

Wonder: The Key to *Being* in an Authentic Relationship with Children

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hildhood is associated with a sense of wonder and discovery that is often absent from descriptions of adulthood. A sense of wonder is key to a life-long process of self-discovery and healthy narratives about self, other, and the world. Play therapists and their clients will benefit from cultivating a sense of wonder in themselves. Therapeutic relationships will benefit from a sense of wonder in two distinct ways: discovering one's authentic self and letting go of negative labels.

When working with children, it is easy to wonder what their parents are doing wrong and how we can fix that. Parenting and providing play therapy have one thing in common: Most of the adult's role in the relationship transcends "doing" for the other and exists in the realm of "being" with the other in the relationship space (Landreth, 2012).

After all the years of longing to be a mother and reading books about what to do, I was not prepared for what I felt emotionally. I sat captive in absolute wonder and amazement at his tiny frame. I ran my fingers up and down the little bumps of his spine; they felt like a pearl necklace under a layer of velvet. I realized that this precious relationship – this way of being in wonder – was the single most important aspect of parenting, and one that I argue is important to carry into therapeutic relationships, as well.

I regard wonder as a key healing component of client-play therapist relationships. My play therapy goal is to be in wonder with my client. I seek to fill the room with wonder. My goal is to invite the client to experience wonder as well. Wonder is essential to discovering one's authentic self and to overcoming hardships and difficulties. We need it throughout our entire lifespan.

Wonder Wanders

Naturalist and writer Rachel Carson believed wonder is possible and essential. According to Fuller (2006), she wrote, "If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in" (p. 108). As play therapists, we are uniquely positioned to assume this role and become the stewards of wonder for our clients.

Fisher (1998) defined wonder as "a sudden experience of an extraordinary object that produces delight" (p. 55), referring to the term extraordinary as what is being seen for the first time. Although it is easy to encounter wonder with a new experience, such as the birth of a child, it becomes more difficult to sustain it as that same new experience becomes familiar, predictable, and ordinary.

Wonder Evolves Throughout the Lifespan

One can tell when babies and children are in a state of wonder by looking at them. Their faces are uncensored and their bodies unrestrained. Generally, they express the same wide eyes, open mouth, raised

CLINICAL

EDITOR'S COMMENTS:

The author describes the power of wonder in relationships.

eyebrows, and open hands typical of the response to wonder and surprise that Darwin noted in 1872 (Bynum, 1997). These characteristics are often connected to spontaneity and vulnerability. Adults often are critical of the first, and cautious of the latter.

Adults have a big effect on how children develop and respond to the world around them. For better or worse, they shape children's sense of wonder. Adults with whom children interact are likely to associate their own past positive or negative emotional experiences with children's present experiences. They are likely to act and speak negatively if their children spontaneously engage in play or activities that they were not allowed to do. In fact, it is during times when children are experiencing energy, enthusiasm, joy, and wonder that they are most likely to attract adults' negative attention (McClure Goulding & Goulding, 1979). Children, intuiting how much they need adults to survive, adapt their ways of doing and being accordingly.

Wonder is Worth Preserving

Wonder is key to discovery. With wonder we are curious, and in every moment we can get in touch with a world of possibilities. Our role as play therapists is often about joining our clients in wonder, where they discover their truth and where they heal.

Too often in life, clients become defined by a time when they were not at their best or were in the process of learning. Experiencing wonder allows them to let go of those labels and see themselves anew. When in a state of wonder, people are open to the moment and the new aspects of themselves that are emerging. When in a state of wonder, people focus on how they or others are in the moment. The power of wonder in play therapy is that it makes space for seeing one's true authentic self of the moment.

The playroom offers a container for the here-and-now moment. Grounded in the now, play therapists see clients as new and delightful, offering them an intimate relationship characterized by openness and vulnerability. This is exactly the type of relationship children need but are not necessarily being offered by the adults in their life. In my work, this is why I do not wonder what parents are doing, but how they are being with their children.



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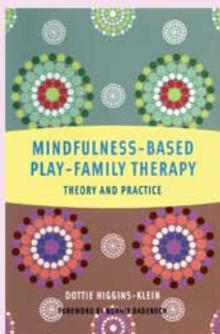
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Foreword by Bonnie Badenoch

Case Illustration

A 13-year-old client slouched in a chair and refused to speak. She grunted. She moaned. She whined about the hardship of being in the room. Her parents described her with labels like rebellious, uncooperative, stubborn, and rude. I looked at her through eyes of wonder and saw something different.

As she grunted, I remarked, “You find creative ways to not answer my questions.” She looked at me in disgust. “You’re not filtering how you feel in the moment. I appreciate your honesty.” This went on for fifteen minutes. Then, she asked, “Can I go now?” I replied, “Of course.” And I added, “I like how you ask for what you want directly.” Her mother was surprised to see us so early and asked how it went. I replied, “Great! In 15 minutes, I noticed that your daughter is creative, authentic, and asks directly for what she wants. She is choosing to leave now. I look forward to seeing you both at the next session.” I wanted to affirm my client’s power.

Both mother and daughter looked at me in surprise. Her mother stood up to leave. Her daughter sat still and stared at the floor. Her mother asked her, “Is everything OK?” The teen replied, “I don’t want to go.” She returned to the therapy room with me, and we finished our session with discussion and laughter.

Over the next few months, I focused on seeing and encouraging her delightful side. This was hard at first. She was angry at being identified the “problem” child. She would often smirk and look to the side or even stick her tongue out at me. Rather than take offense, I played with her, “Oh, just say, ‘I don’t want to and you can’t make me!’ ” while crossing my arms and sticking my tongue back out at her. As I demonstrated that I was fine with all of her feelings and invited her to express herself directly, she gradually showed less resistance and defense. Eventually, she talked about the vulnerable feelings underneath her anger.

One day, she talked about how much she misses her mother. She opened up about feeling awkward while her younger sister was still cute. She perceived that her younger sister was loved more. “I’m the bad one. She’s the good one. Everyone knows that.” I asked, “What about you? What do you know?” I followed my curiosity about what was true for her. “I’m a bit of both,” she said. After a pause, she added, “so is she.” I told her, “You’re very insightful.” She replied, “I am,” surprising me as she owned a positive attribute.

I invited the family in for a session focused on emotional literacy. I wanted to make sure they all had the same information that I was giving my client about feelings. During emotional literacy sessions, I discuss feeling happy, sad, mad, and scared. I invite each family member to act out each emotion. During the session, I noticed the mother’s laughter as she embodied anger. I probed a bit, and she admitted that her mother never allowed her to show anger as a child. The conversation went deeper as I prompted further: “Because ...” From a vulnerable place, she shared, “I had to take care of her.” I acknowledged her underlying need, “I bet you really needed her to be there for you.” She replied, “I did.”

I invited her to do an experiment, prompting her to move her chair in front of my client's chair. I modified the Initiator-Inquirer (I-I) process from couple's communication (Bader & Pearson, 2018). I briefly explained each person's role; as inquirer, my client's mother's role was to listen to and reflect what her daughter shared with her. Most people listen and respond from their own position (often defensive), rather than reflecting what they hear and asking the speaker (the initiator) to say more. As her mother reflected her feelings, my client shared more. My client moved from anger to sadness, the more vulnerable feeling underneath. My client's mother was moved to tears as her daughter told her how much she misses her. This was a pivotal moment in therapy.

Over time, my client's parents learned to manage their anxiety about what others would think about their daughter's (quite developmentally appropriate) defiance. They learned to demonstrate greater presence for and delight in their daughter. Rather than focusing on her as the identified patient who needed to be fixed, they started to look at the family system in general. They learned to be curious about each other's emotions, to tune into them, and to respond rather than react from a defensive stance.

People often experience difficulty being curious about emotions that were off limits to them as children. Just as my client covered sadness with anger, her mother covered anger with anxiety. Over time, my client's mother learned to tune into her own emotions. As she took ownership for her anxiety and tended to that, she was more available for her daughter, exploring her daughter's emotions, being present in the moment, and connecting with her.

The Power of Wonder

When we are willing to be spontaneous, vulnerable to intimacy, and to notice and respond to the nuances of ourselves and others, we make room for progress. Children need relationships for optimal emotional, and neurological health (Fraser, 2014), yet no one experiences perfect parenting. However, within reliable good-enough relationships and environments that nourish wonder, children learn that they and those around them are not perfect, but they can still be spontaneous, intimate, and autonomous.

The here-and-now is the only moment that matters for relating and connecting to others in a truly meaningful way. It is where relationships are experienced and nurtured and through which our very concept of self is born. Wonder can be preserved across the lifespan. In fact, the creation of a loving, nurturing society depends on it.

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