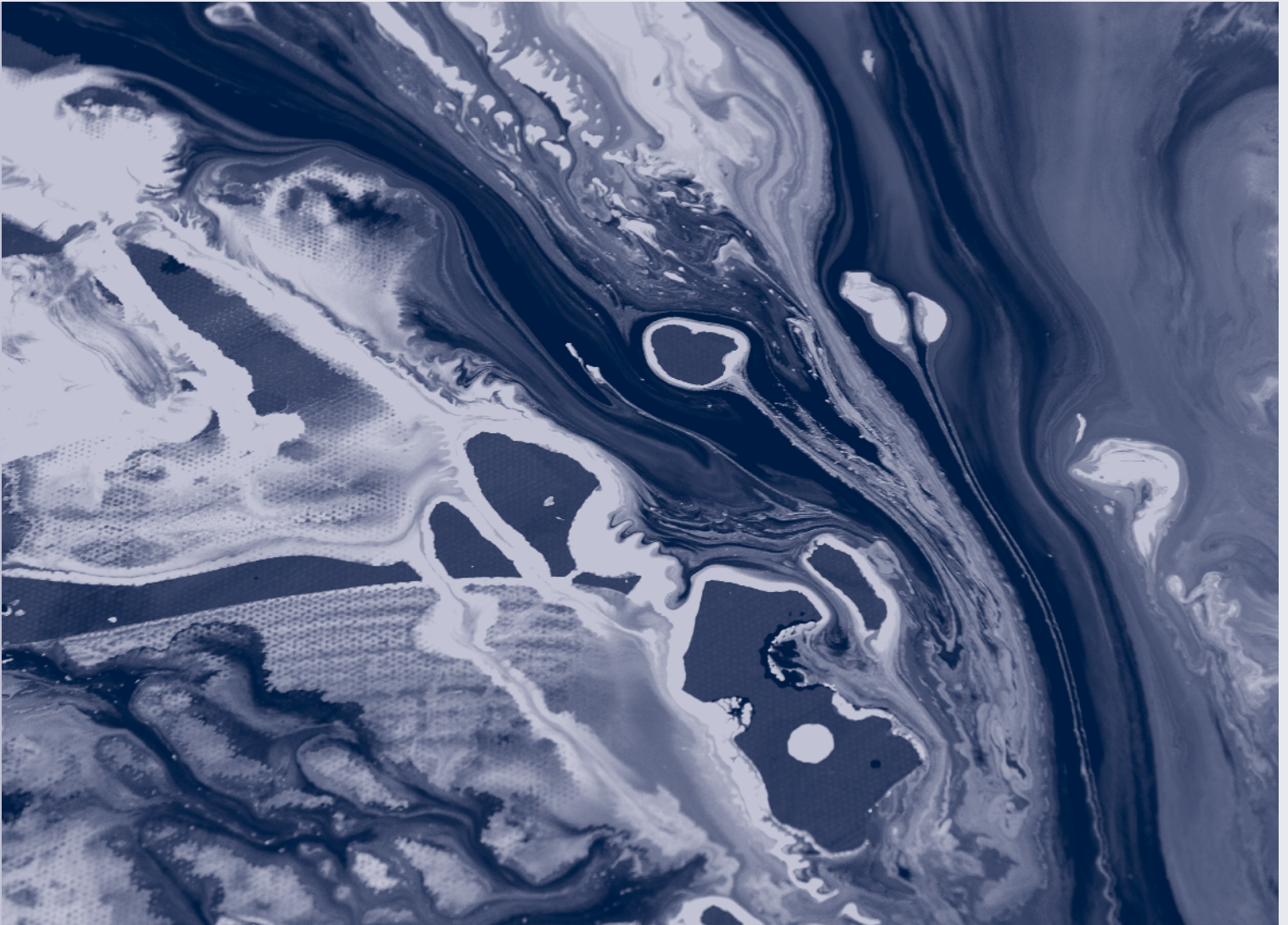


When is a mess just a mess?

Bridget Sheehan describes and illustrates her own model
of the play therapy 'routes' that a child might take



As I read Graham Music's recent article, 'Changing levels to meet the child',¹ and grappled with the intellectual bits, identifying my 'superego figures' and drawn in by 'Stuart's' story, I found myself surprised and, in some places, amazed. The dilemmas and processes that Graham was describing at such an academic level are the everyday occurrences of my work with play. What I was struggling to decipher in the article was actually what I consider fundamental practice in the world of creative therapies. Perhaps his sphere of work demands a different approach initially?

My journey has in fact been one *from* the verbal to the non-verbal. A journey that has taken me towards an ever-deepening awareness of the symbolic and the unconscious, and also of the power of the human mind to seek out what it needs. When I trained as a counsellor (on an integrative course), words were the medium we worked with. Since then, I have trained people in therapeutic play and other creative approaches, and supervised counsellors and play therapists, and found myself in a place where words are simply *one* of the tools available to the client and to myself.

So where do I start when working with a child? I start from the place of not knowing. I may have a big fat file that details for me the facts and events that spell out this child's life experience. And I cannot avoid my brain wanting to make assumptions about what that then means. But I have to remind myself that I do not *know* what it is this child most needs (beyond the basics, such as relationship and security) at this point in time. Only they hold that knowledge somewhere deep inside themselves. So for me, the start has to be non-directive. To start directly is to assume that I know

what I do not – to assume that in my professional wisdom I know what this child needs now, and more importantly, that they are in the right place to receive it from me.

What then? I try to connect, to bridge the gap that there is between two human beings who meet for the first time – so I watch, I tune in, I mirror, I reflect and I share in the experience as I accompany them on the journey. But at this stage, I would never offer an interpretation to the child, or verbally connect a creation with the 'real' world. To do this would be to rip away the safety that the creative metaphor offers. While in the metaphor, they can explore, experience, feel and control at a safe distance. If I wrench them out of the safety of that metaphor and back into the cruel, harsh world, where they have no control, the safety is lost and the therapy room becomes a place where the child may feel trapped and forced to relive a trauma again and again.

I then turn detective. I try to spot the clues hiding within the patterns of play and interaction, and within my own emotional experiences during the sessions. Afterwards, in my notes and supervision, I try to unravel the threads, to reveal the picture that slowly emerges.

From my therapy and supervision work, I have come to a personal conclusion that there are three basic routes down which children travel to use their therapeutic experience to progress. I call this the 'Transformative Play Model' (and as I can find no previous use for the term I have claimed it as my own!). A child may stay on one route for the duration of their journey, or they may move between all or some of the routes, and sometimes those routes may merge to become one. To continue the metaphor – my role is not one of 'therapeutic sat nav' in

Figure 1
The Transformative Play Model[©]

Nurture

- Type of play is not significant
- Focus is on the relationship
- Need is for attention, emotional connection, nurturing
- Transforms experience

Developmental

- Type of play is significant
- Focus is on revisiting missed developmental stages
- Need is for the safety and emotional support to regress
- Transforms developmental experience and enables child to progress

Circumstantial

- Type of play is significant
- Focus is on revisiting/exploring life experiences
- Need is for the safety and emotional support to explore difficult feelings/events
- Transforms experience and enables child to process difficult feelings/events and to move on/develop resilience and coping strategies

Unless I see this play for what it is – a crucial repairing of missed and broken opportunities – I may fail to see the significance of what is taking place and devalue the sessions

terms of dictating the route to be taken (after all, the 'driver' could easily choose to ignore me or turn me off). However, at some points in the journey, when I feel that the relationship is secure enough and I am clear enough about the picture that is emerging, I may 'suggest an alternative route', especially if the client appears to be stuck (traffic jam?) or travelling in circles.

The Nurture Route

As therapists, we are comfortable with the concept that it is all about the relationship. But how comfortable are we when that is *all* the client requires from us? They don't need our intelligence and our intellectual theories, they don't need our toolbox of skills; they just need us to be there with them and available to them. I know from personal experience, and from supervising others in this situation, that children travelling down the Nurture Route can be some of the most challenging to our egos. Our cries of 'But they don't seem to be doing anything!' and 'I'm not sure whether they should be coming, as they don't seem to be working through anything!' reveal the anxiety we feel when we find ourselves questioning the worth of what we are offering. Yet they want to come, and in the outside world something seems to be shifting. So we chant our mantra, 'Trust the process!' and keep going.

Early in my own journey, I worked with one child (let's call her Naomi) with a complex life story and challenging life circumstances. I went into the work expecting the issues to be explored through the sand, the dolls' house, role play or being talked about etc. But none of that happened – instead, every week we companionably sat together and created clay objects

(here was probably an element of the Developmental Route in the sensory aspect of the clay). And while I floundered in a sea of frustration and uncertainty, Naomi's class teacher reported significant changes in her behaviour. Somewhere deep inside her, she knew what she needed at this point in her life – and it was the relationship I offered. Perhaps at another point in her future, Naomi would journey down the Circumstantial Route, but now was not that time.

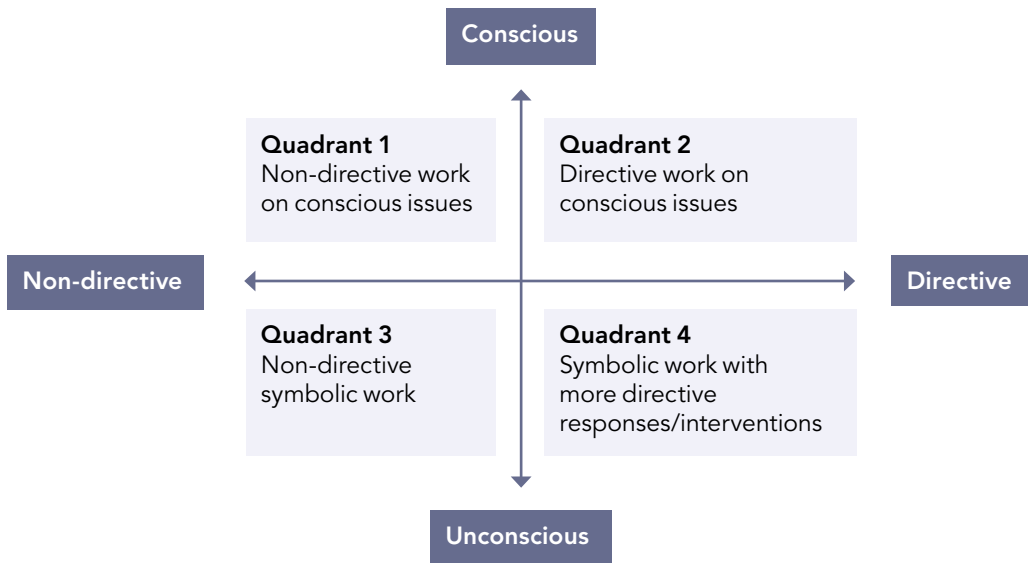
The Developmental Route

This route is also one that leaves many therapists scrabbling in vain to find symbolic meaning in a child's play. And I am sure there are many out there who will disagree with me, and for whom all is symbolic. But sometimes I feel that we can grasp at an empty space – desperately seeking the symbolic meaning hidden within a creation/moment – and I suggest that maybe we *struggle* to find it because it has never been there.

At an early age, children need to be free to explore their world with an attentive adult to accompany them and keep them safe. For many children this does not happen, for a wide variety of reasons. For them, there remains a gap in their progression. For some, the gap is so vast that they remain stuck, unable to progress developmentally, functioning at a level that is increasingly at odds with their chronological age. For others, this gap then becomes a gap in their foundation, and all that is built thereafter wobbles, threatening to cave in. Piaget² describes these developmental behaviours in terms of schemas – eg transporting, boundary, enclosure, connection, filling, circularity etc. I see children explore these schemas

Figure 2

Adapted from Yassenik and Gardner's Play Therapy Dimensions Model, 2004



over and over again in therapy sessions and then move on – the child who drives a car round and round the table, the plane that is flown from corner to corner, the sand that is endlessly poured into containers. The gap has been closed, the foundation built, they can catch themselves up – mission accomplished.

But who am I? What role do I play in this regressive and yet progressive journey? I am the holder of boundaries, the creator of safety, the fellow filler of containers, the co-pilot of planes, and ultimately the playmate. This play starts off solitary, but becomes co-operative as I mirror it, and then progresses to co-operative – a vital progression in social interaction. But unless I see this play for what it is – a crucial repairing of missed and broken opportunities – I may fail to see the significance of what is taking place and devalue the sessions, feeling *nothing* of significance is happening.

In my work with a Year 6 looked after child (whom we will call Patrick) we journeyed down all three routes at different times but it was from his 'messy' play that this article title emerged. Patrick journeyed down the Developmental Route, exploring sensory play experiences denied at the ideal early stage. A bowl, whisk and jug, water, paint, cornflour, shaving foam and bubbles became the tools and ingredients for mixtures and potions. At first the focus was the exploring of colours, smells, textures and the magical changes that took place as ingredients were added. The familiar stage of needing to use all of everything was worked

*In our overeagerness to understand,
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life experiences and emotions*

through, then the play took on an imaginative element – it became porridge, milk shake, magic potion. Once this stage had been reached, the play took on a different feel. We had diverted, or progressed, to the Circumstantial Route. The purpose of the play felt different, the mixtures were no longer named but there was a need to preserve the dark, sticky concoctions from one week to the next. Plastic bottles from the junk box became the required receptacles and labels ensured no unsuspecting adult destroyed the process by emptying out the noxious substances. Was this a challenge to see if I could hold safe and contain the toxic past? Then one day a crucial decision was reached

– the bottles of dubious mixtures were inspected and declared smelly (true) and no longer to be kept. Patrick unceremoniously tipped them down the sink and moved on to making bright and beautiful creations that he kept and took with him at the end of his therapy. (I am sure some of you are raising your eyebrows at the health and safety issues of fermenting potions.)

The Circumstantial Route

At last – our comfort zone as therapists. Our brains delight in the detection of clues, the piecing together of pieces, the unravelling of themes. We see sense and meaning layering themselves within the play; we feel a sense of purpose and usefulness – the child is exploring the issues, and this is what is meant to happen. But danger lurks. In our overeagerness to understand, we may leap to inaccurate conclusions shaped by our own life experiences and emotions. In our desire to enable the child to progress towards a better emotional state, we may clumsily pull or push towards a more conscious level of working, and risk shattering the fragile safety we have worked so hard to create.

So when do we intervene? In my own work, and as I supervise, I find Yassenik and Gardner's³ Play Therapy Dimensions Model an incredibly useful tool (see my adaptation of their idea in figure 2). The first dimension encompasses the continuum of consciousness, the second dimension the continuum of directiveness. I would start, as stated above, in Quadrant 3. The child leads and we work with the play – symbolic or developmental. I would not actively move the interactions into Quadrant 1 (as I explained above), but if a child made this step into the conscious, then I would follow. As our relationship develops and the child feels safe, I would use the clues I have gleaned to guide me as I move into Quadrant 4 – responding in a more directive manner while remaining within the world of play. If a child has taken the step into the conscious

(Quadrant 1), I may then offer a suggestion or an activity that would enable them to explore this issue further (Quadrant 2), but the choice remains theirs, and if this leap into the conscious has been too scary for them, I need to accept it if they beat a rapid retreat to Quadrant 3.

Working with another Year 5 looked after child (we'll call him Anthony) really challenged me. Anthony's journey was not one that moved seamlessly from route to route but one that jumped in a clear demarcated leap from one session to another. For weeks he would play with Lego. Together we would sit and create objects. The play did not appear to be symbolic, neither did it seem to be part of a developmental journey – he was firmly journeying down the Nurture Route, and due to his traumatic experience of relationships, this was a very long road. Then one week he came in and declared that he was going to paint. He had taken a sharp turn down the Circumstantial Route and painted a picture that resonated with deep symbolic meaning that paralleled the point he was at in his life. But the next week he veered sharply back onto his original route. That symbolic adventure was quite enough for now and he needed to regroup. More weeks of Lego play passed until once again he took another sharp turn and another significant picture appeared. Anthony had to be really secure before he could turn, ever so briefly, to look at his life experiences. He then needed to retreat and regroup before he could venture there again. Anthony's sense of safety was so fragile, and his venture to the symbolic so massive a task for him, that I never ventured out of Quadrant 3. We stayed firmly in the symbolic world, and I stayed one step behind his lead all the time.

For each child, the journey is unique, but my model helps me to make sense of some of the more mysterious routes taken. It challenges me to lay aside my role as the all-knowing adult and step into the seat of passenger or co-driver, and let the child take the steering wheel.



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