

**Satisfying basic psychological needs as the goal of psychodrama with children**  
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In the 40 years of my psychodramatic work, it has been an important concern of mine how child psychodrama can be further developed so that it contributes to the healthy development of children. I found a good orientation in the model of basic needs. Many studies have impressively demonstrated that there is a strong correlation between the fulfilment of basic psychological needs and mental health. It must therefore be a central question for all child and adolescent psychotherapists, regardless of which therapeutic direction they represent, which basic psychological needs must be met in order for children to develop positively.

For the mental health and psychotherapeutic treatment of adults, the Swiss psychotherapy researcher Klaus Grawe presented a model of basic psychological needs with a wealth of empirical evidence in his book *Neuropsychotherapy* (2004). However, this approach has hardly ever been applied to therapeutic work with children and adolescents. I have incorporated Grawe's model of the 4 basic needs into my approach to child psychodrama with a few modifications.

Firstly, I would like to introduce the 4 basic needs and then show how they can be satisfied in child psychodrama.

**1. the basic need for self-efficacy**

I see this basic need of wanting to achieve and influence something as the most central need for children. On the one hand, because self-efficacy is required to satisfy the other 3 basic needs. Secondly, because this is what drives children's development. I can see how important it is for my 3-year-old grandson to eat, dress himself and decide for himself what he wants to play. Woe betide you if you ignore this.

Studies show that the violation of self-efficacy is toxic for psychological development. If children often experience that they have no influence, no room for manoeuvre, but are powerless and helpless, this can lead to a negative expectation of self-efficacy and learned helplessness.

And massive loss of control, powerlessness and helplessness lead to aggression, adjustment disorders and, in the case of total powerlessness, to post-traumatic stress disorder. Anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorders are also closely linked to severe violations of self-efficacy.

**2. the basic need for attachment and belonging**

This basic need is also particularly relevant in childhood, as the fulfilment of the other three basic needs, especially in young children, depends on sensitive attachment figures being able to establish a secure bond. Being connected to an attachment figure who provides reliable protection, comfort and support is of paramount importance for healthy psychological development. Insecure attachment and attachment disorders in childhood are the greatest known risk factor for the development of mental disorders.

**3 The basic need for self-esteem**

It is the basic need to be good, okay, valuable, appreciated, lovable and competent. The fact that a self-assessment as bad, inferior and worthless leads to psychological suffering can be experienced directly by everyone.

And studies show that experiences that violate self-esteem, constant criticism, devaluation and insults are associated with internalised psychological problems, depression and social anxiety.

#### 4 The basic need for pleasure

The pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of unpleasure is the outstanding motive for action. Pleasant, enjoyable and pleasurable experiences and conditions should be sought out and unpleasant, painful ones avoided if possible.

Violations of this need can lead to a refusal to perform and addictive behaviour.

Under the influence of its specific living conditions, the child develops approach strategies for satisfaction and avoidance strategies for protection. If a child grows up in an environment that is geared towards satisfying its needs, it will mainly develop approaching, adapted strategies that are very likely to lead to more positive experiences of satisfaction. I would like to illustrate this briefly with a sculpture in which the 4 musketeers D'Artagnan, Athos, Porthos and Aramis stand for the 4 basic needs. If these musketeers have had good experiences so far, are self-effective, securely attached, feel valuable and have had pleasurable experiences, they will confidently tackle new challenges. So when they arrive in a foreign country, they will get on well with a foreign queen, foreign knights, different customs and traditions. Translated, this means that they will manage the challenging transition from kindergarten to school well.

If, on the other hand, a child grows up in an environment in which its basic needs are repeatedly violated, threatened or disappointed, it will develop strategies with high side effects, maladaptive, disruptive strategies, as it is not possible to fulfil its needs in any other way.

And if their basic needs are massively violated, they will develop avoidance strategies to protect themselves from further violations. Strong avoidance strategies may lead to a reduction in anxiety in the short term, but later block the path to positive need fulfilment. I would like to show the effects of this with a 2nd sculpture: Musketeer Self-efficacy is exhausted, has a wounded arm in a sling; Musketeer Attachment is hiding; Musketeer Self-worth is ragged and ashamed and Musketeer Desire is in pain. With this negative experience that the world is hostile to them, either Musketeer Self-Efficacy will dominate and rush in for a surprise attack to forestall the feared attack of the strangers. Or the musketeers are so hurt that they shy away from the new challenge (school) and the musketeer self-efficacy orders them to retreat.

What does this mean for child psychodrama?

Since a happy, healthy life is closely linked to the fulfilment of basic psychological needs, better satisfaction of needs can be seen as a general, cross-disorder therapy goal. As central resilience factors, satisfied basic needs contribute to children developing positively and mastering upcoming developmental tasks despite all the stress and increased developmental risks.

In the following, I would like to show how the satisfaction of basic needs can be realised in child psychodrama, if possible in every session:

### **Strengthening the sense of self-efficacy**

For children from troubled families, the constant experience of not being able to exert sufficient influence on their environment and of being powerless is very incisive. It is therefore crucial to give them the corrective experience of self-efficacy in psychodramatic symbolic play. This enables them to move away from a helpless, discouraged position, regain courage and confidence and experience that it is worthwhile to work towards solving the problems at hand and to see obstacles as a challenge.

I would like to use three possible interventions to show how self-efficacy can be strengthened:

#### **1. experiencing self-efficacy by setting the scene**

In order to experience self-efficacy as physically as possible, scenes can be created and obstacles can be incorporated as challenges when setting up the scene. I would like to illustrate this with an example

10-year-old boys want to play "mission impossible" in a group therapy session. They develop the game idea that they are the best secret agents in the world and are given the mission to save the world from a nuclear threat. A gang of criminals has entrenched itself on an island built as a fortress and is threatening to destroy the world with nuclear missiles if all the gold reserves are not handed over. Only they, the best agents in the world, could prevent the catastrophe in a race against time.

But since the boys have the idea of eliminating the gang of criminals with machine guns in a surprise attack, which would reduce their self-efficacy to the trigger of the gun, I argue that this cannot be achieved by force of arms alone. The rockets would be detonated automatically with the first shot. And to even get to the island, you have to dive through a sea teeming with dangerous great white sharks. I symbolise the sharks by placing white cloths on the sea depicted with blue cloths. The sharks have to be killed silently with knives so as not to raise the alarm. Only the best combat swimmer can do that. You can only get into the fortress via a sewer, but it is secured with laser beams. And I build a tunnel with cushions and pull ropes as laser beams in front of the entrance. Only the best computer specialist can disable this system. As the boys are stimulated by the first obstacles I set up and feel that this makes the story more exciting and that they are even more important as heroes, they develop further ideas. There is also a pool with crocodiles to overcome. They would have to shimmy across the pool on a rope. This would require the best climber to jump over the pool and attach the rope, I comment. After they have built the pool with a blue cloth and the crocodiles with green cloths, they erect a high concrete wall with a cushion, which they have to climb up with ropes. Behind it are guards, symbolised by cushions. Only a close combat specialist could take them out silently with poison darts, I suggest. Then the surveillance cameras should be switched off, a boy suggests. I attach four clothes pegs to a rope. Only if everyone presses a peg at the same time will it not trigger an alarm, I emphasise. And at the very last second, they could switch off the timer. In order for them to solve the last task together, I suggest that they each have to pull one of the 4 cables at the same time. To do this, they lay down 4 coloured cords.

The boys developed this scene structure with increasing enthusiasm and were thus warmed up for the game. At the same time, this also prevented them from experiencing little effectiveness through a quick action where everyone wants to get ahead of the other. Their special skills and teamwork were required to overcome the obstacles. And they had the positive experience that their efforts and sweating were worthwhile and that their courage, skills and teamwork were useful in successfully completing the mission.

## 2. self-efficacy experience through complementary roles

For each role that a child chooses in the symbol game, the question arises as to which counter-role and which conditions are required for the child to experience self-efficacy in the role they have chosen.

For example, if a child wants to be a watchdog on the farm, I ask them, so that they can feel self-efficacious as a watchdog, whether it could be that they surprise and chase away a fox that secretly wants to steal a chicken at night. If a child wants to play a predator, I ask whether it hunts gazelles in the savannah or water buffalo at the waterhole. If the child says yes, I go on to ask whether we should put a cloth at the waterhole to represent the gazelle. Or whether I should change roles and play a gazelle. Chasing and tearing myself as a gazelle is of course a stronger experience of self-efficacy. And so that a boy who wants to play a mighty elephant can feel his strength, I slide into a swamp in my jeep as an animal guardian, from which only the strong elephant can pull me out before I sink in. If the children want to play brave Indians, I can take on the role of a wild horse, which they capture, or a mighty bison, which they hunt, or a bear, which they fight and then hang its teeth around their neck as a hunting trophy, so that they can feel their cunning, courage and skill. If they are playing wizard students at Hogwards, I can offer to be a strict teacher first, on whom they can try out their wizarding skills with relish before they then take on the dangerous battle against Voldemort.

## 3. self-efficacy experience via the supporting doppelganger

If a child chooses a role but does not dare to act it out or has no repertoire for it, I take on a role in which I can support them in such a way that they experience self-efficacy. In the case of an anxious, inhibited child who wants to play airline captain, I can take on the role of co-pilot to help them fulfil the desired role and have the positive experience of being able to pilot a large Boeing. Or, as a fashion designer, the therapist can support an out-of-control girl to fulfil the role of a model in the game "Germany's Next Top Model" in such an appropriate way that the other girls don't complain again that she has ruined the game.

Let me describe the support of the doppelganger in more detail using an example:

Anxious kindergarten children want to be foxes stealing chickens from a farm during a therapy session. At first, they give the pair of therapists the role of the farmers, who are supposed to be upset about the theft. In the game, however, they don't dare sneak out to the farm and retreat into their cave, saying they need to rest. So I change role and come as an old fox. I ask if they are also hungry for chicken. My mouth starts to water when I hear their clucking. I had discovered a hole in the fence through which we could crawl into the chicken coop at night. Encouraged by the old fox, the children sneak with me to the edge of the forest and wait until the farmer's wife goes to sleep. As the children have become braver, I offer to play the cockerel for a moment. The children say yes. As the cockerel, I mock that the foxes could never get me, the farmer had built a high fence to protect me and they would never get over it. Grinning, the foxes slip through the hole in the fence, chase me around the enclosure and snatch me and all the other chickens. Then I change roles again and, as an old fox, admire their courage and hunting success. They generously throw me a chicken, saying I'm too old to hunt. When the farmer's wife wakes up on the children's instructions and comes running into the henhouse, we enjoy watching, hidden behind the bush, how upset she is that all that is left of her rooster and hens are feathers.

Through this strengthening of the supporting double, the children were able to play out their play intention and experience self-efficacy despite obstacles and anxiety.

### **Strengthening bonding and belonging**

In symbolic play, therapists can play a role as an attachment figure with the dual task of being a safe harbour for closeness, care and comfort. And on the other, a secure base that supports exploration and play with others.

As a farmer, I can feed the horses with the best food, groom their coats so that they shine, clean their hooves and remove prickly thorns from their coats. Search for the horse that has hidden in the forest. And apply healing ointment to the horse that has injured itself jumping and bandage it. Or I can build a basket for the little kitten next to the farmer's wife's bed, feed it with a bottle, stroke its soft fur and play with it with a ball of wool.

If 10-year-old girls play stars on a luxury liner, I as a steward can spoil them with the best food and drinks, and the therapist can be available for beauty care and wellness, thus satisfying their bonding needs.

In addition to the need for attachment, every child also has a need for social inclusion and belonging. A good relationship with peers is one of the most important protective factors with increasing age. However, stressed children often withdraw and are therefore unable to develop their social skills.

Or they are limited in their social skills due to their behavioural problems and are no longer able to work in groups. To enable children to have positive relationship experiences, I always create conditions that require interaction, cooperative behaviour and mutual rescue.

For example, in order to promote interaction between the girls playing horses and thus provide a safe basis for exploration, as the game leader I can ask whether a danger should arise that they can overcome together. For example, would a stable lad use the money for feed for himself and feed the cows bad feed? And whether the clever horses will notice this, catch him in the act, prevent him from escaping and wake up the farmers with their neighing?

Or if you remember the game "mission impossible". I set conditions that could only be overcome together and that made the agents dependent on each other.

### **Building self-esteem**

Strengthening self-esteem is an important protective factor for troubled children, as they experience little affirmation and recognition in their families, nurseries and schools. In order for children to feel valuable, lovable and unique, the scene in individual and group therapy can be organised in such a way that the therapist can admiringly mirror their value, their charm and their abilities. For example, as an animal researcher I admire the immeasurable value of the lion, as a servant I marvel at the grace and beauty of the princesses and the skilfulness and fencing skills of the knights at the tournament and as an alien I admire the bravery, cunning and fighting skills of the Jedi knights.

I can also take on an admiration role by reporting on the heroic deed as a reporter, filming the beautiful stars as a cameraman or describing the courage and art of the tightrope walker as a circus director.

Or I create a scene of admiration. For example, after a successful mission, a red carpet can be laid out for the returning agents. And the therapist, as UN Secretary General, can award the heroes with the highest medal for valour in the presence of all the heads of state and the world's press and television stations.

The mirror role offers the opportunity to express admiration, show the gleam in the parents' eye and utilise the power of loving glances.

### **Satisfying pleasure**

This satisfaction of desire is best achieved in symbolic play, the "royal road" of children. In symbolic play, children represent their inner reality, appropriate it and reshape it. But they do this in such a way that they are able to stage their stressful scenes with relish and have fun working through their painful experiences. How do children achieve this creative performance? They use two highly therapeutic tricks to create pleasure in therapy:

Using a specific form of enactment that differs significantly from the way adults deal with conflict, symbol play, they can externalise and alienate difficult situations and view them from a safe distance. By placing their stressful experiences in a different time (e.g. prehistoric times), in a different place (e.g. foreign galaxies) and in other characters (e.g. heroes or animal figures), they gain distance from the distressing and oppressive situations and can thus regulate their feelings.

In addition, the role change and role reversal, which they perform spontaneously, on their own initiative and without instructions from the therapist, allows them to move from the role of passive sufferer to the role of active creator and agent.

Furthermore, the serious participation of the therapists, who take the children's roles and their assigned roles seriously, helps the children to experience the joy of playing. The desire to play is also encouraged by the fact that the therapists repeatedly ask the children for their instructions so that the children remain the directors and can determine the game.

### **Disorder-specific interventions**

The satisfaction of basic needs and the balancing of basic needs must, however, also be aimed for through a disorder-specific approach. The child's symptomatic behaviour appears in a new light when the focus is on the basic needs. It can then be seen as an attempt, albeit inappropriate and fraught with strong side effects, to secure the fulfilment of individual basic needs or to protect against further injury. Therefore, a change in challenging behaviour will only succeed if therapeutic interventions open up other, more acceptable ways of satisfying this basic need in particular.

I would like to illustrate this with an individual therapy session with a 10-year-old boy who has experienced a lot of powerlessness in his family and stands out at school because of his aggressive behaviour.

In order to feel self-efficacious in therapy and avoid powerlessness, he always chooses overpowering hero roles in the first few therapy sessions. And he assigns me roles of inferior enemies that he defeats. Since the basic need for self-efficacy comes into play here, but the other basic needs, especially the need for attachment, are neglected, I develop his symbolic play. Let me illustrate this with a session:

Marco wants to play Gladiator today. He would defeat all the opponents he wants me to play. And he wants to start the fight straight away without setting up the scenery first. I argue that I, as the opposing gladiator, only play in a large arena with room for thousands of spectators, not just anywhere. And I start to build an arena. This encourages Marco. When he performs, the whole of Rome will come, he replies. I enquire whether the emperor and empress and their entire court will come to his performance. Yes, of course, he replies. And he is also prepared to build the emperor's box. And whether he also has a magnificent room in the arena with servants to prepare him for battle, I ask further. He doesn't need anyone, he refuses. But when I emphasise that the opposing gladiator has a servant who looks after him and takes good care of him, he trumpets that he has a palace next to the arena with lots of servants and slaves. We then build the palace with beautiful cloths.

That way I can create spaces for different needs while I'm setting up the scenery.

And before Marco can start the fight, I come as a servant and ask him if I should anoint him with fragrant oil so that his muscles shine in the sun and everyone is amazed at how muscular he is. And he enjoys it as I admiringly oil his muscles. Then I treat him to bear ham to fortify him for the fight. I then bring him a choice of gold, silver and blood-red armour and various swords. He chooses the golden armour and lets me put it on and polish it. I tell him that the whole of Rome has come to see him. I wonder if he can hear thousands calling for him.

Marco increasingly enjoys my care, so that his need for bonding can also be satisfied.

Then I change role and appear as an opponent. I talk to myself about how annoyed I am that everyone is only cheering for the golden gladiator and booing me. Marco ends the first fight quickly and doesn't put up much resistance. My new opponent is a giant barbarian. In this role, I challenge him more, so it takes more effort to defeat me. Then he demands another opponent. I ask if he is brave enough to fight against predators. He thinks this game suggestion is great, he will kill the most dangerous and biggest black panther ever caught. So that he can experience his strength by rescuing and not just by killing, I ask if this panther jumps up to the empress unexpectedly during the fight and if he can just intercept it before it tears the empress apart. He enthusiastically accepts this idea. As a panther, I come snarling out of the cage, circle the gladiator, jump just past him and suddenly leap at the empress. With a pike jump, he grabs me by the neck and strangles me, of course in a do-as-I-do. During this phase of the game, Marco is able to satisfy his need for self-efficacy, especially as he really worked up a sweat during the fight.

Then I change roles again, dress up as the emperor by putting on a golden scarf, honour his heroism and present him with a gold victory wreath, the highest award for saving the empress. This also fulfils his need for self-esteem.

Finally, I slip back into the role of the servant who admires his master for his courage and bravery. I discover his wounds, wash them carefully, describe how painful they must be and apply pain-relieving medicinal plants. As Marco is tired after the fight, he enjoys the care. This once again satisfies his need for attachment.

By taking on several roles in this game, I was able to dissolve the dominance of self-efficacy over the other basic needs, allow the basic needs for attachment and self-esteem

enhancement to come into play and work on integrating the basic needs.

This brings me to my conclusion. I hope that I have been able to show you how focussing on basic needs contributes significantly to the healthy development of children. And how it also provides paediatric therapists with guidance on what to look out for in symbolic play.

Thank you for your attention.