

## 7. Childminder Case Study

D is a six-year-old girl who was diagnosed with leukaemia at four and at the time of writing was undergoing maintenance treatment to keep her in remission. Treatment was disruptive in that she was in and out of hospital with infections, often off school, unable to join in with a lot of physical play or sport, had total hair loss and considerable weight gain due to steroid courses. She lived with her (young) mother, had no other siblings and saw her father at weekends. She also had a respite childminder/carer who had her overnight once a week and occasionally for a whole week when her mother was on holiday/working away. The childminder (C) was also a playworker and had recently undertaken a therapeutic playwork course, and so on D's weekly visits, she spent significant time playing with her and trying to create opportunities for many different types of play that she had not experienced. The following is an extract from the reflective journal C kept.

*D was staying with us for a week while her mum went on holiday with a friend. I picked her up each day from school and told her that every day that week we would have a dedicated hour or so when we could play whatever she liked.*

*'So what would you like to play?' I asked her. D looked troubled. 'You decide', she said. I looked at her, wondering why it was that when most of the time she was demanding and tried to control everyone and everything (which we didn't allow in our house, but many of her relatives did), she seemed at a loss to control her own play.*

*'Well, let's see what we've got lying around' I said and went round rooms and cupboards with her looking at all the possibilities. She was still reluctant to choose anything and insisting that I decide; so eventually I brought out a large box of diverse plastic dinosaurs – the only thing that had seemed to interest her. 'Let's play with these then', I said. 'How do we do that?' asked D. 'Let's ask them', I replied and picked one up and spoke 'through' it saying, 'Oh great, it's time to play'. D giggled and asked the dinosaur what his name was and then we were off.*

*On that first session, we made a cave on the settee with a blanket and broom and divided all the dinosaurs into family groups. As far as I could, I followed D's lead and she was soon immersed in the play. I was fascinated to see how her dinosaur relationships were compassionate, caring and co-operative – usually D's play was highly competitive and aggressive.*

*The next day D couldn't wait to continue the play and it was a virtual repeat of the previous day – re-enacting the same conversations and activities. She was still entranced and I tried hard not to get bored or move it on too early.*

*On the third day, I made the tentative suggestion through a plesiosaur that I wanted to go on holiday. D immediately responded and we ended up making camp in the garden and feeding them gourmet grass. The rest of the week saw the building of a dinosaur theme park with rides and slides made out of rope and wood and so on. D's behaviour outside of these 'play sessions' also improved dramatically – she even played on her own for short periods (with the dinosaurs), which was unheard of at the time.*

*Interestingly, when routine returned and D was just coming once a week overnight again, she showed no interest in dinosaurs and preferred to play with L, my son, who was ten years older. On the days when L was not about, D would ask me what to play and was always insistent that I came up with ideas. We fell into a routine whereby I would plan particular experiences that I knew she would not otherwise get. These were always presented to her in such a way that she still chose to participate. I wrestled for a while with this, as it seemed to contradict the notion of freely chosen play, but on the other hand, D was accessing new play types and clearly enjoying it.*

*So we went bug-hunting and fishing and tramped through streams and marshes. We made cardboard dens inside and outside, and we made blue and green cakes and biscuits. We played with puppets, we read and re-enacted stories out loud; we recreated hospital scenes with Playmobil figures. I filled a large trunk for her with coloured paper, card, glue, paints, glitter, chalks, scissors, brushes and various fabrics and materials and we had a period of making all kinds of models and boxes and so on. I also taught her various board games that she could play at home and with others (D had few friends) and I took her on a few occasions to the playcentre where I worked as a volunteer.*

*For almost a year this became the pattern – D would rush in after school and say, ‘what are we playing today?’ I would suggest a couple of things and she would enthusiastically choose. She would always have a great time and always ask at bedtime if we could do that again (although when presented with that choice the following week, she always declined).*

*For my part, however, I began to feel pressurized to come up with ideas and I also felt that I was not being true to my own playwork ideals. How was I behaving any differently from a childcare worker that ‘plans activities’? Or to my husband who sometimes read D stories or taught her card games?*

*There was a difference in that on the whole D had freer responses with me and I knew that I spontaneously encouraged her creative thinking and was less ‘educational’ in my approach. But I also knew that I regularly asked D for her ideas and suggestions and she still persisted in wanting me to make decisions – why?*

## Questions

### Chapter 1

- Why do you think D persisted in asking C to decide on what they should play?

### Chapter 2

- Is C actually playing with D or is she playing a ‘therapeutic’ role? Is one of these better, worse or no different?

### Chapter 3

- Does the fact that C plans possible play opportunities hinder or help D’s experiences of playing?

#### Chapter 4

- Might there be any constraints on D due to the nature of their carer-child relationship?

#### Chapter 5

- Over time, which aspects of the playwork curriculum could be applied to the playing described?

#### Chapter 6

- Might there be any constraints on C because of her role as a carer/parent figure?

#### Chapter 7

- What play spaces did C access and/or create and how did these support and/or relate to the playing?

#### Chapter 8

- Has anything struck you from this casestudy that is relevant to your own reflective practice?