

Kicking the towers of temper: how Bryony scaffolded our relationship through play

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I first met Bryony and her mother in June 2004, when Bryony was aged 9. She quickly made it clear that she did not appreciate having to come and see me. Within the first few minutes she let me know that she was bored and that what she wanted was a hamster. At that time Bryony was attending the Day Unit at the CAMHS where I work. The Day Unit worker, Rosie, was with me and told me that Bryony never said she was bored in the Day Unit although she did occasionally have a bit of a sulk. Bryony explained to me that she liked being in the Day Unit and liked playing games there. She repeated that she wanted a hamster. Her mother explained that wanting a hamster was new. For the previous four years Bryony had relentlessly wanted a dog. Perhaps, I wondered to myself, wanting a hamster instead of a dog could be seen as progress?

Things quickly went from bad to worse, and soon Bryony was complaining that she wanted to go home, and she started to express herself quite forcefully on this subject. She started to wail and cry and soon was hitting herself on the forehead with the foam bricks we had in the room. Her mother expressed relief that she had these soft bricks because otherwise she would be punching herself or hitting herself with more dangerous objects or hitting her head against the wall. What I was seeing was nothing compared to what went on at home.

referral

She had been referred to our CAMHS service in August 2003 by the Health Visitor, who reported that Bryony had recently been deliberately cutting her hands with broken glass. She was said to have run away in the past and was described as extremely angry but unwilling to talk about this to anybody. Bryony had changed schools once because of bullying and was also bullied by neighbourhood children. She was said to try and buy friendship. The Health Visitor reported that Bryony's mother, Toni, had struggled with Bryony's behaviour ever since she was a toddler.

Bryony's parents had separated when Bryony was one year old and Bryony continued to see her father regularly. Toni had a partner and they had had a child, Jason, in January.

Bryony had been seen by one of the consultant psychiatrists on our team. He had found it almost impossible to communicate with her and expressed himself as stymied by her angry refusal to participate. In asking me to see her he hoped that a narrative approach might be more effective. At the end of my first session I feared that perhaps I was going to disappoint him!

They came back to see me about three weeks later. Bryony again made it clear that she did not want to take part, this time by leaving the room on two occasions. Between times her mother was able to tell me that what she wanted was for Bryony to feel happier with herself and to be able to manage her feelings, especially anger and frustration. Bryony cooperated to the extent that she told me that what she wanted was more friends.

I tried to use my 'communicating with children' skills by using puppets to facilitate a conversation. Bryony soon got into being a dog and did lots of woofing. I felt that this attempt had come to nothing and had deteriorated into 'silliness', although in retrospect, appreciating better now Bryony's genius for using games to scaffold relationships, I wonder if I failed to see that Bryony was in fact co-operating with me in play. Nevertheless, by the end of this session Bryony had fleetingly told me that anger was a problem, and had agreed to tell me a bit about it next time.

a letter

Here is a letter that I wrote to Bryony after the session:

Dear Bryony

Thank you for coming to meet with me on Friday. I enjoyed spending time with you and I hope your challenge cup mosaic got home safely and was brilliant. I also hope you enjoyed the match on Saturday.

At first you nodded your head when your mother said you needed to feel happier and you needed help managing anger and frustration. But later

you said the only thing you needed was more friends. At school you have lots of friends, but at your end you get bullied. You are the only one in your gang. I thought that sounded lonely.

Then later you thought anger was a problem but you did not want to talk about it. We thought about sending Dilly the Dolphin home with you so he could watch what happens and tell me, but in the end you decided not to do this. Instead you agreed to tell me a bit about it the next time we meet. I must say, Bryony, this anger seems a very tricky customer, it does not even like you to talk about it. That sounds really hard. What do you think?

Look forward to seeing you again on Friday.

Best wishes

Hugh

At the next session, however, Bryony was soon entreating her mother to "Tell him, this is a waste of time". And her mother explained that that morning Bryony had been telling her how she hated coming to see me, how she hated talking and how it was boring. Bryony had asked, "How would you like it if you had to tell all your personal stuff?"

I talked a bit with her mother, and Bryony started to complain and make whingeing noises. But when I caught her eye she was unable to restrain a smile and in response to a question from me she said that her mother thought that she was 'smiling and naughty'.

Desperate to find a way to communicate that Bryony would not experience as intrusive, I suggested that we write letters to each other and Bryony agreed. The deal that we did was that Bryony would answer my questions, that her mother also would answer them and that on my part I would only arrange appointments monthly.

This seemed like a good idea; unfortunately Bryony did not reply to my letter.

Determined to try and build a better alliance with Bryony, I prepared for our next session by obtaining games which staff at the Day Unit knew she liked and when she came we spent most of the time playing 'Shopping' and

'Misfits'. It turned out that Toni had told Bryony that as long as she was co-operative she would make up her pocket money to £9.99 so that she could buy a better skate board, one which would enable her to do tricks. And towards the end of the session she invited me to ask her some questions. I asked what it would be good to ask about and she said "My anger and how I can stop it taking control".

I asked her what ways she had of stopping anger from taking control and she told me she can leave the room, count to ten breathing in and out, or she can cry her eyes out and go up to her room. She liked going to her room and she would get under the covers and it would feel good. It was her mother who would send Bryony to her room, which she would do when she was in a state.

list of tempers

In our next session Bryony proceeded to list the tempers she was subject to. These included:

Big horrible giant boom

Angrufer

Monstroyous

Big batters boom (the worst of the tempers)

The footbang

Stupid temper

The screaming explosion

Laughing torture

Ferocious hit

Whilst listing these tempers Bryony built tall towers out of the soft bricks to represent each temper and then destroyed the tower by leaping through the air and delivering karate kicks that sent the bricks flying all over the room.

She said that temper was better than it was. She told a story of how at school a lad had hit her on the back with a snooker cue and "I chose to ignore him instead of having the footbang temper get me to kill him". I enquired why she had preferred this course of action and she said it was "because he'd have been upset and I'd have been as bad as him" and when I pursued this further she said that she wanted to be "a nice little girl who can control temper and who isn't an idiot". (For those who are into

these things, this is an illustration of the use of statement of position map two leading to an articulation of a preferred identity).

We went on to hear about the 'temper control army' which could fight the 10 tempers and throw them out of Bryony's life.

At our next meeting Bryony told me that she had got rid of the old tempers but that two new ones, 'Big explosion' and 'Line bang', had come along instead. More brick towers were built and vigorously destroyed. Toni confirmed that tempers had caused trouble less often, for less long and less intensely.

At this point we had been working together for about 14 weeks and had met six times. I had written three letters - four if you count the one I wrote following this last session. I might have given more details of the letters I wrote, but later in the work Bryony said that she thought the letters were boring because they just repeated what we had done in the sessions and she could remember that perfectly well without the letters. Her mother confirmed that she barely glanced at them before dropping them in the bin.

We worked together for another seven months, and I met with Bryony and her mum a further ten times whilst on four occasions I met with her mum on her own. During this time we progressed in fits and starts, and soon after the last session described above, Toni was saying that there had been no change since being referred to the service over a year ago and Bryony was saying that she didn't want to talk to anyone outside of the family. Toni did however observe that Bryony found the sessions calming, whilst saying that she herself was desperate for a diagnosis. Later Toni told me that Bryony had started stealing and telling lies, and she noticed that she had "obsessional traits". She was desperately worried for the future. We were clearly not out of the woods.

creativity

Bryony continued to find the sessions hard and she responded to this with all sorts of creative games which structured the 'interviews' as play. These were entirely Bryony's idea and invention and I came to thoroughly enjoy her creativity. For instance, we would play hang man, and every time I got a letter right I was allowed to ask her a question, and every time her mother got a letter right she could ask a question; or a game

where Bryony made a ball of paper and we threw it to each other, and whoever had the ball could ask someone one question; or a game where I could send her a questionnaire through the post and she would answer them and bring the results to our next meeting (see in the box for an example). Meanwhile, I continued to externalise, look for skills and knowledges, witness accounts of preferred identity, develop new language for both problems and solutions, and try to follow Bryony as closely as I could. We had enactments (of 'huffies and puffies') and we had performances (of recovery from the tempers and frustrations that took to invading the therapy room). We compared the effects of disappointment and frustration with the effects of calm and acceptance. We started to think about how tempers got Toni to respond and the effects of these responses on temper. We considered the desirability of celebratory parties and of public awards for achievement (this, it turned out, was considered highly desirable by Bryony!). We also started to listen to increasingly frequent accounts of Bryony dealing with severe disappointment with equanimity. For instance, we heard how Bryony (to whom football was almost as important as skateboarding) had coped with losing her football boots by thinking "It's alright because I can play football any time". We heard how she had accepted her mother's refusal to let her buy a drink from the shop. We heard how when her mother wouldn't allow her out to visit her friend (yes, Bryony found friends!) there was no huffy and puffy and how she 'didn't think about it', and how this meant that she was 'getting better at controlling temper'. We heard how banging her head against the wall had been replaced with slamming doors and how this was a step forward. We heard how Toni was giving Bryony more responsibility for the consequences of her actions and how Bryony was rising to this challenge. We heard that Bryony noticed that her mother was no longer shouting at her and grounding her and how that made Bryony feel nice and good, as well as making her mother feel happy, and how all of this was "relaxing".

running tally

As we heard all the examples of Bryony finding ways to deal with frustration without allowing huffies and puffies to spoil things even further, I kept a running tally, and would frequently rehearse the ever growing list.

Dear Bryony

Here's a quick questionnaire!

1. What is your favourite colour?
2. What is 372×695 ?
3. What is the main ingredient of calamari?
4. What is your best way of stopping the huffies and puffies?
5. What do you most like doing when you are not in school?
6. Who are the members of West Life?

That's all for now. Look forward to getting your answers.

Best wishes

Hugh

Finally, in April 2005, almost eight months after starting our work together, I heard Bryony and her mother considering a problem together and through co-operative conversation agreeing a way forward. I drew attention to the relationship of dialogue I had seen performed before my eyes, and Toni told me that she could not recall them ever working together like this before. Two weeks after this I had a phone conversation with Toni. She told me that a friend had asked how Bryony was doing and without thinking Toni had said "She's making good progress". She had been surprised to hear herself say this and then had thought to herself, "It's true, she is making good progress".

Over the next five months we had three further sessions, culminating in a party, attended by, amongst others, Bryony's class teacher, a wonderful person who had encouraged and witnessed Bryony at every stage of the way. We had sandwiches and a big chocolate cake, and in a brief ceremony I presented Bryony with a certificate which recognised her "skills in blocking out temper, making and keeping friends, and getting happiness going", achievements that Bryony had identified at the previous meeting.

I've met with Bryony and her mother since to talk about this article and to discuss their thoughts about the work.

Both agreed that Bryony had changed greatly and that she was a lot happier now and that they got along a lot better.

what helped, was learned, and remembered

I asked Bryony what she thought had helped her change. She listed:

Getting to see Hugh's nice pea green boots and his frizzy hair like mine

I really wanted a skateboard and Mum had said that if I was good with Hugh I could have one

Wanting the party

Going in the observation room [This was not in use during this work]

Building the towers with bricks and jumping off and knocking them everywhere.

She added that her advice for anyone who found themselves in a similar position was "If they've ever felt that their life is a bit ruined and they think they are a really awful person, just remember happy things and the things you've done before that were good".

Toni said that some of the things she had learned were:

That she had needed help as much as Bryony

That taking the time to sit down and have a conversation and listening gave great rewards

That after an argument we can hug and make up and talk about it until we feel better

That showing Bryony respect you get it back, but that it doesn't come naturally

It's about putting effort in

And Toni particularly remembered:

Sitting there whilst Bryony was doing karate moves through the air and thinking, "What is this about?"

It was like there were no holds barred

Snippets of her being closer and opening up and telling me why she was angry

When we started hugging again

The day I realised things were changing: I said that I didn't feel we were any further on than 6 months ago and you read the notes [from then] and I sat with my jaw on the floor. I thought, "That

wouldn't happen now, Bryony wouldn't behave like that and I wouldn't respond like that".

And Toni added that "When we started it was because relationships were bad, but it's strange to say, I look back on it [the work together] with fond memories".

So do I, so do I. And they are memories that I will always cherish.

A final afterword. Since we finished work together Toni has started back at college and has finished her Level 2 Counselling Course and has been accepted for her Level 3. She plans to take a Diploma in Counselling.