

## ANNA FREUD AND PLAY CONFERENCE

**Friday 15<sup>th</sup> September 2017. Kings College**

Anna Freud's perspective on play has been misunderstood and distorted in some circles to the extent that it has even been said that Anna Freudian child psychotherapists or analysts do not use play. This is a gross misconception - play is absolutely central in Anna Freudian (as well as Winnicottian) child analysis, especially with young children - and we engage more actively with it than some, allowing ourselves to join in a child's play and not just watch and interpret it.

Anna Freud wrote much more about play from a developmental point of view than about play in child analysis. Initially, she did downplay it, thinking that words should take precedence, which led to a controversy between her ideas and Melanie Klein's "play technique". However, Anna Freud soon refined and elaborated her position by explaining why she didn't agree with Melanie Klein - that Klein's exclusively symbolic interpretation of play neglected a developmental perspective and bypassed the vital importance of the ego and its defences. She said that, although symbolic interpretation *"allowed certain flashes of direct insight into the child's unconscious, it seemed...open to objection of various kinds. Like all interpretations of symbols... it had a tendency to become rigid, impersonal, and stereotyped, without being open to corroboration from the child; it aimed at laying bare the deeper layers of the child's unconscious without working through the conscious and preconscious resistances and distortions."* (Anna Freud, 1945 p 7-8)

Anna Freud saw play as having many different meanings, not just symbolic ones. She wrote, *"Nursery school teachers may have a very good idea what each newly emerging play interest means for the child; what constitutes the expression of instinctual concerns, such as the filling and emptying of vessels; what serves reasoning; what mainly ambition, imitation of motherliness, or the wish to grow up in general."* (Anna Freud, 1979 p 325-6). *"When a child builds with blocks...to add one to the other until a high tower is achieved is as pleasurable for him as it is to throw over the structure and scatter the blocks. It would be an error to believe that only the former is done in a positive mood, the latter in anger, disappointment, frustration. On the contrary, the child feels gleeful when carrying out either activity, his mood betraying equal pride in achieving control and mastery of the medium."* (Anna Freud, 1972 p 170).

Ordinarily, play is fun. It will stop if it isn't enjoyable, and it's affected when a child is anxious or fearful. Anna Freud wrote, *"Contrary to the popular belief that children can act out all their emotions with their toys, analysts know only too well how effectively a child's play activity can be blocked and inhibited by overwhelming affect, or by inner conflict. This conviction,*

*acquired within the setting of child analysis ... was borne out further by war experiences which showed that children did not begin to stage the bombing occurrences, and other disasters which had befallen them, before the affects attached to these happenings had been worked through in other, inner ways, ... usually six to twelve months after the occurrence."* She cited Laura who did not play when in hospital: *"The teddy bear which she brought from home, together with a cherished blanket, is merely held and cuddled, ... clung to... a link from home. Laura certainly played when seen first in her own home; (but) under the impact of her hospital experience, she reverts to using her toys as "transitional objects" in Winnicott's (1953) sense of the word... According to experience, one would expect Laura to begin to play "hospital", "doctor", or "nurse" at home after the usual time lag."* (Anna Freud, 1953, p 290-1)

I learned a lot about play in child analysis from my first training case at the Hampstead Clinic, 7-year-old **Sally**. She needed very strong defences to protect her fragile narcissism and couldn't tolerate any direct talking about herself, so most of the analysis involved working in displacement on the toys' feelings and worries. Sally's mum described her as an extremely sensitive and shy adopted child who cried over the slightest criticism and, despite good intelligence, couldn't read. Sally knew about being adopted, but insisted that she'd come from her adoptive mummy's tummy.

I made the common mistake of new trainees in thinking that I should interpret Sally's anxieties and fears from the start, but this just increased her anxiety and led to wild behaviour. She threw the toys about, overturned the furniture and ran out of the room yelling abuse. With my supervisor's help (Audrey Gavshon), I learned to act more naturally and Sally soon felt safer and began to play. The games revealed her view of herself as smelly, damaged and destructive, and therefore thrown away by her birth mother and unwanted by her adoptive mother. In child analysis, unwelcome self-representations are often externalised onto the analyst, so I was cast in a school game as stupid Selina, while Sally was the bossy, strict teacher who punished and humiliated me. Another stupid girl in the class was the doll Lucy, who became the embodiment of Sally's denigrated view of herself. We managed in the play to get Lucy into analysis, but at first Sally confided, "Lucy isn't ready to talk about her worries yet. She just wants to play". I whispered, "That's OK. Anyway, playing is also a way of talking about worries". Later, Sally could tolerate interpretations of the doll's worries in therapy games.

Sometimes, Sally used dramatic play defensively if I got too close to her painful feelings. In an ongoing game with the ugly and broken fairy doll who was badly treated and thrown away, I voiced the fairy's sadness. Sally told the fairy, "Ask a witch for magic wishes", but when I said the fairy's first wish was not to feel so sad, Sally, as the witch,

quickly turned me into a frog who could only croak, very cleverly shutting me up!

In another ongoing game, Sally was Dogtanian, a little dog cartoon hero who tried hard but kept making mistakes. One day, Dogtanian was asleep in the castle when everyone left for dinner. Waking up hungry, sad and cross at being left alone, he hid and refused to be found. Sally and I made a "WANTED" poster for him, and she asked me to make long searches for Dogtanian, as she struggled with feeling unwanted and longing to be claimed lovingly.

We played out many of Sally's adoption theories, such as how she felt thrown away like worthless faeces. The doll Lucy was made to stand in the corner for getting her sums wrong and doing stinky poos. When I voiced the doll's despair, Sally retorted, "I don't care. She was born stupid—ugly and stupid".

A fantasy emerged of the adoptive mother as a rescuer who searched for Sally after she had been discarded by the birth mother. Sally had often thrown the fairy doll into the bin - she was stupid and smelly and should be flushed down the loo. Now she said the fairy was sad, frightened and lost in filthy sewers, and cried out for help. She wrote "Dear Mrs Parsons, please save me!" on pieces of toilet paper, and I would search for the fairy.

One day she announced, "The fairy does have a mummy — you". I spoke of the fairy's sad muddle and wish for me to be her mummy, and Sally replied angrily that the fairy's mummy had died. Her pain and anger being no longer containable, she violently attacked the fairy, torturing it and smearing it with plasticine. Sally hadn't tolerated any mention of adoption, but something important now surfaced and at home she interrogated her parents about the adoption and why her birth mother had given her up - the first time she had asked such questions. When I saw her next, she looked wildly anxious, and ran ahead to hide behind the chair in our room. After a tense silence she burst out, "I want to tell you something. My mummy gave me away and then I had another mummy ... but don't tell me I have a big worry today." So, we spent the hour having happy birthday parties for Dogtanian, to help her recover before working again on her painful feelings in the play.

Having faced the reality of her adoption, Sally began to read. The release of curiosity - previously restricted, it seemed, for fear of knowing about her origins - was now more available for learning, and being able to give up the humiliating view of herself as a non-reader was a big boost for her self-esteem.

Soon afterwards, I had to be a queen who left her new-born baby to look at Dogtanian who had appeared on the doorstep. When the queen went back inside, her own baby had gone, so she adopted Dogtanian instead. Sally became totally absorbed in the bliss of being looked after as my baby, lying curled up on the floor, gurgling and drinking lustily from a toy bottle. Later, Sally gently told teddy his adoption story, explaining that his mummy didn't have enough money to feed him, so she was going to look after him and love him.

Hide and seek games are very common with adopted children. Initially, Sally would yell furiously that I didn't know where she was so wouldn't be able to find her; later, she asked me to find her "slowly". During long searches, I muttered to myself about feeling given away because of not being good enough, about being tricked, about needing to keep secret thoughts hidden for fear of retaliation, and about longing to be wanted, found and looked after nicely. One day Sally declared, "Hiding is a bit like losing people. Like if you lost your children. That's why people play hide and seek, isn't it?" So, she did know that her creative dramatisations were communications in the analysis.

Sally could work on her anxieties and conflicts through displacement in the play, but children in analysis sometimes use play defensively. Anna Freud wrote, "*Technical problems arise when a game or play in the session seems to be used purely for purposes of resistance... (But) playing games for a period does not necessarily serve only resistance in the child. There may be some material which can emerge only in this way, or the child may need time to feel sufficiently safe and comfortable in the analytic situation before going on.*" (Sandler, Kennedy & Tyson, 1980 p 125)

**Ben**, aged 7, felt so nervous and shy that he could only play defensively at first. Putting many toy cars in a long line, he would move the first car forward an inch, followed by each car next in line, then repeat the whole painstaking process over and over. It was deadly boring to watch, and terribly sad to see his tremendous anxiety reflected in such inhibited and strictly controlled play. Gradually, he could use fantasy play, but he remained ashamed of his feelings and thoughts, and anxious that I would be disapproving or intrusive like his mum.

He was terrified about his aggression and played many games in which grown-ups were hurt but always magically came alive again. When, for the first time, the grown-ups ended up dead, I wondered about a funeral for them; but he said "No, we can't. That's too scary", as if a funeral game made the pretend death too real.

His mum had brought him because she was worried about his occasional angry outbursts and his wish to be a girl. As we worked in analysis on

his separation anxiety and fears of his destructiveness, he revealed a fantasy that if he could be a girl or a baby he wouldn't need to fear his aggression, separation or death. We played many games where he was the powerful queen, like his mother, and I was his lady-in-waiting. Later, we looked after a family of bears in our pet shop. Baby Bear felt small and useless, but eventually Ben and I, like proud parents, applauded Baby Bear taking his first faltering steps in learning to walk. Ben now talked for the first time about being a man and wanting to work for the government like daddy - the first sign of his wish to grow up and identify with his father, instead of mother.

Later, he was a deer in the forest and I was a badger. He didn't know how to start the game, so I pretended I was waking up and yawning. Ben watched me closely, trying to think what to do next. While I pretended to drink from a stream, he moved his neck rhythmically round and round. As the badger, I said, "Oh! A deer! I wonder what he's doing." The deer said hello to the badger. I said, "Hallo! What are you doing?". He said, "I'm rubbing my head against a tree, 'cos I want my antlers to grow. I want some like dad". Suddenly, he stood tall and pretended to be showing off something. I said, "Maybe antlers are growing, but I can't tell as you're a long way off." He said proudly, "They're growing fast!", then came closer, showing off with shy pleasure. I said, "You must be very proud of them!" He preened himself, holding his head high, and said, "The antlers aren't very big yet ... but each year they'll get bigger until I've got ones like dad".

Audrey Gavshon, who trained with Anna Freud, outlined the differences between playing in general, and playing in analysis: "*the analyst, through verbalization and interpretation of conflicts, defences and transferences, aims to encourage the child to transform fantasies, via playing, into meaningful communication. Playing then takes on a special meaning within the analytic relationship*" (Gavshon, 1988 p 128). "*It is ... a process which necessarily involves the suspension of reality.*" (p 129) (But) "*Some children cannot use or sustain fantasy play for fear of giving away too much or of being overwhelmed by their fantasies. ... Reality testing cannot contradict existing fantasies or the belief in the power of omnipotent wishes and annihilating fears.*" (p 129)

**Charles**, aged 6, was so overwhelmed by terror and so developmentally delayed that he was unable to play at all for many months. He was referred for analysis because of eruptive aggression, an inability to relate to peers and alarming swings between infantile behaviour and pseudo-mature language. He had already been thrown out of 3 schools for attacking both children and teachers. He was terrified of abandonment, perceived himself as a 'devil' hated by his parents, and was sure I would hate him too. He attacked me violently, behaving like a wild animal: spitting, biting, kicking, hurling toys, smearing

faeces. His unpredictable attacks were enactments of internal chaos driven by panic, not simply manifestations of rage. He experienced me, in the transference, as the source of danger, like his parents who, he felt, wanted him dead. He erupted in wild terror because he lacked resources for processing his feelings and thoughts in symbolic form (either through play or words) and had no effective resources or defences to manage overwhelming internal states. Talking made things worse, so for some time I simply had to survive without retaliating and try to offer him a sense of safety and containment.

My initial aim was to provide a benign protective experience and to help Charles recognise impending danger (the approach of what I called 'spilly feelings'), so that he could prepare himself by using anxiety as a signal (Freud, S. 1926), then build appropriate defences to manage his overwhelming anxiety and feelings and channel them into play and words. Very gradually, play took the place of violent 'body talk'.

One day he built a dam and spoke with mounting anxiety about the dam breaking and destroying the nearby town. I realised that a dangerous "spilly" situation was approaching but didn't interpret this directly as this would catapult Charles into a "spilly" eruption. Instead, I used displacement in the play. I said, "You've built such a lovely town. It would be awful if it got destroyed by the dam breaking. I've got an idea to keep it safe. How about making channels at the bottom of the dam to let out small amounts of water? The dam won't break then and flood your town - like this?" I showed him by carefully removing a few bricks. Charles was immediately relieved and kissed me! I then said, "Sometimes feelings can spill out, like the water in the dam. I'd like to help you find ways of managing your "spilly" feelings so they don't flood you". This, perhaps less understood, use of play in analysis is what Anna Freudians mean by developmental therapy (Hurry, 1998) - I was fostering Charles's ego development by offering ways to manage overwhelming feelings.

I hope these case examples have shown some of the many meanings and functions of play in child analysis. I'll end with some thoughts on technique from Audrey Gavshon, *"Constant interpretation of symbolic play can interfere with the child's pleasure or willingness to play with the therapist. The unfolding of fantasies will therefore be hindered rather than helped. The child analyst has to find ways to sustain the child's analytic motivation, and to this end the therapist may sometimes change the mode of involvement from following the child's play to leading it. By understanding and responding to the expression of fantasy, a pattern of exchange develops between the child who brings the material and the analyst who tries to shape it in a way which becomes therapeutically meaningful. The patient becomes aware that playing has become an important language of*

*therapy and this awareness enables the child to pursue the process of self-discovery."* (Gavshon 1988, p131)

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