

CLINICAL EDITOR COMMENT

This article, adapted from one that originally appeared in the South Carolina APT NewsLetter, shows how a case example can be used as a basis for theoretical analysis of play therapy approaches.



By Rebecca Moise PhD, LISW-CP

Play

Therapeutic Aspects of

the Serendipitous Session

By Cathy Cooper-Ely PhD, LPC, RPT

CASE STUDY

As a nondirective play therapist traveling to different schools in my district, I have learned to use the unexpected in terms of office space and materials already in offices in which I find myself. I still find ways to remain consistent with my theoretical approach. An example occurred today when I went to get "Sam," a five-year-old kindergartner, for his counseling and play therapy session.

Sam (not his real name) was referred to counseling because of aggressive behaviors exhibited toward his peers. He lived in a neighborhood that was known to have drug trafficking and violence. When I visited his home, I saw several homeless men standing beside a fire in a trashcan and drinking alcohol. Sam's mom said the men would stand there and drink all day. She said she didn't allow her children to

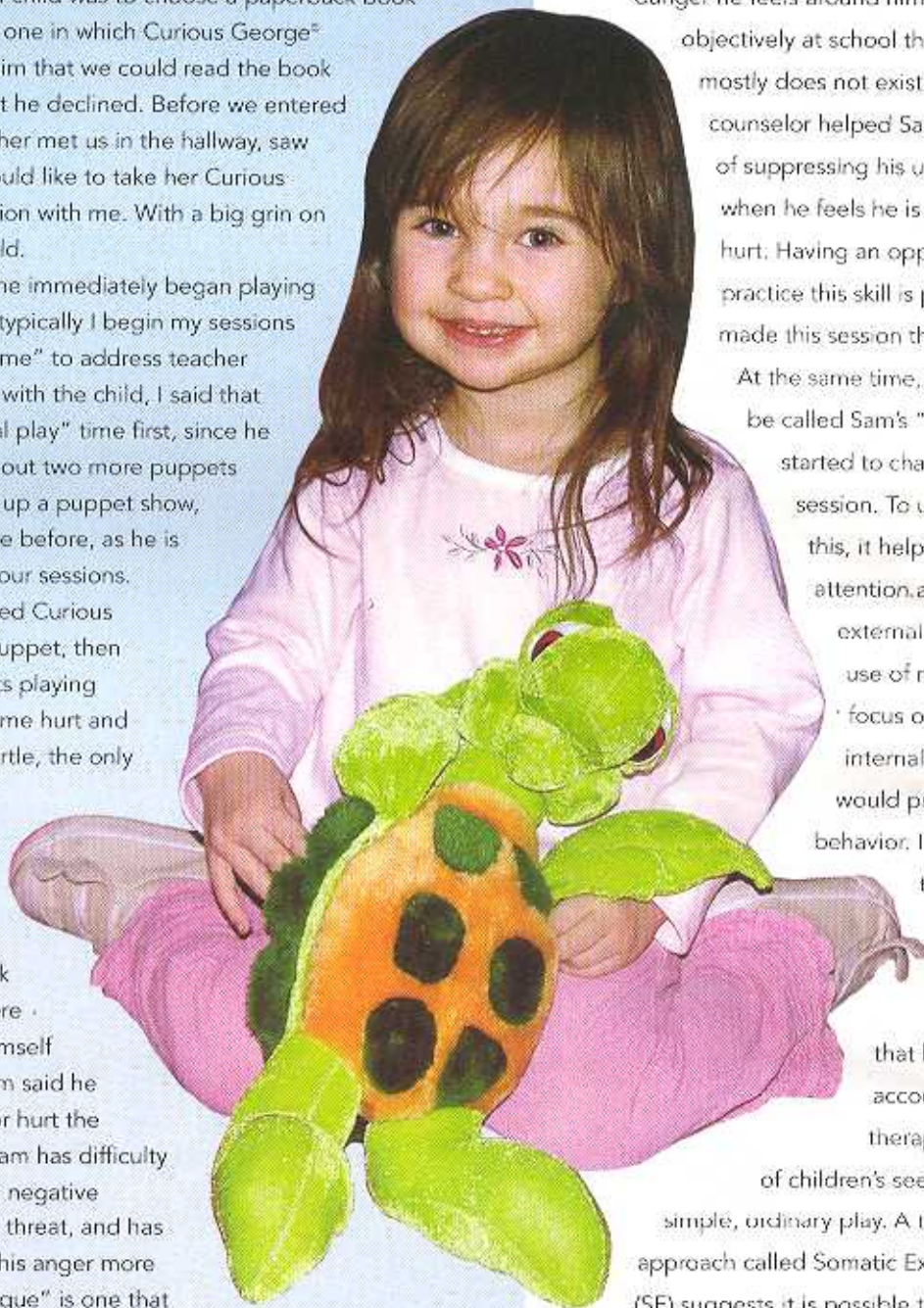
"The Serendipitous Session" and my response were off the cuff. Cathy Cooper-Ely wrote the case study and sent it to me, saying something moved her to do so. It moved me also and as I reflected on why, I began to write a response. I did not speak with Cathy about this and I had no knowledge of "Sam" except what Cathy wrote. Sam's session seemed typical of many play therapy sessions but this is part of what made it interesting: ordinary child's play is therapeutic. Sometimes we might not notice this, or not think too much about it, in part because it appears so ordinary. I found myself wanting to focus more on what happened. I thought of different ways that Sam was

play outside, because she feared for their safety. When this mother was upset (with school staff or her son), she became easily agitated and spoke loudly. She admitted to frequent use of corporal punishment when Sam exhibited inappropriate behaviors at home or school.

On this particular day I found Sam in the multipurpose room participating with other children in the "Reading is Fundamental" program. After sharing experiences in reading, each child was to choose a paperback book to take home. Sam selected one in which Curious George® goes to the hospital. I told him that we could read the book together if he wanted to, but he declined. Before we entered our counseling room, a teacher met us in the hallway, saw his book, and asked if he would like to take her Curious George puppet into his session with me. With a big grin on his face, he said that he would.

Upon entering the room, he immediately began playing with Curious George. While typically I begin my sessions with a few minutes of "talk time" to address teacher concerns or simply dialogue with the child, I said that today we could have "special play" time first, since he had already begun. He took out two more puppets from my play basket and set up a puppet show, something he has never done before, as he is typically rather quiet during our sessions.

Sam's puppet show involved Curious George befriending a cow puppet, then the monkey and cow puppets playing together. Soon George became hurt and needed to see a doctor. A turtle, the only other puppet I had, became the doctor who nurtured George back to health. Sam played the doctor helping George. The turtle-doctor was hit by a rock and went inside his shell where he took a nap and calmed himself down before coming out. Sam said he did this so he would not hit or hurt the animal who threw the rock. Sam has difficulty not responding to others in a negative manner, when he perceives a threat, and has been working on controlling his anger more effectively. This "turtle technique" is one that he and I had worked on together, in previous sessions,¹ as a way to behave when Sam becomes angry. In the technique, he (the turtle) can "go inside his shell" and not say anything or do anything that will hurt someone until he feels calm. Sam had recently made use of this technique in class. Here he brought it spontaneously into his play. My response was, "he's going inside his shell



helped by this session. Sam came to therapy in part because he is predisposed to expect violence and hurt. In other words, there is a probable link between his acting violently and feeling vulnerable to hurt. He views the world through this lens and strikes out against the danger he feels around him. (Although objectively at school this danger mostly does not exist.) His

counselor helped Sam learn ways of suppressing his urge to fight when he feels he is or might be hurt. Having an opportunity to practice this skill is part of what made this session therapeutic.

At the same time, what might be called Sam's "world view" started to change in this session. To understand this, it helps to shift attention away from

external behaviors or use of materials, to focus on the kind of internal world that would produce Sam's behavior. I believe it is this largely-invisible internal world

that helps account for the therapeutic power

of children's seemingly

simple, ordinary play. A therapeutic approach called Somatic Experiencing (SE) suggests it is possible to build new neural pathways, in effect

reprogramming emotional parts of our brain. Here, it could be argued, external support, in concert with Sam's spontaneous play, is changing his internal world.

so that he won't hurt anyone when he's mad."

At this point in the puppet show, Sam decided to read the Curious George book to the puppets. After he began, he needed help and asked me to read the book to the puppets, which I did. When the story was over, Sam began his puppet show once again. In the second puppet show, George and the cow puppet were arguing and hitting one another and George was knocked to the floor. This aggressive, fighting behavior exemplifies how Sam tends to act with his peers. During this second puppet show, neither of the puppets was "hurt," as one was by the thrown rock in the first show. When George hit the floor, the turtle swam down to him, picked him up, and brought him back to safety.

At this point I gave Sam our 5-minute session-ending warning. Sam always creates his own closure for our session by drawing a picture. I occasionally write down a story about the picture as he dictates. Today's picture was of an airplane containing many people being tossed to the ground by two angry clouds on the right. The airplane was in danger of crashing when Superman appeared to the left, rescued the plane and all the people were saved.

In this session, Sam worked on his issues of anger, safety and control. I had not planned the session to happen that way. Serendipitous factors – the Curious George book and puppet – contributed to the environment that Sam needed to work on what seemed most important to him.

The play seemed to help Sam feel less alone and threatened. Stories of rescue and safety helped do this. In the second puppet show, when George hits the floor, the turtle is able to rescue him. When the second scenario ended in safety, we note that Sam's play changed somewhat. Somehow there was a bit more safety than there was before. One might raise the question of "why"? Did the change in the play scenario occur because of the previously taught "turtle technique"? Did it stem from the counselor's empathy? An SE therapist might suggest that when Sam acted out scenes of hurt and danger, he experienced release or discharge. Such release can create a sense of greater safety when it occurs in safe, small doses. In his play, Sam moved back and forth between scenes of danger and recovery, a movement (called "pendulation" in SE therapy) which can be powerfully therapeutic. There are



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several possibilities for "why" when Cathy sensed something new in Sam's play, something later emphasized in his airplane picture at the end.

The learning or new sense of safety experienced in a therapy session might be supplied by the counselor. Here, it was powerful for Sam to have found the stories and created the sense of safety himself. Different people and circumstances strengthened Sam's confidence. He chose a book dealing with the problem of hurt and later a teacher loaned him a special toy that "spoke" to him. Next his counselor allowed him to go directly into special play. Sam was then able to put on puppet shows, something he had not done before. The stories he created helped reduce his perception of threat. Sam acted out a story in which George, in whom he probably saw part of himself, was hurt but then nurtured back to health. In another story, George was knocked to the floor but then brought back to safety. Finally Sam imagined a whole plane load of people about to crash, but saved by Superman. Sam had added the image of a powerful, rescuing Superman to his internal world. The counselor assisted, not by supplying healing stories and images,

but by creating therapeutic conditions wherein Sam could do this himself. It is a core belief among many play therapists that children have the capacity to move spontaneously toward health. A number of therapeutic forces were indeed coming together here. Counseling did not change Sam's real world but it helped create more positive images of what the world could be like.

This case study helped illustrate the value of going with the flow of serendipitous things that seem to come together. From a psychodynamic or Jungian point of view, this occurs when the unconscious becomes more active. I hope the case study and discussion presented here might give other play therapists more confidence to tune into their own unconscious and let this happen. This helps explain why I found myself "analyzing" this case study, shifting slightly from the external situation to what was happening in Sam's internal world. It also helps explain why not only the session in the case study, but also most ordinary play is therapeutic. In play, children are able to tune into their own unconscious.

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