

**Comments by Clinical Editor**

The authors describe how children in Play Therapy can find their emotional homes.

# The Quest for Home

## A Powerful Theme in Play Therapy

Home is ideally a place of belonging, a place of safety and secure attachment to those we are bonded to both by biology and love. Home is a powerful defining theme in the lives of many people. If one is fortunate to have a secure home, that childhood home becomes etched in the bones and tissues of the person. No matter how many other places they may live in during the course of their lives it will not match the attachment they feel toward the secure nest of their childhood that provided the launch pad of their play, fantasies, hopes and dreams. Home is particularly compelling as a defining theme in one's life if you never had a secure place of belonging. The longing for such a home burns inside with great intensity and is not easily quieted. When a child lost or missed out completely on a secure home, a

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sense of rage and profound sorrow is often the result (Hardy & Crenshaw, 2008; Garbarino & Crenshaw, 2008). There is no rage like the rage that follows betrayal. There is no theft like the intimate unwanted, violation of a young child. There is no loneliness like the loneliness accompanying forced exile. There is no depression like the dark despair that envelopes the soul of a child abandoned. These are harrowing losses that left unresolved will puncture the spirit of all but the most resilient child (Crenshaw, 2008a).

In a conversation with Tammi Van Hollander at the 2011 APT Annual Conference, I was fascinated to hear of her experiences in working with this theme in her private practice that is located in an exceptionally wealthy suburb of Philadelphia. While most of my experience in working with the theme of “quest for home” has come out of playroom experiences with children of extreme deprivation, and poverty with frequent exposure to family violence, I soon learned from Tammi that highly advantaged children can suffer a form of “emotional homelessness” that led me to invite her to share her experiences and creative work as co-author of this article.

### **David's Experiences: Longing for Home in the Playroom**

In 1994, in a Play Therapy room at the Astor Home for Children, a 7-year-old boy “Ricardo” played out with compelling emotional intensity the life drama of a lion cub named Simba. Simba, was the rightful inheritor of the Pride Lands throne following the death of his father Mufasa, the King, but was exiled in the hot desert far from his native land. Simba’s unquenchable desire to return home and claim his native land—his place of belonging—struck a responsive chord in Ricardo. The film of the Lion King had been initially released in the summer of 1994 and soon the playrooms at Astor came alive with the startling intensity of lions roaring, fights between lions and hyenas, a meerkat and a warthog battling the hyenas. The powerful themes of loss, abandonment, betrayal, guilt, and exile resonated throughout the treatment center of young children placed out of their homes. Ricardo continued working with this theme in many variations for an entire year, seeking mastery over his sense of abandonment and exile.

### **A Powerful Theme in Play Therapy**

In her pioneering research on play themes with young children experiencing attachment disorders Helen Benedict (2003), identified similar themes such as separation, loss, things broken, and seeking repair. One 9 year-old child suffered the

onerous burden of being unable to protect his younger sisters from the ravages of sexual abuse by their father. This boy repeatedly played out the theme of a thief in the night that broke in and stole the “family jewels” and “everything of value was taken.” A home that was supposed to be the secure base for four young children became a place of unwelcome intrusion, betrayal, theft of something intimate and precious that was irreplaceable.

When the Symbol Association Therapy Strategies (SATS), and its later simplified version for children the Symbol Association Therapy Strategies-Child (SATS-C), were created (Crenshaw, 2008, 2010) the powerful themes of family and home were central features. The therapeutic tool (SATS-C) that encourages exploration of the child’s relational world and key attachments invites children to pick one of 15 carefully chosen miniatures to place on various relational categories beginning with “Family” and “Home”. Recently, a 13-year-old girl whose life has been replete with loss, abandonment, periods of homelessness, and

trauma placed on the category “Home” a miniature of a ship’s wheel. In my inquiry as to what made her choose this particular symbol for home, she explained, “I have lived in many different places, none of which were really a home. Some were temporary shelters. At times we lived on the streets, hungry, and slept in abandoned

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buildings. But I’ve learned to adapt. I’ve learned to change directions. I am taking the ship’s wheel now and I will decide the direction I am going from here.” There could be no greater testament to resilience in a young girl who never experienced the security of a stable home but is determined to make her path; chart her course in life. This unusually creative and talented adolescent who writes beautiful and deeply moving poetry is an exception. Other children with similar backgrounds populate the foster care system in various out-of-home placements without a prognosis nearly as hopeful.

Another adolescent girl who experienced unusually severe sexual trauma placed a small butterfly on “Home” and on inquiry stated that she chose the butterfly because it represents beauty and freedom. She then quickly clarified that the “Home” she had in mind was the Children’s Home of Poughkeepsie where she has lived the past two years. This response also is exceptional because most children in out-of-home placement do not view the treatment facility or foster placement as “home.” Everything is relative however. If the home of your origin with the people intended to protect and nurture you turns out to be a

terrifying, traumatizing place, a place like the Children's Home that has served as a refuge for homeless and troubled children since 1847, may well symbolize beauty and freedom.

### **Tammi's Experiences:**

#### **Concept of Emotional Homelessness**

The longing for home is a powerful theme in Play Therapy. Working in an affluent suburb in Pennsylvania, I see many children who exhibit themes of "emotional homelessness." A number of my clients are overindulged, over-scheduled and disconnected from their parents. Some parents are accustomed to buying things for their children as a way to show them they are loved. There is a pattern of buying love in materialistic ways rather than creating emotional connections. Many parents will bring their children into my office, so I can "fix" their child and reduce explosive behaviors and power struggles. One parent stated, "I give her the world and I get nothing in return." Some parents feel disconnected with their child and lack the basic attachment that is so crucial for the child's emotional development. The nanny often has a stronger connection with the child than they do. I will hear parents feel guilty because they cannot stand to be in the same room with their child, and home is not a safe place for anyone.

#### **Restoring Broken Connections: A Case Illustration**

With all this in mind, most parents will hear me say that my number one goal of treatment is for the parent to restore a loving, connection with their child. I want to talk about a little girl that I have been seeing for three years. Annie came to me in kindergarten. The parents had already fired two therapists because none of the behavioral plans were working. Annie's parents were older and had children college age, prior to having Annie (unplanned) later in life. In the initial meeting, I found these parents intimidating and a bit scary. I thought to myself, "There is no way they will last in my playroom." Playful was not an adjective that described them. Annie's mom presented as harsh and unkind, she showed no empathy, when she spoke of her daughter in a robotic tone. She talked about daily power struggles, dysregulation, social skill issues, and anxiety. She stated that she was worn out and that she would rather be at work than home with

this child. She told me, with guilt, that she cannot tolerate her daughter and questioned if she had love to give her. The father expressed his frustration with his daughter and felt hopeless. He voiced that raising his other two children was a walk in the park compared to raising Annie. He questioned what went wrong and he was skeptical if Play Therapy could benefit her.

Annie came in for her initial session with both parents. This child made Tigger look calm, as she bounced off the walls. She was unable to sit and participate in any of the activities provided. As she jumped on the sofa, her mother looked at me sternly, ready for me to take action and discipline her child. Her father was disgusted and appalled by her behavior. The pressure was on and I wondered how I would be effective, since her parents and so many other therapists had failed her. The second

session, Annie pulled out the puppets and performed a puppet show for mom and me. Her imagination and creativity lit up the room like a Christmas tree. She was instantly drawn to the sandtray and miniatures. In the beginning of her sandtray

journey, sandtrays overflowed with dumping of miniatures, flooding the tray. I imagined what it must feel like to be Annie and, as I observed the chaos, I felt overwhelmed with emotion. Through her sandtrays, I witnessed her pain and learned to understand her world.

**If you water a plant too much it dies. Even if you are watering it too much out of love, it still dies.**

**– Ada Alden**

#### **The Work Deepens**

Annie's sandtray process took her on a journey that lasted the past three years. Her journey was of a child lost in the woods. She would go on adventures seeking connection, love, and



kindness, but obstacles would intrude upon her path, taking her further away from her home. She started finding wonderful adventures on her journey and would get lost deep, deep into the forest. She did not want to go home and chose to be free with the animals where she found love and connection. Bruno Bettelheim (1975) in *The Uses of Enchantment* talks about children leaving the world of reality and entering a fantasy world to work through their issues. "At the end of a fairy tale, a child awakens feeling invigorated and refreshed, like waking from a dream." This is what Play Therapy/sandtray therapy is like for our clients. Annie would leave the playroom calm, cooperative, invigorated and smiling.

Since Annie was such a playful child, mom needed coaching on how to play and how to understand what Annie was communicating to her. In terms of their personalities, the two of them were night and day and it made sense that her mom struggled with her child's creativity and high energy. Some of the helpful measures included placing a boundary that the nanny was not allowed to bring Annie to sessions and mom or dad needed to be present. I also coached the parents on providing clear rules, structure, and consistency.

## Repair and Resolution

During parent feedback, I coached the parents to enter Annie's world where she expressed her need to belong and fit in. I instructed her mom that she needed to spend at least 30 minutes a day for uninterrupted child-centered play. This included turning off the television, computer and cell phone and letting Annie make the rules. This time ended up being incredibly powerful for the two of them. With time, Annie's stories became less chaotic, and her sandtray journey had led her home into her mother's welcoming arms. It was challenging to find her way out of the woods, but this time she knew mom would be waiting, at home with love and acceptance. Her mom learned how to be playful and feel close and connected with her child. She connected with her father and earned the kitten that she had dreamed about for a year. The kitten seemed to connect the three of them in a positive way. Her parents praised her for being so responsible and loving toward the kitten. In session, they expressed pride toward Annie and Annie expressed that pride in herself. Annie started doing well in school, anxiety decreased and power struggles greatly diminished. Mom's favorite activity was to spend time with Annie and she appreciated every minute with her. She lost out on many of the early years with her daughter where they were both feeling emotionally homeless. A home without love. A home without connection.

## A home with rejection and isolation.

Annie's resiliency was such a delight to see. When her mom let down her guard and showed she was no longer the coldhearted woman she portrayed, she recognized the importance of play and helped Annie on her journey. Here, she was able to slow down and celebrate the beauty, strength and talents of her daughter and embrace them.

Many children feel emotionally homeless when they are not connected to their loved ones, and feel misunderstood. As we know, a house must have a solid foundation that can withstand anything - no matter how many storms it may endure. Sometimes it may need a little renovation, but there is hope for every home. Annie's mom never thought she would have a relationship like this with her daughter and was shocked by the power of her child's play. She cried as she thanked me for giving her the daughter she never thought she would have and helping to make her home a loving and safe place. Annie was shut out from her mother's heart and the only way Annie could feel safe was for her mother to open her heart and soul to Annie and "Welcome her home."

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