able to assist her to express

herself as fully as she wanted to. The only person she could talk to was the family dog.

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During the sharing phase Alice spoke of her mother's death for the first time. One of the other women said she hadn't understood why Alice was in the group before, she seemed so together. After many tears there was also much laughter. They joked about some of the first impressions they had had of each other.

A new theme was emerging 'the desire to be myself' versus 'the fear of not being accepted'.

In the seventh week Kelly opened the group by announcing that she wanted someone else to do the work, she was feeling very sick physically. She was also proud of herself for having come to every session 'no matter what'. This is new for her.

Ella said she wanted to find a way of making friends that didn't end up with her feeling like she'd been used. In her drama it became evident that her over-developed roles of 'fearful self pitier' and 'boundariless rapport builder' were not helpful. She became very ashamed as she observed this in herself. However as the group took turns in modelling other possibilities she suddenly realised that they weren't criticising her. "You're all on my side, aren't you?" For her the sharing phase was particularly vital,

and as the other women told what had come up for them Ella was able to feel a part of the group.

The baby became fretful and unsettled. The group were able to be aware of him, register their responses and continue to relate to each other. However Alice was clearly torn between being a group member and a mother.

Alice spoke of her feelings of being overwhelmed, of not coping or being able to make any decisions. She felt there was no one to look after her, and she just kept on pretending everything was OK. I asked her if she would allow herself to be looked after by the group for the rest of the session. There was a momentary pause before she said yes.

As we gave her a gentle massage and took turns in playing with the baby, I had to firmly remind myself that what was happening was totally in tune with the work of the group. I notice that the woman who had had such difficulty before was the one who enjoyed holding and cuddling him most. We sat on the floor together with a contented cooing baby and the women told of feeling serene and rested while they remembered times in their lives when they hadn't known what they needed.

During this session we directly explored the disturbing motive, 'the desire to accept nurturance' in a compelling and practical way.

I'm now going to move directly to the tenth and final session. I wanted to find a good way of celebrating and honouring the work completed and the relationships forged, which wouldn't be sentimental or trivial. I suggested that we could use Playback Theatre to complete our work together. This is a form of improvisation in which

audience members tell their stories and a team of actors play the stories back to them. I said I had noticed how their abilities as auxiliaries had developed during the term and I was confident that they had the skill and sensitivity to enact each others' stories in a worthwhile way. The response to this idea was strongly positive.

The last session was a humbling and enriching experience for me as I conducted the women through stories of rebellion, revenge and delight. The moment I remember most vividly is laughing until there were tears pouring down my face and looking up to see the baby, arms outstretched, shrieking with laughter.

In conclusion, I see my task as one of stimulating the spontaneity, the imagination and the level of warm-up in the group. I am providing a place in which healing, creativity and personal development can occur. My aim is that the progressive roles learnt in the psychodrama group can thrive in the outside world.

My gratitude to the baby stays with me. In his achievement of developmental tasks he provided a strong mirror for the individual and collective gains of the group.