The Work of Play for Parents of Schizophrenic Children

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ABSTRACT: During treatment the schizophrenic child begins to emerge from his constricted, self-centered world and to enjoy interaction, play and playfulness. Many of the parents are as constricted and unable to play as their children. The use of a play corner, dress-up clothes and a staff member who can model roles to play helps reduce the "work" of play for parents and child. Their resulting mutual pleasure and increased spontaneity enhances treatment.

One role of play and playfulness for adults is to provide a change of pace and reduce the stress from demanding work. The capacity to experience relationships in a more lighthearted and pleasurable manner sets a tone in the home that gives permission to feel and behave playfully. Parents who are appropriately playful and childlike with children permit the child to relate to and enjoy the adult at the child's level of development.1

Some parents of schizophrenic or otherwise seriously disturbed children are not able to use the re-creative aspects of play with the other parent or with their children. As if bound by iron bands, these parents and their schizophrenic children often appear similarly wooden and rigid in all their behaviors. The etiologic impact of such parental behaviors affecting at least the preservation of the disturbance in the child have been speculated on.4

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The tentative use of play as a symbolic expression of wishes and conflicts is a major therapeutic milestone with schizophrenic children. Such an achievement usually occurs only after long, arduous work within the therapeutic relationship. This paper illustrates the rationale and process of helping the parents of schizophrenic children who talk and appear to have a normal intelligence to work at freeing their own spontaneous and playful impulses in a milieu treatment program. These efforts at freeing the parents' abilities to play and to encourage their children to play have also been described in a different context by Shopler and Reichler. Shopler and Reichler encouraged parents to become co-therapists. In learning to work with their child parents become more spontaneous and playful. Weikert and his co-workers and Gordon and his colleagues are among several educators who have developed home teaching programs for less disturbed children which included teaching children and parents to enjoy playing together. A model program of parent-child learning together through play was described by R. Berlin. In this paper clinical examples illustrate the difficulties both parents and staff experience in engaging in playful activities. We describe some processes which were helpful in diminishing these difficulties.

Development of Play with Schizophrenic Children

While play is the typical and essential vehicle for the expression of fears and conflicts required to master the environment, and social learning for the normal young child this is not so for the seriously disturbed and schizophrenic child. In fact, it will only occur after the child has established relationships in which he is able to trust the adult enough to express feelings. As is well known, such trust comes neither quickly nor easily and is dependent on the psychopathology not being so severe and of such long duration that both language and intelligence are seriously affected. Once trust is achieved however, the child will, with appropriate support, encouragement and modeling, begin to slowly and tentatively use play and fantasy.

Frequently, the initial transformation occurs when the child is helped by adults to use speech or play to express the conflicts manifest in withdrawn self-destructive or assaulative behaviors. The milieu staff members first focus on helping the child reduce his conflicts about and provide appropriate avenues for expression of conflictful feelings. To do this the milieu staff must attempt to change the con-