Monsters Under the Bed and Superheroes in the Playroom: Helpful Responses to Children's Dreams and Fantasy Play [1]

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Parents spend a lot of time helping children put causes to effects in the everyday world: for example, we explain that if we want homemade cookies we have to mix dough, cut it into pieces, and put it in the oven; that the dog is barking because he hears someone knocking on the door; that we are going to be late to school because there is a lot of traffic this morning; – and so on. What we often don't realize is that it is just as important and just as possible to help children understand and manage their feelings. Children can feel happy, sad, angry, upset, frightened, jealous, content, or anxious, but they rarely know why. Even when they are conscious of the precipitating event, such as a wonderful birthday party, a skinned knee, a new baby, moving houses, or feeling ill, they may have trouble making the connection. It is a rare child under ten who can say, "I'm really out of sorts this morning because you are paying too much attention to my little sister."

Fortunately, children do communicate about the causes of their feelings through dreams and fantasy play, which gives parents, teachers, and mental health professionals the opportunity both to gain insight into children's wishes and concerns and also to respond constructively. Effective and helpful strategies for enabling children to make sense of what they are feeling are crucial to children's healthy development and, moreover, will strengthen the bonds between children and the caring adults in their lives. Once children see that dreams and fantasy play operate like secret messages that they themselves can decode and understand, they can become as astute about their feelings as they are learning to be about the world around them. Making sense of their feelings in the context of a relationship with a caring adult empowers children and also prevents them from feeling helpless and victimized when feelings are unpleasant.

In general, dreams and fantasy play have a lot in common, but there are also important differences. Often, the engine that drives them is the same: children are happy, sad, worried, upset, jealous, angry, frightened, or content and those feelings assume greater power in a child's mind than they do in an adult's, both because children often fail to make clear distinctions between feelings and actions, and also because they tend to assume that other's minds are like theirs. That is, if they feel angry at a parent, they worry that their accompanying wishes for harm may actually come true, and also they may assume the parent is angry in return. So strong feelings and then feelings about these feelings (ie. I

[1] Adapted from a talk given in Oak Park, IL, October 18, 2005

am really angry, but I'm worried my anger will blow up my house or hurt my parents or make them angry at me) remain a source of concern and get expressed in dreams and fantasy play.

One obvious difference between dreams and fantasy play is that dreams have already occurred and are therefore circumscribed, whereas fantasy play is ongoing and interactive. As we will see, both dreams and fantasy play offer unique opportunities to help children understand their own minds.

Imaginative Play

If you spend any time with young children, you are certain to be caught up in their imaginative play, whether it's playing house, cops and robbers, superheroes, talking stuffed animals, and so on. Or you will observe fantasy play taking place between friends. Since this play is not only about having fun but is also a communication of what is on children's minds or just below the surface, when we understand and respond accurately to these communications, we can help children understand their minds and also show them the value of turning to relationships for help with their feelings. Yet parents and other caregivers are commonly at a loss as to how best to respond to the often intense and frequently bizarre nature of children's imaginative play. The following are some principles for understanding and participating in children's play.

First and most important, is not to puncture the veil of play. I cannot overemphasize that we do not want to respond as if the child's playful behavior were occurring on the level of social reality. For example, if you and your child are playing with stuffed animals and your child's giraffe tells your elephant that she is "stupid," you do not want to tell the child (or the giraffe) that that “isn’t a nice thing to say.” Insisting on social manners cuts off the flow of communication and robs you of the chance to understand what is on a child's mind. In this particular case, when the child’s parent asked why the giraffe thought the elephant was "stupid," the child responded that it was "in the dumb math group." This kindergartener was himself in a remedial math group and was clearly feeling ashamed.[2] Without "outing" the child, the parent was able to explain that children and animals learn at different speeds and that the elephant wasn't dumb but on a different learning curve and one day might well be as good at or even better at math than the giraffe. I want to emphasize that it is a rare kindergartener who could walk up to a parent and say that he felt ashamed about being in the lower math group. This is why play is so invaluable and why we want to explore the negative (and often aggressive) feelings expressed in play, and not squelch them by treating them as though they were “for real”.

The same principal of not puncturing the veil of play applies to activities that would be forbidden in the "real" world. For example, a three year old had baby dolls whose limbs detached, and he was playing "cannibal" and removing their heads and arms and legs and pretending to eat them. His father was sorely tempted to tell his son that this level of aggression toward babies was unacceptable, but caught himself at the last minute and astutely asked what the babies had done to deserve this fate. The boy said, "They were born!!" Not surprisingly, his mother had just given birth to a baby sister. The

[2] There are numerous examples to illustrate the points I want to make, but in each case I have changed the identities of the children involved to preserve their privacy.

father was able to reassure his son that sometimes children with new babies in the house wish they would disappear and that those feelings were normal.

*There are **exceptions** to the principle that we should go along with children's fantasy play even when it is antisocial.* One exception occurs when children ask us to express negative feelings toward *them*. For example, a child may request that our superhero figure "kill" her superhero, that our puppet tell her puppet that she is stupid or that we hate her, or that our doll tell her doll that she doesn't want to play with her. Children who want their caregivers to enact angry or rejecting behaviors through play are feeling badly about themselves and concluding that they are deserving of punishment. Rather than "agreeing" with them by "killing" their superhero, we have a wonderful opportunity to help them. You can speak through your superhero and say something like, "I would never hurt you – why do you think I should?" Often children will have their superheroes respond that they have been "bad" in some way. Parents can tell the superhero that if she is feeling guilty about angry feelings, that feelings are not the same as actions because they don't have consequences and so they are nothing to worry about. If children say their superheroes have actually done something "wrong," we can explain that everyone makes mistakes or breaks rules sometimes and that telling an adult and finding a way to correct the mistake is much better than looking to be punished. Again, through play we can show children that we are interested in helping them, and that we have no wish to be angry at them or to punish them.

An example is the five year old who asked his mother to have the mother doll throw one of the child dolls off the dollhouse roof. When the mother doll asked why she would want to hurt the child doll, the child doll said she had spilled coke inside the doll house. Realizing that her son had probably done something against the rules, the mother had her doll say, "I would never want to hurt you, how about I help you clean it up instead?" The little boy gave a relieved smile and said, "Okay!" and the two dolls cleaned together. When a little later the mother asked if there was something she could help her son clean up, he admitted that he had been drinking orange juice outside of the kitchen and spilled some on the rug. The mother said she was very glad he told her and together they cleaned up the spill. Testing out his mother's reaction to the doll's transgression in play allowed the boy to feel safe in telling his mother about the actual mistake he had made.

In a bestselling parenting book, the author relates an incident in which his preschool child comes downstairs one morning and says, "Pretend that I'm still upstairs and that we're going to be late and you're really mad." The author proceeded to shout upstairs, saying "We're late, and I am really mad!" Then he started storming around and stamping his foot. The author comments that, "Pretending to be mad helped me not to be really mad."

From a Smart Love perspective, however, the father's behavior in going along with the child's wish that he pretend to be angry with her was unhelpful and missed the point. The child was upset by her father's anger at her for being late. She was trying to detoxify the anger in the context of a pretend game that occurred when she was actually on time and in no danger of his real anger. If the father had gotten the message behind the script of the drama, namely that his daughter was being overwhelmed by the anger he expressed when she was late for school, he would not have followed her instructions to pretend to be angry, but would have said something along the lines of, "You know, if you're late I should never be angry at you. So if you are late this morning I would like to apologize for having been

angry in the past and I would like to help you get ready." Understanding the true meaning of his daughter's play would have helped the father improve his relationship with her and become more thoughtful about his responses when she wasn't on time.

Another exception to the principle that antisocial feelings are allowable in fantasy play is when children frighten other children by pretending to shoot them or otherwise are too aggressive. Stepping in to defuse the content of the play gives children the important message that play is for fun – and if other children are being upset and frightened, that is not fun, and so is not acceptable. I will give you an example from the Natalie G. Heineman Smart Love Preschool[3]. Two boys were having a great time playing Superman and Batman until they decided to see who was more powerful, at which time they began shoving each other and trying to push each other over. The teacher stepped in and said, "I can see you are playing superheroes, but you need to pretend to fight, not actually fight because someone could get hurt. Anyway, Batman and Superman are usually on the same side. Do you think they could work together to catch the lawbreakers?" At this point the boys climbed up into the loft and spent a good fifteen minutes cooperatively looking down on the "city" and pointing out situations where there were people in trouble who needed their super powers. Rather than lecture the boys about the virtues of being nice to each other and not shoving, which would have felt critical to them, the teacher preserved the fantasy play and successfully appealed to the two superheroes' positive social motives.

It is very enlightening to children to realize that play is for enjoyment and that if someone is being made unhappy, something needs to change. This is a lesson they can take with them on the playground and as they move up in grades and on into adulthood. It will make it easier to walk away from friends who are having a bad day and not being nice and to join up with other friends who offer a more satisfying experience.

Another valuable function of fantasy play is that it offers adults the opportunity to help children who have undergone traumatic experiences. Experiences that children find traumatic can range from a scary movie, to a car crash, to upset over parental illness or divorce. Sometimes the trauma is played out quite literally. One child who had been in a car crash took out his cars as soon as he got home and began crashing them together. But he denied that he had been frightened and asserted that he was the firefighter who would rescue the people in the cars. When he resisted any suggestion that the accident must have been scary, his father supported his need to feel in control by joining with him and pretending to be a fellow firefighter. A day later, the boy was still playing the fireman rescuing the victims in the crashed cars, but he began to say that the dolls in the car were frightened, and that he was going to comfort them, which gave his father a chance to agree that crashes were very scary and that perhaps he was still feeling a little scared and would like a hug himself. The boy nodded and threw himself into his father's arms.

Sometimes the traumatic feelings being expressed in fantasy play are more disguised. For example, at the Natalie G. Heineman Smart Love Preschool two children were playing at putting a teacher and other children in jail. Then they would let them escape, catch them and put them back in jail.

[3] See www.smartlovefamily.org

The teacher wasn't sure what upsetting experience lay behind this game so, while staying in character, she made an open-ended remark, saying, "It's not fun to be locked up. I want to be with you, I don't want to be by myself. What did I do that was bad?" One of the children said, "You were rude and talked back." The teacher asked if the boys ever talked in ways adults didn't like and if so what happened. The children immediately said they were given time-outs at home and that they hated being sent to their rooms. The teacher said, "It sounds like when you get a time-out it feels like being put in jail." Both children agreed. Without realizing it, by putting other children and the teacher in jail, the two children were identifying with their parents and using isolation to make others unhappy. When the teacher talked about how she felt in jail, the children were able to connect the fantasy play with their discomfort during time-outs. They progressed from identifying with their punishers to staying in touch with their own feelings.

Incidentally, this example illustrates the reason time-outs are not benign, which is the way they are often presented. If we give time-outs when we don't like children's behavior, they may learn to isolate themselves when they are upset rather than to seek help. Moreover, as adults, they may be unsympathetic with people in their lives who are unhappy or have differences of opinion. On the other hand, if we manage their immature behaviors firmly but lovingly, children will grow up to know that differences of opinion don't have to lead to acrimony and alienation but can be resolved with love and kindness.

Sometimes the unpleasant experiences being expressed in fantasy play alert us to the fact that children are being overwhelmed by something in the environment we may not be aware of. For example, children may engage in fantasy play that expresses intensely negative feelings about their caregivers. Because children do not usually realize that their communications can be easily "decoded," this behavior throws light on the way they are experiencing us. If we can avoid taking their words personally, we may learn that we are coming across to children differently than we think.

One mother who believed she was encouraging, but not pressuring, her daughter to practice the piano was taken aback to hear her daughter in the character of Super Girl calling her mother on her play phone. The girl began to yell into the phone, "I don't want to practice flying, Mom, I hate it. And I don't like you, I don't like you, I don't like you!" Her mother was able to put aside her hurt feelings and think about what underlay this negative outburst. She realized that it must have to do with her insistence that the girl practice the piano. Staying in character as Super Girl's mother, she said, "Do you hate practicing the piano, too?" Super Girl said, "YES!" The mother said, "Well, we can probably work something out so that if you really hate flying and practicing the piano, you won't have to do either unless you feel like it." In this case, it was only through the child's play that the mother was able to get in touch with how pressured her daughter was feeling and how counterproductive it was to make her practice if she didn't want to.

Often children reveal important misconceptions in fantasy play, so that adults have the opportunity to use the play for education. Three three-year-olds, Joan, Rachel, and Emily, were having a playdate. Joan was pretending to be the mother of triplets. She said, "I just had these babies!" Rachel said approvingly, "You did? They are very cute!" Joan responded, "Yes, they were in my tummy and then the nurse cut my vagina open and took the babies out." Joan's mother seized the opportunity the

play offered for a little education and said, "Actually the babies weren't in your tummy, they were in your uterus and if the babies need to be taken out the doctor takes them out from the uterus, not the tummy and they don't cut open the vagina." Again, no three year old will walk up to a parent and share her misconceptions about where babies come from, but important misinformation will often come out in play.

Imaginative play can also be used to strengthen social skills and empathy, but for this growth-promoting end to be accomplished, sensitive adult intervention is often required. In one example from the Natalie G. Heineman Smart Love Preschool, two boys, Robert and Andrew, were making a fire truck out of big blocks and they announced that only firemen were allowed on the fire truck. A third boy, Elliot, wanted a turn but instead of saying he was a fireman, he said he was Spiderman. Robert said Spiderman was not allowed, only firemen. He even made a sign with a Spiderman on it and drew a circle around it with a diagonal line through Spiderman, indicating how serious he was about this. In response, Andrew ripped the sign down, looked at Robert, and said “I say Spiderman can come on the fire truck.” Robert didn’t know how to respond to this announcement, so he sat there. After a moment he said “That’s ok I’ll make another sign.” He started making another “No Spiderman” sign, saying, “I made the firetruck and so I can say, “No Spiderman is allowed.” At this point the teacher stepped in because the situation seemed to be deteriorating. The teacher observed that since both boys had made the fire truck, they should both have a say in who could be on it. Andrew said, “Yeah and I am saying Elliott is allowed.” In the meantime, Elliott had climbed on the fire truck. Robert said, “Well, Elliott, how about if instead of being Spiderman you are the firedog?” Andrew said, “Yeah, Elliott, can you be the firedog?” Elliott began barking in agreement and remained on the fire truck. The teacher said, “You guys did a wonderful job of working this out. Everyone compromised here!”

The teacher stepped in just in time to avoid a meltdown and made a minimal but strategic input that put the children on track to work the problem out among themselves without tearing the fabric of the fantasy play. She never became critical and lectured them about social obligations etc. but simply facilitated their ability to work out the solution themselves within the story line they were creating.

Dreams

Let’s turn now to the subject of dreams and how best to respond to them. More and more the importance of good sleep to children's social, emotional, physical and academic well-being is being recognized. One commonly quoted statistic is that children normally spend 40% of their childhoods sleeping. Recent research has shown a strong relationship between good sleep and academic performance. There are many things that interfere with that sleep, but certainly one of them is bad dreams.

Bad Dreams

When children run into parents' rooms in the night chased by bad dreams, they are frightened not only by the bad dream, which seems utterly real to them, but also by the conviction that they are at the mercy of these dreams. This helpless feeling often makes children afraid of bedtime, with the result that

children and parents miss out on much needed sleep. Unfortunately, the usual advice parents are given – to tell the child the dream isn't "real" and to show the child that there is nothing hiding under the bed or in the closet – doesn't help and, in fact, ensures that the child will reawaken parents on a regular basis. Dreams are even more real to children then they are to adults, and when parents try to convince them otherwise, children feel misunderstood or, worse, inadequate when they remain fearful in spite of parents' reassurances. That monster may not be under the bed now, but it could come back as soon as parents leave the room and it was certainly there before because the child "saw" it. The result is that children continue to feel terrified by their bad dreams, which sends them running into their parents' room night after night. Taking children into your bed to comfort them is not the answer either, because this response reinforces children's fears that they need protection from the monsters in the bad dreams.

On the other hand, if we respond to them in a helpful way, children's bad dreams can actually be empowering rather than terrifying. *The goal is to help children understand that they have created their bad dreams out of anxious, angry, or disappointed feelings from the previous day.* Making this connection empowers children. They start thinking of dreams as puzzles they can solve rather than as torture they must endure.

Interpreting children's dreams is not terribly difficult because children's dreams are usually fairly transparent. Bad dreams are an attempt to deal with lingering emotional upsets, so the best way to help a child who has had a bad dream is to explain that, "Dreams are stories we tell ourselves for a reason. We just have to understand the reason." In the children's picture book, *Mommy, Daddy, I Had a Bad Dream!*[4] I wrote to help children and parents with children's bad dreams, Joey, a bouncy little kangaroo has a series of bad dreams which his parents lovingly help him to understand. By the last dream, Joey is able to apply his father's wisdom that "Dreams are stories we tell ourselves for a reason," make sense of his bad dream, and put himself back to sleep.

Once children understand that they are the authors of their bad dreams, they can enthusiastically engage in connecting the dreams with losses that are still bothering them. Eventually, like Joey, they can learn to make sense of their dreams on their own and often are able to put themselves back to sleep without having to awaken their parents.

Typically any experience that makes children sad, angry, or worried can cause bad dreams. Examples are everyday stresses such as sibling rivalry, the flu, a spat with a friend, starting a new school year, or disagreements with parents over bedtime. Or the dreams may be caused by more traumatic occurrences, such as parental divorce, a grave illness in the family, or the death of a pet. Parents may be surprised to find that when they ask children what might be bothering them, children over three can often identify a worry or loss that parents can connect with the bad dream. Having tried to no avail to reassure children who have bad dreams, parents are gratified to discover how enthusiastically children will engage in the process of connecting their bad dreams to events from the day before. Children love a puzzle and they want to feel in charge rather than victimized. This active approach to identifying the causes of bad dreams will ensure that both children and parents will get more sleep.

[4] Smart Love Press, 2012.

Parents have told me that just reading *Mommy, Daddy, I Had a Bad Dream!* to their children gave their children the tools to understand their own dreams. One little boy told his father that he was "just like Joey" and had figured out a bad dream in which he found himself on a desert island calling for help and no one came. He said he was worried about starting kindergarten the next day and needing his parents but being all alone, like being on a desert island. Unlike the Natalie G. Heineman Smart Love Preschool, the kindergarten did not allow parents to stay in school with their children on the first day. Because he had figured out the cause of the bad dream, this boy and his parents were able to talk about his fears and what to do if he missed his parents (they suggested that he remember that they loved him and were thinking about him, share with his teacher that he was missing his parents, keep in mind all the things they would be seeing if they were there and tell them about everything when they picked him up, etc.).

When children are too young to make the connections themselves, parents are usually enough in touch with the important events in their children's lives to make sense of the dreams for them. For example, Emily, who was turning three, woke up one night in tears over a bad dream. She said that a lion was eating her. The day before, the family cat had caught a mouse and played with it until it died. When Emily asked what had happened to the mouse, her mother had told her that their kitty was just playing a game with it and that the mouse was "fine" and just "sleeping." Emily kept insisting that she wanted to see the mouse, so clearly she had realized that the interaction between the cat and the mouse was not fun for the mouse!

When she heard the dream, Emily's mother realized that Emily had understood more about the scene she had witnessed than the mother realized. She responded by acknowledging that the cat had killed the mouse, and that she knew how upsetting that was, and that was probably the reason for the bad dream. She added that that's what cats do and it wasn't the cat's fault, but she was sorry Emily had had to see such an upsetting event. Emily buried her head in her mother's lap and cried for the mouse, but then she was able to go with her mother back to her own bed and she slept the rest of the night without bad dreams. One moral of this story is that we often underestimate the perceptiveness of our little ones!

In general, children may have fewer bad dreams altogether if parents acknowledge upset feelings as they occur during the day (such as the sadness Emily felt when the mouse was killed by the cat) and also regularly ask children at bedtime if there is something that happened that day that is still bothering them. The experience of having a caring and sympathetic ear to tell their troubles to may be all children need to prevent those troubles from reappearing in disguised form in a bad dream. The key is to welcome the feelings being shared even if they seem silly or unnecessary to adults. For example, one five year old announced emphatically to her mother at bedtime that she didn't want to go back to school the next day. After some gentle questioning by her mother, she said that one of the goldfish in the classroom had died. Her mother was tempted to respond that goldfish die all the time and can be replaced, but she realized that that was an adult perspective. She told her daughter she could understand why she felt upset and asked about the goldfish – what its name was, how old it was, etc. Then she asked whether her daughter would like her to contact the teacher to see if there could be a memorial service for the goldfish the next day. Her daughter nodded emphatically. Because she was able to get comfort for her upset feelings, the little girl was spared bad dreams about the goldfish, and, in addition,

because she was focused on participating in the goldfish's memorial service, she forgot all about not wanting to go to school the next day.

It's important to ask children about their day in language they can relate to. For example, we will get much more information if, in place of the general question, "How was your day?" we ask our children, "Did anything make you very happy today?" or "Did anything make you unhappy today?" And when they tell us what made them unhappy, we need to resist the temptation to take away the pain with reassurance, i.e. "I'm sure Johnnie will want to play with you tomorrow." When children sense that we are uncomfortable with their sad or upset or angry feelings, they are less likely to share them. So it's important to stick with the feelings they express: "I hear how sad you felt when Johnnie didn't want to play with you." Then often we can engage children in problem solving. "Do you have any idea why Johnnie might have been having a grumpy day?"

Summary of The Most Helpful Responses to Children Who Have Bad Dreams:
-Do ask them at bedtime if they are bothered by something that happened that day.
-Don't try to convince them their bad dreams aren't "real."
-Do explain that they are the authors of their dreams.
-Do help them to connect the dream with upset feelings from the day before.
-Always offer a big hug and a snuggle when they come to you with a bad dream.

Good dreams

I would like to spend just a moment on good dreams, because, like bad dreams, they can be used to help children get in touch with their feelings. Frequently children have good dreams in which their all-powerful-selves make them feel indomitable. For those not familiar with Smart Love terminology[5], the all-powerful-self represents children's age-appropriate but unrealistic convictions that they have great powers. The all-powerful-self experience explains why children routinely claim to be stronger than the adults around them and to know **everything.** Normally, maturation and life experiences cause the all-powerful-self to be outgrown by the end of adolescence and to be replaced by a self-experience that is more consonant with reality. For example, an adolescent who as a child claimed to run "faster than a cheetah," may tell her parents how much she admires a classmate who is a champion runner.

The all-powerful-self often figures in children's good dreams. Children may fly, wipe out legions of bad guys, have unlimited access to a candy store, or chase off a lion. As with bad dreams, the goal is not to tell the child that the dreams aren't real and couldn't happen. Adults can share in children's enjoyment of good dreams while, at the same time, they help children understand that good dreams, too, are usually responses to something that occurred the previous day. To illustrate, a six-year-old went on a birthday trip to an amusement park and was thrilled to discover that he was now tall enough to go on

[5] See *Smart Love: The Comprehensive Guide to Understanding, Regulating, and Enjoying Your Child*, Smart Love Press, 2011.

rides from which he had previously been excluded. The next morning he couldn't wait to tell his parents about his wonderful dream. He was Batman's assistant and flew all over Gotham helping Batman catch bad guys. His parents commented that sounded like a lot of fun and how it must have seemed like flying to him when he got to go on the more "grown-up" rides the day before. The little boy saw the connection and nodded enthusiastically.

Conclusion

I have tried to illustrate ways in which parents, teachers, mental health professionals, and other caregivers can decode and respond helpfully to children's fantasy play and dreams. By showing children that there is another dimension to their imaginative life besides the surface story, we enrich their experience of their own and others' minds. We also help them recognize, make sense of, and defuse feelings that are troubling them. As they become increasingly able to solve the puzzle of their feelings, children become more in charge of their own minds. Equally important, by responding constructively and lovingly to bad dreams and fantasy play, we establish the superiority of turning to caring relationships for help and comfort in times of distress.