

## **The adult and transformations in the group with children: from chaos to the game**

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### **Abstract**

The paper discusses the specific elements of clinical work with children in groups: some of these elements are meeting with the chaos, with the primitive emotions and the bodily involvement. Go through and deal with the analytical model these elements is the genesis of any possibility of designing a game that can be shared in the group game. The presence of the adult and his role as the guide, when you work inside the game requires the ability to regress and to immerse themselves in no way to begin to translate thoughts into the language of bodies in motion, noise and excitement, which draw just the beginning narrative fragments. When the conductor resist stopping in K -, can then re-emerge with a building sense that it allows the structuring of a story that the group shares. This path analytic model applied to groups of children can jump-start the evolutionary development.

**Keywords:** children, group, transformation, shares

In a group in which children expressed the excess of excitement with a continuous whirling motion, running along the walls of the room, the group leader, thinking of a pattern that would contain the circular motion, suggested that they do the train : the idea, which was taken up for a few moments, was immediately abandoned by the children who went back to running and pushing each other about in an even more disorderly fashion. The leader, who continued to search for an image that would organize the group in a game, tried to say that the children looked like many coaches without tracks and volunteered to build the tracks with them. The kids kept running around, ignoring the adult's suggestion, and one of them started tripping the others.

A few minutes later, the leader's attention was caught by the circulatory motion that each child produced not only by running along the walls but also by spinning around : he tried to say that he would play 'top' too, since the group moved as if they were all 'top-children', and he positioned himself at the center of the group and started spinning. The children stopped at once and, screaming, surrounded him to make him spin like a top.

The adult and children had finally found a form of communication - the adult had admitted that the perpetual motion of the group involved him as well by putting himself momentarily on a par with the children who were thus able to represent in play their need not to think and not to let the leader think either.

Once this level of play was accepted, when the leader said his head was starting to spin and suggested that the top become at least a merry-go-round, the children agreed to go along with the new game and, starting to spin less vortically, they asked the adult to play the person operating the merry-go-round: they said he would be in

charge of starting or stopping the merry-go-round <<*so that everyone's head would not spin too much*>> (Miglietta, 2000).

In this sequence it is interesting to see how in the initial stages of the group it is the children who, when the time comes, recognize the adult's leadership function, and how this occurs when the adult himself is willing to look for an effective game together with the children.

Paraphrasing Winnicott, we could say that in every situation of child group psychotherapy, the type of action that is structured as a game may effectively replace interpretations and will be the more easily accepted by the children the more the interpretation that is played out surfaces and situates itself where the children's imagination was about to create it, was about to invent it, extracting it from the movement of the group that is developing, and that the function of the leader, that is of the adult, consists in identifying this type of construction.

Accompanying group leaders who are just beginning to work with groups of children, we have seen that every adult who faces group leadership is alternately - depending on the age of the children - feared, attacked, involved in play, treated as a puppet, called to be the guardian of their drives, or the captain of the journey. Among the members of the group, who are children, he is the one who is capable of participating in the game of personifications and of accepting the unpleasant roles, temporarily suspending morality and logic ; he can do this precisely because he is an adult and is capable of enduring the destructive personifications without being destroyed and without defeating the game and the pleasure that comes from it. His active participation in the game allows him to be used by the children not only for mirroring : although he is on the sidelines, the adult steers the children towards the common task, he creates links between the activities, identifies the aims, weaves with the children a plot that serves as a narcissistic ground for the group. Although he retains his thinking function, he does not present himself as the leader ; sometimes he plays the part of the toy or the puppet, but he remains a thinking toy and an intelligent puppet. In the situation described above, one clearly sees that when the leader succeeds to fulfill this function of thinking puppet, through it he favours the containment and transformation of excitement and therefore the construction of a paraexciting shell.

The adult must move within the group and let himself be involved, while at the same time he has to remain sound and must be ready to return to his original function which is to offer help: in fact, the children in the group must feel that they can always turn to the adult, temporarily stepping out of the game, and return unharmed to reality in order to be comforted at critical moments and to modulate the excitement adequately.

Such a complex and difficult position cannot be invented by any group leader merely on the basis of the willingness to explore new territories nor simply on the basis of his experience with dual child psychotherapies.

Many times in groups under supervision we have observed that in the initial phases of the groups the contents appear and vanish much too quickly to take on a form that can be described. The contents and emotions move like the colored fragments of a

kaleidoscope and the leaders experience disorientation and difficulty thinking, which however they must cope with and tolerate in order to lead a group of children towards the construction of a common game and the possibility of creating meaning. The leader will thus learn to grasp and use the visual and perceptive elements which will replace interpretation until the whirling patterns slow down, leaving room for a window through which the group communicates, according to its style, the minimum level of meaning that, by and by, it will be possible to build together (Lombardozi, 1990).

The adult function is crucial because the group is not a therapeutic tool per se, as Golding's film, *The Lord of the Flies*, suggests. This film shows how the absence of the adult function causes a destructive regression and transforms the group into a primitive and fierce horde. "What has happened to you?" the rescuers ask when they land on the island and find themselves before the children who have turned into bloodthirsty monsters.

I believe the clinic provides a good answer to this question. In a group, after the summer break, the children wrote a story together which they then read out to the leaders: this story answers the question asked by the officer in *The Lord of the Flies*: <<*What has happened to you ?*>>

The children wrote : <<*There once was a family made up of a Daddy, a Mommy and five children. Mommy and Daddy went off on a holiday and left the children on their own. The kids looked after themselves, got up in the morning, washed. They made breakfast, lunch and dinner and went to school. Everything seemed to go well in that house but at night you could hear meowing, howling and growling and the following morning the house would be in shambles and the children would have to fix everything and clean up the place. One night the parents came back and ... surprise ! Instead of the children they found five little monsters. They thought they were in the wrong house but soon realized it was actually their own house. So they began to worry about what happened to their children: perhaps the little monsters had eaten them up and chopped them into little pieces. So they understood that by leaving them alone they had abandoned them to a terrible fate : leaving them alone with the monsters. They cried and cried for their lost children until the monsters' meowing, howling and growling turned into children's weeping and they realized that it was their children who had assumed the likeness of monsters !*>> (Boatti, Cormaio, group led at the child neuropsychiatry ward of the public hospital of Alessandria).

The presence of the adult who comes back is capable of transforming loneliness and fear into weeping. As long as with his presence and understanding an adult takes charge of events, there is hope that the children will not feel like, and indeed turn into, monsters. When such a function cannot be fulfilled by a parent, someone else has to step in and take care of the growing children. The group can be one of these other places where an adult - the therapist - who is in contact with the children, at the right moment, can step in and help them by introducing transforming images.

For instance, in one of the supervised groups, at one point the children who were all screaming like savages were invited to participate in a screaming contest, which led to the group's discovery that it is possible to sing together in a chorus. However, it is the adult who, in tune with the atmosphere, finds the right moment to suggest the transformation. The dynamics of children in a group and of groups of children led according to the psychoanalytic model reveal the creative and destructive potential present in the ground. It is precisely the intensity of such potential that calls into play the adult function and the responsibility of the leader, which in consequence is great both in terms of the creativity that has to be protected and enhanced, and of the destructiveness that has to be transformed, and which requires serious training and constant updating and dialogue.

The adult who leads a group must know how to work with what is happening while it happens ; his function is aimed to sustain the movement of the group without deciding the ways, the themes and the sequences, which are always unpredictable.

Like in the virtual world of play, a child can become an airplane, a car, the wind ; he can also become a wild beast or a vampire, and when this happens it is necessary that he meet someone who accepts the content of the game as the product of a fictional aspect of the ground and develop it with him, knowing that every child must play in order to think, because the very activities of play, as Corrao pointed out, often also represent the foundation of the genesis of the Self (Corrao, *Sul sè gruppale*, in *Orme*, p. 190).

Surely, in a group of children scraps of a primitive world are likely emerge which need to be dealt with : the language and setting of the group will swing between evolved moments and the sudden appearance of fierce beasts, upheavals, storms, which the group can cope with if the leader follows the unforeseen events and, facing them, succeeds to experience with the group the birth of meaning, a meaning that is created by the children's world which proceeds alongside the adult's reverie in play. Often, through play, ghosts, beasts, catastrophes seek a way to materialize in scenes. As regards the topic of play in groups of children in the developmental age, is it also worth underlining that while in other countries groups are based mainly on verbal communication, in Italy play has been chosen as the way to express anxieties, drives, the proto-emotional sphere, because the leaders feel less concerned with confining chaos, providing a more structured setting (Bernabei, 1997). We can no doubt state that the ability to play in scenes, which is necessary in every form of therapeutic work involving children, is a truly indispensable quality that an adult must acquire in order to work with groups of children. While in dual psychotherapy objects require a narrator, one can say that in the group of children they also need a player, and if in dual analysis the narrator must become experienced in multiple narrations, likewise in the group the player must be able to play also with ghosts, beasts, swamps. One also plays with fear, but to play the fear must not be too strong, and in order for fear not to overwhelm the mind, it must be transformable, that is there must be sufficient confidence in the ability of the relationship to cope with the effects and to survive the game. Knowing that when he plays he builds an atmosphere of *reverie vis à vis* drives, the adult should use the world of play to carry out this function and thus

manage to transform fear, together with the children, turning it into something they can play with in order to convey to them the possibility of interacting with the sensorial elements that interrupt the weave of the fabric of language, breaking through the screen of the moving bodies. In our experience, we have seen that training based on analytic psychodrama favours contact with the experience of the processes that are at the origin of the ability to interact through play. Just as the practice of group training and supervision represents a path that is capable of activating the contact with the elements and problems of groupality, the group led according to the psychodramatic technique, through the acting out of scenes, produces an atmosphere of familiarity with the kinetic and scenic language that children use as a privileged channel of communication. In leading groups of children, in fact, one must participate in creating a space of thinking and symbolization that must necessarily draw from the language of play. The leaders must thus develop their tendency to move in the potential areas of experience, which goes from the mental to the kinetic spheres, participating in the creation of the playful ground of the group and must do this knowing that the adult function does not consist in being able to guarantee order but in identifying the boundary between play and act. If the leader becomes attuned to the circulating emotions and is truly in contact with the group, he can step in at the right time, fluctuating between negative capability and chosen facts, helping the children by introducing transforming images. One might then say that if it is true - as Vallino Macciò writes in *Giocare e Pensare* (1995, Guerini Studio) - that there can be no child's game unless there is an adult that can tell about it, it is likewise true, for play in a therapeutic group, that the story cannot be separated from the capability of the leader to play inside the canvas of the stories that the group itself creates in time as a process. The adult's intervention helps the group to make the expressive space of play a space that favours links between the outside and the inside. In this way, play - creating images that allow to evoke what is not visible and to represent it through the symbolic function - places alongside the juxtaposition between the world of the subject and the world of the group, that between the inner scenes evoked by words and the visible scenes evoked by games. The experience of building up shared play makes it possible for a third story - neither reality nor fantasy - to arise, which produces new links between levels of thought and levels of reality. Therefore, the adult who leads, rather than interpreting and describing, should be able to interact through words with the emotions present in the group's ground of experience, increasing its ability to express itself (Neri, 1995). By facilitating the development of games one favours the progressive differentiation of emotions and the expansion of the emotional qualities which result from experiences. Over time, in the group, play becomes a principle which organizes the experience of disassembling and re-assembling, and when the leader allows for a game to be effective, he steers the group without replacing its work of gradually transforming experience, limiting himself to highlighting the significant emotional contents that announce future developments. The encounter, contact and production of chaos, which are frequent in groups in the developmental age, do not result from the love for disorder but, as Benjamin would say, of the path that crosses it.

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