

## How Oliver Becomes Lord of The Seven Seas – playing with families

### Alfons Aichinger, 4th International Conference on Psychodrama with Children and Youth, Cluj

It is a great honour and pleasure for me to give the opening lecture at this special event. Tomorrow we celebrate the life, work, and tireless dedication of an impressive personality: Hanna Kende is turning 100—a truly extraordinary event. She is a pioneer of child psychodrama and recognized its power and potential early on. Tirelessly, she worked to make this method known and taught in her home country and far beyond. Through the training of numerous professionals and her publications, she has created a legacy that extends far beyond her direct work with children. It is impressive how she emphasizes the power of symbolic play, through which children can find healing. In doing so, she has helped children in stressful situations to find their voice, to show and process their painful experiences through play, and to develop healthier coping strategies with their creativity.

Dear Hanna, you are a **role model and an inspiration** to us all. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts for your valuable contribution to our child psychodrama community. In the words of J. L. Moreno: “A true therapist is not the one who brings healing, but the one who enables the patient to heal himself.” This is exactly what you have embodied in your work, dear Hanna. It is no coincidence that the subtitle of your book is “Healing Children Through Their Own Creativity.” And you are also the best proof that playfulness **keeps you young**.

I wish you all the best for this special anniversary and hope that you will continue to enrich us with your knowledge and experience for many years to come. I would therefore like to dedicate this lecture to you.

And now I would like to come to my topic. Among the 100 faces of child psychodrama, **psychodramatic family play therapy** has emerged for me as a very effective and enriching method in working with children and their families. That is why I have used it more and more frequently. If we want to give children a voice in family therapy, we must build on their natural ability for processing their experiences with all their senses and finding solutions through symbolic play. If play, as neuroscience emphasizes (S. Pellis 2010), reduces anxiety and stress and promotes creativity and relationship skills, then play is helpful not only in child therapy but also in family therapy. However, play is usually the last thing

on parents' minds when they come to family therapy. They are disappointed, angry, stressed, worried, frightened, feel guilty, powerless, and hurt. This negative emotional state and the associated body language are not conducive to creativity, either for the parents or the child. Even if it is initially an imposition for parents to adapt to their child's world, play is the optimal way to break out of an irritable and joyless interaction. This creates a context that enables changes by transforming the family atmosphere and the relationship.

The following example may illustrate this, in which a boy uses his intuitive bodily knowledge to initiate a process of joint development within the family. And he shows everyone involved, through the symbolic way, what a solution could look like, namely, allowing and fostering unlived aspects.

I have chosen an example of an anxious child, as anxiety disorders are among the most common mental disorders in childhood and adolescence. Almost one in ten children suffers from them, and anxiety disorders have increased even further due to the Corona pandemic. Anxiety is a signal that children shy away from an upcoming developmental step.

Oliver is six years old, about to start school, and is referred to me because he won't stay at kindergarten without his parents.

### **The Initial Consultation:**

In the initial consultation, his parents report desperately and angrily, that a first attempt at settling him in failed a year ago. They are very worried because the new attempt also threatens to fail, and Oliver is due to start school in six months. Either he complains of stomach ache in the morning, or he sits on a bench in the kindergarten hallway next to his mother or father and does not make contact with the educators or other children. As soon as his mother or father tries to leave, he cries and clings to them. His mother emphasizes that they cannot bring themselves to leave their crying child alone in kindergarten, as the educator has recommended. Oliver also behaves shyly towards other unfamiliar peoples and hides behind his parents.

For the mother, Oliver's behaviour is particularly stressful, as she herself was anxious and inhibited as a child. The father, on the other hand, is reassuring, saying that he was also rather quiet as a child and still "made something of himself." When asked about Oliver's developmental history, the mother reports that he was initially a lively child during his first two years. After the birth of his sister, whom everyone "fawned over",

he reacted with aggression. For example, she heard him standing next to the crib saying “snip, snap, head off” while making a sawing motion at the baby's neck. This frightened her very much. She reacted to his jealousy very negatively and made sure that he did not hurt the baby. After that, Oliver became increasingly inhibited.

Studies on childhood anxiety show a consistent correlation between parental anxieties and their children's anxiety. Children of anxious parents show higher levels of anxiety than children of non-anxious parents. An overprotective and overly controlling parenting style is also associated with child anxieties. On the one hand, overprotective parenting can increase the risk of childhood anxiety. Through role modeling and social referencing, children learn about the risks and dangers of a particular situation. Children assess the danger situation based on their parents' emotional reactions and anxious facial expressions. On the other hand, these parents give their children help too quickly and too much and relieve them of difficulties too easily. Of the dual task of the attachment figure- being a safe haven and a secure base for their child-they only adopt the caring side. Added to this is family accommodation. This means parents change their behaviour because they want to help their child avoid anxiety-related suffering or alleviate stress. The anxiety disorder inevitably also chronically activates the attachment system, which triggers corresponding caring behaviour in the parents. For example, they cannot leave their crying child in kindergarten. Parental indulgence encourages the child to continually avoid anxiety-provoking situations. This perpetuates the pattern of the child relying on their parents to regulate their anxiety instead of learning self-regulation and independent coping skills. It is therefore important to involve parents in therapy. Only in this way can the results of treatment of childhood anxiety disorders be significantly improved. Here, family play therapy offers itself: a basic need not lived in the family, namely the need for self-efficacy and autonomy, can be developed and promoted through shared symbolic play. As anxiety researcher Le Doux (2001) emphasizes, in therapy we must talk to the amygdala, the fear centre, and not to the neocortex. But the amygdala only understands images, not cognitive logic.

Making this clear to everyone in the family, namely that the parents should focus on the joint change and not on that of the child., is the task of **part works**. Oliver comes along for parts work into the second session. He sits turned, away, does not look at me, and buries himself deeper and deeper into his father's jacket. After the parents have briefly described their concerns, I begin with parts work using animal figures (Aichinger, 2012). I ask Oliver to choose an animal for the part of him that doesn't

want to stay alone in kindergarten. Only when his father goes with him to the figures arranged on the floor can he choose a little chick. When I ask him what he likes about the chick, he whispers to his father that it likes to cuddle. For the side of himself that is a little brave, e.g., standing up to his sister when she takes his toys, he chooses the eagle. It has a sharp beak and claws. For himself, he chooses a hedgehog, which can protect itself well. For the part of his father, that makes him feel good, he finds a St. Bernard dog, which saves lives. For his good mother part, he chooses a mother hen, which has soft feathers that the chick can hide under. For his three-year-old sister, he picks a little duck, which is quite cheeky.

In the second step, I let him show how the animals relate to each other. The hedgehog and the little chicken turn away from the eagle. The mother hen and the St. Bernard father push him away and lock him behind a fence.

### **Image 1**

The mother justifies herself: she has to intervene when he treats his sister roughly. When I comment that it is understandable that the St. Bernard and the hen, as farm animals, are not familiar with an eagle and therefore are frightened of it, they laugh.

Then I let Oliver set up the kindergarten situation. As an example of the children who frighten him, he chooses a little lion. For the children he would like to play with, he chooses a little rabbit, and for the educator, a giraffe. When Oliver places the chick and the hedgehog opposite the lion, the parents realize that as long as the eagle is locked up, the children cannot go to kindergarten without the protection of the mother hen or the St. Bernard father. They also realize that the wilderness is no place for a chick, but that an eagle can thrive there.

### **Image 2**

I build on the parents' insight that Oliver can only stay alone in kindergarten if he also has access to his eagle part. And I ask what would have to change for the eagle to be released into freedom and for all the farm animals to be happy to have an eagle as a friend. The mother replies that the eagle would just have to become more peaceful. When I ask, "Like a chicken?", the parents laugh. Since they can't think of any other solution idea, I ask what would change if the parents also showed or developed an eagle part in addition to their hen and St. Bernard parts. As "eagle parents", the father confirms, they would certainly be better able to deal with a young eagle and enjoy it. I let

Oliver set this up in a solution vision, with the eagle chick being taken into the middle by the eagle parents.

Through the arrangement of Oliver's parts and the attachment figures, the interaction between inner and outer system dynamics becomes clear. The rejection of the eagle part by his parents led Oliver to a negative internal evaluation of this ego state. He has to lock away the "eagle" part and retreat into his "hedgehog" self. This creates an internal conflict within the basic need for self-efficacy between the approach strategy, which wants to achieve something, and the avoidance strategy, which wants to protect against further injuries.

Since the relationship between Oliver and his parents is very tense, I suggest family play therapy. This should take place without the daughter, as she might draw too much attention from her parents during the play, and in addition she is not anxious.

### **Family Play Therapy: A new adventure begins**

The aim is to create to create a positive family atmosphere through play and thus enable a context that makes changes possible in the first place. Secondly, space for play should be created and new experiences conveyed to foster the "eagle part" in everyone. In addition, play could bring everyone in a different, more effective posture, especially so that the parents feel competent again, not helpless.

The first play sessions, which I will describe in more detail, revolve around the question of whether Oliver shows himself as a **brave pirate captain** or as a **anxious, inhibited child**. In the first session, which takes place during Carnival, Oliver appears in a red pirate costume. However, he hides behind his father and avoids any eye contact. Although in the last part work session he wordlessly showed which part of him needed to be liberated, he responds to my attempt to establish a relationship by withdrawing even more. I point to the figures I have set up again from the parts work and remind him of their meaning. Then I ask him if he would like to play a story with an eagle family or a pirate family, since he is already dressed as a pirate. After some hesitation, he whispers to his father that he wants to play a pirate. When I ask further who should play which role, he again uses his father as a mouthpiece. To my surprise, he wants to be the pirate captain himself. His father is to be his sailor, and I am to be an enemy pirate captain who is holding the princess, his mother, captive.

This choice of roles provides deep insights into Oliver's inner world and his unconscious solution strategy. As is often the case with anxious

children, the choice of theme reflects the solution vision, but the setup of the scene reflects the avoidance strategy, as we will soon see.

Oliver, with his parents and my support, builds his ship using upholstery elements and cloths. It is striking that Oliver insists on building the front of the ship high like a fortress. This shows that his avoidance system is activated and that he chooses a problem-stabilizing response.

After that, I build the enemy ship in the opposite corner. Then we adults also dress up with cloths: I drape a black cloth around myself, the mother wears a silk cloth, and the father lets his wife tie a red headscarf around his head. I put treasures (golden cloths), swords (foam tubes), and cannonballs (small pillows) in my ship. Oliver and his father immediately imitate me.

After transforming into pirates and princesses, I start the play. I boast about what a good catch I've made: gold, precious stones, and a beautiful princess, for whom I will extort a large ransom from the king. Since all ships at sea will surely turn away quickly as soon as they spot my black pirate flag, I can now calmly and unhindered sail to my treasure island. Oliver then becomes very agitated. For the first time, he contradicts. "That's not true", he says to his father. "I am the strongest pirate". However, he remains hidden in the ship.

Unlike in individual therapy, in family play therapy, the primary task of the therapist is not to directly strengthen the child's self-efficacy and thus present themselves as better interaction partners. Rather, they are auxiliary egos for a successful parent-child relationship.

However, since the father cannot yet provide support due to his creative block, I change roles. As a parrot, I fly to their ship to bring the father out of his inhibitions as a supportive double and to initiate a joyful, anxiety-free play. I loudly ask if there's better food with the red pirates than with the black pirates, where there is only fermented sauerkraut and old, hard rolls. And if the sailor will feed me and teach me new, funny swear words with which I could annoy the black pirates. The father lures me with nuts. But when I fly onto the ship, Oliver hides behind his father and tells me to fly away. As a parrot, I croak repeatedly: "Away, away, away!" The father tries to calm him down and says that I'm a funny bird and won't do anything. He says I could be taught to call the black captain "scaredy-cat," which would surely annoy him. I squawk over to the other ship: "Scaredy-cat, scaredy-cat, scaredy-cat!" But Oliver insists that his father chase the parrot away. He doesn't want it to be with them. I react anxiously: "Quick, away, before they throw rotten tomatoes at me!" But Oliver doesn't respond.

Since Oliver perceives my proximity on the ship threatening, I switch back to the role of the pirate captain and think aloud whether I should sail to the island and harvest some fresh fruit. The princess has already complained about the bad food. I don't want her to become rebellious. Hopefully, the red pirate captain doesn't know about this island with its delicious fruits. I briefly step out of character, build the island with cloths, and lay out cloths for fruits like bananas and pineapples. Then, as the play leader, I ask if it could be that the red pirates might beat us to it and took all the fruit onto their ship, leaving the enemy pirate empty-handed and terribly annoyed. The father urges his son to quickly fetch the fruit, but he refuses.

To lower the bar of the challenge even further and reduce Oliver's anxiety, I say that fog is rising, and I can no longer see my hand in front of my eyes. Hopefully, the enemy captain won't take advantage of this to calmly get the fruits under cover of the fog. The father then tries to push his son out of the ship toward the island “, I say. But Oliver resists and hides behind the ship's wall again. I make an internal role change and take on the anxious side. “With such poor visibility, I don't dare to go onto the island”, I say.” I don't want to get lost or unexpectedly fall into the hands of enemy pirates. If even the bravest pirate on the seven seas wouldn't dare, then the red pirate captain certainly wouldn't.” Thereupon Oliver says to his father that he is braver. Now he is ready to take up the play suggestion. Hand in hand with his father, he jumps from the ship onto the island. They quickly grab all the “fruits” (cloths) and rush back to their ship. Only when they are safe again do I say that the fog has disappeared and I can now venture onto the island. When I arrive on the island and see that the trees have been harvested, I get upset. “Who was so brave as to venture onto the island in the thick fog?”, I ask? From the ship, I hear Oliver say, “Me.” I quickly return and explain to the princess that unfortunately there is only old sauerkraut again. The princess complains, whereupon Oliver giggles on his ship. I appease the princess, saying she is surely used to better food and that I will look for good fruits and fresh water in the other bay. With this, I want to give Oliver another opportunity to repeat an action he enjoys and to have another experience of self-efficacy. “Hopefully,” I say to myself, “the unknown, brave pirate won't get there before us again.” As the play leader, I lay out cloths for fruits and for the spring on the other side of the island. Father and son whisper to each other, gather the fruits and water, and bring it onto the ship. When I arrive too late again and find empty fruit trees and a dry spring, I stamp my feet in anger. I apologize to the princess for bringing only stale water again. It must be a ghost at work; the red captain couldn't be that brave and courageous. Oliver beams at this admiring mirroring.

I then lie down exhausted and give the fictional guards order to guard the ship well. To initiate another play idea to promote self-efficacy, I briefly step out of my role and ask if the enemy pirates would take advantage of my sleep to damage my ship under cover of darkness. After a brief discussion, father and son sneak up while I am snoring loudly and strike my ship with their swords (foam tubes). Immediately, the mother stops Oliver and admonishes him not to break anything. As a pirate, I am pleased that the princess is on my side and restrains the attackers.

Here it becomes obvious how much the mother is frightened by Oliver's aggression and how she inhibits his need for self-efficacy.

Then I get angry that the enemies dared to swim to my ship and damage it despite the guards. Now we have to bail out water all day and repair the leak. And how weak I appear before the princess now! Not that she loses her fear of me and rebels against me. With this soliloquy, I want to awaken her resistance and get her more involved in the play, but the mother doesn't pick up on it.

At the end of the session, we sit down together briefly. I comment admiringly on how the red captain tricked me with his sailor and how brave they were to attack my ship. Then I ask Oliver and his parents what they liked about the play. Oliver whispers to his father that he was stronger than the black captain. The father liked how they stole the fruits on the island together. The mother says that she dared to complain about the bad conditions on the ship. And all three are ready to come back for further play sessions.

In our experience, children react joyfully to this shared playtime and encourage their parents to embark on this shared journey. Their enthusiasm often motivates the parents most strongly to continue participating in family play therapy.

In this first session, I was very active as an auxiliary ego, which may have seemed strange to you. I did this so that Oliver and his father could feel like brave pirates and not inhibited and anxious individuals, and the mother like a princess who asserts her needs and does not just accept everything.

### **The solution image: Approach instead of avoidance.**

In this first symbolic play, Oliver, as I have often observed in children, finds an impressive solution image through his intuitive body knowledge about his essential needs and the upcoming developmental tasks, namely to conquer his place in the kindergarten group. He brings his



intrapsychic conflict between approach and avoidance strategies for his basic need for self-efficacy onto the external stage. In doing so, he takes on the approach strategy in the role of the pirate captain and assigns me the role that wants to hinder him and fight his need for self-efficacy.

My task in the following sessions is now to bring out the possibilities that have not yet been realized as a treasure through dosed interventions. Therefore, I take the role choice seriously, not the role performance: I always see Oliver as the pirate captain, no matter how inhibited he behaves. Through interventions such as admiring mirroring, supportive doubling, and other auxiliary-ego functions, I give these unlived possibilities more and more space and attention. In this way, I bring the solution-promoting, outreach self-efficacy strategy into effect, namely learning to live with anxiety, and not the avoidance strategy.

Secondly, I want to sow play ideas to break down the parents' creativity and self-efficacy barriers and promote their limited auxiliary- ego competence so that they can encourage their son in his need for self-efficacy and show him how to fight and become "Lord of the seven Seas."

### **Overcoming Challenges: From timid steps to brave deeds**

In the second session, since both parents and son are still very inhibited and have no ideas for play, I try to sow play ideas to encourage them to take on small challenges. After setting the scenery, I build on successful play experiences from the last session and ask if the enemy captain is looking for mangos on the island, which should be ripe now. Oliver is now less anxious to anticipate my moves together with his father, so that, according to his instructions, I only find rotten fruits. When I offer it to the princess, she refuses to eat such rubbish. Once again, I get annoyed at how the young pirate captain manages to make me look so incompetent in front of the princess. I don't want her to lose her fear of me and refuse to obey my commands.

As a second challenge, I suggest that, out of concern that the enemies might attack my ship again and steal my treasure, I want to bury it secretly on the island. But what if they hide, attack me, and snatch the treasure from me?

Again, both take up the play idea, sneak up and hide behind the bushes. When I want to bury the treasures (golden cloths), Oliver orders his father to attack. But instead of demonstrating how to approach challenges despite fear, the father pushes Oliver in front of him, directly towards me. Oliver resists with all his might and starts to cry. His father

laughs at him and calls him a coward. As an enemy pirate, I am surprised that a sailor dares to push the captain in front of him and use him as a shield instead of- as is customary among pirates - fighting for him and covering him with his own body. Spontaneously, Oliver says, "Did you hear that?"

According to research, good emotion regulation is hindered when, first, parents fail to coach their children in emotional situations. Second, when parents do not offer a model. And third, when they devalue their child in difficult situations. Therefore, I try to mentalize the pressure the father is putting on Oliver and the lack of help.

Only after this mirroring does the father go into battle alone, albeit very cautiously. Protected by his ship, Oliver observes how his father fights sword battles with me and steals my treasure. I reinterpret Oliver's hiding positively. The red captain does not even glance at me, the most feared pirate on the seven seas, and does not take me seriously as an opponent, sending only a simple sailor forward. I get upset by this disrespect, which makes Oliver grin. Afterwards Oliver, hidden behind his father's back, dares to make a few quick attacks, tearing down my sail or hitting my ship with his sword. Again, I get annoyed by his lightning-fast attacks and damage. Later, I repair my sail while grumbling, which makes Oliver happy.

The mother watches the fighting with alarm, immediately stopping Oliver when he hits my ship violently with his sword (a foam tube) and admonishing him not to hit so hard. Instead of correcting his mother, I, as a pirate, am delighted that the captured princess is trying to prevent the powerful pirate captain from making my ship unseaworthy. Oliver immediately complains that she must help him, her friend, and not the enemy. I also consider how frightening these battles must be for a princess who grew up sheltered in a castle. I don't have to worry about her secretly sneaking into my armoury, stealing a sword and attacking me from behind or conspiring with the other pirates. However, the mother again does not take up this indirect play offer to promote self-efficacy but remains obediently seated in her cabin.

**The inhibition and anxiety that the mother shows in the play make it understandable why Oliver wants to keep her captive as a princess on my ship. This way, she is less able to prevent his first steps toward becoming a pirate captain.**

The next therapeutic process, like in the fairy tale "The Boy Who Went Forth to Learn Fear," is under the theme "From timid steps to brave deeds." Oliver plays variations of this pirate play for another 18 sessions.

This is because effective relearning can only be ensured if the family system changes in such a way that new patterns are allowed and can be actively practiced (Schwing, 2011). The symbolic play, it is now about exposing oneself to fear instead of avoiding it. Avoiding the anxiety situation perpetuates the problem. However, since anxiety has a good intention, it is not possible to fight it. According to Le Doux (2001), in evolution there are the anxious and the dead. And we are the descendants of those who were quickly anxious, because anxiety ensured survival and thus the passing on of genes. Therefore, anxiety should only be kept in check to the extent that it does not restrict Oliver's experiences and behaviour. Freedom from anxiety is therefore the wrong goal.

### **Cultivating Courage: Supporting the lord of the seven seas**

First, I strengthen the father, who is still quite lax in his fighting with me, in his competence to show his son how to fight and become "lord of the seven seas." For example, I say aloud to myself: "Hopefully, the sailor won't pull my entire crew to one side with a fierce attack so that his captain can damage the other, unguarded side." The father immediately whispers to his son and discusses tactics.

In the next few sessions, Oliver attacks under his father's protection. To get the mother more on the side of the enemy pirates and strengthen their resistance, I treat her suppressively. For example, I demand that she cook and eat the shark or octopus I have caught and wash the dishes. She protests against this intervention by the external enemy. She says she doesn't eat such disgusting stuff. She is not my cook or cleaning lady. She is a princess who is used to giving orders, not taking them. After that, she increasingly encourages Oliver to attack me and applauds successful attacks. Since she no longer holds him back, Oliver frees the princess from captivity at the end of the third hour and takes her to his ship.

In the following sessions, I suggest that I might no longer dare to fight the young, brave pirate captain face to face. That I prefer to keep my distance and shoot with cannons but not hit well. And whether it could be that the red captain maneuvers his ship so skilfully that I can't hit it. Oliver takes up this play idea, dismantles the fortress wall and thus improves his firing position. He asks the princess (mother) to hand him the cannonballs (cushions). Under the guidance and support of his father, he fires "cannonballs" at my ship. I support his intention by letting myself be hit, falling down injured, or becoming indignant that he singed my hair or destroyed the cabin with a well-aimed shot. I marvel at the

captain's accuracy. Oliver is delighted and becomes more and more lively. I, on the other hand, still fire with dosed power and shoot just past him so as not to overwhelm him, but to let him experience effectiveness and fun. This has an inhibiting effect on the neuropsychological anxiety cascade. If I miss, Oliver laughs at me: "Nichts getroffen, Schnapps gesoffen", "Missed, drunk to much!" With his father, however, I engage in harder fights to bring out his desire to play. In this way, I strengthen healthy aggression in both as a gateway to vitality and courage to take risks despite anxiety.

In my interventions, I draw on the results of embodiment research (Storch, 2006). These show that many people find it difficult to directly change their feelings and moods – especially when they are under pressure and anxiety. It is easier, even in the most stressful moments, to change one's body posture and thus positively influence the psyche. Even small changes in posture can pave the way for emotional change. This insight has far-reaching implications for therapy: we can use the child's body as a tool to actively influence their mental state. In this way, play becomes solution-oriented exercise.

After the fifth session, the parents are delighted to report that Oliver now stays at kindergarten on his own.

### **Flourishing Self-efficacy: Oliver's Triumph**

In the sixth session, the mother, who is showing increasing vitality, insists on joining in the fight. Playing princess or just handing over cannonballs is too boring for her. As a pirate, I comment that I was afraid she was secretly a pirate queen. The whole family enjoys covering me with a hail of cannonballs at Oliver's command. Oliver and his mother, in particular, are delighted when a cannonball hits me and I fall to the ground.

To increase the challenge and demand direct physical contact, I quietly swim to their ship at night and try to climb aboard. With great pleasure, the mother and Oliver, who are already lying in wait, push me back into the sea.

The father discovers that he can build a catapult with a rubber band stretched in the corner between two walls, with a cloth hanging from it as a sail. He is as happy as a child when he manages to shoot down my sail with it. Then he also teaches Oliver how to shoot with it, which is great fun for both of them.

And Oliver becomes increasingly courageous. He no longer hides behind the safe wall on his ship but stands high on a cushion and mocks me. He attacks me directly and hits me with his sword. I supportively double this by admiring his fighting art and wondering where he learned it. Spontaneously, he replies, "From my father." This makes his father happy. After a harder blow, I also drop my sword. At the same time, I challenge him more by firing sharper shots and hitting him more often.

With this dosing of dangers, I try not to overwhelm his situational control. He should not experience a situation of helplessness in the play, no powerlessness and no loss of control, which are characteristic of the "biology of fear" and pathogenic stress. Rather, he should have a bodily experience of strength and fearlessness, which has an inhibiting effect on the neurophysiological anxiety cascade. The importance of positive emotions, which are precisely triggered in play, for learning and change is emphasized from a neuropsychotherapeutic perspective by Berking and Grawe (2005).

In the course of the play, Oliver also expands his play space outside. He visits other children in the afternoons, goes to the playground alone, and becomes increasingly open with adults.

In further family play, Oliver finally dares to touch me. For example, when I try to board his ship and jump onto it, he wrestles me down and ties me up. Tied up with a brush in my mouth, I have to scrub the ship. As I grumble to myself, he lets me be keelhailed on his father's advice and throws me to the sharks. His mother is now able to allow this. She softens the punishment a little so that I can escape after a few bites.

Oliver manages the transition to school without any problems, even though this is associated with stress and increased vulnerability. Nevertheless, his parents do not fully trust this development. To be safe, they want to continue going to therapy sessions with their son. But also, they say, because they feel the invigorating effect of playing on their relationship as a couple.

### **In the third phase, the pirates measure their strength in battle against each other.**

From the 15th session onwards, Oliver, together with his mother, fights against his father and me. This allows Oliver not only to measure forces with his father but also brings his father into my combat training. The family enjoys competing against each other in battle. The mother in particular laughs heartily when she hits her husband with a cannonball or can "beat him up" with the sword. And Oliver is proud to defeat me and

his father. In the last session (20th), he robs our ship, smashes it and sinks it, so that we drift on planks, accompanied by the laughter of Oliver and his mother.

In the final discussion with the parents, they report that Oliver has become much livelier, that he has learned to deal with his anxiety, and that he has learned to face challenges. But they, too, were able to overcome old inhibitions, which is good for them and their relationship as a couple.

### **Conclusion: The Power of Play**

As Reiner Schwing (2011) explains, therapeutic strategies that involve humour, fun, laughter, and physical activation promote learning and relearning. Oliver's story is an impressive example of how child psychodrama helps children and their families discover their inner resources and unfold unlived possibilities. However, to ensure that psychodramatic symbol play leads to the further development of the family and not to the consolidation of problematic patterns, disorder-specific interventions are necessary that address the internal and external systems. This is especially important in families where avoidance strategies dominate, e.g., families with an anxious child, an insecure-avoidant attached child, or a child with attachment trauma. Thus, for the solution-promoting approach strategy to take effect and not the problem-stabilizing avoidance strategy, we must not only be empathetic companions in the symbolic play but also intervene in a disorder-specific way. Only in this way can we promote friendship between the strategies that satisfy the four basic needs or protect against injuries. And only in this way can we familiarize the family with the split-off basic need and enable them to have experiences they would not allow alone.

With this, I would like to conclude. I hope that Oliver's story shows you how powerful child psychodrama can be and how it helps children and their families discover their inner resources and develop unlived possibilities.

Thank you for your attention.