

Uli Yaron

Coping Anxiety through Play

“It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self.”

Donald Woods Winnicott, Playing and Reality

After graduating from the Amherst Feldenkrais course in 1983, I worked for many years with children and adults with FI and ATM. In my work with children suffering from significant developmental difficulties I have found that there is great benefit in a rich environment that enables playing, and I have not been satisfied with classic FI work on the treatment bed. When I became acquainted with the work of Yael Ophir, also a student of Moshe Feldenkrais, I found a room with various facilities such as ladders, tunnels, ball pools, elevated surfaces, pillows and mattresses, where the child can move freely and spontaneously. By creating awareness to the movement, or non-movement of the child in the room, and to his actions and lack of actions, the child learns about himself.

Yael Ophir has developed a method that takes Moshe Feldenkrais' FI principles into the free play space. While playing, we learned from her to emphasize the components of movement, which are direction, power and time, and how the child leans and moves. As in FI, emphasizing the components of movement brings the child to awareness and self-learning that leads to his development. Moreover, the method that she developed recognizes the crucial developmental role that spontaneous play has, which is necessary for the development of the human psyche.

There are several forms of universal children's games which can be found in different human cultures. It is through these games that each person undergoes its mental development. They play a role in the understanding of relationships, of the self, and as a gateway to the processing and integration of deep anxieties. These forms of play include, for example -

1. Hide and seek
2. Tag (chase)

3. Throwing and catching a ball

The hide-and-seek game, which we will focus on in this article, appears in its early form as a "Peek A Boo!" game, with the eyes closed or the eyes hidden with a small object or with the hand. Through playing the child realizes that he is separate from the other, that he knows what he does not see in that moment, and that when he hides the other does not see him. The child's momentary experience of separation may be accompanied by a range of deep anxieties - abandonment anxiety, being alone and in the dark, and the great fear "Will they find me?". Through the game of hide-and-seek, the complex of anxieties is contained in the playful context with the other, and undergoes processing and refinement through movement and awareness.

As confidence and self-awareness increase, the game will develop until the child hides for a long time and waits for them to find him. Later on, the ability to play social hide-and-seek will also develop with clear rules and in larger groups. In my work with children, the room is built according to the child's ability to play, so that a spontaneous play is created according to his developmental stage. With the game, I bring to awareness the child's movement patterns in different ways, such as words, sounds and touch and the use of props in the room in support, while moving in the room.

I will give here an example, a case of a six-year-old boy who came to me. His parents brought him to me because he had only walked on tiptoes since the day he started walking at the age of one-year. His heels did not touch the floor at all, even when he was wearing shoes. They also said that he does not bend his head down, as this causes him pain. They also described that the child does not play with other children, neither in kindergarten nor in playgrounds, and prefers to sit with the adults. In our first meeting I saw a boy, with wide-open eyes with great curiosity, but with lots of apprehension, knees bent, head tilted forward and down, and waist pushed back. Since he did not step on his heels, when he was standing he had to jump back and forth in restlessness. The pattern of movement of the child was very much in-line with the pattern of anxiety described by Moshe Feldenkrais in his book "The elusive obvious," a pattern whose evolutionary goal is to protect the center of the body from injury.

In the first sessions, in each attempt to climb, jump on a trampoline or move from one facility to another, he fell with lack of organization, and everything was done on his fingertips. In one of the

first lessons he got into a barrel. When I tried to cover the barrel with a cloth for the hide-and-seek game, he immediately came out frightened. He did not despair and continued to enter the barrel, and slowly the time spent in the barrel became longer as I accompanied it with descriptions of his absence, his being in the barrel and my being outside, with sentences such as: "You are inside, I am outside", "I really do not see you", etc. until he asked to cover the barrel with a cloth. Each time he came out of the barrel happier, while I am literally describing how he is using different body parts to lean on, on his way in and out. The movement became more sophisticated, and hide and seek became the main game in the room.

Later in the sessions, each time before his father came to pick him up, he hid in increasingly complicated places and for a longer time. At the same time, his gait improved, until he began to step on the whole foot, and his back straightened more and more. He began to enter the barrel with his head down, completely bent, and rolled, which allowed him to straighten up later. About four months from the start of the process he began to play happily in playgrounds with other children, and began to step on his whole foot most of the time and especially during games and ball games he had not agreed to play before.

The game of hide and seek, specifically, has brought about a vital and creative encounter with the patterns of anxiety, which were expressed in both the body and the child's behavior. The work described here is achieved by combining scrutinising attention to the evolution of the movement patterns, the evolution of the game patterns, and the perfection of the movement patterns while playing. In this way, the changes in movement patterns are connected to new ways of functioning in the environment, and allow the child to spontaneously learn his abilities, in a new way. Earlier, the child experienced himself as someone who was unable to jump, hide or play ball. Now the improvement of the movement patterns opened up a range of possibilities for the child, and created new associations about his abilities. Through all these, the child was able to change his perception of himself.

Another example: A boy was brought to me by his mother for a weekly class, coming from afar. The child was 14 months old and very skinny. He could roll over from side to side, and crawl, but could not stand. He had difficulty swallowing, was not able to eat solid food, and could only drink milk from a bottle. According to his mother, the diagnosis was severe hypotonia, which also affected the

ability to swallow, and breathing problems. Indeed, the breath was heavy and the sternum area and his ribs were sunk inwards.

The first time they entered, the boy was hanging on his mother's neck and was unwilling to let go. I worked with him while he was in his mother's arms. The child was very alert, he seemed curious and intelligent, yet he was suspicious of the situation and was not willing to part with the mother.

At the next session, when the mother sat down with the child in the room, I took a very delicate, slightly transparent large sheet, and created a separation between them and me, emphasizing their disappearance from me and their togetherness. At the first moment I could hear and feel the discomfort behind the sheet accompanied by the child's heavy breathing. I brought the fabric down and turned it into a hide and seek game. The boy was intrigued, straightened up a bit and started playing with me. He attempted to look for me behind the sheet.

The following week, I covered the mother and child with the sheet and like before, I could feel the restlessness behind the sheet. I continued playing again, and to my surprise after a few times the boy came down from his mother's lap and started playing with me.

From that point on, the development was very fast, he started crawling around the room and away from his mother, and soon he started standing. In one of the following lessons, when I saw that the swallowing had greatly improved and so had the breathing, I offered the child a slice of apple. The mother was really scared, but because she trusted me, she allowed it. The boy ate the apple and swallowed excellently and from that moment began to eat solid food.

Three months after our first meeting (around 13 lessons), the boy started walking. The mother wrote to me that "he walks happily around the village".

The hide-and-seek game highlighted the fear of disengagement and separation from the mother. This fear, I believe, was what created a serious hindrance to the boy's natural development. Once this barrier was brought to his awareness, through the game, he could abandon it and open the way for development and recovery.

For the past 20 years, I have been documenting my work with children in order to be able to scrutinize it and understand where changes and developments happen. Looking again through my documentation, for the purpose of selecting the examples, I was surprised to find how often the game of hide and seek was a significant turnaround point for the children, each in his or her way and timing. And so, I believe that the hide-and-seek game is an integral part of every child's development process, and is essential to the development of a healthy self.