

Playing away an experience of remote play work

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The experience of bereavement often involves a sense of loss of control. Working through play offers children a chance to regain some of this control within a safe space with agreed boundaries. An essential element of this safety is the creation of a shared play space. For some workers, the physical aspect of this creation may already be achieved (subject to minor variations) and they may have access to playrooms, designed and equipped to offer a secure therapeutic space when needed. This provides some certainty, not only for the child, but also for the worker, who is freed from the worry of physically creating such a space.

Often, however, this is not possible. In my work with seven-year-old Joseph, distance prevented us from using the project's dedicated playroom, so alternative accommodation had to be found near Joseph's home. Through the helpfulness of a district nurse, we found a room but unfortunately it was impossible for us to have it for longer than the hour of our sessions. To deal with this, we developed together a routine in which Joseph helped to set up and pack away at the beginning and end of each session, creating our play world from the contents of a travel bag.

Whilst this approach is not approved by all play workers¹, it became clear that it was an important factor in Joseph's sense of ownership and control over our shared environment. Over the first three sessions, an agreed order emerged which involved us walking the same route from Joseph's home to each session, making the same shop stop for our 'supplies' and following the same pattern in setting up

our room, in which Joseph took a leading part. Posters were put up, our 'magic carpet' (a large tartan rug) was spread, playthings were arranged around its edges and we were ready for our 'picnic', a modest snack which helped to establish the nurturing atmosphere and lasted until Joseph was ready to begin more active play. This magic carpet was important, not only in giving us somewhere soft to sit and



Artwork by Heather Harscöet
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lie, but in helping to define the boundaries of our space². Emotional safety here was established for Joseph, at least in part, through the predictability of the order of events and this shared control of his play environment.

One might imagine, as I did, that this emotional safety would be shaken by the unexpected need, just over halfway through our work, to change the venue for our meetings. This was particularly troubling, given the generally acknowledged importance of consistency and dependability in play work. However, I had no option but to move to another room close by which, though different in size, shape, lighting etc, was at least safe and available. I was concerned, however, that the room would be too different and that Joseph

would be unable to settle to a new environment.

To my relief and my surprise, he appeared to adapt with barely a flicker! After a moment's consideration of which wall would be best for which poster, in light of the door and window being 'in the wrong place', as he put it, our magic carpet was spread, our materials laid out and we were into our picnic as though we had never met anywhere else. It seemed that, for Joseph, the continuity in our routine and resources created a strong enough pattern to impose a psychological order on to the physical change. Our familiar equipment and Joseph's own established behaviour defined for him the boundaries of our safe space more decisively than the different walls or altered shape of the room.

These experiences of working away from base taught me several things. When first faced with the difficulties which prevented Joseph and me from using my project's playroom, it took some reflection for me to see that neither of us needed the security of that particular room: we could make that safe space somewhere else. Later, when we had to move, it emerged that not only could we create our special space outside the purpose-built playroom, but that we could carry that space with us to somewhere new. Joseph showed me that whilst physical environment may be an important factor in creating that 'free and sheltered space'³ which is essential in play work, the emotional safe space, which develops with and through the relationship of the players, is the decisive factor. It is not always necessary to be on 'home ground' and, though initially perhaps more demanding, it can be liberating and inspirational to 'play away'. BC

References

1. West J. *Child Centred Play Therapy* (2nd edn). London, UK: Arnold, 1996.
2. Cattanach A. *Play Therapy: where the sky meets the underworld*. London, UK: Jessica Kingsley, 1994.
3. Kalf D. (1971) *Sandplay: mirror of a child's psyche*. San Francisco, USA: Browser Press, 1971.

FORTHCOMING CONFERENCES AND COURSES

Loss, longing and love: transforming emotions and feelings to create hope. 26 February 2000. London, UK. Led by Peter Lang. London Bereavement Network annual volunteers' conference, open to all. Write with sae to LBN, 356 Holloway Road, London N7 6PA.

Children and Bereavement, Who Cares?: a challenge to the community. 21 March 2000. London, UK. One-day conference. Apply to Margaret Fitz-Hugh, Marie Curie Cancer Care, Harestone Drive, Caterham, Surrey CR3 6YQ. ☎ 01883 347761.

Mole Conferences events. London, UK, 2000. **Mental anguish and religion.** 20 March. One day conference.

Gone but not Forgotten: the impact of past trauma in later life. NB new date, 22 March. Organisers Gillian Mezey, Ian Robbins **Understanding Depression and Finding Freedom.** 10 May 2000. Afternoon seminar with Dorothy Rowe
Contact Mole Conferences, 26 Church Road, Brighton BN41 1LA. ☎ 01273 242634.

Loss and Bereavement. 8 February, 9 May 2000. Bristol, UK. Courses for those caring for patients with cancer and their families.

Apply to the Education Administrator, Bristol Cancer Help Centre, Cornwallis Grove, Bristol BS8 4PG. ☎ 0117 980 952

Supporting You: Are you providing help to grieving families? Child Bereavement Trust residential training courses for volunteers or voluntary organisation staff working at least 10 hours/week with children or families. UK. 2000: 2-4 February, 6-8 July, Scarborough; 12-14 September, 10-12 October, Chester area; 8-10 November, location tbc. Contact Carole Heeley, CBT, Brindley House, 4 Burkes Road, Beaconsfield, Bucks HP9 1PB. ☎ 01494 678088.