

Spontaneity With Children: Applications of Psychodrama that Enable Children to Express their Creativity

by Sara Crane

Sara is a Psychotherapist and Psychodramatist working with children and families in Christchurch New Zealand. She has created a play room separate from her consulting room. It is full of interesting objects, toys, symbols, art and craft materials and games. Children feel at home because this environment has many parallels to the imaginative world in which they dwell.

Play therapy is the most commonly used term to describe therapeutic work with children. In essence play therapy assists children to make sense of their experiences through play. This might include sandtray, art or other mediums. In drama therapy themes of personal experience connect with the themes of universal dramas.

When Moreno joined in with children, playing out real life dramas and imaginary stories, he took on the roles, among others, of *active encourager* and *attuned witness*. At these times he could be described as a play therapist.

Many parents, child educators and health professionals take on roles that can be attributed to the play therapist as they work and play with children in ways which promote self-expression and creativity. Because children who are referred to therapy have frequently been neglected, deprived, abused and/or

traumatised the ability of the play therapist to be empathic and to be willing and able to provide encouragement and reassurance is essential.

The play therapist or child therapist is the umbrella under which I practice psychodrama with children.

Spontaneity Training

Children who delight in their own spontaneity will be more able to sustain themselves and their relationships with others when encountering painful or challenging events in their lives. A wide range of roles and an ability to move freely between these roles will enable the child to respond spontaneously and creatively when faced with serious conflicts or trauma. Fewer roles and less knowledge and experience of spontaneity will limit the child's ability to respond. This is likely to result in the child becoming more

inclined to withdraw or escape into a fantasy world, to react in a violent or hostile way, or to put their own desires aside in order to accommodate others when a painful crisis or severe difficulty arises for them.

Moreno advocated training the imagination to increase spontaneity in order to bring vitality into relationships and life. The main emphasis is on how spontaneity may be developed so that creativity is expanded by 'acting out', as in outside the individual. Action is involved as well as the thinking and feeling capacities.

The techniques of concretisation, maximisation, enactment and sharing are what I use most, and also they are ideas which I find parents and caregivers can most easily understand and support. In this article I give examples of clinical work to illustrate the technique of enactment and the principles that underlie it.

Enactment to Enhance the Creative Capacity

Increasing the creative capacity opens the door to an increase in spontaneity. The enactment phase of the drama is when the protagonist enacts a scene from life, either real or imaginary. The director assists the protagonist by producing the action and enabling the action to progress through various techniques within the psychodrama frame.

Many people, children and adults, have developed the capacity to be creative and have fantasies. Unless a context where these capacities are encouraged is produced they may never come to life; spontaneity may be stultified in an escape process.

The enactment phase of a session may

be fleeting but it is often the significant experience remembered by the child.

This experience may aid catharsis; as in enabling the child to express feelings previously withheld or experienced through fragmenting roles. It may assist insight and may allow opportunities for role training.

"The Time I Was the Dinosaur"

When Danny takes on the role of *powerful raging dinosaur* he smashes everything in sight, eats helpless babies and sleeps replete. He does this many times, more and more fully. The role reversals with other characters in his story are, at first, partial. As he feels more comfortable with expressing rage he becomes more able to take on the roles of *helpless waif* and *distraught protector*. Eventually his dramas demonstrate more enabling solutions as he deepens the warm up to a wider range of roles. He develops the character of *carrot muncher* who shows the angry dinosaur how to make vegetables tasty, even grass. The babies go and stay with their grandparents to be safe. The parents learn dinosaur speak and become expert negotiators.

Danny frequently refers to "*the time I was the dinosaur when...*". He uses the situations he has created in dramas to come to terms with other events in his life. He has drawn many pictures of dinosaurs and written stories about them, he has experimented with how different events impact on the characters in his drama. He has become much more aware of his own capacity for creativity.

The Paper Bag Princess

Sophie is just six. She is so frightened of her father (with whom she now has no contact) that it is hard for her to warm up to roles other than *watchful antelope* and *exacting*

bossy controller. She is an expert at setting up situations whereby I will leave the room, e.g. to get paint water, and she hides. This is her way of 'setting the scene' and together we have enacted many dramas where she defies and destroys a variety of monsters. Taking the aggressor role was harder for her until we read *The Paper Bag Princess* together (Munsch, 1988). The introduction of a story assisted her to imagine other roles and outcomes to those she had previously experienced. She took on the role of the conceited dragon with great delight. At first it was harder for her to be the heroic princess, she wanted so much to be more like Elizabeth that this longing got in the way of her taking up the role. By being the dragon many times she was able to develop the confidence to dare to challenge herself to be courageous. She is now able to take on a range of fantasy roles in a co-operative spirit.

There have been two significant outcomes. Her peer relationships have improved and she no longer believes that she was responsible for her father's behaviour. Previously she had used her excursions into the realm of fantasy to avoid relating to others and had often chosen to read by herself instead of engaging with other children at school. This had alerted her teacher to the over-development of the *withdrawn daydreamer*.

Using the Dolls House as a Stage

Moreno conceptualised the psychodrama stage in a very particular way. His stage was circular and had a series of levels which could be used to represent different areas of the protagonist's life, time, space or ideas so that the truth could be explored through dramatic means.

The dolls' house has limitations in that

the child cannot climb inside the house to experience events and reverse roles. However it can be a useful medium through which relevant circumstances may be explored and enacted at a distance. This can be a step towards lessening resistance to experiencing strong feelings.

The use of enactment with one child assisted her to give outward and hence expansive expression to her creativity. Nell was brought to see me by her parents because of a serious debilitating condition which had caused her to be listless and unable to attend school. She complains of being really sick all the time. A pediatric consultation has revealed no physical symptoms present.

"It's a bit like my old bedroom"

Nell is eleven. She looks pale and wan. As her mother relates her anxiety about her daughter and tries to remember what has happened in the family over the last year, Nell moves over to the dolls' house and starts to play. This was the first of a series of sessions during which Nell used the dolls' house as a stage.

In a subsequent session I move to sit nearer so that I can see what she is doing. There is a meditative quality about her face and movements as she carefully arranges furniture and objects. We are in the warm-up phase now and Nell is setting her scene. I wait for her cue.

Nell: "It's a bit like my old bedroom."

Sara: "Show me what it's like."

It's vital for me to stay in the present to increase her warm-up. Sometimes there's a temptation to ask questions, e.g. "Is that where you used to live?" This would take her away from what is happening right now.

We move into enactment and Nell talks out loud as she chooses pieces and puts them in place. She explains that the door and windows are not in the right places and demonstrates where they should be. I ask her what she can see out the window. Nell starts to cry. Sobbing loudly, she tells me how much she misses her old house. Nothing has been the same since then and she doesn't feel like herself any more. She tells me all the awful things that have happened since then. This is the point of catharsis and I am aware that any intervention will have an effect on the integrative work and role development.

I double her distress by putting words to how lost and alone she feels which allows her to accept her pain as she grieves. As she becomes calmer and her breathing softens she reaches out and fingers the piano for the first time

Sara: "How about you find a place in the house for the piano."

Nell takes everything out of one of the upstairs rooms. She puts the piano down and looks thoughtful. She places a small stool by the piano and the figure of a girl playing it.

Sara: "Tell me what it's like playing the piano here."

Nell: "Well, it's lonely and it's peaceful and she's got lots of time to think, she thinks a lot."

Clearly this is the end of the drama. As we put the miniatures away, Nell tells me some of the things she's done when she has felt angry. Through the intense experience of feeling and expressing the rage and distress which were previously unexpressed and unacknowledged she has discovered something new which has brought about the impetus for change. She now feels hopeful and at rest with herself.

I will now describe part of a subsequent family session with Nell demonstrating the increased capacity for creativity stimulated through enactment. During this session I utilised the doll's house in a different way; this time including both of her parents.

Nell is telling her parents that she's not well enough to go to school. I observe in her the roles of *distraught implorer*, *whining infant* and *bullyboy*. This produces in her mother the counter role of *calm nurturer* and I note glimpses of a *humorous elf*. Her father oscillates between *fearful withdrawer* and *anxious placator*. When Nell attempts to draw me in the role of *judge*, I decide to set my observations out using the doll's house. By now she has enough trust in the therapeutic relationship to become a *willing and curious observer*.

Using the technique of director as mirror, I make a mealtime scene with a dining table and three chairs. I choose two figures - a man and a woman - and set them on two of the chairs.

Nell: "Mum and Dad."

Sara: "Right, and I'm going to choose animals to be like the you that I've just seen. This is a little baby bird that wants to be fed (I put the bird on the woman's knees) and this is a bossy rhino that wants its own way" (I put the rhino on the floor between the two figures).

There is a magical moment when Nell roars with laughter and impishly offers to "make Mum and Dad be animals too" (in the role of humorous elf). She picks a "cuddly cat" for Mum and a turtle for Dad.

Dad: "Won't the cat eat the bird?" (this being the most animated I've seen him).

Nell: "She'll tell it to stop whining and sit in its own chair."

Nell puts the bird on the empty chair. She picks up the rhino and puts it on the chair beside the bird. Nell then gets up and sits on a chair. It is clear from the increased spontaneity that this family can now engage with each other more fully.

In subsequent sessions Nell uses the doll's house to re-enact some other memories that are unresolved. In particular she works on "the time the house burnt down".

She has discovered that using the doll's house is providing her with a means of outward expression - action - which enables her to expand her creativity and move forward. Through enacting a wide range of scenes she is able to work through painful events and rehearse her dreams and visions which she can then enact in the world outside the therapy room.

The continued choice of the doll's house for this work was made because it provided a container within which the action could take place with more meaning and because it was Nell's own choice to begin with. The doll's house became the stage, which invited action, from which a new resolution was possible.

Through the expanded experience of acting out with her creativity Nell increased her spontaneity. She learnt, through experiencing spontaneity and being conscious of it, that she is capable of creating new perspectives.

Both Danny and Sophie found creative solutions through the experience of enactment. They were then able to continue development of progressive roles through action play.

Spontaneity at the Point of Closure

The principle of spontaneity continues to have significant applications during the closing sessions of a therapeutic relationship. During the sharing of a psychodrama, the director relates to the emergence of spontaneity in the group members and may well intervene to promote an increase in spontaneity. This principle has significant relevance when therapy is finishing with a child.

In a sense there is never a completion of therapy. However it can be useful to mark the last session in ways which acknowledge the unit of work and reflect the meaningful rituals which may be developed to enhance relationships and our sense of meaning and purpose in life.

The final stage of a psychodrama is the sharing (although processing may also follow) and just as the first session may be equated to the warm-up so the last session has some parallels with the sharing phase of a drama.

When preparing for closure there are some interventions that may increase the likelihood that learning will be carried forward and continue to provide opportunities for expressions of creativity.

Spontaneity in Making Transitions

Because of the nature of family life and events, good-byes may be unplanned. Many of the children I work with have had repeated experiences of significant people and places disappearing without warning and with no chance or time to say good-bye. A spontaneous way for the child to have the opportunity to experience a satisfying farewell needs to be created, sometimes at very short notice.

Bringing parents and caregivers in at the end of a session and talking with them about how the child is likely to progress can support the developing roles. This may require some coaching so that the parent understands clearly what the purpose of the review is and how they might best support the child. One foster mother who has attended many therapy sessions commented:

"After I saw how Danny stood up to the dinosaur and wouldn't let him eat the baby, I imagine that Danny won't let those two boys at school bully him into giving them his lunch, specially not the chocolate biscuits."

Danny beams at her and methodically puts the animals he has used back on the shelf. Relating his story to his school experience will assist him develop the role of *staunch self-supporter*.

Closure of sessions needs to be planned to make the most of gains made. If the parent or caregiver has not been part of the session this may be the time to bring them on board, to support the developing roles or to build the relationship. It is important to discourage the bringing in of new material which can't be dealt with at this stage. It may be necessary to explain the purpose of finishing off together with the caregiver so that they can participate thoughtfully. For example:

"Jane wants to show you the story she made in the sand so that you can remind her that it's OK for her to feel sad at night when she misses her Dad. You might both want to make a plan together for how she can stay in her own bed."

Keeping alive to the positivity and health in the family system can present challenges to my levels of spontaneity. I have been tempted to react as a blaming critic towards a parent rather than warm up to the whole

system and make an analysis from which a creative response can emerge. The thoughtful use of psychodramatic principles assists me to provide opportunities for a range of closures to promote spontaneity.

Implications for Psychodramatists

The ability to access and stay alive to the roles of the *thoughtful clinician* alongside the *encouraging playmate* will greatly enhance the potency of the practitioner. These reflect the two main areas which need to be developed in order to work effectively in the area of enabling children to express their creativity.

An understanding of, and an ability to speedily tune in to the child's developmental stages and their relational needs (Erskine and Trautmann, 1996) is essential. What this means, in practice, is to be able to estimate what the child is likely to be interested in, and capable of, at any given age, so that the warm up and planning for a session with a particular child will include setting up the play room with that child in mind. During the session the practitioner will need to be alert to the child's cues and to be making an ongoing role assessment of the child's functioning in relation to developmental progress. For instance the young adolescent is likely to spend more time daydreaming than a five-year-old. This needs to be taken into account when planning sessions and working towards an increase in spontaneity. Inept choices of play materials or activities are likely to stultify rather than increase creativity. The ability to observe astutely and respond authentically to each individual child, to double their experience, requires continuous practice and fine-tuning.

I think that Moreno developed his developmental theories in order to answer the questions of how people can encounter

each other and be more spontaneous. He wanted to offer a guide and a sound basis from which to proceed in the healing and creative work which had the potential to change the world.

Regular ongoing contact with ordinary children playing and doing ordinary things has been one of my sources of replenishment and is a means to keep in touch with the world of children.

The other area, that of the *encouraging playmate*, requires a capacity to play. This requires the ability to enter into imaginative worlds lightly, without intrusion, to have a range of creative abilities which can be shared with and taught to the child. The practitioner needs to be thoroughly trained, or have transferable experience, in a wide variety of play activities and to have a well developed creative imagination. It may be necessary to have opportunities to express one's own creativity outside the therapy room and it is certainly necessary to have had some depth of experience in being a protagonist. This enables role reversal along with the cognitive understanding of the demands that therapeutic work places on all parts of the system.

The organizing role which binds and informs these two is that of the *tender lover of life*. The ability to love and attend to the child with patience, lightness and sensitivity is essential. This includes the role of *the witness*. When a child knows and fully experiences the witnessing act of a loving companion and guide, their own experience of themselves flourishes. This can be kept in mind during the establishing of a mutually positive tele relationship.

This article has explored applications of the psychodramatic principle of enactment to assist the increase of spontaneity and creativity with children in one-to-one therapy sessions. As these children experienced their own creative genius their ability to love themselves was strengthened and their capacity to give and receive love was expanded.

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