

**Title: Repetitive Symbolic Play as a Therapeutic Process**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Child centred play therapy theory explains that the facilitative environment of the relationship between child and play therapist allows the child the opportunity to confront emotional pain imbedded in lived, relational experiences, and in so doing process and gain mastery over it. However very little research exists into how the child, through his use of repetitive, symbolic play, as a therapeutic process, achieves this resolution. This research project aims to address this gap in research by exploring and describing repetitive symbolic play as a therapeutic process within child centred play therapy that facilitates change in the child's sense of self, assisting him towards healthy adjustment. The research project uses a young boys' therapeutic process as a case study, employing a qualitative research design that draws from interpretative research.

Fourteen repetitive play sequence themes were analysed within the context of the case formulation and follow-up feedback meetings that took place throughout the therapy process. Using a hermeneutic enquiry the researcher illustrates how the child's sense of self, dependent on his perceptions of his external environment, became far more congruent, as evident through his behaviour, when his environment, first in play therapy, then at home and at school became more consistent, supportive and nurturing. Within this facilitative environment the researcher then describes how the child used repetitive symbolic play to address and process emotional issues relating to earlier experiences within his external environment. Hermeneutic analysis suggests that the child's use of repetitive symbolic play within the facilitative relationship between him and his therapist became a therapeutic process in and of itself that contributed towards self-directed healing, and change within his sense of self, that promoted healthier adjustment within his environment.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

This research project aims to explore and describe repetitive symbolic play as a therapeutic process within a child-centred play therapy modality that promotes self-directed change in a child's sense of self which facilitates healthier adjustment to his environment.

Chapter 2 introduces and orientates the reader within the field of play therapy by providing a working definition of children's play, and outlining the therapeutic value of play for the growing child. Child-centred play therapy is presented as a developmentally appropriate and evidence-based psychological intervention for children, and within this context, a theoretical understanding of repetitive symbolic play is outlined. The chapter concludes with a summary of the case of Peter, a six year old boy who was referred for play therapy after he presented for psychological assessment and treatment following his parent's divorce.

Chapter 3 presents the research methodology selected to meet the aims of this research project. Within this chapter qualitative, interpretative research and case study methodology is outlined as the method of choice for this particular research project. The data collection and reduction processes are clearly detailed and motivation for the use of a hermeneutic enquiry as the selected data analysis process, is presented. In addition the necessary ethical considerations pertinent to this research project are identified.

Chapter 4 describes in detail the analytic process of immersion in the individual narratives, identifying of common themes across narratives, and developing associations between these themes while applying child-centred play therapy theory, with the intention of addressing the research aim of exploring and describing repetitive symbolic play as a therapeutic process.

Chapter 5 reviews the research project, drawing overall conclusions about the research process, while reflecting on whether it was able to meet the aims of the project. In addition strengths and limitations in the research design are examined and discussed.

## **2. CONTEXT AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 PLAY:**

Play is the most fundamental of childhood experiences, spontaneously engaged in for pleasure without the need for adult instruction or external rewards (O’Conner, 1991). It is a “limitless language of self expression” that allows children to explore, experiment and discover themselves within a non-threatening and controllable environment of fantasy and make-believe (Landreth, 2001, p. 3).

As children play they improve motor co-ordination skills, experience kinaesthetic stimulation and achieve sensory integration (O’Conner, 1991). Play allows children to experiment with separation from their primary care-givers and begin interacting socially with others as they explore and gain physical mastery over their external environments (O’Conner, 1991). Through play children also develop cognitively and emotionally as they practice expressive language and communication skills, social and interpersonal skills (Landreth, 2001). In addition children’s play holds significant therapeutic value.

### **2.2 THE THERAPEUTIC VALUE OF PLAY:**

In his work with children Winnicott (1942) theorised about the potential therapeutic value play provides for the growing child. The following four fundamental therapeutic qualities of play can be extracted from his work.

#### 1) Play provides a natural and spontaneous context for self expression:

Winnicott (1942) identified the spontaneous and unconscious nature of play and emphasised the pleasurable quality of play both physically and emotionally. Within this enjoyable context Winnicott (1942) noted that as children play they communicate their experiences and perceptions of their lived realities and inner psychological worlds. Erikson (1963) likened the spontaneous self expression evident in children’s play to that of adult speech, explaining that in much the same way as adults give meaning to their lived experiences by talking about what they have lived through, so children communicate their experiences spontaneously and unconsciously through the enjoyable activity of play.

Landreth (1982) theorised that children express their emotions and needs within the themes of their play. He explained that the content and themes apparent in children's play are not simply spontaneous creations, but develop through lived experiences. When children are faced with overwhelming experiences their natural, unconscious impulse is to express and make sense of these experiences through play (Landreth, 1993).

Because most children only fully develop the ability for abstract thinking and meaningful verbal expression between eleven and twelve years, younger children express themselves more naturally through the concrete act of play (Landreth, 2002). Play can thus be conceptualised as the language young children use to communicate their thoughts, feelings and experiences, both directly and symbolically (Landreth, 2002).

2) Play is neither fantasy nor reality but rather a bridge between the two:

Winnicott (1971) described play as a safe and comfortable space where children manipulate objects from their external realities into their own imagined meanings and feelings based on their inner, personal realities. As a result children's play represents neither their external environments nor their internal psychic worlds, but rather bridges the gap between the two through symbolism and make-believe.

Within this magical space children draw on concrete objects in the form of toys, to organise and make sense of overwhelming experiences in their external adult worlds, symbolically reengaging with frightening experiences from their lived realities, but within the safe and controllable confines of the world of play (Landreth, 1993).

As children draw on wishes, magical beliefs and imitation, they become both the monsters and superheroes of their fantasies, assuming stronger, more resourceful characters in their stories (Schaefer, 1993). They are able to deny elements of reality that they find overwhelming or unpleasant, allowing them to be braver, stronger and more powerful than their enemies (Schaefer, 1993).

Play thus promotes the integration of children's lived experiences with their inner psychological realities (Landreth, 1993), allowing them to develop insight, problem-

solving skills and mastery as children gain an understanding of their experiences (Bratton, Ray, Rhine & Jones, 2005). What was overwhelming and unmanageable in the external, adult world becomes controllable and open to manipulation in the magical world of play.

3) Play provides a safe and containing context for the processing of emotions:

Within this magical context, children are able to express their emotions about what they have experienced and witnessed in their lived realities with others. Play allows and contains these expressions without judgement or retribution, providing children with a context that tolerates emotional expression without subjecting children to negative consequences for their feelings (Winnicott, 1942).

Children are thus able to unconsciously transfer emotions from lived experiences onto their play, rearranging elements of painful emotional experiences they were unable to overcome in reality, into fantasies that allow them the opportunity to experiment with agency and imagined mastery over these experiences (Erikson, 1963). The symbolic expression children choose to use combines the process of emotional expression with problem-solving as they resolve frightening or confusing experiences while playing them out symbolically (Landreth, 1993).

4) Play develops personality, life experience and social skills:

Winnicott (1942) observed that as children play they gain life experience through social interaction with other children and significant adults. They practice different role identifications as they play dress-up and take on imaginary identities in their play. Erikson (1963) understood this process as a means by which children imagine and practice mastery over their physical and social experiences, developing trust, autonomy and a sense of identity within their social environments.

In addition children repetitively reengage with old conflicts and past experiences, experimenting with new ways of being in their play. By taking on new roles and characters as they draw on symbolism and fantasy, children revise old images of themselves, and relationships to significant others and the world (Frank, 1982). Their perceptions are challenged and changed as they are able to manipulate their games, taking on new positions of agency and resourcefulness in their play realities.

In summary, play can be understood as a natural and spontaneous context of self expression that bridges reality and fantasy, allowing children to make sense of their lived experiences and process their emotions while discovering their personalities, developing social skills and gaining life experience. Play effectively provides a safe, protective and containing space where children can recreate themselves and self cure (Erikson, 1963). Play can thus be conceptualised as the most self-healing tool childhood offers the developing child (Erikson, 1963).

### **2.3 THE INTRODUCTION OF PLAY THERAPY:**

Recognising the therapeutic value of play, psychoanalytic theorists Anna Freud and Melanie Klein began using play as a developmentally appropriate alternative to the adult technique of verbalised free association in their analytic work with children (Bratton, Ray, Rhine & Jones, 2005) drawing on Sigmund Freud's personality theory of infantile sexuality (Lee, 1999).

Experimentation within the field of play therapy led to a variety of different theoretical approaches emerging, and diverging from this initial work including David Levy's release play therapy and Gove Hambidge's structured play therapy approaches (Bratton et al., 2005).

In addition to these more directive approaches, Virginia Axline introduced non-directive play therapy drawing on Carl Roger's person-centred therapy principles (Axline, 1982). Axline's primary focus centred on allowing the child to take responsibility for the direction of the therapeutic process (Axline, 1982). Furthering Axline's work, Gary Landreth developed the child-centred play therapy approach (Landreth, 2002). For the purposes of this research project discussion will now focus on this therapeutic approach.

### **2.4 CHILD-CENTRED PLAY THERAPY:**

Landreth and Sweeney (1999) describe child-centred play therapy as a philosophy of 'being', as opposed to 'doing', in relation to the child. The therapeutic relationship is primary and draws on humanistic principles of unconditional positive regard, empathy and genuineness, while the strongest therapeutic tool for change is the

child's "innate human capacity to strive towards growth and maturity", or the "ability to be constructively self-directing" (Landreth & Sweeney, 1999, p.17).

### 1) Personality:

The child's personality is conceptualised from a Rogerian, person-centred therapy perspective and children are understood to develop a sense of themselves, including perceptions about their unique characters, abilities, values, ideals and conceptions of self in relation to others, based on an interplay between the child as person and the child's perceived experience of his/her reality (Landreth, 2002).

The child's person is made up of a physical being with his/her own thoughts, feelings and behaviours, while his/her perceived reality consists of both his/her internal psychic experiences, as well as interactions with significant others and the external world (Landreth, 2002).

Together, the child as person and the child's perceived reality make up his/her sense of self. This sense of self is open to change allowing children to "exist in a continuously changing world of experience of which they are the centre" (Landreth, 2002, p 57).

### 2) Behaviour and Pathology:

Children have an inner drive towards self realisation, maturity, independence and affirmation, observable within their growth through natural developmental stages (Landreth, 2002). As a result, behaviour is understood as being goal directed towards self-actualisation, in an attempt to satisfy the child's need for self realisation within the context of his/her perceived reality (Landreth & Sweeney, 1999).

But behaviour is also congruent with a child's present sense of self (Landreth, 2002) and can thus be conceptualised as an expression of the present meaning that child is making about him/herself as person, influenced by his/her experiences and perceived reality (Landreth, 1993). Behaviour makes sense in accordance with the child's internal frame of reference (Landreth & Sweeney, 1999).

The process of self-actualisation is highly influenced by the child's external environment, including his/her relationships with significant others (Landreth &

Sweeney, 1999). A conflicted, negative external environment challenges a child's concept of him/herself as person, in relation to the way he/she experiences him/herself through interactions with significant others, resulting in incongruence within the child's sense of self (O'Conner, 1991). This incongruence manifests in psychological maladjustment, psychopathology and symptomatic behaviour (Landreth, 2002, O'Conner, 1991).

However the child continues to struggle to satisfy the need for self realisation and worthiness, and the natural drive to continue self actualising persists, manifesting in behaviour that either fights to establish a sense of self in the toxic external environment or confines the sense of self to an internal psychic reality where it can develop passively without confrontation and challenge (Landreth & Sweeney, 1999).

### 3) Towards Healing: The Therapeutic Relationship:

Within the therapeutic relationship between child and therapist, the aim is to provide a more adaptive and facilitative external environment that promotes congruence with the child's sense of person, thus a more congruent sense of self that reignites the self actualisation process (Landreth, 2002). The child is allowed and encouraged to lead the play therapy process as the therapist tracks play behaviours, reflecting on both the content and feelings of the child's play (Baggerly & Jenkins, 2009). The therapist returns responsibility to the child, while providing encouragement and building the child's self-esteem, facilitating understanding of play behaviours and interactions in the playroom, and providing appropriate and therapeutic limit-setting (Baggerly & Jenkins, 2009).

Axline (1982) emphasised the importance of the secure relationship that develops between a child and his/her play therapist, in providing the space and freedom necessary for the child to express him/herself in his/her own way at that present moment in time through the toys and play he/she chooses to engage with. The play therapist's role becomes one of providing the therapeutic space necessary for the child's self-healing power to be released (Landreth & Sweeney, 1999).

The therapist becomes a symbolic representation of the child's present external reality, and a receptive audience that acknowledges and validates the child's core

attitudes and feelings, while the child becomes his/her “own architect... people[ing] his[her] world with the folks of his[her] own making” (Axline, 1982 p. 48).

Within this facilitative environment the child is empowered through self-exploration and self-discovery to achieve his/her developmental capabilities, leading to constructive, self-directed change (Landreth & Sweeney, 1999).

As the child is perceived and experienced more positively by the play therapist, he/she finds the “courage to delve deep into his/her innermost world and thus bring out the real self” (Landreth & Sweeney, 1999, p. 22). The child is able to discover his/her inner strengths, while becoming more self accepting and self-reliant, and developing competent problem-solving skills and resourcefulness that over time are generalised to the world outside of the playroom (Paone & Douma, 2009). The child’s perceptions of self are challenged, changed, and then internalised (Baggerly, 2005) within an optimal external environment that is positively reinforcing and no longer conflicting with the child as person (O’Conner, 1991).

As the child experiences him/herself in a new way through his/her relationship with the play therapist, he/she feels safe enough to revisit painful past events and re-experience emotionally charged memories in a different way through play (Axline, 1982).

#### 4) Efficacy and Effectiveness:

Child-centred play therapy has been shown to be highly effective as a psychotherapeutic treatment for children. A meta-analytic review conducted by Bratton, Ray, Rhine and Jones (2005), examined the effectiveness of play therapy drawing on fifty years of outcomes-based research, evaluating ninety-three cases of play therapy. Their results illustrate the effectiveness of play therapy as a “statistically viable intervention” for children with emotional and behavioural symptoms, that is “uniquely responsive to children’s developmental needs” (Bratton et al, 2005, p. 385).

Play therapy was found to have a significant effect on children’s behaviour, social adjustment and personality “across modalities, settings, age and gender, clinical and non-clinical populations and theoretical schools of thought” (Bratton et al, 2005, pp

385). Le Blanc and Ritchie (1999) concurred that play therapy proved to be an effective treatment intervention for children 12 years and younger. Child-centred play therapy specifically, produced “significantly larger treatment effects than non-humanistic-directive approaches”, however both approaches were shown to be effective (Bratton et al, 2005).

The effectiveness of play therapy was shown to increase significantly in relation to duration of treatment, with 35 sessions proving the most optimal length of treatment to bring about enduring, intrinsic change (Bratton et al, 2005, Le Blanc & Ritchie, 1999). In a quantitative analysis of long-term child-centred play therapy Muro, Schottelkorb, Ray, Smith and Blanco (2006) found that steady declines in both internalising and externalising problems were realised over 32 sessions. Parent involvement was also shown to significantly increase effectiveness of play therapy interventions (Bratton et al, 2005, Le Blanc & Ritchie, 1999).

In terms of efficacy LeBlanc & Ritchie (1999) found that children receiving play therapy performed 25 percentile points above those not receiving treatment for emotional problems. Garza and Bratton (2005) also reported reduced externalising and internalising problems in children receiving 12 sessions of child-centred play therapy in comparison to those who received no play therapy treatment.

These meta-analyses illustrate the effectiveness and efficacy of play therapy and child-centred play therapy specifically, as an appropriate psychological intervention for children that results in symptom reduction as well as improved psychological functioning and adjustment. However, while the therapeutic relationship between therapist and child, viewed as a catalyst for promoting the child’s self healing, has been credited for much of the success of child-centred play therapy, the curative play process that occurs within the context of this facilitative relationship has received less attention, and yet holds significant therapeutic value.

The aim of this research project is to generate greater understanding about these curative play processes, focusing in particular on the process of repetitive symbolic play within the facilitative relationship between the child-centred play therapist and child.

##### 5) The Role of Repetitive Symbolic Play:

Landreth (2002) describes repetitive play as repeated engagement with either the same toys and play activities, or the same play theme, over a period of time. In understanding repetitive symbolic play within the context of the child-centred playroom, Landreth (2001) highlighted two guiding principles. Firstly play is significant and meaningful only when it is interpreted within the context of what is typical and age appropriate for a particular child taking into account relative environmental influences (Landreth, 2001). Thus what a child is saying, feeling and doing is constantly being compared to what is age and developmentally appropriate for that child in his/her particular environmental context (Price & Price, 2001).

Secondly play is a distorted combination of a child's conscious and unconscious thoughts, feelings and experiences and not necessarily always a concrete representation of reality (Landreth, 2001). Children may play out their lived experiences directly, or use projections onto toys and play themes to symbolically express their thoughts and feelings, or adopt the same interactional style in their play that was employed at the time of the significant experience (Pepe, 2006). But whichever method is employed by the child, the repeated play behaviours and play themes, revisited over time, are good indications of significant and important emotional experiences the child is communicating, processing and mastering (Landreth, 2001).

This repetitive symbolic play behaviour is understood as an expression of painful past experiences being repeatedly communicated in the present (Pepe, 2006). These are not the stagnant, non-purposeful, repeated re-enactments evident in traumatic play of children with posttraumatic stress disorder, but rather dynamic attempts at meaning-making and problem-solving (Findling, Bratton & Henson, 2006). Repetitive symbolic play is thus purposeful and therapeutic in that it allows the child to actively engage with past emotional experiences while altering the outcomes through play (Findling, Bratton & Henson, 2006).

Through this revisiting process children reengage with confusing and overwhelming lived experiences in fantasy, repetitively re-connecting with overwhelming emotions

(Winnicott, 1942). This process allows for a developing familiarity with the child's fears, as well as predictability in a sequence of play events the child can control, allowing for mastery over these fears and the opportunity to learn new skills and resources to draw on when faced with these fears in the future (Landreth, 2002, Schaefer, 1993).

The child experiments with and develops new solutions in reaction to his/her experiences, while the play therapist comments on the child's play, actively partaking in it, but still promoting the child's agency in entering into and manipulating his/her game (Ryan & Wilson, 2000). Through this process children develop coping strategies and mastery over painful lived experiences as they are brought into awareness and processed in a manner that allows the child to gain perspective over the event (Ryan & Wilson, 2000).

For example, while investigating the play of young children undergoing treatment for leukaemia, Gariepy and Howe (2003) observed that children showed a tendency to select toys that allowed them to confront their anxieties about treatment and would engage in the same activities, using similar toys and themes of play, repeatedly over a period of time. By re-enacting frightening events repetitively and generating new, more adaptive ways of coping with the events in play, these children were able to move from a position of chaos, to positions of strategising and resolution of their anxieties (Gariepy & Howe, 2003). The act of repetition produced a feeling of security that was reassuring and comforting.

Klaniczay (2000) similarly observed that children who had experienced disrupted attachments from their mothers would express and process their traumatic experiences, wishes and fears by repeatedly recreating these situations in play in an attempt to gain understanding and mastery over them.

## **2.5. CASE STUDY: A SIX YEAR OLD BOY AND HIS BADDIES**

Peter, a six year old boy of average height and build, completing Grade R at a Grahamstown Pre-Primary School, was referred to the Rhodes Psychology Clinic by his father after Peter's teacher commented that he appeared to be unhappy and irritable at school. Peter had been diagnosed with a Phenological Disorder at age

three and was currently attending weekly speech therapy classes. His speech therapist described him as highly anxious and confused.

Developmentally Peter was a sickly child who suffered from recurring ear infections and experienced speech delays. As a result he was emotionally and socially immature for his age. He grew up in an antagonistic, conflicted home environment that was inconsistent and unpredictable. At age four Peter's parents divorced and he relocated with his mother to a new home and school in a different province. Peter's emotional and social immaturity made this transition extremely challenging.

While living with his mother Peter was often left unsupervised, experiencing emotional neglect and feelings of abandonment which further impeded his emotional and social development. His home environment was unpredictable and frightening. In response Peter developed a significant attachment to his blanket and would use this object as a self-soothing source of comfort and security when left alone.

Eighteen months after his relocation Peter was sent to live with his father under the premise that he would receive improved speech therapy treatment in Grahamstown. This transition offered a more nurturing environment for Peter where he was able to develop a strong attachment to his father, paternal grandparents and teachers, however provided limited contact with his mother. He experienced consistent care-giving within the context of a predictable routine and was able to make friends at school. He relinquished his blanket and made substantial improvements in his quality of speech.

However six months later Peter's mother arrived in Grahamstown and requested that Peter return home with her. Her request resulted in an aggressive custody dispute between herself and Peter's father. In response to this conflict Peter became withdrawn, unmotivated, tearful and irritable at school. He began carrying his blanket with him and soiling himself during classes. In addition his quality of speech deteriorated. Peter's mother left Grahamstown one month later, however the custody evaluation process continued. While Peter's behavior improved slightly after her departure he remained socially withdrawn, easily irritated, tearful and unhappy. He struggled with his academic tasks and his reading, writing and speech remained poor. Noting the lack of improvement in Peter's behavior, his teacher advised Peter's

father to refer him to the Rhodes Psychology Clinic, a training centre for Clinical and Counselling Psychologists, for assessment and treatment.

Following an initial intake and assessment process, Peter was recommended for play therapy and attended thirty play therapy sessions with a trainee counseling psychologist under weekly supervision within the child-centred play therapy modality. The aim of the therapeutic process was to assist Peter in adjusting to his parents' divorce and as a result reduce Peter's presenting symptoms of anxiety and depression. During these sessions, within the facilitative relationship that developed between Peter and the trainee psychologist, Peter engaged in repetitive symbolic play that appeared to serve a healing purpose in his play process. These repetitive symbolic play sequences subsequently became a focus for this research project. In addition, the project holds the potential to generate evidence for the transportability of child-centred play therapy to a South African population group.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 RESEARCH AIM:**

The aim of this research project is to explore and describe the repetitive symbolic play process within a child-centred play therapy modality, drawing on Peter's psychotherapy process as a case study.

#### **3.2 METHOD:**

A qualitative research paradigm was chosen for this research project because it provided the researcher with an opportunity to gain a rich, contextual understanding of Peter's therapeutic experience (Kelly, 1999). An interpretative orientation allowed for an empathic understanding and exploration of Peter's repetitive symbolic play process (Kelly, 1999).

A case study methodology was selected because it allowed the researcher to explore Peter's therapeutic process qualitatively over time producing a detailed narrative of his use of repetitive symbolic play (Edwards, Dattilio & Bromley, 2004). However because of its qualitative research nature, case study methodology has

certain limitations that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, case study methodology applies to a single, unique case, making it difficult to accurately replicate the therapeutic and research conditions in other case studies, and to generalise the outcomes obtained because of the specificity of the case (Snow, Hudspeth, Gore & Seale, 2007). Secondly, the qualitative nature of the method raises questions about the validity of data collected, and makes causal links difficult to substantiate (Lindegger, 1999).

However, in spite of these limitations Kelly (1999) describes the value of qualitative research and case study methodology as lying in its generative nature, in that such research allows for the development of new knowledge and understanding. Case study methodology provides the researcher with rich descriptions of a therapeutic process longitudinally, allowing for new hypotheses to develop and existing theories to be critically reflected upon (Lindegger, 1999). In addition, while the nature of this type of research is subjective and interpretative, remaining reflexive about the research process, contextualising reflections and interpretations, and continuously revisiting the data during analysis for consistency and applicability, strengthens the credibility and transferability of this research paradigm (Parker, 2005).

### **3.3 PARTICIPANT:**

The participant selected for this research project was a six-year-old boy named Peter who presented for treatment with symptoms of depression and anxiety, at the Rhodes Psychology Clinic during his parents' custody dispute. Peter's case was selected for research because his use of repetitive symbolic play within sessions, re-enacting the anxiety he experienced in reaction to the consequences of his parents' divorce, and the apparent sense of control and mastery he achieved over his emotions during this play, prompted investigation into the therapeutic process of repetitive symbolic play within a child-centred play therapy. Peter attended 30 play therapy sessions over a one year period, providing rich information about a successful therapeutic process that yielded symptom relief while taking place for an almost optimum duration according to child-centred play therapy effectiveness research (Bratton et al, 2005).

Therapy sessions occurred at a regular weekly time-slot at the Rhodes Psychology Clinic, in a playroom compliant with child-centred play therapy recommendations. The play therapy sessions were conducted by a trainee counselling psychologist under weekly child-centred play therapy supervision.

### **3.4 DATA COLLECTION:**

Edwards (1998) emphasises the importance of generating detailed and accurate descriptions of the case when using a case-study methodology. In Peter's case, intake interviews with Peter and his father, and telephonic interviews with Peter's Grade R teacher and his speech therapist, were conducted to obtain a contextual understanding of Peter's presenting symptoms in the form of an intake report and case conceptualisation detailing Peter's developmental and family history, current behaviours and psychological functioning.

Edwards (1998) comments further that information obtained during the therapeutic process enables a rich and detailed understanding of the case. Each of the 30 play therapy sessions Peter attended were video-recorded and session records reflecting the play therapy process were recorded by the trainee psychologist following each session. The play therapy sessions were also observed by the trainee psychologist's supervisor who generated additional process notes during these observations that ensured that the therapeutic process was compliant with child-centred play therapy principles. In addition, the trainee psychologist kept session records of three feedback sessions with Peter's father, Grade R teacher and speech therapist conducted at eight session intervals over the duration of the therapeutic process. These feedback sessions detailed changes in Peter's behaviour and symptom presentation, and were used to further guide the therapeutic process.

Case study methodology has been criticised for being vulnerable to bias because researchers may be prone to omitting contradictory or inconvenient data (Edwards et al., 2004). In addition, no control group was used to compare Peter's therapeutic progress, and changes that did occur could have been the result of external factors outside of the therapeutic process.

However the variety of sources used during this data collection process, including video-recordings, session records, feedback sessions and observations by the supervisor of Peter's case, allowed for the generating of a rich and detailed narrative account, improving the possibility of replication of the therapeutic process for purposes of testing the hypotheses generated from this case study and ensuring credibility of the argument presented (Edwards et al., 2004).

### **3.5 DATA REDUCTION:**

Edwards (1998) comments that a thoroughly documented assessment process allows for case formulation and a foundation for treatment, all of which involve organising and interpretation of data based on established psychotherapy principles, amounting to qualitative research. Because this case study explores the therapeutic process of repetitive symbolic play within a child-centred play therapy modality, child-centred play therapy theory was used to guide the case formulation.

As a result data generated from the initial intake process, including the intake interviews with Peter and his father, and telephonic interviews with Peter's Grade R teacher and his speech therapist were reduced to a case formulation narrative (see appendix A). It must be noted that the formulation narrative was constructed by the researcher acting in a dual role as clinician, and as a result open to bias, however the numerous sources of data used for the case formulation added consistency and credibility to the narrative (Parker, 2005).

The aim of this research project is to explore and describe repetitive symbolic play as a therapeutic process. For the purposes of this research project repetitive symbolic play is defined as significant areas of emotional conflict being processed within and across play therapy sessions, through the revisiting of repeated play actions or play themes (Landreth, 2001). As a result the 30 recorded play therapy session videos with related session records and supervisor observations were reviewed, transcribed and reduced into a repetitive play sequence narrative comprising of 14 play themes that were repeated at least three times in either play content or overall theme, within and across therapy sessions, over the duration of the therapeutic process. Within each play theme, specific play vignettes relating to the theme were documented, as transcribed from the videotapes, session records

and supervisor observations (see appendix B), describing both the verbal and non-verbal behaviour that made up Peter's repetitive symbolic play. In addition, verbal and non-verbal behaviours just prior to and following each repetitive play sequence were recorded.

The researcher once again played a dual role as clinician during the constructing of these narratives, exposing the narratives to bias. However the inclusion of video-taped recordings and supervision observations provided additional reflections that further enriched the data reduction process, and greatly improved the credibility of the play vignette narratives produced (Parker, 2005). In addition, interpretation of the play vignettes was avoided during this reduction process.

Data obtained during the therapeutic process in the form of records of feedback sessions with Peter's father, Grade R teacher and speech therapist were reduced to three follow-up case narratives (see appendix C) that described Peter's behaviour and changes in his living circumstances within three different contexts; at home, at school and in the playroom, assessed at eight-session intervals. Once again, these narratives are open to bias because of the researcher's dual role as clinician within this process. However the consistency of reported changes in behaviour and play collected from three sources in three different contexts, adds credibility to the narratives produced (Parker, 2005).

### **3.6. DATA ANALYSIS:**

A hermeneutic enquiry was selected to guide the analysis of the narratives. Kelly (1999) describes a hermeneutic enquiry as the generating of meaning about a process by exploring the subjective experience of that process from within it, as well as generating an interpretation of the process by attempting to step outside of it, reflecting upon it from a distance. In essence the parts that make up the subjective experience must be understood in relation to the context of the overall process, in much the same way as the overall process can only be understood in relation to its respective parts (Kelly, 1999). Edwards (1998) elaborates further that the hermeneutic enquiry allows researchers to ground case narrative interpretation within psychological theory, while at the same time providing a base of practical evidence in the form of case study narratives to reinforce that psychological theory.

For purposes of this research project, a hermeneutic enquiry was used to generate a greater understanding of repetitive symbolic play as a therapeutic process within a child-centred play therapy modality as illustrated within the context of the case presented. The case narratives generated in the form of the case formulation narrative, repetitive play sequence narrative and feedback narrative, were analysed to generate practical evidence for this theory. The dual role of researcher as clinician proved invaluable because it allowed the researcher to be an active participant in the research project, as clinician (Kelly, 1999).

### The Hermeneutic Cycle:

#### 1) Step 1: Immersion

The researcher immersed herself in the case formulation narrative, repetitive play sequence narrative and feedback narrative, familiarising herself with the data, in an attempt to gain an empathic understanding of the overall meaning of the therapeutic process as well as the meaning evident within each individual narrative by identifying common themes within each narrative (Kelly, 1999). In so doing she was able to “preserve the complexity of the psychotherapeutic process” by generating a rich understanding of Peter’s experience of play therapy (Edwards et al., 2004, p. 590)

#### 2) Step 2: Common Themes

The researcher then focused on unpacking meaning across the narrative texts by listing common themes evident across the case formulation, repetitive play sequence and feedback narratives, and then exploring how these themes related to one another (Kelly, 1999).

#### 3) Step 3: Associations

Finally the researcher examined the associations generated across all the narratives, with the aim of applying the child-centred play therapy theoretical framework to the themes evident (Kelly, 1999). In so doing she was able to identify supporting data for understanding repetitive symbolic play as a therapeutic process within the child-centred play therapy modality (Edwards et al., 2004).

### **3.7. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS:**

This case study was initiated as a therapeutic process and as a result the therapeutic goals of Peter's process as opposed to the research outcomes of this thesis, remained the primary focus of attention. Ethical approval was sought and obtained from the relevant ethics review committee of the Psychology Department at Rhodes University, the clinician/researcher's supervising university, to conduct this research. Because Peter was not old enough to give his informed consent to the writing up of his therapeutic process, the project was described to his father, and legal guardian, asking for voluntary consent with the condition that Peter's anonymity be protected. In addition Peter was asked to give his assent that some of the stories of his play could be used to show others how powerful and healing his games had been for him.

## **4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

### **4.1. IMMERSION IN THE INDIVIDUAL NARRATIVES:**

The first step in the analysis process, as outlined by Kelly (1999), was for the researcher to immerse herself in the case formulation narrative (appendix A), repetitive play sequence narratives (appendix B) and follow-up narratives (appendix C). In so doing the researcher identified significant themes within each narrative, each of which are outlined below.

#### **1) Themes within the Case Formulation Narrative:**

The case formulation narrative reflected three dominant and repetitive themes that generated insight into Peter's experiences leading up to the commencement of therapy.

##### **a) Inconsistent Home Environment:**

Firstly the case formulated narrative illustrated a theme of repeated inconsistency within Peter's home environment. Initially his home environment was loving and supportive, containing and safe. This nurturing environment remained consistent up until Peter's third birthday. But following his mother's extra-marital affair, his home

environment became conflicted and argumentative. After the couple's separation and Peter's relocation with his mother, his home environment became rejecting and abandoning. But when Peter was returned to his father's care in Grahamstown in August 2007, his family environment became far more affirming and nurturing. However his home environment reverted back to hostility, conflict and aggression when his mother petitioned for full custody.

b) Changes in Behaviour:

Secondly the case formulation narrative reflected a repeated presentation of changes behaviour that Peter manifested in reaction to his changing home environment. The first manifested change in behaviour occurred when Peter was diagnosed with Dyspraxia and Phonological Disorder just prior to his parents' separation, during a period when his home environment was extremely conflicted. Peter's behaviour change manifested again when he relocated with his mother to a new town 12 hours drive away from his father. In reaction to this move Peter withdrew socially and began carrying his blanket with him wherever he went. When Peter returned to Grahamstown and his father's care, eighteen months later, he reacted behaviourally to this change once again. Peter's speech, reading and writing regressed, he carried his blanket around with him at school, withdrew socially and cried for his mother. While these behaviours dissipated after Peter became more familiar with his new home environment living with his father, they returned and increased in severity when his mother arrived in Grahamstown and petitioned for full custody six months later. Peter returned to this behaviour of carrying his blanket around with him at school. He regressed in his quality of speech, reading and writing, and began soiling himself in class.

c) Resiliency :

Thirdly the case formulation narrative comprised of a repeated theme of resiliency in the face of extreme disruption, change and challenge to Peter's sense of self. The first instance of resiliency is evident in Peter's ability to continue to thrive and meet his developmental milestones timeously, in spite of experiencing repeated ear infections and speech delays in his formative years. Next Peter demonstrated his resiliency in his ability to develop a supportive and nurturing relationship with his

step-brother within the context of an extremely rejecting and abandoning home environment while living with his mother. Peter once again showed resiliency following his relocation back to his father's home in Grahamstown. After a period of adjustment Peter was able to settle into a new school environment, and adapt to his new surroundings. This healthy adjustment was evident in the significant improvements he made in his speech, reading and writing during this period.

2) Themes within the Repetitive Play Sequence Narrative:

The repetitive play sequence narrative comprising of 14 play themes illustrated through play vignettes, reflected individual dominant themes of emotional processing Peter was engaging with during his play therapy experience.

a) Choosing the best gun: Protective Power (session 1,2,3,6,7,8)

Within this play vignette Peter engaged repeatedly with the theme of protective power. He would enter the play room and begin exploring and examining each gun available to him, then select the most powerful gun that would afford him the most protection based on its length, width, size of bullets and the noise it made. Peter used this play vignette in six sessions during the first eight sessions of play therapy, beginning his play sessions each time with this vignette. After selecting the gun that would provide him with the most protective power, he would engage in play that involved demonstrating this power, either in the form of shooting bad animals and robbers, as he did in four of the six sessions, or in exhibiting his ability to survive attack, as was evident in two follow-on sessions.

b) Good animals protect us, bad animals attack us: Good vs Bad (session 1,2,4, 5,7,14)

Within this play vignette Peter engaged repeatedly with the theme of good verses bad. He would examine each animal carefully to differentiate between the good animals who he bestowed with a protective power, and the bad animals who he associated with danger and attack. He aligned himself with the good, protective animals and embraced the responsibility of killing or burying the bad, dangerous animals who he perceived to be attacking him and other good people in his world. Peter used this play vignette in six of the first fourteen play therapy sessions. In five

of the six sessions he would engage with this play after establishing a sense of safety within the playroom, either through selecting the best gun, building a safe house, rocking on the rocking horse, or demonstrating his ability to survive attack. Peter would continue with this play until the end of the play session in four of the six sessions, focusing particularly on killing the bad animals. In the other two sessions he demonstrated his ability to survive attack, firstly against baddies, and then against the sea.

c) Cops and Robbers: Surviving Attack and Killing the Attacker (session 3,7,10)

Within this play vignette Peter engaged repeatedly with the theme of surviving attack then outsmarting, overpowering and killing his attacker. He would initiate the play by identifying himself as the good cop and the therapist as the baddie wanting to kill the cop. The cop would be attacked by the baddie, survive the attack, outsmart the baddie and then kill him. Peter would then reverse roles and become the baddie, successfully attacking and killing the cop. Peter used this play vignette in three of the first ten play therapy sessions. The good cop died the first two times Peter played this game, however by the third time the cop was unable to die, no matter how many times the attacker shot him. Peter initiated this play after establishing a sense of safety in the playroom, either through selecting the best gun with the most protective power, or killing baddies that threatened him, or demonstrating his ability to survive attack. Peter followed this play by rocking on the rocking horse, or demonstrating his ability to survive further attack.

d) Special Bullets: Responsibility to Rescue and Protect (session 1,3,6,17,18,19)

Within this play vignette Peter engaged repeatedly with the theme of taking responsibility to rescue and protect himself and others from enormous attacked. Peter would identify attackers in the form of baddies ranging from eighty-nine to one hundred attackers at a time. The baddies would want to kill Peter and the play therapist, but depending on the size and danger of the baddies, special bullets would be required to kill them. Peter used this play vignette in six sessions over nineteen sessions of play therapy. During the first three times that Peter introduced this play, within the first six session of play therapy, he embraced full responsibility for killing the baddies, referring to his bullets as the only bullets special enough to kill the

baddies. He initiated this play after killing baddies in the form of bad animals or robbers, and would follow this play with a demonstration of his strength and ability to survive attack. During the next three times that Peter revisited this game, in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth sessions of play therapy, Peter delegated responsibility for killing the baddies. First he assigned the play therapist some responsibility in that she could kill smaller baddies, while he would take responsibility for killing the biggest, most dangerous baddies. Next he assigned responsibility for killing the baddies onto a special gun he was particularly fond of, and finally he assigned responsibility onto special bullets that he and the play therapist could create together on paper.

e) Building a Safe House: Creating Safety and Protection Against Attack  
(session 2,4,13)

Within this play vignette Peter engaged repeatedly with the theme of creating safety and protection against attack. He would construct the safe house, then evaluate its security, putting measures in place to ensure safety either in the form of locks and bolts on the entrances, or snakes surrounding the house to protect it against attack. Peter used this play vignette in three sessions during the first thirteen sessions of play therapy. In two of these sessions he engaged in this play after surviving attack, while in the other session he initiated his therapy session with this play. In all three instances the building of the safe house established a sense of safety and security within the playroom. Peter followed this play with a demonstration of his ability to survive further attack.

f) The Rocking Horse: Self-Soothing (session 3,4,5,17,18)

Within this play vignette Peter engaged repeatedly with the theme of self soothing. He used this play vignette in five sessions, during the first eighteen sessions of play therapy. Peter initiated rocking on the rocking horse after play that involved killing baddies or surviving attack. He would walk over to the rocking horse, climb on top of it and rock gently back and forth. On occasions he would engage in conversation while rocking, while other times he would be silent. After rocking Peter engaged in play that involved establishing a sense of safety in the play room, such as initiating discussion about his special bullets, or building a safe house.

g) The Punching Bag: Building Strength to Protect against Attack (session 3,5,12,19)

Within this play vignette Peter engaged repeatedly with the theme of building strength to protect against attack from the baddies. Peter would walk over to the punching bag and begin hitting it with his fists, demonstrating, while saying, how strong he was getting. He used this play vignette in four sessions, during the first nineteen sessions of play therapy. Peter engaged in this play at the start of two sessions, and then introduced this play after games that involved reference to his superpowers in the other two sessions. Peter would either continue this play until the end of the session or follow-on from this play with games that further demonstrated his superpowers.

h) Surviving Attack using Superpowers: Invincibility (session 5,7,8,10,13,17, 25)

Within this play vignette Peter engaged repeatedly with the theme of his own invincibility in the face of life-threatening attack and his ability to protect others from attack as a result of his superpowers. While engaging in this play Peter would take turns in either shooting the play therapist and demonstrating how she was able to survive the attacks because his superpowers allowed him to stop bullets, or asking the play therapist to shoot him repeatedly, in different areas of his body, and demonstrating how he was able to survive the attacks by using his superpowers to stop the bullets. On occasions baddies would attack Peter and the play therapist, killing them, but Peter's superhero powers would allow them to awaken again, surviving death. This superpower was a gift from God and as a result made Peter a very special boy. Peter used this play vignette in seven sessions during the first twenty-five sessions of play therapy. Either he would engage in this play after establishing a sense of safety in the playroom through selecting the most protective gun, demonstrating his strength on the punching bag, and referring to his special bullets; or he would initiate this game after surviving attack from baddies. Peter continued with this play until the end of the session in four sessions, and followed-on from this play with self-soothing games like the rocking horse, and task-based games like puzzle building in the other three sessions.

i) Musical Instruments: Self-Soothing (session 6,13,14)

Within this play vignette Peter engaged once again with the theme of self soothing. He would walk over to the shelf and pick out a tambourine and drum and begin playing them in turn. Peter used this play vignette in 3 sessions, during the first fourteen sessions of play therapy. In two sessions he initiated this game after play that demonstrated his ability to survive attack, while in the other session he began his play session with this game. After playing with the musical instruments Peter engaged in games that involved safety in the form of building a safe house or rule-based games like marbles.

j) Good vs Bad Army Guys: Good and Invincible verses Bad and Attacking; (session 8,10,11,12,30)

Within this play vignette Peter engaged repeatedly with the theme of good, invincible characters surviving attack from dangerous bad, characters. He would examine each army figurine carefully to differentiate between the good army figurines with impressive weapons to protect against attack (e.g.: the powerful motorbike, who he bestowed with power and invincibility) and the bad figurines with dangerous weapons who he associated with lethal attack. Peter used this play vignette in five of the thirty play therapy sessions. However the first four times he used this play, within the first twelve sessions of play therapy, the baddies had extremely dangerous and powerful weapons at their disposal. Even though the good motorbike was able to overpower the baddies, they were extremely strong and frightening. However the last time Peter used this play, in session thirty, his last session of play therapy, the good guys had at their disposal extremely strong and powerful weapons, while the baddies used weak, unthreatening weapons. Peter used this play to begin four of the five sessions, and followed this play with games that demonstrated his strength, superpower and ability to survive attack.

k) Surviving the Sea: Surviving Attack (session 8,11,14,18)

Within this play vignette Peter engaged once again with the theme of surviving attack. He would position himself at the sandpit and the sand would become the sea. The sea was rough and strong, filled with dangerous waves that crashed and tried to

drown the good guys (e.g.: the cars, the boat, the Barbie doll), but in spite of these dangerous attacks the good guys were able to survive the sea, either because of their own special abilities or because someone stronger, with superpowers, was able to rescue them (e.g.: the motorbike or Peter himself). Peter used this play vignette in four sessions during sessions eight to eighteen of play therapy. He would engage in this play after establishing a sense of safety in the playroom, either after demonstrating his superpowers, referring to his special bullets or identifying good animals who would protect him. Peter continued with this play throughout the session on four occasions, and in the other instance, followed this play with a game that involved musical instruments. Peter stopped using this play vignette after the Barbie doll drowned and then came back to life in session eighteen.

l) Building the Swimming Pool: Containing Water (session 9,21,23)

Within this play vignette Peter engaged repeatedly with the theme of containing water. He introduced this play in session nine by building a beach, and spent the session relocating sand from the sandpit into a corner of the playroom. However Peter revisited and developed this play further in sessions twenty-one and twenty three where he decided to build a swimming pool. Together he and the play therapist dug a hole in the sandpit and Peter then filled the pit with water until it was full. Peter used this play on three occasions and during all three Peter used the entire session for this game.

m) Task/Rule-Based Games: Competency (session 14,25,26,28)

Within this play vignette Peter moved away from fantasy, symbolic play and instead demonstrated his competency through games that were task or rule based such as winning marbles, completing sums on the board, preparing paints, fixing pens, completing puzzles or painting pictures. Peter used this play in four sessions during the last sixteen sessions of play therapy. He introduced task and rule-based play in session fourteen after surviving an attack from the sea, and revisited this play in sessions twenty-five, twenty-six and twenty-eight, during which times he initiated the play sessions with these competency games. In three of the four sessions Peter continued with this play throughout the sessions. On one occasion he followed this play by demonstrating his ability to survive attack.

n) Limit Testing: Agency (session 20,23,24,27,29)

Within this play vignette Peter once again moved away from fantasy, symbolic play and instead demonstrated his agency through limit testing activities in the playroom, including pushing limits around drawing activities, filling the swimming pool without spilling water, and choosing to play with friends instead of coming to play therapy. Peter's limit testing became a play theme in the last ten sessions of play therapy where he drew on this theme in five sessions. During these sessions he engaged with limit testing throughout the duration of the play sessions.

3) Themes within the Follow-Up Case Narrative:

The follow-up case narrative comprised of three narrative accounts containing dominant and repeated themes that generated insight into Peter's symptom relief evaluated at eight-session intervals throughout the duration of play therapy process. Relevant themes that emerged as a result of immersion into this narrative are outlined below.

a) Within the Playroom: Personal Danger and Attack – Invincibility and Indestructibility – Survival after Attack

After eight sessions of play therapy, two months after initiating therapy, Peter's behaviour in the playroom expressed a theme of personal danger and attack in conjunction with an intense need to take responsibility for the wellbeing and safety of his family and himself. After sixteen sessions of play therapy, six months after initiating therapy, Peter's behaviour in the playroom expressed a theme of personal invincibility and indestructibility in the face of danger and attack, in conjunction with a continued need to take responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of his family and himself. After twenty-four sessions of play therapy, eight months after initiating therapy, Peter's behaviour in the playroom expressed a theme of survival after attack and the introduction of more task and rule-based games as opposed to the symbolic fantasy play that had dominated his sessions previously.

b) At Home: Resistance towards Mother – Openness towards Reconnecting with Mother – Personal Agency and Self Confidence

Two months after initiating therapy, Peter's behaviour at home indicated a theme of resistance towards reestablishing contact with his mother, but openness towards continued connectedness with his step-brother and father. Six months after initiating therapy, Peter's behaviour at home indicated a theme of developing openness towards reestablishing connectedness with his mother and continued connectedness with his step-brother and father. Eight months after initiating therapy, Peter's behaviour at home indicated a theme of increased agency and self-confidence as he engaged in limit testing behaviour in his interactions with his father.

c) At School: Resiliency and Adjustment – Personal Competency – Persistent Personal Competency and Self-Confidence

Two months after initiating therapy, Peter's behaviour at school indicated a theme of resiliency and adjustment demonstrated through increased concentration and work competency, improved quality of speech, reading and writing abilities, increased social interactions and establishing of friendships. Six months after initiating therapy, Peter's behaviour at school indicated a theme of personal competency demonstrated through improved schoolwork competencies, healthy adjustment to Grade 1, improved self confidence and social skills as well as interest and involvement in extra-curricular sports. Eight months after initiating therapy, Peter's behaviour at school indicated a theme of persistent personal competency and self-confidence demonstrated in his continued schoolwork and extra-curricular achievements and healthy development of social skills and friendships.

#### **4.2. COMMON THEMES ACROSS THE NARRATIVES:**

Once the repeated, dominant themes within each narrative had been identified, the researcher then focused on unpacking meaning across the narrative texts by linking commonalities between themes (Kelly, 1999). These commonalities were then tabulated to create a graphic representation of the common meaning across the narratives.

**Insert figure 1: Common Themes Across The Narratives;**

The Case Formulation Narrative (CFN) at the initiation of play therapy identified three dominant and repeated themes that were pervasive in Peter's psychological world, namely Inconsistent Home Environment, Resiliency and Changes in Behaviour. Each of these themes were compared to the repeated and dominant themes evident in the Play Sequence Narratives (PSN), taking into account the sessions in which these play themes occurred. In addition, the dominant and repeated themes apparent at eight session intervals within the Feedback Narratives (FN) were also included for comparison.

1) Inconsistent Home Environment:

Firstly, the theme of Inconsistent Home Environment from the Case Formulation Narrative was linked with two general play themes used in Peter's repetitive symbolic play sequences, namely a) Good vs Bad and b) Surviving Attack, because these play sequences appeared to represent symbolically, Peter's emotional experiences within his home environment.

a) Good verses Bad:

The theme of Good verses Bad comprised of two repeated play sequences Peter revisited throughout his play process, namely 1) Good Animals Protect Us, Bad Animals Attack Us and 2) Good verses Bad Army Guys. Within these play sequences Peter explored the concept of good verses bad, bestowing good figures with protective power and aligning himself with them, while associating bad figures with danger and attack. Peter assumed responsibility for protecting the good figures by killing the bad figures.

Peter engaged with this theme of Good verses Bad in ten of the initial sixteen sessions of play therapy indicating that this was a significant theme he was busy processing emotionally at the onset of therapy. It was hypothesised that this theme represented Peter's experiences of his home environment as an unpredictable and fearful reality filled with bad, attacking figures. The environment held little protection and support for Peter in the form of powerful, strong, nurturing good figures who could protect him. In order to survive and manage this anxiety-provoking environment, Peter assumed responsibility for rescuing and protecting the good

figures within it, including himself and the people he loved and cared for. However when Peter revisited this play theme in his final play session (session 30), the bad figures held no dangerous threat, and the good figures were extremely powerful and strong. This change in play theme was interpreted as an indication that the bad attacking figures in Peter's home environment had become significantly less powerful by the end of therapy and that the good figures had grown in strength, power and ability to nurture and care for Peter.

b) Surviving Attack:

The theme of Surviving Attack comprised of three repeated play sequences Peter revisited throughout his play process, namely 1) Cops and Robbers, 2) Surviving the Sea, and 3) Surviving Attack using Superpowers. Within these play sequences Peter explored the concept of good figures surviving dangerous attack and outsmarting their attackers, either due to their own special powers or as a result of being rescued by a more powerful character with superpowers that made him invincible.

Peter engaged with this theme of Surviving Attack in eleven of the initial sixteen sessions of play therapy indicating that this was also a significant theme he was busy processing emotionally at the onset of therapy. It was hypothesised that this theme further represented Peter's experiences within his inconsistent home environment as consistently threatening and attacking. Peter was left unaided to navigate these attacks and as a result developed a sense of responsibility for overpowering and outsmarting his attackers, and rescuing others who also fell victim to these attacks. As a result he developed superpowers in order to be victorious against the enormous attacks. While he revisited this play an additional three times towards the end of therapy, frequency and intensity of this play theme declined notably, indicating a decline in Peter's sense of pending danger and attack within his home environment.

It is of interest to note that during the first sixteen sessions of play therapy when Peter was engaging actively with the themes of Good verses Bad and Surviving Attack, the Feedback Narrative reflected a shift in dominant themes. During sessions one to eight, the theme of Personal Danger and Attack in the playroom, and the theme of resistance towards his mother at home, were very apparent.

However during sessions nine to sixteen the theme of Invincibility and Indestructibility became a more dominant theme and Peter's attitude towards his mother became more open and accepting. Once again this shift is reflected of a decline in Peter's sense of pending danger and attack in his home environment.

## 2) Resiliency:

Secondly, the theme of Resiliency from the Case Formulation Narrative was linked with three general play themes used in Peter's repetitive symbolic play sequences, namely a) Creating a Sense of Safety, b) Responsibility to Protect, and c) Self Soothing, because these play sequences appeared to illustrate Peter's resiliency in the playroom, while processing his emotional conflicts.

### a) Creating a Sense of Safety:

The general theme of Creating a Sense of Safety comprised of three repeated play sequences Peter revisited during his play process, namely 1) Best Gun, 2) Building a Safe House, and 3) The Punching Bag. Within these play sequences Peter explored the concept of developing the power to protect himself and others from pending danger and attack.

Peter engaged with this general theme of Creating Safety in all of the initial eight play therapy sessions indicating that this was a particularly significant theme he was busy processing emotionally at the onset of therapy. It was hypothesised that this theme communicated Peter's great need for safety and security within the context of a family environment that had been unpredictable, dangerous and attacking. But more so, this self-reliance on creating safety and embracing responsibility for his own protection within his play environment indicated notable resiliency in the face of unrelenting attack, in that Peter continued to hope for and attempt to establish his safety. While he revisited this play an additional three times before the completion of therapy, its frequency and intensity declined notably, indicating a resolution in Peter's anxiety regarding his sense of safety and need to protect against attack.

#### b) Responsibility to Protect

The general theme of Responsibility to Protect was present throughout Peter's play vignettes but became most apparent in one repeated play sequence Peter revisited throughout his play process, namely Special Bullets. Within this play sequence Peter explored the concept of taking personal responsibility to rescue and protect himself and others from pending danger and attack through the use of his superpowers.

It was hypothesised that this theme again represented Peter's perception of his inconsistent home environment as dangerous and frightening, and his sense of being alone and self-reliant in the face of environmental attacks. Instead of giving up and succumbing to these attacks, Peter assumed responsibility for creating the protection and safety needed for him to survive. The act of taking responsibility for himself reflected his resiliency and ability to self-care.

#### c) Self Soothing:

The general theme of Self Soothing comprised of two repeated play sequences Peter revisited throughout his play process, namely 1) The Rocking Horse and 2) Musical Instruments. During the eight sessions that Peter engaged with this play theme, he reverted to self soothing after games that involved survival of attack. It was hypothesised that Peter drew on this theme of play to sooth himself after engaging in games that caused him heightened anxiety and distress. Once again, the act of meeting his own need for comfort and self soothing reflected an enormous resiliency and ability to self-care.

Of note is that Peter continued to demonstrate resiliency within the themes of Creating Safety, Responsibility to Protect and Self Soothing, throughout sessions one to nineteen of his play therapy process, after which seemed to no longer have a need for such heightened resiliency and self reliance. The Feedback Narrative reflected a shift in dominant themes relating to Peter's resiliency during the process of therapy indicating that sessions one to eight demonstrated a theme of heightened resiliency and adjustment to change within his new environments at home, school and the playroom. But sessions nine to sixteen indicate a move towards personal competency that later developed into a greater sense of competency and self

confidence in sessions seventeen to twenty-four. This shift illustrated Peter's new found ability to thrive within his environment, as opposed to his previous attempts at surviving his environment through resiliency and self reliance.

### 3) Changes in Behaviour:

Thirdly, the theme of Changes in Behaviour from the Case Formulation Narrative was linked with two general play themes used in Peter's repetitive symbolic play sequences, namely a) Containing Anxiety and b) Competency and Agency, because these play sequences demonstrated adaptive and healthy changes in Peter's behaviour that indicated healthy adjustment and a reduction of anxiety symptoms.

#### a) Containing Anxiety:

The general theme of Containing Anxiety comprised of one repeated play sequence Peter revisited during his play process, namely Building the Swimming Pool. Within this play sequences Peter was able to control and contain the rough and dangerous waves of the Surviving the Sea play sequence through the act of building a safe and containing swimming pool. It was hypothesized that while engaging in play with a substance (sand) that had previously been associated with danger and pending attack (drowning) Peter was able to explore the concept of containing his own anxiety through the control and manipulation he exerted over the sandpit and water. In this way Peter developed a sense of containing and gaining mastery over his own anxiety whereas previously he could have acted it out behaviourally.

#### b) Competency and Agency:

The general theme of competency and agency comprised of two repeated play sequences Peter introduced in the last sixteen sessions of his play therapy process, namely 1) Task and Rule-based Games, and 2) Limit Testing. Within these play sequences Peter explored the concept personal competency and agency by demonstrating his abilities and aptitudes through games, while also testing limits in asserting his desires and goals.

Peter engaged with this general theme of Competency and Agency in seven of the last eight sessions of play therapy indicating that this was a significant theme he was

busy processing emotionally at the conclusion of therapy. His play sessions at this stage no longer focused on the intense fantasy and symbolic play he brought initially to therapy, but rather illustrated his abilities, interests, personal choices and desires.

It is of interest to note that the Feedback Narrative relating to sessions seventeen through to twenty-four reinforced this theme of competency and agency in dominant themes of survival after attack, in the playroom, agency and self confidence, at home, and competency and self confidence, at school.

#### **4.3. ASSOCIATIONS AND APPLICATION OF CHILD CENTRED PLAY THERAPY THEORY:**

The third step in the analysis process was for the researcher to examine associations across narratives while applying the child-centred play therapy theoretical framework to the themes evident within the subjective experiences of Peter's repetitive symbolic play (Kelly, 1999). In order to achieve this, the researcher drew from child-centred play therapy theory to generate an understanding of Peter's sense of self at commencement of play therapy. Next Peter's use of repetitive symbolic play within the context of his play therapy process was explored using child-centred play therapy theory, making reference to changes in Peter's behaviour, indicative of changes in Peter's sense of self, during the play therapy process. Adaptive changes in Peter's sense of self denoted healthier adjustment to his parents' divorce.

##### **1) Peter's sense of self before initiating play therapy:**

Referring back to Landreth's (2002) explanation of personality within child centred play therapy theory, Peter's sense of self comprised of an interplay between his perception of himself as a person and Peter's perceived experience of himself based on his interactions with significant others, namely his parents, within his external environment.

Peter's initial experiences of his external environment as a young child were optimal and conducive to the development of a healthy, confident sense of self. In particular the case formulation narrative made reference to Peter's parents' relationship as initially loving and supportive, and the home environment as containing and safe.

This nurturing external environment provided the space necessary for Peter to begin establishing an affirming concept of himself as person, relating to his thoughts, feelings and beliefs about himself. So much so that even in the face of recurring ear infections and speech delays that challenged his self confidence and emerging social skills, Peter consistently embraced his resiliency and potential to self actualise, and continued to develop age appropriately, meeting his other developmental milestones timeously (Landreth & Sweeney, 1999).

However when Peter's parents' relationship became tense and conflicted, following his mother's extra-marital affair, and his parents' volatile arguments became the focus of their relationship, Peter's external environment became turbulent and unpredictable. The couple soon separated, and Peter was relocated to a new and unfamiliar environment with his mother. Because a child's sense of self is open to change, and dependent on consistency between the child's developing concept of person, and perception of self based on interactions with his external environment, this sudden change in Peter's parents' relationship had a significant effect on his developing sense of self (Landreth, 2002).

Peter lost the consistency and security of his father's permanent presence in the home, his family structure changed dramatically, and he lost the familiarity of his home and social environments. These changes significantly challenged his previous conception of his external environment as predictable, safe and secure. In addition Peter was left alone for long periods of time in a new, unfamiliar environment without his mother's attention or supervision. Peter's external environment, relating specifically to his relationship with his mother, became rejecting and abandoning, and was no longer able to meet his emotional needs for love and affirmation. Instead, this negative external environment challenged Peter's positive, affirming concept of himself as person resulting in incongruence within his sense of self (O'Conner, 1991). In reaction to this incongruence, Peter became socially withdrawn and anxious, and developed a reliance on a blanket, in order to comfort himself within this lonely and scary environment.

Within child centred play therapy theory, where behaviour is understood as a reflection of a child's sense of self in that moment, Peter's behaviour made logical

sense (Landreth, 2002). Instead of reaching out to his environment, Peter withdrew and concentrated on conserving his limited resources. Peter struggled to satisfy his need for self realisation and worthiness within this rejecting environment. However his resiliency and natural drive towards self actualising persisted, manifesting in his ability to develop a nurturing and supportive relationship with his step-brother during this period (Landreth & Sweeney, 1999).

But when Peter was relocated to Grahamstown in August 2007 to live with his father, the limited positive external environment and support he had been able to develop was lost and the rejection and abandonment he had experienced as a result of his mother's neglect was reinforced by her apparent disinterest in being his primary care-giver, and her act of sending him away. His extremely fragile concept of person was significantly challenged by a harsh and unloving external environment that reinforced the incongruence within his sense of self, manifesting in symptomatic behaviour (O'Conner, 1991). Peter's speech, reading and writing regressed. He withdrew socially and carried his blanket with him throughout the school day.

However as Peter became more familiar with this new environment and experienced consistent and reaffirming care from his father, grandfather, teacher and speech therapist, his behaviour changed. By the beginning of 2008 Peter's speech had improved, as had his reading and writing, and he no longer required the security of his blanket while at school. These positive changes in Peter's behaviour indicated an increased congruence between Peter's sense of person and his now affirming and nurturing external environment (Landreth, 2002). This more cohesive sense of self assisted Peter in the self-actualisation process necessary for him to adapt to the enormous change he had experienced (Landreth & Sweeney, 1999). He was able to adjust to his new family, school and social environments with the presence of his father and grandfather, and tolerate the absence of his mother and step-brother.

Unfortunately, Peter's family environment reverted back to conflict and aggression when his mother returned to Grahamstown and petitioned for full custody. This hostile external environment challenged his positive concept of person and recreated the previous incongruence in his sense of self (Landreth & Sweeney, 1999). In reaction, Peter's quality of speech deteriorated and he regressed to bringing his

blanket to school with him. He began soiling himself in class and his reading and writing regressed.

While previously, the containing and supportive external environment of Peter's father, grandfather, teachers and new friends in Grahamstown was able to provide the reinforcement necessary to re-establish congruence in Peter's sense of self, allowing him to adapt to and continue the self actualisation process in his new environment, his mother's unexpected arrival and the resultant conflict and aggression in his home environment caused significant regression in Peter's self development that three months after his mother's departure, remained evident in Peter's behaviour (Landreth, 2002). Peter began attending play therapy in July.

The aim of child-centred play therapy and the therapeutic relationship developed between Peter and the play therapist was to provide the therapeutic space necessary for Peter's self-healing power to be released, allowing for adaptive changes in Peter's sense of self that promoted healthier adjustment to his parents' divorce (Landreth & Sweeney, 1999).

As a result Peter was encouraged to lead his play therapy process, selecting games that allowed him to express what he was thinking and feeling in the moment (Axline, 1982). The play therapist in turn tracked and reflected Peter's play actions, acknowledging and validating Peter's self expressions, and as a result provided encouragement and facilitated understanding of Peter's play, while setting appropriate limits when necessary (Baggerly & Jenkins, 2009). As Peter began to experience a more positive and supportive external environment in the form of the facilitative play therapy relationship, he found the "courage to delve deep into his innermost world and bring out his real self" (Landreth & Sweeney, 1999, p. 22).

## 2) Changes in Peter's sense of self during the first eight sessions of play therapy:

Through repetitive and symbolic play, using the games Peter played in the play room, he was able to begin expressing and processing his painful emotional experiences relating to his parents' divorce (Landreth & Sweeney, 1999). During the initial eight sessions of play therapy Peter's behaviour in the playroom reflected two

primarily themes. The first theme was Peter's experiences of an extremely inconsistent home environment that he perceived as threatening, attacking, and filled with dangerous baddies. The environment held no protection and support for Peter in the form of powerful, strong, nurturing good figures who could protect him. The second theme was Peter's resiliency and self-reliance within a context where he perceived himself as abandoned, and left alone to defend against these attacks. As a result Peter accepted sole responsibility for the wellbeing and safety of his family and himself.

In order to survive this frightening, unpredictable and dangerous reality Peter began creating the protection and safety he so desperately needed, within the playroom. Peter found the most powerful weapons, built safe houses, improved his strength and developed superpowers that made him invincible to death, allowing him to kill his attackers while rescuing those unable to help themselves. In addition he learnt to use self-soothing play behaviours that further reinforced his self reliance and resiliency.

The intense repeated, symbolic self expression evident in Peter's play lead to the initiating of constructive, self-directed changes within him that were evident in symptom relief and changes in his behaviour at school and at home (Landreth & Sweeney, 1999). Two months (eight sessions) after beginning therapy, Peter's behaviour at school demonstrated healthy adjustment to his new environment apparent through his increased concentration and work competency, improved quality of speech, reading and writing abilities, increased social interactions and establishing of friendships. At home Peter was able to develop consistently nurturing and supportive relationships with his father and step-brother, however he continued to communicate resistance towards reestablishing contact with his mother.

### 3) Changes in Peter's sense of self during sessions nine to sixteen of play therapy:

Within the playroom Peter was provided with a facilitative environment that allowed him to discover his inner strengths, while becoming more self accepting and self-reliant, and developing competent problem-solving skills and resourcefulness (Paone & Douma, 2009). During sessions nine to sixteen Peter's behaviour in the playroom

continued to address and process the experiences of his extremely inconsistent home environment played out in his play themes of good verses bad, and surviving attack. His environment continued to consist of dangerous baddies and limited nurturing good figures who could protect him. However Peter stopped engaging with the theme of resiliency and self-reliance, moving away from play that focused on the creating of safety, self-protection and self-soothing. This change in play communicated a shift in Peter in that he was beginning to perceive his environment as safer and to find support and nurturing in his relationship with the play therapist. The repetitive revisiting of safety, protection and self-soothing had allowed Peter to create an internal sense of safety and security that was contained within his relationship with the play therapist. In addition, Peter's behaviour reflected an acknowledgement that he no longer needed to be so self reliant and resilient, although he continued to accept sole responsibility for the wellbeing and safety of his family, himself and the play therapist. He thus adapted his play to begin communicating a theme of personal invincibility and indestructibility in the face of danger and attack.

Peter began to generalise this experiential learning within the playroom to his world outside of the playroom, at school and home, where his environments became far less threatening and frightening (Paone & Douma, 2009). At school Peter showed increased competency and self confidence apparent in his improved schoolwork competencies and healthy adjustment to Grade 1. Peter showed improved social skills as well as interest and committed involvement in extra-curricular sports. At home Peter communicated willingness to reestablishing communication with his mother while he continued to develop nurturing relationships with his father and step-brother. These positive and adaptive changes in Peter's behaviour indicated an increased congruence between his perception of himself as person, and his more nurturing, supportive and consistent external environment.

#### 4) Changes in Peter's sense of self during sessions seventeen to twenty-four of play therapy:

During his play therapy experience Peter's perception of himself was challenged, changed, and internalised (Baggerly, 2005) within an optimal external environment

that was positively reinforcing and no longer conflicting with his concept of person (O'Conner, 1991). During sessions seventeen to twenty-four Peter's play communicated a resolution in his experiences of his inconsistent home environment as he shifted away from this play and instead began introducing task and rule-based play that reflected his personal competencies, sense of agency and a containing of his anxiety. However it's interesting to note that concurrently Peter reintroduced resiliency play, revisiting themes of self-soothing and taking responsibility to protect himself and others. This self-protective, safety play makes sense in that Peter was beginning to reengage in his self-actualisation process, but this process challenged his perception of himself as competent and able. In reaction, Peter questioned whether his external environment could provide the nurturing, support and safety he required in order to face his own self-exploration and his anxiety returned. In order to manage this anxiety Peter reverted back to resiliency and self-reliant play initially. But as the environment proved consistent Peter was able to process, contain and shift away from these anxieties. This adaptive and facilitative external environment promoted congruence with Peter's sense of person, thus a more congruent sense of self that reignited his self actualisation process (Landreth, 2002). After twenty-four sessions of play therapy, Peter's play behaviour in the playroom communicated an ability to survival in the face of attack.

Eight months after the initiating of therapy, Peter's behaviour at school demonstrated personal competency and self-confidence demonstrated in his diligent schoolwork, extra-curricular activities and friendships. At home Peter showed increased agency and self-confidence as he engaged in limit testing behaviour in his relationship with his father. It was decided at this stage that Peter no longer needed the play therapy relationship to facilitate his development, seeing as his external environments of home and school were now consistently and positively reinforcing his sense of person, and thus his sense of self.

##### 5) The end of Peter's play therapy process:

Sessions twenty five to thirty focused on facilitating an ending to the therapeutic relationship between Peter and his play therapist. During this time Peter engaged predominantly in competency and agency demonstrating play. He showed no need

to revisit resiliency play, communicating to the therapist his sense of safety and protection within his environment. And while Peter briefly revisited the theme of surviving attack in session twenty five, and the theme of good verses bad in session thirty, in both cases Peter's experience of his external environment was one of strong, powerful, protective good figures verses weaker and less threatening or dangerous bad figures. Peter left therapy communicating to his play therapist that his external world had changed into a place of nurturing safety and supportive security, filled with competent and strong positive figures who would protect him, allowing him to let go of his need to be so resilient and self reliant.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS**

This research project aimed to explore and describe repetitive symbolic play as a therapeutic process within a child-centred play therapy modality that promoted self-directed change in Peter's sense of self which facilitated healthier adjustment to his environment. In attempting to meet these aims the researcher identified fourteen repetitive play sequence themes that Peter revisited throughout his play therapy process, then explored these themes for meaning within the context of Peter's case formulation, and follow-up feedback meetings that took place throughout the therapy process.

Using a hermeneutic enquiry the researcher illustrated how Peter's sense of self, dependent on his perceptions of his external environment, became far more congruent, as evident through his behaviour, when his environment, first in play therapy, then at home and at school became more consistent, supportive and nurturing. Within this facilitative environment the researcher then described how Peter used repetitive symbolic play to address and process emotional issues relating to earlier experiences within his external environment.

Within the first eight sessions of play therapy Peter's use of repetitive symbolic play centred on processing his fears concerning his inconsistent external environment, and his need for self reliance and resiliency in order to survive it. While Peter continued to use repetitive symbolic play in sessions nine to sixteen to further

process these anxieties, he was able to resolve and gain mastery over his feelings of being alone, unsafe and unprotected in this frightening environment, and ceased to revisit self reliance and resiliency play in these sessions. In sessions seventeen to twenty-four Peter began introducing repetitive symbolic play representative of personal competency and agency, while at the same time reintroducing self reliance and resiliency play to contain his anxiety about recommencing his self-actualisation process in this previously inconsistent but now far more nurturing external environment. By sessions twenty-five through thirty, Peter had replaced the dominant symbolic, fantasy play of his earlier play therapy sessions with task and rule-based play that concretely demonstrated his growing personal competencies and agency.

It's not possible to conclude that Peter's use of repetitive symbolic play was solely responsible for the symptom relief, healthy positive adjustment and secure attachment Peter developed within his external environment throughout the play therapy process. The facilitative relationship between Peter and the play therapist in conjunction with consistent and nurturing relationships between Peter and his father, grandfather, teacher and speech therapist all promoted self-directed change. In addition, external factors outside of play therapy may have had significant contributing effect. However hermeneutic analysis suggests that Peter's use of repetitive symbolic play within the facilitative relationship between Peter and his therapist became a therapeutic process in and of itself that contributed towards Peter's self-directed healing and change.

Further research into the area of repetitive symbolic play as a therapeutic process within child-centred play therapy would be extremely valuable in understanding to what extent the repeated revisiting of symbolic play is valuable and therapeutic to the child. In addition, a larger sample group and variety of presenting problems would also assist in generalising the theory of repetitive symbolic play as a therapeutic process.

Finally, reflecting on the research design of this project it is important to recognise that the researcher performed a dual role as clinician throughout this process, being both an internal participant and external observer (Kelly, 1999). This dual role

resulted in subjective bias in the narratives and generated arguments, however at the same time, allowed for a rich and deep understanding of the case material that also strengthened the reliability of the narratives and arguments generated (Kelly, 1999).

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## **APPENDICES**

### Appendix A:

#### **CASE FORMULATION NARRATIVE:**

*Peter was not a planned pregnancy but was accepted with excitement by his mother and father who were both eager to be parents. Initially Peter's parent's relationship was loving and supportive and the home environment containing and safe. Peter met most of his developmental milestones timeously, however, as with his father and uncle, showed significant delays in speech development at two and three years of age. He was also plagued by recurring ear infections. Peter was diagnosed with Dyspraxia and Phonological Disorder just prior to his fourth birthday. His speech disorder impacted significantly on his self confidence and emerging social skills. However Peter continued to develop age appropriately in spite of his speech delay.*

*In 2004 Peter's mother began an extra-marital affair and the couple began engaging in tense verbal conflicts on a regular basis. Peter's home environment became turbulent and unpredictable and his emotional needs would go unmet as his parents attempted to resolve their conflicts. The nurturing and containing external environment Peter experienced earlier was replaced by a hostile, inconsistent environment.*

*The couple separated at the end of 2005 when Peter turned four years old. Peter and his mother relocated to a different province 12 hours drive away from Peter's father. This was an extremely unsettling period of change and disruption in Peter's life. He lost the security of his father and family structure, as well as the familiarity of his home and social environments. In addition, while living with his mother, Peter was left unsupervised for hours at a time, locked in his bedroom with his step-brother who was 10 years old at the time.*

*While Peter and his step-brother developed a supportive relationship of shared comradary during these periods, Peter also experienced severe neglect and abandonment. Peter reacted behaviourally by withdrawing socially and developing a reliance on his blanket from which he drew a limited sense of comfort and soothing. During the eighteen months that Peter lived with his mother he received three visits from his father at six-monthly intervals.*

*In August of 2007, at five and a half years of age Peter was returned to his father's care on instruction from his mother because she felt that Peter would receive an improved quality of speech therapy in Grahamstown. Peter once again faced an enormous transition and disruption to his family and social environments, as well as a reinforced sense of rejection and abandonment from his mother. He returned to his father's home and resumed his Grade R year at a local pre-primary school.*

*Behaviourally Peter communicated his anxiety, insecurity and confusion by bringing his blanket to school and crying for his mother, the quality of his speech and reading regressed and he withdrew*

*socially. However by the end of the year Peter had settled into a predictable routine within a nurturing and affirming environment of family, school, teachers and friends. This supportive environment allowed Peter to adjust well to his new school and home. Although, his teacher voiced concerned about his emotional maturity and suggested he repeat Grade R in 2008 instead of progressing to Grade 1.*

*In early 2008, within a growingly more familiar and consistent school and home environment, Peter's speech improved significantly. He stopped bringing his blanket to school and his reading and writing improved. These behavioural changes indicated a healthy adjustment to his new living circumstances.*

*However in April of 2008 Peter's mother arrived in Grahamstown to fetch Peter and return home with him. In reaction Peter's father approached the family advocate's offices in Port Elizabeth and petitioned for full custody. Peter's family environment became conflicted and aggressive. Peter's quality of speech deteriorated and he regressed to bringing his blanket to school with him. He began soiling himself in class and his reading and writing regressed.*

*Peter's mother returned home in May 2008 with the custody outcome pending, and Peter remained in Grahamstown with his father. Peter's behaviour improved slightly after his mother's departure, although he continued to struggle with academic tasks, worked extremely slowly in comparison to his peers, and appeared easily irritated by friends. He withdrew socially. His speech, reading and writing quality improved slightly but Peter remained tearful, unhappy and anxious.*

*Peter's teacher recommended that he begin a play therapy process in an attempt to make sense of his parents' conflicted custody battle, and find security in his home environment once again. Peter was referred to the Rhodes Psychology Clinic in July 2008.*

## Appendix B:

### PLAY VIGNETTES

#### 1. CHOOSING THE BEST GUN:

*Peter walked over to the shelf and picked up each gun, one at a time, noting its length, weight, size of bullets in the bullet chamber, and noise it made when fired. After he had examined each gun he selected the one he liked the most for himself and handed me his second best choice. (session 1, 2,3,6,7,8).*

- *Play sessions 1,2,3,6,8 began with this sequence. However Peter introduced this play after burning the baddies in the farm house in session 7.*
- *Peter followed this play with shooting bad animals in sessions 1, 2; shooting baddie robbers in session 3,7; talking about his special bullets in session 6 and displaying his ability to survive attack in session 8.*

#### 2. GOOD ANIMALS PROTECT US, BAD ANIMALS ATTACK US:

*Peter pointed at a picture of an elephant and instructed me to shoot at it with him. We hit the elephant, and Peter then pointed at a picture of a monkey. We shot at the monkey too. Next we aimed at the tiger. Peter would point to the body part where the bullet hit each animal and then announce that we had killed the animal. Peter then pointed to the bees and instructed me to shoot at them with him. We needed to duck down low to hide from the bees, and as we shot at them Peter whispered "We are shooting the baddies." (session 1)*

*Peter explained to me that there were good animals and bad animals in the jungle. The bees were good animals today, and they were on our side, while the monkeys and the leopard were bad and wanted to hurt us. Suddenly Peter stopped cooking and shouted to me that the animals were attacking. He instructed me to get my gun, and grabbing his, crouched down behind the table and began shooting at the bad animals. He killed all the attacking animals. He returned to cooking the meal at the stove and then instructed me to sit down at the table. He served us our meal. As we were eating, a bad monkey ran into our house and attacked us. Peter explained that the monkey didn't like people with long hair or white hair. Peter killed the monkey. (session 2)*

*Peter then changed the game and began building us a new house. He chose a handful of snakes from the shelf and hid them under the cushions of the house. Peter explained that the snakes were good animals and that they were being put there to protect us from the baddies if they tried to attack us. (session 4)*

*Peter noticed a bottle of marine animals on the shelf, collected them and tipped them out onto the floor. He then spent the last five minutes of play sorting out the dangerous bad animals from the good*

ones, picking each animal up in turn and examining it to assess its danger. The very dangerous ones with claws, spikes, sharp teeth and dangerous stings, he buried in the sandpit to keep us safe, while the good ones remained on the carpet next to us. (session 5)

Peter then walked over to the shelf of toys and chose a small farmhouse. He dug a hole in the sandpit and buried the farmhouse in the hole explaining to me that the farmhouse was filled with baddies. He fetched a bottle of toy snakes from the shelf and surrounded the farmhouse with the snakes. He explained that the snakes would eat any of the baddies who tried to escape from the farmhouse.(session 7)

Peter fetched the jar of snakes from the shelf and tipped the snakes onto the floor. He then fetched a small, black wire cage and began selecting the most dangerous snakes and putting them inside the cage. He then built a high wall around the cage with building blocks and placed one good snake on the windowsill above the cage to prevent any of the dangerous snakes from escaping. He said the good snake would also keep a watch for any of the real snakes that live outside of the playroom and warn us if they are close by and want to attack us. (session 14)

- Peter began this play after selecting his guns in session 1,2; after building a safe house in session 4; after rocking on the rocking horse in session 5; after disclosing about his nasty nanny who threatened to hurt his grandpa in session 7; and at the start of session 14.
- Peter followed this sequence with a reference to his special bullets in session 1; building a safe house in session 2; (however in both cases he reverted back to killing animals afterwards, and continued until the end of the session). In session 4, 5, he ended the session with this play, in session 7 he followed this play with killing baddie robbers and in session 14 he allowed the Barbie doll to surviving the sea.

### **3. COPS AND ROBBERS:**

Peter explained that we were going to play cops and robbers. He was the cop and I was the baddie. He told me to hide behind the stove while he closed his eyes. I crouched behind the stove. He opened his eyes and pointed the gun at me then shot me dead. He told me it was now my turn to be the cop. I stood up and moved away from the stove, closed my eyes and turned my back to him. Peter hid behind the stove. I then opened my eyes and turned around. He pointed his gun at me and shot at me, then shouted that I was dead. Peter told me to hide behind the stove again, as the baddie. After I had crouched down behind the stove he pointed his gun at me and shot me, shouting again that I was dead. Peter then stopped the game. (session 3)

Peter said we were now going to play shoot the baddies. First Peter was the policeman working at his desk and I was the baddie who had come to shoot him. Peter saw the baddie first and was able to shoot and kill the baddie. He then became the baddie and I became the cop. This time

*the baddie was able to shoot and kill the cop before the cop noticed he was there. Peter then changed the game. (session 7)*

*Peter said that the game had become too scary and that instead we should play the cop game. Peter explained that I was the baddie sent to kill the cop, who was Peter, the good guy hiding in the kitchen behind the stove. Peter asked me to shoot him and assured me that the good guy couldn't die no matter how many times he was shot. He then told me he could stop bullets with his hands. He then changed the game. (session 10).*

- *Peter began this play after selecting his guns in session 3; after killing the baddies in the farm house in session 7; and after the motorbike survived attack in session 10.*
- *Peter followed this play by climbing onto the rocking horse and rocking himself in session 3, and by surviving attack in session 7, 10.*

#### **4. SPECIAL BULLETS:**

*Peter then pointed to the bees and instructed me to shoot at them with him, but he explained that only his bullets were small enough to hit the bees, only his bullets could protect us from them. (session 1)*

*Peter climbed onto the rocking horse and explained that he was a cowboy, riding through Grahamstown on his way back from PE. He said that there were lots of baddies Peter needed to shoot dead on his way from PE to Grahamstown. So far he had managed to kill 89 baddies with only 80 bullets because the bullets in his gun were so strong. He told me he was going to protect us and that because he had these strong bullets we were going to be safe from the baddies. (session 3)*

*Peter told me we were now in the army. He was a soldier and I was the boss. Peter explained that he was responsible for killing all the bad soldiers who attacked us because he had special bullets that could kill them. My job was to watch out for the bad boss and shoot him dead. Suddenly the bad soldiers attacked us. There were so many of them and only two of us. But Peter kept shooting them dead with his special bullets. He killed nearly 100 bad soldiers. At the end we were exhausted but he had killed all the baddies. (session 3)*

*Peter explained that there were 94 baddies hiding in the playroom, who were very dangerous. It was our job to kill them. Peter said that I would be in charge of killing the little baddies because I had little bullets in my gun while he would be in charge of killing the big ones with his big bullets. Suddenly the baddies attacked and Peter was able to kill all 94 baddies in one shot. (session 6)*

*Peter turned to the shelf and picked up a gun. He then explained to me that the bullets in this gun were very strong and could kill anyone who attacked him or tried to hurt us. These bullets were so strong that they caused huge fires not even firemen could put out! (session 17)*

*Peter went over to the rocking horse and began rocking back and forth. He pointed to the guns and picked one up. He explained to me that each gun used different bullets. Some of the bullets were small and powerful, while other bullets were very large and even more powerful. He then placed the guns on the shelf and walked over to the sandpit. (session 18)*

*Peter then reached over to the guns and said we should play the cops game, but as he fetched the guns he saw the paper and asked instead for drawing pencils so he could make bullets. He explained that we needed special bullets to kill the baddies and said that he would draw us some. But when the paper was in front of him he found that there was a tear in the paper and spent his time fixing the paper by breaking off a piece of paper from the bottom of the page and gluing it over the tear to fix it. (session 19)*

- *Peter began this play after killing the bad animals in session 1; after killing the robbers in session 3; after selecting his guns in session 6; at the beginning of session 17; after rocking on the rocking horse in session 18; and displaying his strength in session 19.*
- *Peter followed this play with killing more bad animals in session 1; with demonstrating how strong he had become in session 3; demonstrating his super powers in session 6; by rocking on the rocking horse in session 17; surviving the ocean in session 18; fixing the paper in session 19.*

### **5. BUILDING A SAFE HOUSE:**

*In the middle of the jungle was a big house that Peter and I lived in together. Peter used pillows and chairs to create the walls of our house, while we stood inside it. He explained that we needed to lock the doors to the house and keep our guns close by in case the bad animals found us and came to attack us. We locked all the doors and bolted the windows. Peter inspected the house and after he was sure that it was secure, he went over to the stove and began cooking us dinner. (session 2)*

*Peter got up and sat on the rocking horse. He didn't talk to me or look at me. Peter then changed the game and began building us a new house. He chose a handful of snakes from the shelf and hid them under the cushions of the house. Peter explained that the snakes would protect us from the baddies if they tried to attack us. (session 4)*

*Peter looked over at the table and said that we were going to build a house to live in. He used the chairs and table as foundations and piled pillows on top of them. He explained that the house was very safe and would keep us protected against any attack. Then Peter turned to the rocking horse and sat rocking back and forth for a few minutes. Peter spoke about his grandfather's death and how he feels sad that his grandpa isn't around to visit with anymore. Peter returned his attention to the fort and selected two guns from the shelf. He handed me a gun and then said that I should shoot at him. (session 13)*

- Peter began this play following an attack of bad animals in session 2; an attack from a bad boss in session 4; playing musical instruments in session 13.
- Peter followed this play by killing more bad animals in session 1; surrounding the house with dangerous snakes to protect us in session 4; and displaying his super powers in session 13.

## **6. THE ROCKING HORSE:**

*Peter then stopped the game and climbed onto the rocking horse, rocking himself back and forth gently while explaining to me that he was a cowboy, riding through Grahamstown on his way back from PE. (session 3)*

*Peter explained that the good boss was still angry but that he didn't want to hurt me anymore. Peter was very cross and banged his hammer and saw as he worked, fixing the chair. He then got up and sat on the rocking horse. He didn't talk to me or look at me. Peter then changed the game and began building us a new house. (session 4)*

*Peter then asked me to shoot at the door, the window, the shelves of toys, and each time repeated that nothing had happened because his superpowers had protected the items from being broken. Peter then stopped the game and climbed onto the rocking horse, rocking gently back and forth. He noticed a bottle of marine animals and tipped them out onto the floor. (session 5)*

*Peter explained to me that the bullets in his gun were so strong that they caused huge fires not even firemen could put out! He then walked over to the rocking horse and sat rocking back and forth telling me how much he was enjoying cricket at school. He chose a jar of coloured piping from the shelf and tipped it onto the floor, then he began joining the piping together to make a pair of glasses. While playing he told me that he had told his friends at school about his special superhero powers, but that they had not believed him. He was very angry and thought they were silly for not believing in his powers. He returned to the rocking horse and rocked back and forth agitatedly for about five minutes. (session 17)*

*Peter went over to the rocking horse and began rocking. He pointed to the guns and picked one up. He then explained to me about the different bullets each gun used. (session 18)*

- Peter began this play after killing the robbers in session 3; after killing the bad boss in session 4; after demonstrating his super powers in session 5; after discussing his special bullets in session 17; at the beginning of session 18.
- Peter followed this play with reference to his special bullets in session 3,18; with building a new safe house in session 4; by separating good from bad animals in session 5; and continued with this play until the end of session 17.

## **7. THE PUNCHING BAG:**

*At the end we were exhausted but he had managed to kill all the baddies. Peter stopped the game, moved over to the punching bag and began hitting the bag hard with his fists. He said, "Look, see how strong I am getting." He explained that if he was able to get very strong then there was no way any of the baddies would be able to get him. (session 3)*

*Peter walked over to the punching bag and began hitting the bag with his fists. He turned to me and told me that he was getting very strong, so much so that in a play fight at school that day he had beaten all his friends because he was the strongest out of them all. (session 5)*

*Peter placed a small piece of paper in his hand and closed his fist, then when he opened his hand again the paper was gone. Next he walked over to the punching bag and began punching the bag with his fists saying that he was very strong. He said he was so strong that he didn't even need to put the gloves on to protect his hands. He then went over to the tools on the shelf and selected the hammer. He pulled the two halves of the hammer opened and then said that he was able to fix it and put it back together again. (session 12)*

*Peter came into the playroom and put the boxing gloves on his hands. He then began to punch the punching bag gently while talking about his cricket match at school today. He found it very difficult to decide on what to play and instead spoke about school, his teachers and his friends. He described an incident where he stole some yogurt from the fridge and his dad caught him and punished him. (session 19)*

- *Peter began this play after reference to his special bullets in session 3; on entering the play room in session 5,19; and after showing the motorbike's special powers in session 12.*
- *He continued with this play until the session ended in session 3,12; but followed this play with demonstrating his super powers in session 5; and talking about his special bullets in session 19.*

## **8. SURVIVING ATTACK USING SUPER POWERS:**

*Peter told me to hide behind the curtain at the one-way mirror and then chose a gun from the shelf. He aimed the gun at me and shot me. He then told me that even though he had shot me I had survived. He hadn't killed me and I wasn't dead. Next Peter asked me to lie down on the floor. He covered me with pillows so that my entire body was hidden. He stood back and shot me, then told me once again that I was not dead and that he hadn't killed me. Peter then told me to hide underneath the table. Once again he shot me, but reminded me that he had not killed me and that I was not dead, I had survived. Then Peter told me it was his turn to hide and my turn to shoot at him. He asked me to cover him with pillows and to shoot him with the gun. I aimed the gun and shot at him. He laughed and told me, "See, I'm not dead!" He explained that he had superpowers that allowed him to survive.*

*He instructed me to shoot at the table, lifted his hand up and said, "See, nothing happened, my superpowers stopped the bullets." He then asked me to shoot at the door, the window, the shelves of toys, and each time repeated that nothing had happened because his superpowers had protected the items from being broken. (session 5)*

*Peter then changed the game and asked me to lie down on the floor. He covered me with pillows and then stood back, took his gun and shot at me. He told me that I was not dead, and that he had not killed me because he had decided to save me from his bullets. He then lay down on the floor and told me to cover him with pillows. He gave me his gun and asked me to shoot him in his head. I shot him and he told me that he was fine, his superpowers had protected him from the bullet. He pointed to his heart and told me to shoot him there. I shot him and again he showed me that he was fine, his superpowers had protected him from the bullet. Peter then asked me to lie down on the floor and again covered me with pillows. He took the gun and shot me in the heart. He then told me that I had survived and that the bullet had not killed me. He gave me the gun and told me to stand up. He then lay down on the floor and asked me to cover him in pillows. He then told me to shoot him in the mouth. I shot him. He told him that his superpowers stopped him from dying and that he could survive no matter where I shot him. (session 7)*

*Peter handed me a gun and asked me to shoot him in the head. I shot him and he then said, "Nothing, see!" He told me to shoot him in the mouth. I shot him, and again he showed me that nothing happened to him. He survived. I reflected that in the playroom with these pretend bullets he was all-powerful and able to survive the attacks. (session 8)*

*Peter asked me to shoot him and assured me that the good guy couldn't die no matter how many times he was shot. Peter then told me that he could stop bullets with his hands. He also said that I couldn't die either because he was there to protect me. He then began explaining to me that I had lots of weapons at my disposal including a sword, a gun, a bat and lots of bullets. He explained that he was now going to attack me and that I should try to kill him. Peter attacked me and was able to overpower me, taking away all my weapons. Then suddenly Peter was attacked and shot by the baddies. He fell down to the ground and lay dead on the floor for a minute. Then he told me that I had been shot dead too and instructed me to lie down on the floor. We both lay dead for a few seconds and then Peter stood up and told me to stand up to. He said that we were healed and had woken up. I reflected that we had both survived the attack, the baddies hadn't killed us dead. (session 10)*

*Peter handed me a gun and then said that I should shoot at him. I shot at him but his special powers were able to stop the bullet. He told me to shoot at him again, and again when I shot he was able to stop the bullet. Next he shot at me, and when I asked him if I had been shot he said no, he had stopped the bullet. Peter explained that God had given his special powers to prevent him from dying, and that he was a very special boy. He was so special that he was even able to heal the baddies. Peter then asked me to shoot at him again but this time said that I wasn't shooting correctly. He took the gun and showed me how to aim correctly by looking down the barrel of the gun. Then he*

*told me to show him how I shoot and this time he said it was correct. He said I would also need some special powers to protect me from the baddies and gave me some of his powers by touching my shoulder. Now neither of us could die, he explained. (session 13)*

*Peter chose a jar of coloured piping from the shelf and tipped it onto the floor, then he began joining the piping together to make a pair of glasses. While playing he told me that he had told his friends at school about his special super powers, but that they had not believed him. He was very angry and thought they were silly for not believing in his powers. He returned to the rocking horse and rocked back and forth agitatedly for about five minutes. (session 17)*

*Peter then instructed me to lie down and covered me with cushions. He then reached over to the shelf and collected his gun. He pointed the gun at me and fired. This time I died. He killed me. After a few seconds he leaned over and whispered, "Get up". I survived his bullet. (session 25)*

- *Peter began this play after demonstrating his strength in session 5; after making reference to his special bullets in session 17; after killing baddie robbers in session 7,10; after selecting his gun in session 8; after rocking on the rocking horse disclosing his grandpa's death in session 13; after completing a task game in session 25.*
- *Peter followed this play with rocking on the rocking horse in session 5,17; continued this play until the end of session 7,10,13,25; and then built a puzzle in session 8.*

### **9. MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS:**

*Peter then stopped the game and chose a tambourine and drum from the shelf, asking me to play music with him. (session 6)*

*Peter walked into the playroom and chose the tambourine and drum to play with. He handed me the flute and began to bang on his drum. He looked over at the table and said that we were going to build a house to live in. (session 13)*

*Peter then stopped the game and went over to the musical instruments. He picked up the beater for the drum and said that it was a magical wand. He waved his wand and said that the baddies had all been changed into snakes. (session 14)*

- *Peter began this play after displaying his super powers in session 6; he began session 13 with this play; after the girl survived the sea in session 14.*
- *Peter continued with this play until the end of session 6; building a house in session 13; with a task game in session 14.*

## **10. GOOD VS BAD ARMY GUYS:**

*Peter went over to the shelf and found a bottle of army men and tanks. He picked up the jar and brought it to the carpet then emptied its contents onto the floor. Peter then began picking up each army man individually and examining him for the amount of bombs, knives and guns he had on his person. The most dangerous army guys with the most weapons were placed on one side and became the baddies. He then inspected the planes and tanks and picked up a motor bike. He exclaimed that the motorbike was the most powerful of all the figurines. He began driving the motorbike on the carpet. The baddies wanted to attack the good motorbike (session 8, 10)*

*Peter then selected army figurines with guns, bombs and lots of bullets to act as baddies attacking the motorbike. The motorbike had superhero powers that allowed him to survive the baddies' attacks and kill them. The army figurines took turns trying to kill the motorbike. First an army guy with a long gun aimed it at the motorbike and fired the gun, but just as the bullet left the gun the motorbike fired his own bullet that blew up the army guy's bullet and killed him. Another army guy tried to shoot the motorbike but he flew up into the air and missed the bullet then shot the baddie dead. I asked if the motor bike was scared when the baddies kept attacking him but Peter said no, the motorbike wasn't scared. (session 10)*

*Peter came into the play room and collected the motorbike from its place on the shelf. He spent the session showing me all the amazing tricks this motorbike could do that made it so special. First the motorbike could jump high up into the air, and cover enormous distances that normal cars and bikes couldn't cover on the ground. Then the motorbike could fly and do somersaults in the air. The motorbike also had many dangerous weapons like guns and bombs that it would use to kill its enemies and keep itself and others safe. Peter began talking about his mom's boyfriend who drove a cool motorbike. Peter said he was a cool guy. The motorbike Peter was playing with suddenly lost its ability to do its special tricks. It couldn't jump, or fly or shoot bullets. The motorbike had to go back to school to learn its special powers again. After being taught to do its tricks again the motorbike regained his special superpowers. (session 11)*

*Peter walked into the playroom and went over to the sandpit, he collected the jar of military soldiers from the shelf and tipped the contents out onto the floor next to the sandpit. Peter picked each figurine up one at a time and looked at it carefully, selecting the two strongest, most dangerous men with the most weapons. He buried each of these baddies in the sand to prevent them from hurting anyone. He explained that the motorbike was the most powerful of all the figurines but not someone we needed to be afraid of (session 12)*

*Peter arrived and went straight to the army figurines. He tipped the jar out onto the carpet and began separating the men out into two groups. The first group were the cool guys and the second group were the weird guys. The cool guys had lots of weapons and were very strong while the weird guys looked weird and didn't have cool weapons. (session 30)*

- Peter began this play after displaying his super powers in session 8; he began his play with this sequence in session 10,11,12,30.
- Peter followed this play with a demonstration of the motorbike's power to save others in distress and survive attacks in session 8; by killing baddies in session 10; by surviving the sea in session 11; showing how strong he was in session 12; by all the good soldiers destroying all the bad soldiers in session 30.

### **11. SURVIVING THE SEA:**

*Peter took four cars off the shelf and placed them in the sandpit explaining to me that the cars were drowning in the water. The motorbike jumped into the water to rescue the cars. The water was very rough with high, strong waves, and filled with dangerous snakes. The snakes tried to bite the motorbike and the water tried to drown the motorbike, but the motorbike was the strongest of everything and able to survive the water and the snakes. The motorbike saved all four cars and carried them out of the sandpit to safety. I reflected that the cars were now safe thanks to the motorbike. They were so lucky to have the motorbike there to keep them safe. I wondered who looked after Peter when he was scared. He explained that he didn't need looking after because he was the strongest boy inside and outside of the playroom. (session 8)*

*Peter then showed me that the cars were special too and that because of their superpowers they were able to swim in the sandpit sea and survive the rough, high waves, no matter how dangerous and scary the sea became. Peter brought a boat into the sandpit too. The boat was able to float over the huge waves of the sea. I reflected that I was worried about the boat and whether it would be ok in the storm. I added that when things got so scary the boat seemed to worry about the waves, but I also said that I was relieved to see how the boat always managed to survive no matter how scary things got. (session 11)*

*Peter then walked over to the sandpit and took a female Barbie doll with him. He explained that she was swimming in the sea. She was skiing on top of the water. He explained that he had been given special powers to prevent the scared people from being hurt and to rescue and heal the baddies. The girl was scared because she was skiing on the water and the waves were getting rough and high. But Peter was there to protect her. Peter then stopped the game and went over to the musical instruments. (session 14)*

*Peter then placed the guns on the shelf and walked over to the sandpit. He explained that the sandpit was an ocean filled with huge waves crashing in the sea. He fetched a Barbie doll and placed her in the sea. Peter explained that she was all alone in the water and that the waves were crashing over her. One wave after the other would crash over her head. The girl was drowning under the water and very scared. No one was coming to save the girl, she was all alone. Then Peter announced that the girl had died, alone at the bottom of the sea. Peter got up and went to the bathroom. He was in the bathroom for about 10 minutes. When he returned he sat back down at the*

sandpit. Suddenly the girl came alive again and was surfing on the waves, but this time as the waves became bigger and more dangerous the girl was able to continue surfing on the waves and survive the storm. The waves became bigger and bigger but the girl was able to survive them. I reflected how the little girl was able to survive the angry waves and not get washed away and drown this time. Peter agreed. Then Peter fetched the boat from the shelf. The boat was now floating in the waves. The waves became bigger and bigger. Peter would make waves of sand with his arms. The boat would float up to the top of the wave and hover at the top, uncertain as to whether it would fall back into the waves or overcome the wave, but each time the boat would overcome the enormous wave and survive. I reflected once again that the boat was able to survive the huge waves and Peter agreed. (session 18)

- Peter began this play after demonstrating the motorbike's super powers in session 8,11; after using good animals to protect him in session 14; after talking about his special bullets in session 18
- Peter continued with this play until the end of session 8,11,18 and followed this play with musical instruments in session 14.

## **12. BUILDING THE SWIMMING POOL:**

Peter picked up the motorbike from the previous play session but then saw a wooden train and decided to play with it instead. He spent the session putting the train together and filling it with sand from the sandpit. He planned to move the sand to a corner of the play room diagonally opposite to the sandpit and build a beach there. He spooned the sand into the train containers and transported it to the corner of the room. He then scooped the sand onto the floor and made a beach. He chose four baby dolls and placed them in the sea of sand, explaining that he would only swim in the sea until the top of his chin was in the water but that his dad could put his whole face underwater and swim under the water no matter how deep it was. His friend's dad could swim in the sea and kill sharks, and so could his dad too. (session 9)

Peter came into the playroom and said that today he wanted to build a swimming pool. He asked if I would help him and then explained that together we would need to dig a deep hole in the sandpit. He handed me a spade and took one for himself. He assigned me the task of loosening the sand while he would dig it out of the hole. Together we loosened and dug sand for 20 minutes. Once the hole was big and deep enough, Peter went over to the sink, collecting a bucket on his way. He filled the bucket with water then carried it over to the sandpit and poured it into the hole. He returned to the sink five times to fill the bucket with water and then empty the bucket into the sandpit. The swimming pool filled up with water. Peter then chose two dolls from the shelf that he said were mom and dad. He kept the dad doll and gave me the mom doll. Together dad and mom swam in the swimming pool. Dad did big long jumps in the air as he dove into the swimming pool. (session 21)

*Peter returned to the sandpit today and explained that he wanted to build a swimming pool once again. He asked if I would help him and then directed me to dig a deep hole in the sandpit. He handed me a spade and took one for himself. I loosened the sand while he dug the hole. Once the hole was big and deep enough, Peter went over to the sink, collecting a bucket on his way. He filled the bucket with water then carried it over to the sandpit. I reminded him that we had played this game before and that at the end of the session the water had begun to leak outside of the sandpit. I set a limit of continued play on the condition that we stopped if the sandpit began to leak. Peter agreed and poured the water into the hole. He returned to the sink four times to fill the bucket with water and then empty the bucket into the sandpit. The swimming pool filled up with water and the sandpit began to leak. I reminded Peter of the limit and he made a contingency plan. He wanted to continue pouring water into the sandpit but balanced an additional bucket in the hole to catch the water. The bucket filled up and the water balanced on the rim. Peter wanted to continue pouring water into the hole so he diverted the water with a spade onto the dry sand. The water did not spill and he maintained his play within the limit set. I reflected how he was able to make a plan to do what he wanted while keeping within the rules of the playroom. I also reminded him that we had discussed us ending our play sessions together and asked how he felt about this time together coming to an end. He ignored my comment and continued balancing the water. (session 23)*

- *Peter began this play at the beginning of session 9,21,23*
- *Peter continued with this play until the end of session 9,21,23*

### **13. TASK GAMES:**

*Then Peter walked over to the container of marbles and chose a handful of marbles to play with. He spread the marbles on the floor and spent the remaining time trying to throw one marble at another in order to hit it. Once he hit a marble he would ask me to try to hit one too. We took turns trying to hit the marbles. (session 14)*

*Peter came into the playroom and walked over to the pens, picked the jar up and said he would like to draw today. But as I turned to fetch the paper off the shelf he put the pens down and was distracted by the chalk. He picked up a piece of chalk and began writing sums on the board. But then he asked if we could paint instead and reached up to collect the paint off the shelf. He sat at the table and I sat opposite him. He reached for a paintbrush and handed one to me, then he began opening all the paints. He started talking about when he was 6. He said things were very scary when he was six years old, but things are much better now that he is seven. Peter then leaned over and took the paintbrush out of my right hand and placed it in my left, in the same position that he was holding his paintbrush, also in his left hand. Peter then closed each paint bottle carefully and put the paints away. (session 25)*

*Peter came into the playroom and went straight to the paints. He took them off the shelf and positioned them on the table. He stirred and prepared each colour for use, removing the lids, mixing*

*the paints and adding water to create the right consistency. He then announced that he was ready and handed me a paintbrush. He picked one colour at a time and used each one on his page making long thick strokes. Next he looked over at my picture and said I was finished, grabbed his painting and mine and positioned them on the window ledge to dry. He then fetched each of us a new sheet of paper and began painting again. He continued to make colourful lines on each sheet of paper and once his and my paintings were completed, would position them on the windowsill. Together we painted 20 sheets of paper by the end of the session. Peter told me to look after the paintings as they dried and keep them safe. He said he would like to stick them up next time he comes to play so that everyone can see what we do here together and so that I will always remember him. (session 26)*

*Peter came into the playroom and went over to the chalkboard. He began writing up sums on the board. As he wrote out a sum, he would leave a square for the answer and then write the answer inside. After completing three sums he wrote out a fourth and asked me if I knew the answer. Before I could answer he gave me the answer. I reinforced that he was able to do the sum all by himself and he smiled, then wrote the answer in the block and chose a new sum. Peter completed three sums, writing out the sum, leaving the answer blank, asking me for the answer then giving the answer himself. He then walked over to the puzzles and chose two. He spent the remainder of the session building these puzzles. He took each puzzle in turn, turned the pieces out and mixed them up. He then reassembled the puzzle. I reinforced how he was able to complete the puzzles so easily all by himself. (session 28)*

- *Peter began this play after surviving the sea in session 14, and began session 25,26,28 with this play*
- *Peter continued with this play until the end of session 14,26,28 and followed this play with surviving attack in session 25*

#### **14. LIMIT TESTING:**

*Peter came into the playroom and sat down at the table. He asked for paper and collected the drawing pencils. He took the pencils apart and filled them with alternative colours. He asked me to help him and told me which colours to place in which pencils. Peter picked up a rubber and asked if he could take it with him when he left. I set a limit to which he responded that he wanted to break the rubber. Once again I set a limit which he responded to well, leaving the rubber and then continuing to draw. He began drawing on his page and then asked if he could draw on the table to which I responded with a limit. He then asked if he could draw on my hand to which I once again responded with a limit. Peter then returned to his paper and continued to draw distractedly. He continued scribbling on his paper and seemed reluctant to leave when the session ended. (session 20)*

*The swimming pool filled up with water and the sandpit began to leak. I reminded Peter of the limit and he made a contingency plan. He wanted to continue pouring water into the sandpit but balanced an additional bucket in the hole to catch the water. The bucket filled up and the water*

*balanced on the rim. Peter wanted to continue pouring water into the hole so he diverted the water with a spade onto the dry sand. The water did not spill and he maintained his play within the limit set. I reflected how he was able to make a plan to do what he wanted while keeping within the rules of the playroom. (session 23)*

*Peter arrived for his session but refused to enter into the playroom. Family friends had arrived to visit for the day and Peter was told that he could join them after his session. The family came with to drop him off and were then going out. He wanted to join them and cried when he was told that he would have to stay behind. He said he wanted to join them instead of coming for his session today. The session was cancelled and rescheduled for next week so that Peter could join his family friends for the afternoon. (session 24)*

*Peter refused to come to play therapy today. He had been playing with a friend at his house during the afternoon and when the child-minder told him it was time for his friend to leave so that he could come to therapy he became extremely angry and shouted at her that she should just go away. Peter's father called to inform me what had happened and I agreed to call Peter to let him know it was ok that he did not attend his session today and instead spend time with his friend. However when I got Peter on the phone he began shouting at me "I am never coming to play again!" I said that I had missed him at our session today and asked if he would like to come again next week. He shouted, 'I don't miss you and I don't want to come again. I am not coming next week and I don't want to talk to you! "I arranged with Peter's father to bring him along next week if Peter agreed to come back. (session 27)*

*Peter arrived for his session but would not get out of the car. His father asked him to get out and go into the playroom but Peter refused. I walked over to the car window and began speaking to him. I asked him if he would like to come and play with me today, he said he did not want to come inside and would prefer to go home with his dad and play at home. I said that if that's what he would like to do then he could do that. I gave him a sweet and I had a sweet and there were two sweets left in the box. I showed him the box and reminded him that next week would be our last session together. Peter left. (session 29)*

- *Peter began this play at the beginning of session 20, 24, 27, 29; this play was followed by the building of the swimming pool in session 23.*
- *Peter continued with this play until the end of session 20, 23, 24, 27, 29*

## Appendix C:

### **FOLLOW-UP CASE NARRATIVE: 2 MONTHS (SEP)**

#### *In the Playroom:*

*Peter's play reflects themes of heightened anxiety. His environment is scary and unpredictable. There are many baddies that Peter is responsible for killing in order to protect his family. He needs to take care of his father and fix all the bad things that are going wrong in order to make his environment safe. As a result Peter focuses on making himself strong and fit so that he is able to protect those he loves from the baddies. He must experience himself as indestructible so that nothing, no matter how bad or scary, can hurt or destroy him.*

#### *At Home:*

*Peter refuses to have any contact with his mother. She calls every two to three weeks. However he enjoys speaking to his step-brother who calls him weekly. He seems anxious about his future living arrangements and whether he will be sent back to live with his mother. He has established a loving and warm relationship with his father who is consistent and reliable. He has moved into a new home and has his own bedroom and sense of permanency. Peter is establishing a friendship with a neighbouring young girl.*

#### *At School:*

*Peter's concentration and working speed has improved. He is completing his tasks on time and is no longer tearful and socially withdrawn at school. He is establishing friendships and his reading, writing and speech have improved in quality.*

### **FOLLOW-UP CASE NARRATIVE: 6 MONTHS (FEB)**

#### *In the Playroom:*

*Peter's play continues to test his invincibility and indestructibility in the face of enormous danger. Even though the baddies may overpower him on occasions he is always able to survive the attacks and emerge victorious. He must be the strongest, with the most weapons, in order to protect those he loves, but he has no perceived need to be taken care of and protected by others. In addition Peter exhibits his uniqueness and specialness regarding the superhero powers he has been given in order to protect those around him. He is very special. Peter shows continued concern and worry for his father's well-being and while waiting for him after sessions often comments that he does not believe his father will arrive to fetch him.*

#### *At Home:*

*Peter's father described him as a lot more confident and less anxious at present. Peter's father was awarded full custody of Peter at the beginning of this year. Peter's mother calls every two weeks and*

*Peter now converses with her without any resistance. Peter has recently begun asking about when he will be able to go and visit with his mother and step brother, however he has not had any contact with his step-brother over the past two months. Peter's grandfather died in the December holidays and Peter has been very sad following his death.*

*At School:*

*Peter was promoted to Grade 1 at the beginning of the year. His teacher is very happy with his academic progress. His confidence, social skills and speech have improved significantly and he appears happy and well adjusted. He is engaging in extra-curricular sports activities including cricket and karate. Peter also attends weekly speech therapy classes and homework supervision classes in the afternoon.*

### **FOLLOW-UP CASE NARRATIVE: 8 MONTHS (APRIL)**

*In the Playroom:*

*Peter's play continues along the theme of survival in the face of enormous danger and challenges although his play has moved away from the gun games he initially played in sessions. Recently he has become far more verbal in the playroom, speaking freely about his experiences at school with his friends and teachers, his extramural activities and fun stories about his home life and experiences with his father. Peter has engaged in a large amount of sandpit play recently, particularly around making gifts for others, and creating water scenes in which his characters survive against enormous adversary. Peter has also recently begun including more creative and task orientated games into his play like puzzles, building, drawing, as opposed to previously fantasy dominated play sessions. In addition limit-testing and setting has become a very important part of Peter's play and he responds well to the boundaries drawn within the playroom.*

*At Home:*

*Peter's father is experiencing Peter has far more confident and assertive at home. At present they too are working with limit-setting. Peter's father has noticed a significant change in the way in which Peter responds to limits now. When previously Peter would cry and tantrum when unable to have his way, now he will push the limits his father sets but then accept boundaries without crying.*

*At School:*

*Peter's teacher is very happy with Peter's academic performance. He is coping well in Grade 1 and interacting in social and extra-mural activities confidently with his friends and peers. However there is a concern that Peter is no longer attending daily speech therapy classes and as a result his quality of speech is not improving as would be expected. Peter's father has been encouraged to make the necessary arrangements for Peter to continue with these classes.*

**Recommendation: termination of play therapy.**

**FIGURE 1: COMMON THEMES ACROSS THE NARRATIVES**

Therapy Case Formulation Narrative (CFN)	Sessions 1-8	Sessions 9-16	Sessions 17-24	Sessions 25 – 30
Communicating Before Initiation				
Inconsistent Home Environment (CFN)				
- Good vs Bad				
- Surviving Attack				
Resiliency (CFN)				
- Creating a sense of safety/ protection from attack				
- Responsibility to protect				
- Self Soothing				
Changes in Behaviour (CFN)				
- Containing anxiety				
- Competency and Agency				
In the Play Room: Feedback Narrative (FN) At Home: (FN) At School: (FN)				