

## Changing a Teacher's Perspective Toward Children by D. Lynn Cousineau B.A.

Skinny, competitive, noisy, and in a constant state of motion, Rose was the 9½ year old I worked with in play for six weeks this year. The play sessions with Rose were part of the practical experience included in the course "Play: A Counseling Intervention", taught by Dr. JoAnna White at Georgia State University. The course was a requirement of my Masters degree program in school counseling. Taking this course and knowing Rose through play was an enlightening experience for me professionally.

For the past eight years I have been an elementary School teacher in an urban setting. As a teacher, I have a great deal of contact with children and comprehend many of their needs. Yet, the school and classroom setting only allow me to assist children with a small number of their individual needs. I must, for the most part, address children in a group, providing them with structured development and academic experiences that fit the whole group and then do my best to customize these activities to each child's individual ability. The primary focus of my activity as a teacher is to develop each child's potential. I assist them in building skills and attitudes they will need to be healthy, productive, contributing adults. I am, in essence, required to view the children entrusted to me as human-potentials, or human-dolings. I rarely get the opportunity to stop and admire them for the human-beings they are in the present moment. As a teacher, I believed I knew children well. Yet, the experience I had with Rose through play, backed by the theory and encouragement of Dr. White's play therapy course at Georgia State University, changed my perspective toward children.

Rose is nearly 4 feet 5 inches tall and weighs just over 70 pounds. This is accentuated by the fact that she preferred to wear slim fitting cotton tights or leggings and light weight tops that look like pajamas rather than to wear heavier or warmer clothing. She also prefers to keep her feet bare when she is at home. Rose has below-the-ear length thin blond hair, which she did not fuss over or always keep clean. When her mother was present Rose would pull on my arms, hug me for prolonged moments, and assert herself loudly in an attempt to tell her mother "This is my time with Mr. C., go away!"

Rose is in the fourth grade. She gets mostly A's on her report cards but usually ends up getting unsatisfactory conduct grades. She gets into trouble with her teachers because she often completes her work before most of the other students and then wants to "socialize" with her friends in class. Rose acknowledges that this is her behavior pattern in the classroom but, to Rose, the socializing is more valuable than the price of the consequences. She has no friends outside of school.

Rose is an only child. She has no cousins and she is the only grandchild. Her mother has never been married. Rose's mother is in her late thirties. She is attractive and assertive but has had no significant intimate relationships since Rose was born. Her mother's relationship with Rose's biological father is adversarial and based solely on the issues of visitation and child support payments. Rose has seen or visited her father fewer than five times in her lifetime. She showed no interest in knowing him.

Rose's experience of marriage is one of irregularity and divorce. Her only aunt has never been married. Her grandparents are divorced. Her grandmother has been living with a man in a common-law type marriage for more than seven years and her grandfather has an on-and-off girlfriend.

Rose lived her first seven years with her mother in a suburb of a large Midwestern city. After completing her Master's degree in engineering, her mother got a job in the Atlanta metropolitan area. They moved into a town house with their two cats, Pork and Beans. Rose's physical home environment is well suited for an only child. She has almost every art supply appropriate for a child her age. She has unrestricted access to her mother's Macintosh computer and she has a piano. Besides having her own bedroom, she has a play/television room where she can watch video tapes, do art work,

or just watch her favorite television show as well as have a messy snack. She does not play with the children in the apartment complex because her mother does not like the way they play.

Rose cares for several stray cats from the apartment complex that came to their back porch to visit. She could identify at least 15 of them with names she had given them. She was very kind to the cats. They would let her pet and hold them, when they would not let her mother or me. She and her mother argue over Rose feeding these cats. Her mother did not want her to feed them, but in the end, a small bowl of dry cat food and water was left on the porch. These cats played an important role by allowing Rose the opportunity to nurture something living all by herself.

Her mother acknowledged that because Rose was an only child she got a great deal of attention from adults. She described Rose as being one half of the household but not having quite one half of the household chores. She said that Rose often wanted things to go her own way and wanted things immediately. If things did not go her way, she would yell or tantrum until she did. Rose often engaged her mother in power struggles. Her mother most often responded to these by shouting until Rose gave in. They had no openly established set of democratic rules or consequences in the home. Whenever her mother saw Rose doing something she did not approve of, like playing piano when her mother was on the telephone or jumping on the furniture, she yelled at Rose to stop. Her mother would yell at Rose when they were in public and Rose would also tantrum in public. Most of her mother's correction of Rose's behavior was in the heat of the moment and was expressed in a loud and angry tone of voice. She was very direct with Rose and did not give her much of an opportunity to speak for herself when they argued. She did not reason or compromise with Rose when she wanted things done her own way.

In some instances, Rose's mother was permissive with her. Rose was free to choose how she spent her time at home and was not asked to do many chores around the house. She was not expected to always have a clean bedroom or to pick up her clothes.

The family atmosphere was a combination. One, the household was authoritarian. The rules were that Rose had to abide by her mother's wishes and demands. Two, Rose was expected to perform well and apply effort in all of her pursuits, so the atmosphere was one of high expectations. Finally, there was an disparaging atmosphere because her mother was often critical of Rose's behavior. She expected Rose to be appreciative of the life and things she gave her.

During our play sessions together, which were conducted at her home, Rose was outwardly polite in offering me a say in what we chose to do. However, when told that this was her time and she could choose, she had a definite preference for the types of activities we engaged in. She did not like having to draw when I asked her to and she preferred to play board games with me, rather than engage in any type of fantasy play. I imagine that she liked board games because they were systematic and had rules. Rose is at a developmental age where understanding rules and applying them is quite important. I also suspect that she liked board games because she could win. She appeared to find great pleasure in winning a game against me, the adult.

In our first play session together, we played the new Monopoly game she got for Christmas. She had it already set up for us when I got there. We played at the kitchen table because she said her bedroom was too messy. Rose took a lot of risks and tried many strategies during the game. She would say, "I don't like you" if I advanced, bought property, or if she landed on something I owned and had to pay me. She would celebrate with a deep affected laugh if I had to pay her or if one of my moves was not favorable for me. At times, she made up rules. When she did I would read from the official rules to clarify. She acquiesced when she was shown that her rule was not official. I realize now that I should have gone by the rules she made up, rather than try to clarify them. It was *her* play session. I was there to observe and interact, not win the game. We played the game for our entire time together and she attempted to hedge and add time when I told her our time together was almost over.

In our second play session, I asked Rose if she wanted to show me the toys and stuffed animals she had. I was hoping this might

give her the opportunity to engage in some role or fantasy play. She began by showing me her doll collection, especially her collection of old Barbie dolls that were once her mother's. She showed me her stuffed animal collection but only gave me a brief tour. Rose soon got tired of doing this and quickly engaged me in a game of Manacala, an African stone counting game. I asked her to explain to me how to play the game, which she did both by description and example. We played several rounds of the game, most of which Rose won. Again, she cheered with excitement upon winning or growled and said "I hate you!" if I won a round. She then moves us to a game of checkers, which she forfeited and let me win because it was taking too long.

For our third session I asked Rose to make a drawing for me. I wanted her to start with the House, Tree, Person (HTP) drawing. She said she did not want to just then but that she would do it later in the session. She wanted to play the Atlanta version of Monopoly. We did this instead and the game carried out much as it did during the first session. Rose took many risks with her money and purchases. She also complained loudly whenever a move was in my favor. She never did do the drawing I had asked her to make, even though I reminded her twice during the game. She did not want to do the drawing and while she said she would, she passively let the game carry on to take up our entire time together. She won the game and showed great joy by singing, "I won, I won! Ha, ha, ha. Ha, ha, ha!" For me, it was a joy to see her enjoy winning so much. Rose promised she would make the HTP for me during the week and have it for our next session. She also called me the next night to ask me specifically what I wanted in the drawing.

Rose did not make her HTP before our next session. So, she made it during our fourth session. She wanted to do it while watching television in the living room. I told her I wanted to talk with her and that the television would be distracting. In response, Rose got out her mini-television and placed it on the kitchen table where we were going to work. She was engaging me in a power struggle and was going to watch television anyway. I reflected to her that she liked to do things her own way. To this she responded with, "not always" and put the little television away. She then proceeded to make the HTP drawing. During this session she commented that her cat "was being stubborn today." She was sharing an accurate projection of herself, I suspect. The drawing took the entire 1½ hours of our time together.

Two of the most striking features of Rose's HTP were how exactly she had drawn it and that she used no color, only pencil. She said she wanted to leave the color to the imagination of the person looking at the drawing. Not using color probably reflected her wish to be evasive in revealing too much about how she felt about her home and life. Lily was very careful to draw each element to her own very exact standards. She used a ruler to get the roof just the way she wanted to. The house was very large and fancy. The girl in the drawing was small and seated sideways. This might reflect Rose's feeling of being dominated by her mother and her lack of power in being able to compete with her mother. Rose said that she liked the drawing a lot and asked for both her mother's and my opinion of it.

Our fifth session consisted of Rose and me playing Manacala and Monopoly again. She won more often and continued to show great joy when she did. She also read a story to me that she was writing. It was based on the Laura Ingles Wilder book "Little House On The Prairie" and gave different names for the girls in the story.

I scheduled an additional sixth play session with Rose so that she could do her kinetic family drawing. She procrastinated doing this by becoming engaged in another activity. I patiently attended as she reorganized her animal cards notebook until she was ready to begin the drawing. Once she began the drawing, I noticed that if I moved or did anything that took my focus away from what she was doing, she would stop drawing until I refocused my attention on her. This was an eye-opening experience for me. Something that reminded me to be conscious of my own actions and to attend fully and directly to children when working with them in one-to-one sessions.

It is significant to describe Rose's favorite television show, "Xena Warrior Princess". This is an action fantasy where the heroine is a strong, aggressive woman, like Hercules. She roams the medieval

countryside of Europe with her female companion. Together they resolve conflicts and help people in need through Xena's cunning, superior strength, and sometimes mystical magic powers. I imagine that Rose identified with the main character and would like to be able to solve her own conflicts with the same success as Xena. Rose said in her interview that she and her mother quarreled a lot. This bothered her, particularly because her mother always won. "I don't ever win", she said. Rose would like to get back at her mother for always winning but she knows she would just get into more trouble. Undoubtedly, her behavioral goals of power and attention are Rose's way of getting back and winning.

Rose showed an honest concern for other people in the world, especially children. When asked to tell three things she knew were true, she responded with, "I'm very lucky to sleep in a bed when many children don't have one. There is lots of suffering in the world, especially in Bosnia. Children in some places have to fight in war when they are only seven. There is lots of violence in the world". When asked who was the worst person in the world, she responded in general with, "The people who bring out violence. The destroyers of the earth". She then said that the greatest person in the world were her ancestors (sic) "...who fought in the war against the evil king who killed all the Jews". I recall in an earlier conversation, she referred to Hitler as "the evil king". In several instances she spoke of how lucky she was to have a home and a family and that many children in the world do not. One instance stood out as significant because she said something to her cat I suspect she meant metaphorically for herself. As her cat meowed loudly while sitting at the back door, she said, "Oh, Pork. Don't be so territorial. This isn't your condo and it isn't mine. We don't own it and we're lucky to live here". Rose believed that she was fortunate to have what she had, when most children in the world did not have as much as she did or "had to work for their food". Her mother stressed to Rose that she should feel grateful for the things she had. She often used this as a ploy to motivate Rose to do more of what she wanted her to do.

Rose had already established several beliefs that will effect how she approaches the mastery tasks in her life. She is an intelligent and highly motivated young person. She demonstrated that in her work she felt she must always do her best. The results of her work need to be nearly perfect for her to feel satisfied. This will most likely be a useful quality in her educational and career pursuits, but it might cause her to have poor self esteem if she ever fails or does not meet her own expectations.

Rose has learned that her friendships are brief and circumstantial. Her only friends are her schoolmates. She seem to believe she has to do something, rather than be herself, in order to attract friends. She also learned that authority can sometimes prevent her from interacting with friends, making friends, keeping them, and developing meaningful friendships may be an issue for her in adulthood.

Rose learned from the adults in her family that intimate relationships were temporary, hard to come by, and that they are riddled with frustrations. She has never seen a lasting successful marriage among the adults in her sphere of influence. This too, may be an issue Rose will have to learn on her own through the school of "hard knocks".

Rose's kinetic family drawing was also done in pencil. The picture was of Rose and her mother sitting together watching television with a cat between them. The content was significant for several reasons. First, it was probably the only thing they do together that was not business or a task of daily life. The sofa was the central focus and was the only place in real life where Rose is allowed to be free, relaxed and affectionate with her mother. They were however, not touching each other in the drawing. Instead, a cat was sitting between them. Cats could symbolize the mother's presence and the cat in real life was, in a sense, the property of her mother. It may indicate that even when Rose wanted to feel close to her mother as a person, the issue of parenthood, authority, power, and the struggle these involved would always prevent Rose from being close to her mother. The drawing was very literal. She would allude to no elements of fantasy when asked about the picture. For example, when I asked her what was in the closet, what was up the stairs, and what was outside the window, she gave only real-life responses. The low ceiling in the drawing might imply that Rose felt

that her house was a restrictive environment. She did not like this drawing as much as her first.

Rose demonstrated two mistaken goals of behavior at home with her mother and in the play sessions with me. First, she sought to have power in the interactions she had with adults. She used both active and passive destructive behaviors to attain power. She was destructive when she argued and had tantrums, and passive when she was stubborn and lazy. Then, Rose demonstrated a strong need for attention. She loved to perform and display her talents. She sang, played the piano, and did magic tricks. She said things that she knew would impress adults. Perhaps these goals were partly the result of her family constellation and the fact that Rose had no other children to play with in her neighborhood. At home and in her mother's world, she interacted mostly with adults.

Yet, Rose also has many *positive* goals of behavior. She was quite self-directed when she was allowed to be. She was not afraid to try new activities or become involved with an unfamiliar group of people. She was often willing to take risks that shy people would otherwise not want to try. She had a strong sense of world justice and wanted genuinely to do something about it. Rose was very accepting of other people who are different. She had contact with a great variety of people through her mother's pursuits and interests. Rose viewed the world as a collection of interesting and worthy people who are all different and yet all alike.

Rose's mother expected Rose to do well in school, practice piano, and do many things for herself. She did not allow Rose to be lazy in the way she performed intellectual or artistic endeavors. Her mother's expectations were expressed either through anger or direct stern statements. When she was tender and loving with Rose, she spoke to her as if she were a much younger child. She often called Rose her "little flower" when she was being tender and endearing.

Rose knows she is expected to do well in her personal and intellectual pursuits. She is learning that expectations do not come from caring and tenderness but from harshness and anger. I suspect that she may grow to become the kind of adult who gets angry with herself when she does not meet her own expectations. She is also learning to act younger than she is in order to receive nurturance and tenderness. As an adult, this may generalize to other relationships in her life. She may have the mistaken belief that in order to receive love and tenderness from someone, perhaps a significant intimate other, she will have to regress to a more immature state before she can be seen as suited for receiving love.

Working with Rose in play and by observing her in her home environment I began to gain an understanding of Rose, and perhaps of all children, that comes from within Rose's sphere of understanding. I began to see Rose's world from her perspective. I could understand Rose in a way that was different from my own adult perspective. As I worked with Rose, read, and listened in lecture, I began to understand that there was a fundamental flaw in my approach with my students. I was not getting to know them as individuals as fully as I could. In a sudden moment of insight, I realized that I was not relating to my students as complete human beings. My soul was impressed by their development and growth, but it never recognized the uncharted territory to be explored in the person each child is as the complete and fully developed human beings they already are. I had not been relating to and respecting my students as people, like I might respect an adult as a well developed person. I was amazed by this revelation (and even more amazed that I discovered it on my own). It was a shock to me that I had believed all along that I was doing my best for my students. I realized that I was not understanding them as they functioned and lived in the present. Instead, I viewed and related to them as the people they might become, to their potential as adults.

As a teacher, I looked at children as incomplete adults. Bundles of potential, needing to be molded and developed. My task as a teacher was to look for each child's strengths and help them to develop these into assets they could use as adults. This is an appropriate task for a teacher, but it ignores another more significant aspect of the child. It denies a child the complete and whole person they are in the moment. They are already living their lives to their fullest potential. Their lives are no less meaningful because they are not adults. Their feelings and motivations are no less valid because they are children. We think children do not know

themselves as well as adults know themselves. We believe that a child's feelings are immature and muted because they have not fully developed into the mature feelings an adult possesses. These beliefs are common in education and permeate what I do as an educator. Yet, these beliefs are inaccurate and they deny the completeness of the child in the present moment. Who else but a child could know her or him self better than anyone else? A child's feelings are complete as they are and must be respected as genuine. A child's life has rhyme and reason in itself and is not a precursor to what we adults often believe is the more enlightened and complete life we possess as adults.

The experience I had with Rose and the play therapy course with Dr. White significantly changed the way I respect and interact with children. It also affected the way I structure my classroom. Spending time with one child and attending to only the needs and motives of that one child gave me the opportunity to relate to children in a way I had not done before. In the educational setting, I was expecting myself to attend to the external learning needs of the children I interacted with. Now, I am able to see, feel, and relate to each student's needs, as well. I can value each child's present moment without allowing other influences to affect my interaction with them. My classroom is much more democratic and encouraging. My students walk in every morning happy, energetic and positive, which I never saw in previous school years. I do more now to enjoy each child at the moment I am with them. I provide my students with more control in choosing the direction of our daily activities. Just because I am the adult does not always mean that I know what is best for my students at every moment. I am becoming better able to understand each child's need within the group and put my own needs aside without feeling harmed, disrespected, or defensive. My perspective has changed. I am seeing more fully the children I am working with as the people they are in the present. I am no longer viewing them as the adults I believe they have the potential to become, adults I may never know.