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Problems in Make-Believe: Real and Pretend

by W. George Scarlett

Not long ago an experienced director of a program for normal four and five year olds called me to ask my opinion on a problem she was having. Three boys were playing in a very disturbing way. The boys called themselves "robbers" and pretended to cut apart baby dolls. In the middle of some activity, one of the boys would cry out "The babies!" and all three would dash to the doll corner to begin hacking away with play knives and sticks at the dolls' arms and legs. The director and her teachers were puzzled. Were the boys *just playing* or were they practicing violence and cruelty? The answer isn't obvious or clear cut. Teachers and directors can, however, develop guidelines to judge the health or ill health of fantasy play. In so doing, they can increase their chances for making wise decisions over whether and how to intervene.

Is the Fantasy Mature?

In mature make-believe play, children create characters who are fanciful. These characters interact rather than going their separate ways. The actions are imaginary, not ordinary; and the scenes are imaginative rather than straight out of real life. Mature fantasy moves forward with a feeling of suspense; immature fantasy remains fixed in predictable repetitions.

This question of maturity in make-believe is serious. Let me illustrate. Recently, I was asked to observe a three and one half year old — to check the child's *speech problem*. He did, indeed, have a speech problem. At lunch he hardly talked at all; and when he did, it was to indicate (by saying "Wahh" and by pointing) some food he wished to have. However, speech was only part of his problem.

After lunch I succeeded in getting him to join me in the doll corner where we played at drinking from empty cups. Other children joined us and developed our play into make-believe cooking, eating, and attending to doll babies' boo-boos. The child I was observing never got further than pretending to drink. When I ceased prompting, he began bringing me various cups and saucers to pile in a single location — play typical for toddlers rather than three and one half year olds. This child showed a very serious delay in ability to make-believe. This delay left him isolated, unable to communicate effectively, and far from progressing toward meeting future demands of a normal school.

Our three robber boys provide a different picture than this child who could not make-believe. By comparison, their fantasy seems mature enough for their young age. It has fanciful characters (robbers) that interact. Its actions (hacking away at babies) are anything but ordinary. And while we have little information about scenes, there is suspense in the unpredictability of when the robbers will strike again. It may be fantasy which is cruel or in bad taste but it is the bad taste of four to five year olds, not that of much younger children.

Is the Fantasy Shared?

A second way to evaluate the health or ill health of fantasy is to look at the degree to which fantasy is shared. By shared fantasy, I mean make-believe play which is adapted for another — as occurs in the give-and-take of cooperative dramatic play among preschoolers. Obviously, our three robbers are sharing their fantasy in dismembering babies; but what could possibly be of value in such gruesome sharing?

When children are willing and able to share fantasies, they open themselves up to pressures and support not found when fantasizing alone. These pressures and support prod them to develop and organize their make-believe. The demands of an audience or play partner push children beyond private daydreams, repetitious make-believe, and violence that threatens to become real. Furthermore, partners in fantasy provide additional excitement and ideas to keep a child focused and thinking so that he does not become bored and move prematurely to the next activity. Like the audiences of playwrights and novelists, partners bring out the best in young children's imaginations.

Shared fantasy also requires rules — rules to govern which versions of characters are *right* and which moves violate the rules. Private fantasy need not follow rules: boys can be mothering, and girls can do as they please. But in public, mommies, superheroes, and even robbers all conform to the group's rules which define their respective roles. This rule-governed nature of shared fantasy play forecasts the more sophisticated rules in games of older children.

Shared fantasy also is an important means for developing young friendships. For the past ten years, I have had a special interest in isolated preschoolers — those children who spend much time wandering around classrooms, watching others without interacting. When these children do play, they are as likely as others to ride tricycles, fix puzzles, build with blocks, or engage in the other types of play common to their age group — with one exception. They are much less likely to engage openly in make-believe play. The implication is clear. Make-believe play is especially valuable for fostering relations among preschoolers; its absence makes it difficult for children to relate.

The fact that the robber-boys are sharing their fantasy seems, then, to make it healthier than might have appeared at first glance. The demands and support of the group keep the boys developing the fantasy so that its characters and actions are mature enough. The well-developed quality of the sharing keeps the violence restricted to the dolls and unthreatening to the players — at least for the moment. The consistency of the robber roles means the boys are following rules rather than impulses. The obvious pleasure in the make-believe fosters friendship among the three.

Is There Confusion about Fantasy/Reality?

This is a third question to ask when judging make-believe. In the excitement of performing their dissection, are the boys becoming so carried away with emotion that they lose sight of what is real or likely? It is not uncommon for very young children to become terrified in the middle of their own monster play. A boy I knew often played Count Dracula. He would bare his teeth, repeat that unforgettable phrase, "I'm going to suck your blood!," and then delight in the scared expressions on the faces of his peers. But then, quite suddenly, his own facial expression would match the others', and he would cry out in terror.

Possibly the robbers could scare themselves. Confusing fantasy and reality might take a different form. Thinking even for a moment that they are actually Superman, The Hulk, or some other super-being, the children might perform some dangerous act, such as attempting to fly from an apartment window. Stories exist of such incidents; and while the incidents may be rare, who wishes to take chances? Might the little robbers find some real knives and hack away not at baby dolls but at themselves or others?

A third result of confusing fantasy and reality is that children avoid adapting and stay locked within their fantasy worlds long past the preschool years. They can have in fantasy what they are too scared or unwilling to try in reality. Pretending to be Mother or The Hulk is much quicker and easier than taking painful steps to learn skills such as reading, hitting a baseball, or avoiding lines in hopscotch. Playing at being mighty and cool saves children from feeling vulnerable when trying to make friends. Might our robbers use their fantasy to avoid having to cope with uncomfortable feelings in themselves — feelings about real dangers or about real-life situations (overhearing adults talk about a burglary or having a new baby at home)?

These, then, are the bad effects of confusing fantasy and reality. They give us reasons to intervene in a child's play when there are clear signs of confusion. But in the case of our three robbers, are the children confused? To answer this question, we need to be clear about the signs of confusion.

What Are the Signs of Confusion?

The clearest signs come from children's reactions to their own play. When children react to make-believe

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in the same way as they would to real objects and situations, they are confused by play. Also, if children show no special pleasure, joking, or excitement in play, they may be confused about the boundary between real and pretend activity. If a child pushes a toy iron back and forth across a toy ironing board without doing anything else and with the serious expression that often accompanies real ironing, the very real way the toys are treated suggests the child is not distinguishing pretend and real. To the child, this may be ironing. This type of confusion without fear shows up when disturbed children care so much about the arrangement of plates on a table that they cry or hit if another child shifts them even in play.

The three robbers are not confused in this way. The doll babies are not actually dismembered. Instead, they are left whole to be used over and over again for pretend hacking. The hacking does not involve actual or even realistic replicas of knives, but rather invisible knives or sticks used as knives. The pretense is not intense; rather, it is playful.

There is a second way to judge confusion in play. Children older than three often mark their fantasy by saying things like "Let's pretend . . ." or "Pretend that. . . ." This marking is necessary for well-coordinated, shared fantasy. It clearly indicates that fantasy and reality are being distinguished, not confused. Can we say anything about the robbers' use of markers? We lack specific information as to whether they use markers, but chances are they do. It would be difficult for them to have continued so long to carry out this fantasy together without markers to indicate what the group should be pretending. Even if they do not use markers, it is hard to imagine them responding to the question "Are you really robbers?" with anything but a response such as "No, I just pretend." Furthermore, when I asked, the director said the boys did not insist on being called robbers, nor did they carry their fantasy roles beyond their group and the doll corner.

There is a third sign we might use to evaluate the boys' confusion. When aggressive play is both explicit and extreme — as it is here — the feelings expressed appear real and potent. The danger is that the fierceness or anger acted out on the babies will spill over into other activities. The worry is that the boys will rush out of the doll corner, stomping down block buildings, yelling, or hurting other children. This kind of confusion seems a real possibility with the robbers. However, it may not occur. Before assuming any spill-over, teachers should observe: Are the children unusually aggressive outside as well as within the fantasy play? If so, they may need help separating make-believe from other activities.

Should Adults Intervene?

Using the questions above, it would seem unnecessary to intervene in the case of the three robbers. Their fantasy is mature enough. It is shared, and there are no obvious signs of confusing fantasy and reality. Still, there is the possibility that the director's and teachers' worry is the best guide. (In fact, these adults did talk to the boys about their play.) After all, is it not better to be safe than sorry by taking control of the situation?

But intervention has risks. The benefits of make-believe play come, in part, from the freedom to wish and fear freely. Such mature and shared play is not a simple retreat from reality. It is a child's way of coping with reality. Within make-believe, skills develop, friends are made, and difficult feelings are expressed and tolerated. Any interface in such a valuable activity warrants caution. Too much control can cause play to wither and disappear. As adults, we may shiver at the violence of the baby-hacking. However, good make-believe contains its own natural controls. The boys themselves may spend their interest in hacking — better on dolls with play knives than on real children with sticks. As fantasy matures, the hacking may become surgery. Because play is shared and public, another child can come by and say, "That's mean." For as long as the boys are clear about playing, they will remind each other that the hacking cannot spill out of the housekeeping corner. For as long as these natural controls are working, my rule of thumb is *stay out*.

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