The Boa Constrictor
or the Hat:
a Dilemma for Child Therapists

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ABSTRACT: The child therapist must satisfy two prerequisites for successful treatment. These conditions are: 1) a positive alliance with the parents; 2) an understanding of the child's world. At times, the demands imposed on the therapist via these conditions conflict. Empathy, for either child or parent, may become blocked. This paper will explore the vicissitudes of conflicting identifications within the child therapist. Possible resolution of this conflict via simultaneous empathy will be discussed.

Imagine a pictorial outline of a boa constrictor swallowing an elephant. Now, picture the space filled in. Is it possible to deduce the original image? This question is vividly posed by Antoine de Saint-Exupery in his book, The Little Prince (1943). The book begins with the previously mentioned image, which serves as a yardstick for measuring the adult's capacity to perceive the child's world. The adult who saw only the hat in the picture failed the test. In the author's view, this meant that the child's trust might be lost to such a person.

My drawing was not a picture of a hat. It was a picture of a boa constrictor swallowing an elephant. But since the grown-ups were not able to understand it, I made another drawing: I drew the inside of the boa constrictor, so that the grown-ups could see it clearly. They always need to have things explained. My drawing NUMBER TWO looked like this!

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The grown-ups' response, at this time, was to advise me to lay aside my drawings of boa constrictors, whether from the inside or the outside, and devote myself instead to geography, history, arithmetic, and grammar... grown-ups never understand anything by themselves, and it is tiresome for children to always be explaining things to them... I have lived a great deal among grown-ups. I have seen them intimately at close hand. And that hasn't much improved my opinion of them.

Drawing Number One

This image of the hat in *The Little Prince* will be utilized in this paper to present a dilemma of the child therapist. The position of child therapist involves a delicate balance: the therapist must balance an understanding of the child's world (boa constrictors and elephants) without, at the same time, losing empathy for the parents (hat).

Many factors unique to the situation of the child therapist may at times promote oversimplifications, and at other times, conflicting identifications. Some practices may block empathy for either the child or the parents and create conflict for the therapist.

Initially this paper will present the general reactions that tend to be induced by factors idiosyncratic to the situation of the child therapist. Discussion will then follow to illustrate conflicts in identification. The final section will discuss resolving the problem of conflicting identifications by gaining increased empathy with the parents.

*Factors Unique to Child Therapy*

To begin, it is necessary to list factors that are unique to the child treatment situation. These include the following (Glenn, 1978):