

4. Adventure Playground Setting: Story Told by Playworker in the Staff Reflection Meeting at the End of the Session

On a staffed adventure playground (with big high wooden structures comprising platforms, ladders and rope swings, a zipwire, a large sandpit and a firepit, an outdoor tap and grassy mounds and bushes), children come after school and at weekends and are allowed to come and go as they please and can use tools themselves and cook over the open fire. During the school day, school groups often access the playground either for free play sessions or for curriculum-related visits. Each week, a particular PRU group (a group from a pupil referral unit which takes children excluded from mainstream school due to their challenging behaviour) visits the playground and the children are allowed to just play. The children in this group are all boys and apparently have diagnosed socio-emotional disorders like ADHD or high functioning autism.

One eleven-year-old boy (M) from this PRU group turned up on his own one weekend during a public session – this was the first time he had done this. A playworker (E) greeted him warmly as he arrived, noting that he seemed angry and upset and when M went and sat heavily on a wooden base, E sat by him and asked if he was okay. M replied, 'It's not fair – it's always me that gets the trouble. I wouldn't mind if it was me that did it, but I didn't and I still got in trouble.' E knew M fairly well and was aware of the social dynamics in the PRU group and what often transpired. E suggested to M that because he was bigger and louder than his peers he was more noticed and that if there was trouble brewing and he wasn't part of it, perhaps he could help himself more if he moved away from those causing hassle. This was talked about for a little while. M then asked for a hammer and nails and E got him some – this was often a way children 'got their anger out' by banging nails into pieces of wood. M then went to the woodpile and carefully chose an old banister spindle and started strategically knocking nails into one end. E stayed close by pretending to sort the woodpile but actually keeping a close eye on M, as if he lost his temper, E knew this could endanger others and there were a lot of other children on site. After a short time, E stood and watched M and then commented that his 'creation' looked a lot like a weapon. 'Yes it is', M said aggressively. E continued to watch and said that actually it looked a lot like a mace which is a ceremonial weapon carried by a bishop who is not allowed to carry a blade or a sword. M asked a couple of questions while E weaved a story about a mace representing authority and peace rather than violence and how it is still used today in various countries' parliaments. M seemed to take this in and after a lull; he then stood up and put his hands underneath his 'weapon' lifting it up so that it lay flat across his palms. He then proceeded to walk slowly and purposefully towards the fire. E walked slowly with him, wondering what M was going to do and planning to put himself between M and any others at the firepit if that became necessary. To E's amazement, M walked over to the fire and with great ceremony and seemingly oblivious to the other children around the fire circle who were lighting candles and poking the fire, he walked slowly through them, got down on one knee and solemnly placed the now heavily spiked spindle into the flames as though offering up treasure. He then stepped back, sat up straight on a nearby stump and both he and E watched as it slowly burnt. When it broke apart into embers, so did the spell holding their attention and M – no longer angry – moved away and went off to play elsewhere. Neither M nor E mentioned this again.

Questions

Chapter 1

- What kind of reflective questions would E be asking himself in order to respond to M in the ways he did?

Chapter 2

- Why do children like M often end up excluded from mainstream school?
- What is it about the playwork approach that helped M in this incident?
- How might this relate to the evolutionary paradigm for play?

Chapter 3

- How is E containing M's play frame?

Chapter 4

- What assumptions might be made about M and his peers after reading that they (a) are all boys and (b) that they have diagnosed socio-emotional disorders?

Chapter 5

- Which aspects of the playwork curriculum are in evidence at this playground?
- Which intervention styles does E employ?

Chapter 6

- How is E safeguarding both M and the other children? Which policies might support E's actions and how?

Chapter 7

- How might this incident be contributing to M's emotional development?

Chapter 8

- This setting puts aside time at the end of each session for staff to collectively reflect on the session that day. What are the advantages of this and how might the staff team benefit and/or improve how they do this?