

# The Power of Symbolic Play in Emotional Development Through the DIR Lens

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Symbolic play is a powerful vehicle for supporting emotional development and communication. It embraces all developmental capacities. This article describes how symbols are formed and how emotional themes are symbolized whereby children reveal their understanding of the world, their feelings and relationships, and how they see themselves in the symbols they choose in play. The DIR (Developmental, Individual Difference, Relationship) model provides the framework and context for understanding the unique profiles of all children, including those with autism, and the importance of elevating feelings and impulses to the level of symbolic ideas that support emotional and behavioral regulation. Children need play where interactive relationships with parents and caregivers help them climb the symbolic–emotional ladder, even when development is uneven, as in autism spectrum disorders. Examples illustrate children solving emotional challenges, exploring the range of emotions, developing reality testing, and reaching abstract levels of thought and empathy through symbolic play and conversations unifying emotions and intellect in early childhood development. **Key words:** *autism, DIR, emotional development, parent-child interactions, relational play*

## THE MEANING OF SYMBOLS

Peter Pan is a beloved character for many people, representing the child who does not want to grow up. Consider the following scenario in which 6½-year-old Joey plays with action figures and his mother in his story of Peter Pan, Peter Pan yells loudly at Captain Hook, “You will not hurt anyone anymore,” as he seizes him on the deck and throws him ferociously into the pirate ship’s dungeon. He tells Wendy, “No more bad guys anymore!” He then finds the crocodile and starts to twist rubber bands around its mouth. Wendy pleads with him to go with her, “But Peter, come

with me to London. You can do things you cannot do in Neverland. It’s nice in London! You’ll be safe!” Peter responds, “No, sorry, no! I know how to swim away from crocodiles here. And I don’t want to grow up. You can’t play in London. I don’t want to be a lawyer! It’s boring! I want to play!! Stay here Wendy, we will play forever!”

Joey’s voice is intense and shaky as he clenches the figures in this scene. He is wearing his beloved green Peter Pan suit, which transforms him into his ever-victorious hero, who expresses his wishes that he could always live in Neverland where he can shape his world. In play, Joey can express his fears and feelings, and he can regain control and regulate his emotions, find safe solutions for his problems, and access reasoning to bridge his symbolic ideas to reality. In his inner world, Joey’s Peter generates excitement encompassing both anxiety and victory.

What does this play scene tell us about Joey? His choice of symbols is quite common and even obvious, beloved by many children. Who would not welcome a ship that soars through the sky, pixie dust to make you fly,

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friends who join your adventures, and an enemy you always defeat? Joey has read the story of Peter Pan and seen the movie many times and reenacts these images with toys and in his mind. But for Joey, the meaning of his play is his own. Its repetition is essential for him as he struggles with learning challenges at school and resistance to the increasing demands of reality. His play helps him restrain his impulses and conquer his fears and growing sense of inadequacy, providing respite and a safety zone in which to work on his turbulent emotions and communicate his thoughts and feelings.

### **Symbols have personal meanings**

When adults play with children, they open the window into children's inner emotional experiences through the symbols they choose and stories they create. Joey's version Peter Pan is his own story. It is one example of how children symbolize emotional themes in early development through play, whereby they reveal their understanding of the world, their feelings, their relationships, and how they see themselves. Who or what they choose varies, and the content does not matter as long as it is meaningful to them. When children activate symbols in their minds and make the symbols their own, although such symbols may be familiar to others, they are imbued with the individual child's unique emotions and thoughts, which find safety in symbolic pretense where children can project, experiment, and seize powers they realize might not be available in reality, thus finding ways to understand their emotions and regulate their behavior. This symbolic process is essential for emotional development and emotional regulation.

### **Interface between symbolic and emotional development**

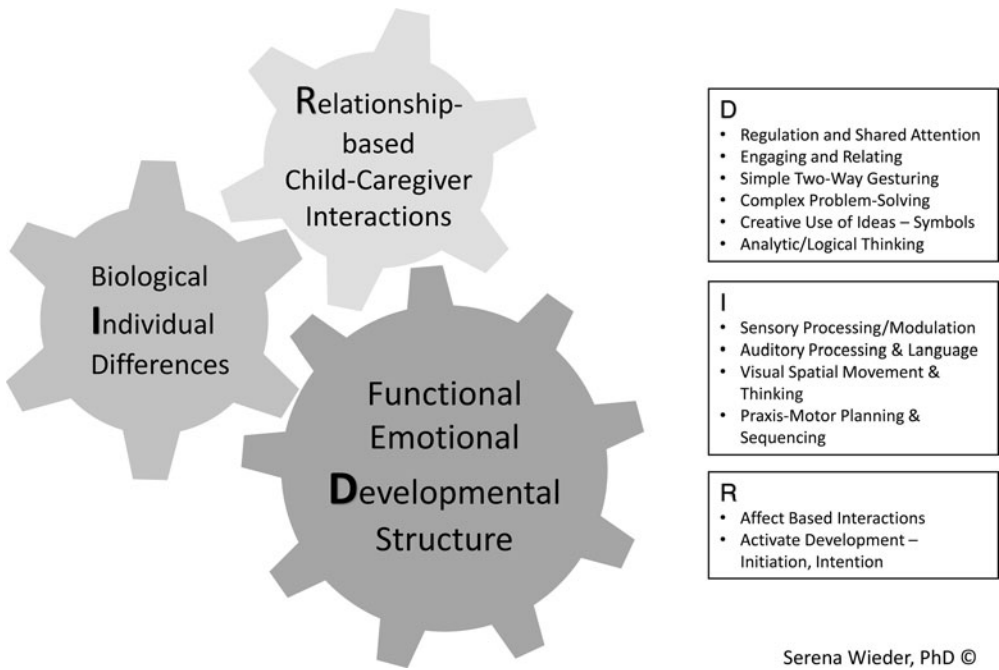
This article describes the interface between symbolic development and emotional development seen through play as they mirror each other as children grow. It is a process that originates in the signaling between infants and parents early in life. Using the DIR (Develop-

mental, Individual Difference, Relationship-based model; Greenspan & Wieder, 1998) as a framework (illustrated in Figure 1), the article provides an explanation of how children, through play, climb the successive levels of emotional-symbolic development, with steps of the ladder illustrated in Figure 2 and discussed later, allowing them to differentiate reality from fantasy and self-regulate the developmental anxieties inherent in this process (Greenspan & Wieder, 1998). The DIR model and developmental ladder illustrate the integration of affect and intellect, the hierarchy of emotional development, and how symbolic choices and play relate to other aspects of development, including individual differences in affective, sensory, and motor processes.

A critical additional point is that children with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), although often thought to be unable to play imaginatively, do have the potential to play and to climb the symbolic ladder when intervention is tailored to their unique profiles. This occurs when intervention promotes multiple forms of symbolic expression (see Wieder & Greenspan, 2003; Wieder & Wachs, 2012).

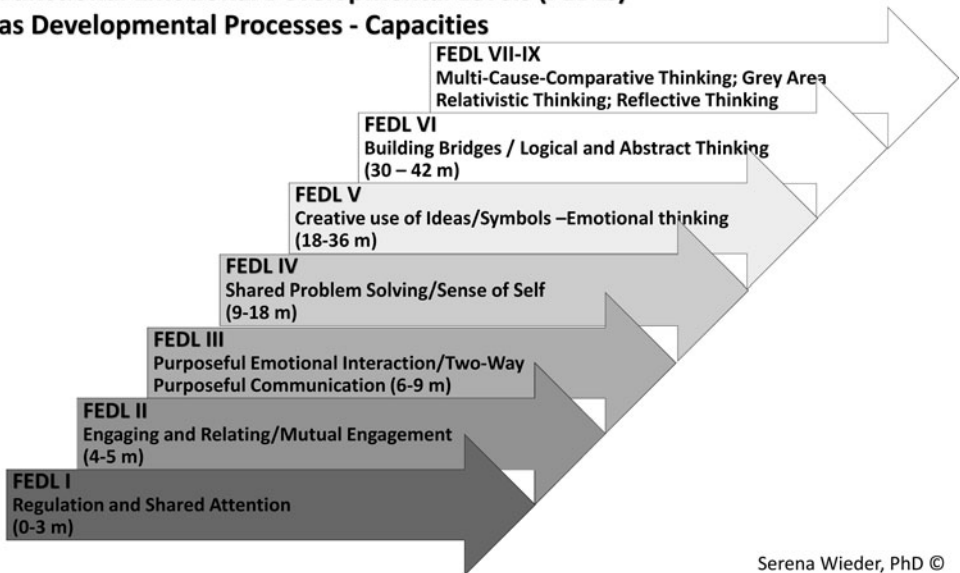
### **Formation and function of symbols in development**

A symbol can capture an element of reality by representing real objects, ideas, or behavior, but it is not the real thing. Rather, symbols are expressed through words, images, drama, movement, art, or music. The child's symbols reflect functional levels of emotional development along a developmental hierarchy or ladder, as represented in Figure 2. This usually begins with symbols representing the child's personal experiences of being cared for and loved, where all needs can be met. Imagine play with teddy bears, feeding play food, and using doctor kits. Later, symbols capture more complex emotions and drives such as anger, fear, jealousy, aggression, competition, rivalry, fairness, compassion, and justice, consistent with the growing child's expanding awareness of reality. Symbolic function is crucial for emotional and behavioral



**Figure 1.** Representation of the DIR model (Developmental, Individual Difference, Relationship-Based). Copyright 2017 by Serena Wieder. Shared by permission of the author.

**Functional Emotional Developmental Levels (FEDLs)  
as Developmental Processes - Capacities**



**Figure 2.** Illustration of Functional Emotional Developmental Levels (FEDLs) that constitute the steps of the developmental ladder children must climb as they move toward emotional-symbolic maturity. Copyright 2017 by Serena Wieder. Shared by permission of the author.

regulation and the mastery of typical developmental anxiety that accompanies this expanding emotional range. Anxiety, poor regulation, and aggression may reflect poor symbolization, which can be associated with poor impulse control and acting out. This can stem from possible challenges with comprehension, empathy, and theory of mind, as well as with sensory processing and environmental difficulties and threats that derail development. Without symbolic expression to communicate and negotiate, there is no safety.

### **The importance of play and affect in development**

Play has long been revered as the “work” of childhood. Few topics have been studied as extensively as play in the development of intellect, language, movement, social skills, cognition, and self-regulation, both historically and currently. Historically, researchers have described the stages and functions of play (Piaget, 1962; Singer & Singer, 1992; Vygotsky, 1967); more recently, researchers have examined the relationship and pathways between symbolic play and language (McCune, 1995, 2010; Orr & Geva, 2015; Westby, 1988). Others have examined the relationship between motor development or visual object recognition and symbolic development (Smith & Jones, 2011). But fewer studies have given attention to the role of affect, which is the experience of emotion that accompanies the child’s development of symbols and representational play, as well as in daily living.

Affect finds a home in psychological theories of development, attachment, affect regulation, affective communication, mentalization, therapeutic approaches, and more. As an example, Feldman and Greenbaum (1977) studied the role of affect regulation and synchrony in the play of mothers with their typical infants. The researchers found that these were precursors of symbolic competence at the age of 3 years. Similar attention has not been given to the capacities of children on the autism spectrum to engage in symbolic pretend play beyond functional and simple imitative use of objects. This gap is discussed

later in this article. Deficits in free play, however, have been linked to problems with mental health, including childhood disorders such as anxiety and depression (Gray, 2011).

### **The role of pretend play**

Historically, the role of pretend play in development has been debated by psychologists. In 1933, Vygotsky (published in English in 1967) described how a child moves forward in development through play activity, a process starting with imagining experience in real life, separating from the real objects and action into pretense, substituting images on the basis of what they mean, so that a stick or a galloping action can mean riding a horse (with no horse in sight), and creates ideas that express his wishes. In play, the child suspends reality and becomes what he wishes to be, just like Peter Pan in a ship that flies, as illustrated previously. In that example, Joey’s ideas were freed from the reality and constraints of the objects in his play. He could imagine what he wished, and he expressed meanings through play and words. He insisted on play and loved to play, clearly taking pleasure in doing so, but anxiety intruded on his wishful thinking and feelings.

Vygotsky (1967) also argued that creating imaginative play is the means or pathway to abstract thinking. In contrast, Piaget (1962) described play as an epiphenomenon of other skills, such as adult interaction and language, that actually cause development. He argued that play does not promote development but reflects it. Neither Vygotsky nor Piaget put great emphasis on emotional development and the role of affect, focusing more on cognitive development. Other researchers have argued that play helps foster development but that it is only one of several routes to development, called *equifinality*, thus minimizing the role of play in development as a unique contributor (Lillard et al., 2013).

### **Uniting the silos of development through play**

Whereas the components of development such as language, fine and gross motor, cognition, and social-emotional abilities have been

studied, it is important to consider how these developments occur simultaneously in order to understand a child's functioning as an individual. Understanding emotional development depends on examining the interaction between what the child's biology brings into the world and how relationships and the environment shape developmental capacities. As illustrated in Figure 1, Greenspan and Wieder (1998, 2005) integrated these components in the DIR model, in which child-parent interactive relationships are viewed as the key to advancing emotional and cognitive development. The DIR is an integrated theory, which utilizes a primary methodology of free play, known as Floortime. This provides the framework to examine the role of affect in symbol formation in all children. During Floortime, children are free to play in any way they prefer, and it is up to children to initiate themes that are treated as intentional as they carry on back and forth interactions with their parents or clinicians and later, their peers.

## **THE DIR MODEL**

The DIR model, as illustrated in Figure 1, has moved away from the silos of development, where each aspect of development has been measured and reported as a separate domain, although domains sometimes could be added together to yield a developmental or intellectual quotient identifying deficits and strengths. This approach did not capture how children actually function, where multiple domains must function simultaneously to support comprehension, communication, relating, creating ideas, and regulating emotions. In DIR, the domains interact with each other as children interact with caregivers and the environment to create capacities that will support functional emotional and intellectual capacities. Each capacity emerges in synchrony with brain and body development early in life and continues to develop as the subsequent capacities emerge. Together they build the foundation for lifelong relating and learning.

The DIR model introduced major paradigm shifts from behavioral frameworks to a frame-

work of dynamic-developmental systems that bring unity to emotion, experience, and reasoning. This model represents the theory and provides the context for understanding and supporting symbolic development (Greenspan & Wieder, 1998; Wieder, 1996; Wieder & Greenspan, 2003). The components of the DIR model are described in the sections that follow.

### **“D”—Developmental capacities of emotional and intellectual functioning**

#### ***Regulation and shared attention (between infant and caregiver)***

From birth to 3 months of age, infants' capacity for calm, focused interest in the sights and sounds of the outer world grows and serves as a means to be calm, attend, and share their interests with their caregivers as they look around the world. Regulation is by no means automatic. It may vary depending on the biological capacities or individual differences with which newborns enter the world and how they experience their environments. Even very young infants can convey comfort or stress to their parents who are learning to support their infant's behavioral and emotional regulation. Parents play important roles in supporting their infants' development of smooth cycles of sleep and alertness, ability to focus and shift attention, and to adapt to internal and external sensations, movement, and emotions. The capacity for behavioral and emotional regulation expands in duration, range, and stability as children develop and share attention first with their parents and then with others. Shared attention is between people, whereas later, joint attention emerges as parents and infant attend to the same object as they play with it or look at it, such as a toy or book or an activity. Both shared attention and joint attention are usually pleasurable.

#### ***Forming attachments and engaging in relationships***

During the first 4–5 months, infants and parents become increasingly intimate as they

interact with each other with warmth, trust, and attunement. They use all their senses to enjoy each other through looks, hugs, songs, and movement, setting the stage for all relationships in life. A secure attachment is supported by a parent's sensitivity and insight (Oppenheim, Koren-Karie, Dolev, & Yirmiya, 2012). Over time, the growing infant will need to remain related and engaged across the full range of emotions, even when disappointed, scared, angry, or feeling other stress. As children develop, the range of emotions expands and they are expressed through symbols, as described later.

### ***Intentional two-way affective communication***

Between 4 and 10 months, the purposeful, continuous flow of interactions with gestures and reciprocating emotions gets underway. Infants begin to act purposefully, as they mature and gain awareness of their bodies and the functions they can perform. As infants gain motor control over their bodies, they are better able to communicate their desires and intentions. With the emerging abilities to reach, sit and turn, crawl and creep, give and take objects, and vocalize, infants' awareness of the interpersonal world grows, as does their awareness of their body in space and in relation to others who also may be moving.

### ***Complex social problem solving and emerging sense of self***

Between 9 and 18 months, infants—now emerging toddlers—develop the capacity to problem-solve using social interactions. Most have learned the back and forth rhythm of interactive emotional signaling, and they begin to use this ability to think about and solve their problems, such as how to do what they want and find emotionally meaningful, such as bringing Mommy to the cabinet where the cookies are. Their senses work with their motor systems and emerging language skills as they interact with others to solve problems, begin to differentiate their sense of self from others, and develop thinking. Challenges arise

when old means fail to solve new difficulties, leading to new discoveries and means of problem solving. For example, when crying alone does not get toddlers what they want, they discover that they need to point or pull their parent over to what they desire, or to wait.

### ***Creating emotional ideas***

Between 18 and 36 months, toddlers begin to represent or symbolize their intentions, feelings, and ideas in imaginative play, using gestures, words, and objects symbolically. Toddlers now may pick up the toy phone to call Daddy, or they may set up a picnic or tea party for Mommy or a friend. A toddler playing symbolically may examine the sick baby with the doctor kit or repair the car with play tools, substituting objects or gestures as needed to express ideas. Images form in toddlers' minds, so they can think ahead without seeing actual toys and can now imagine the objects in context, such as having tea with one's dolls with the tea set now infused with the pleasure of having shared the delicious tea and cookies with mother (Winnicott, 1971). These first symbolic ideas come from experiences in real life that can now be enacted in personal pretend dramas as the child experiments with different roles and feelings and begins to discover magical thinking.

### ***Emotional thinking, logic, and sense of reality***

At about 3 years, young children begin to combine ideas to tell a story as they develop more logical thinking and better understanding of themselves and others and of what is real or not real. Their stories may use imaginative characters and animal figures who talk, as well as fantasy figures, from princesses and fairy godmothers to witches or wizards, as they discover the need for more power to encounter the conflicts and challenges in life. At this point, they also become able to take on the perspective of others in different roles or conversations. Just as with Joey's Peter Pan, each story has personal meaning and often is

replayed in various ways. Children's advancing reasoning skills help them build sequential bridges, and their stories become increasingly logical with a beginning, middle, and end. For example, children may begin to relinquish magical thinking as the solution to everything and may begin to create logical fantasies. They can now plan an idea for an adventure in space, or be a hero defeating an enemy to bring justice, or they may step into future roles with which they identify, such as parenthood, expanding their narratives with more characters, prediction, theory of mind, and empathy. Over the next few years, children's emotional and mental abilities move toward abstract thinking and they develop the ability to distinguish reality from fantasy, self from nonself, one feeling from another, and how to take time and space into account. This capacity develops further through childhood into multicausal and comparative thinking, relativistic or gray-area thinking, and self-reflection, which are the top rungs on the developmental ladder illustrated in Figure 2.

At any of these functional emotional developmental levels, variations may exist in the robustness, stability, and completeness of these capacities. As seen with Joey, stress related to health or learning difficulties, family change and parental stress, losses, and moves, along with other events, can throw a child and family off course. At all times, it is critical to meet individual children at the level at which they are functioning in the moment. Either over- or underestimating a child's ability and emotional status has risks. A developmental perspective means that it is important to pursue progress at any age, and the length of time progress takes may vary for each child as roadblocks or gaps are identified and need to be addressed (Greenspan & Wieder, 2006).

**“I”—Individual differences in sensory modulation, sensory processing, sensory affective processing, and motor planning and sequencing**

Every infant enters the world with unique characteristics determined by biology (genes) interacting with the environment. The in-

fant's first experience is through physical caregiving practices shaped by cultural values and beliefs. The infant's body is the first object of discovery and it is the sensory information the infant takes in through touch, sound, smell, vision, interoceptive sensations, and movement in space that are the sources of relational, linguistic, and cognitive development to be assimilated in unique ways.

Consider the example of Joey again. He was born with a reactive and intense nervous system. Joey relied on symbolic play and self-talk when he was alone to modulate his anxiety and practice solutions for his fears. He held onto magical thinking where he could be successful but was also excited by the danger in his play scenarios. He did not understand the interaction between his fears and excitement and was driven to fight his enemies with poor control over his impulsiveness. Other children may have other reasons for identifying with Peter Pan or any superhero fighting evil. In some cases, children try to understand the motives of bad guys whom they see as very powerful by assuming their power in play and thereby also know that the bad guy cannot get them. It sometimes is a counterphobic attempt to not be afraid of the bad guy's aggression. Some are able to alternate roles as they develop abstract thinking to explain why good guys and bad guys both fight but one is “good” and the other “bad.” Whichever role they experiment with, it is important to make meaning of their intent and not to confuse symbolic play with the real thing.

In the DIR model, careful attention is paid to the body, sensory processing, postural control, motor planning, visual-spatial and auditory capacities of children, and the ways they support or compromise functioning in other areas of development, especially emotionally and their sense of self. The DIR model (Greenspan & Wieder, 1999) added a theoretical framework for understanding every child's unique profile and the impact of altered patterns of sensory responsiveness on the development of children with sensory processing challenges before these were even recognized as a diagnostic feature of ASD.

Biologically based individual differences are the result of genetic, prenatal, perinatal, and maturational variations and/or deficits, including problems with modulation in each sensory modality (overresponsive, underresponsive, and sensory craving), sensory-based motor disorder (dyspraxia and postural disorder), and sensory processing (comprehension and expression) in each modality (Miller, Schoen, & Nielson, 2012). Essential for symbolic development is sensory-affective processing in each modality, which is the ability to perceive, interpret, and react to affect, including the capacity to connect “intent” and affect to motor planning and sequencing, language, and symbols (Greenspan, 2002).

These processing capacities are relevant to all children and especially so for children with ASD (Greenspan & Wieder, 1998, 1999). Recent brain studies support this contention, finding divergent connectivity in the limbic structures and the fusiform gyrus related to reciprocal communication and facial emotional processing in children with ASD, differentiating them from children with sensory processing disorders, although both share white matter brain disruption (Chang et al., 2014).

#### **“R”—Relationships and interactions**

Relationships not only activate development but also serve as a base from which children can move into the world with curiosity and confidence to explore, discover, learn, and master. Attachment theory informs the DIR model (Bowlby, 1988; Dolev, Oppenheim, Koren-Karie, & Yirmiya, 2014; Greenspan & Wieder, 2006) and promotes sensitive and attuned interaction and insight. Relationships go beyond primary attachments, however, to expand reciprocal interactions with other caregivers to attain emotional constancy across an affective range and to support differentiation and individuation and identifications and social roles in later life. Relationships that offer attuned and responsive interaction are the vehicles for learning, encouraging initiative and intentionality, respecting a child’s own agency, and also providing the security to

feel safe, accepted, and loved, taking priority over all other goals across the life span.

Together, the “D,” the “I,” and the “R” provide a unified dynamic framework to identify each child’s strengths and challenges. The DIR model can guide the experiences provided by parents and caregivers to advance development for all children and interventions when needed.

#### **DIR’S DEVELOPMENTAL SEQUENCE: FROM SIGNALS TO SYMBOLS**

Symbolic abilities build on the foundation of the aforementioned developmental processes defined in the DIR model that start at birth. The newborn must adapt to the myriad of sensations he or she experiences as the external world impinges. Some infants do so smoothly, establishing rhythms of sleep and alert wakefulness. They share attention easily, looking and referencing their parents, soothe easily when upset, and develop self-calming mechanisms over time. Others are fussy, hard to soothe, and need more coregulation to dampen the distress and heighten their focus for shared attention. Either way, these are the infant’s first emotional communications (Tronick, 1989), and the caregiver’s attunement to the infant’s sensory-affective signaling provides the preverbal foundation for attachment as well as regulation (Schore, 2014).

From the start, parent or caregiver–infant interactions involve an exchange of emotional affective signals. The emotional signal conveys intent before engaging in an action. For example, the baby may look intensely at you deciphering who you are, before breaking into a smile, but if he feels scared or distressed, may grimace and hold his breath before starting to cry. When the parent responds to these signals and reaches for the baby, she or he can preempt action and help the baby modulate the intensity of emotions before crying or biting, for example. The “real thing,” which may be signaled by intense alarmed crying or tantrum, does not have to happen when the signal conveys intent and



the parent can reassure the baby with a soothing tone of voice and holding or moving the baby. Even an older infant or young toddler can read the signals of a parent's impatience or disapproval and knows when not to interrupt or make demands, regulating his or her behavior by staying out of the way. The memory of the looks and actions, infused with affect, will soon turn into mentalized images of the child's experience and perceptions at the time. Through this process, signals become the precursors of symbols (Greenspan & Shanker, 2004; Winnicott, 1971). Signaling continues throughout life, carried by affect expressed through facial expressions, tone of voice, eye contact, posture, movement, intensity, and timing, conveying positive and negative meanings and feelings with many variations. How these are expressed depends on individual differences of both the child and the caregiver.

### **Preverbal signals**

As noted previously, in the DIR model, regulation and shared attention are the first building blocks of development. They set the stage for engagement and attachment and subsequent developmental capacities. Preverbal signals abound as parents and infants connect and share affect as they "fall in love," with increasing number of gestures to communicate and ways to solve problems together. Motor development advances simultaneously as the 7- or 8-month-old baby reaches for a desired object the baby's mother is holding, or as the walking toddler pulls the parent's hand toward the object the toddler wants. In each case, these presymbolic actions stem from desire and the earlier interactions that gave the objects meaning (Schore, 2014; Tronick, 1989). Later, as toddlers develop, they do not have to see the swing in the backyard to recreate the pleasure of that experience; rather, they can imagine the delight they experience when they are swinging and their mother turns the swing into a journey to the moon and acts as the copilot. The swing is not just the fun swing perceived earlier, but it is now an internalized image, which becomes a

symbol that can be transformed in many ways as the child's ideation grows. Thus, children expand their symbolic adventures by playing not only with their parents but also with other caregivers and children.

However, affective experiences are not only pleasurable, they also may be frightening, angry, or even traumatic, encompassing a range of feelings. Often parents seek to suppress negative affects quickly, for example, by saying, "Don't be angry (or scared), it's okay," even before accepting the feeling or identifying the cause for the child. Although positive feelings are more desired and comfortable, all feelings need to be accepted for children to feel safe and learn to understand their experience in order to share and self-regulate rather than act impulsively or withdraw. Sometimes children's negative affect is intuitive and provides an important signal to the parents of anxiety, danger, or lack of readiness. Avoidance is another important signal to be understood.

Is this process automatic? Not necessarily. If the presymbolic level of signaling does not develop or is not robust, the child may not have capacities to develop self-regulation and may expect to be intruded upon and overwhelmed. If children's signals are not read or they are unable to signal back, they may not get the support they need from their caregiver to feel safe or to change the environment. Children then may have difficulty using affect as a symbolic signal to cope with and regulate feelings and to find solutions, with possible stress increasing and anxiety escalating and overwhelming them. In such instances, children's symbolic level may become fraught with fear and aggression as their behavior disorganizes.

Only regulated affects can serve as signals. If a caregiver misses the child's signal, such as not seeing frustration building and does not help in time, the child may act out. If a caregiver overreacts or underreacts to a child's signals, for example, when the child is anxious or scared, the child can feel overwhelmed and fail to get soothing reciprocal interactions or the help to form the symbols needed to understand his or her feelings. Such children

then may have difficulty using affective interactions to regulate and may be unable to read and respond to soothing calming affective signals their caregivers offer in efforts to coregulate. The interaction between children's capacity to signal and parents' sensitivity is a critical factor in this process of development (Greenspan & Shanker, 2004; Oppenheim et al., 2012).

### **Separating from perceptions of the "real thing"**

It is emotional signaling that enables children to separate perceptions from fixed predictable actions and to free their perceptions so as to acquire emotional meanings that become symbols. When children register sensation of what they see, hear, smell, or taste, or experience when they move, in their minds, the sensation is coupled with the emotion felt at the same time. The affective experience may be one of pleasure, curiosity, pride, or discomfort, worry, fear, or anxiety.

The experience could be stressful or invigorating, as in the following examples. Sally watches mommy walk toward her high chair with a small bowl of cut up grapes and smiles in anticipation signaling her appreciation. Danny waves his arms with excitement, keeping his gaze on Daddy as he is about to roll the yellow ball toward Danny, so that Danny shifts his gaze to reach for the ball to push it back, already anticipating its return. Ana cuddles her teddy bear blankie as she is cuddled before bedtime. Benny frowns as he sees mommy putting on her coat and starts to whimper as she soothingly reassures him that she is going to work and will be back soon.

These perceptions are simultaneous, with an emotion and an action. When a person is able to perceive without being driven to act out or expect another's action, the person is left with a freestanding image in mind related to the action *and* the experience of how it felt. So, Danny's yellow ball is not just another object, but it takes on special meaning and becomes an image coded with the pleasure he experiences playing with his father. The image becomes a symbol represent-

ing the object or experience and the affect that accompanied it. A freestanding perception that becomes an internal symbol continues to take on meanings through experience. Ana could then cuddle her teddy bear when she is alone, feeling the comfort and security associated with her mom and can give her baby doll a teddy when playing and doing for the baby what was done for her.

### **The dual coding of experience and symbolic meaning**

Many have described the sequence of symbolic play, as when children reenact the use of a small object demonstrating its real use, or substitute an object or gesture to show that they are drinking tea at a tea party, or feeding the baby doll or teddy bear with a toy bottle but, lacking that, by substituting a long block to represent the bottle. At such times, they are demonstrating cognitive abilities and functional play (Kasari, Chang, & Patterson, 2013; Westby, 1988). But is that all? This pretense also has emotional meaning stemming from children's own affective experiences of being fed, looking at their mother's smiling face, or hearing their father's cajoling voice to eat a little more. The teddy bear was one of Ana's first gifts. It stood watch over her as her mother cared for her, eventually becoming a transitional object representing her mother when she left the room at night or went to school, helping her self-regulate and reinforcing the image or symbol of her mother in her mind (Winnicott, 1971).

This dual coding of experience applies to all experience in early development where affect takes the lead in learning (Greenspan, 2002). Words also take on symbolic meaning through this dual coding. A baby first learns through the signals he receives from a caregiver who lets him know that the bathwater is still too hot as the adult's voice escalates, "Hot, hot!," and then calmly reassures the baby, "Just a minute, we'll splash in just a minute." The baby does not understand the temperature of the water or the length of a minute, but these words take on emotional meanings that help the child stay regulated while observing the

caregiver get the bath ready. When waiting seems frustrating, the caregiver might help the baby be patient by singing a song, or providing some toys to throw in, smiling and applauding how well the baby throws, or how happy the fish is to be back in the water and then giving a tender hug and kiss while lifting the baby into the tub and saying things about loving the baby so much and how much fun they can have. So this is the secret of “love,” the secret ingredient is affect, and the process is the dual coding of experience, where emotion and intellect are one and language or actions have more than one meaning.

### **CLIMBING THE SYMBOLIC LADDER IN EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Social-emotional constructs are often identified together as if they are one set of skills. Or, emotional is coupled with behavior and regulation. It can be difficult to describe a child’s inner emotional life, especially when young. But symbolic interests or preoccupations can indicate some of what is going on in the child’s inner life. Emotional development has a unique trajectory, integrating all aspects of development reflected as one climbs the symbolic ladder and as symbolic play is guided by emotions based on this hierarchy. Beginning with dependency, children’s first symbols are used to reenact experiences of being cared for and loved. Later, they move on to discover emerging expectations often represented by symbolic figures they come to love that accompany their journeys. First, they may experience Barney as a big cuddly dinosaur who sings of happy families and love, “I love you, you love me, we’re a happy family . . . .” But then Barney also asks them to “Clean up, clean up, everybody do your share . . . .”, investing them with their first responsibility for taking care of themselves and others. Mental images start with real objects that enable children to think about those objects when the objects are not physically present. They allow the child to think about experiences before, during, and after their occurrence. Visualizing what they heard and imagining

prior events help children better understand experience, know what to anticipate, and find new solutions to needs and fears. For the first time, children can integrate experiences from the past into the present and plan for the future as they imagine what will come next. Images also foster creativity as they are no longer bound by time and space in reality.

Examining the emotional content of play during the first few years of life, whether symbolized through words, toys, language, mime, stories, movement, or art, now severed from reality, reveals children’s understanding of the world, their feelings and relationships, and how they see and experience themselves (Wieder, 1996; Wieder & Greenspan 2003, 2006; Wieder & Wachs, 2012). They reenact their personal worlds striving toward mastery of visiting the doctor, or understanding the reasons to fix the car, or shop, and cook. They enjoy dressing up for different roles or using figures to represent the characters involved as they practice being in someone else’s shoes and what it feels like. One hears how good the food tastes, or the doctor saying, “No shots today!” or the squeals of jumping in puddles with friends as they move from reality to symbols, first “reliving” real experiences and then moving on to fantasy.

### **The choice of symbols**

Children share not only language to communicate and create ideas but also symbols transmitted through culture representing emotional development. Examining the symbolic play and preferences children express, the symbols they adopt from shows and books they love to see and hear repeatedly, offers insight into their inner experiences. When they begin to play with these figures, it is no longer a replication of real life as earlier but a pathway to discovering themselves. Whom they dress up as or the play figures they choose, whom they form alliances with, and whom they rescue or vanquish in battle now reveals more complex emotions as they identify with more complex representations.

Consider Sesame Street, where urban characters learn letters and numbers and friend-

ships reign, even with grouches and villains, each one unique and no one more beloved than Elmo. Or, go to the woods and find poor Winnie-the-Pooh forever searching for honey, supported by a group of friends to solve his problems. In both, there is another character like Christopher Robin, who can help. And Dora and Diego venture out into the world discovering new places, searching for answers, finding adventure. Or, Thomas the Train encounters countless challenges on his job, including stronger and more competitive trains that pass him by. *Good Night Moon* signals that it is time to go to bed with gentle farewells to the child's world. The underlying emotional task to be mastered is separation. Words and visual images prepare the child to transition from the familiar world into sleep. These characters represent preschoolers as they discover more of the world, have to think for themselves, and figure out who they are in the process. Symbols unite emotions and thinking and action as problems are solved. Emotions expand from caregiving to separation, to striving for independence, with curiosity, adventure, some fear, competition and loss, and victory. There are many developing emotions on the symbolic ladder, all true to life and symbolized safely with increasing elaboration of ideas as preschoolers prepare for reality.

### **The development of fantasy**

Each culture provides symbols related to emotional development, handed down from legends, fairy tales, and stories transmitted over generations. Between three and six years, there is a leap, taking children beyond the emotional reality-based themes described previously into fantasy so that they can embrace magical thinking as they move back and forth from outside-in to inside-out, with the space in between described by Winnicott (1971) in *Playing and Reality*. For some, fantasy is fueled by classic fairy tales and books parents read to children, with words now conveying intense emotions related to the child's growing awareness of feelings. Here too is a hierarchy of emotional tasks advancing development as children begin to realize they may

encounter threats and begin to deal with life more on their own. In the *Three Little Bears*, Goldilocks has to deal with getting lost and with her hunger and fatigue as she searches for home. She discovers a house in the woods and helps herself to porridge and rest, only to be awakened, feeling terrified, by the bears. *The Three Little Pigs* are evicted and have to manage life on their own. There are wolves out in the world and two must be rescued by their brother, who was wise and built his house out of brick, whereas they chose sticks and straw. How different they each are. In *Jack and the Beanstalk*, Jack finally cuts down the beanstalk to the dismay of the giant chasing him, seeking the golden eggs. What a heroic and reparative act after giving away the cow for a few beans. And lovely Cinderella is surrounded by chirping birds as she gets ready for the ball unbeknown to her jealous and mean stepsisters who rip her dress off, consumed with jealousy. Fantasy and realistic images blur with dragons and knights, fairy godmothers, and witches; it does not matter. The emotions are so vivid and so are the symbols representing them. Such stories usher children up another rung on the developmental ladder. Their value depends on the caregivers' response to their children's emotions when they act the stories in play or during their conversations about how the characters felt and how they feel to encourage theory of mind, motives and perspective taking, emotional thinking, and abstract abilities.

### **Hierarchy of symbolized affects**

Emotional and symbolic development, now expressed in play and language, expand in parallel fashion. As indicated earlier, the first themes reflect the essence of infants' and toddlers' lives, as they depend on caregivers for care, protection, enjoyment, and love in order to build attachments and the secure foundation for what is to come. With development, symbolic play moves on to reflect transition themes related to separation, disappointment, loss, sadness, and fears. Children begin to symbolize the necessity to be more assertive and independent as their play

assumes more control and power to deal with competition, threats, battles, and disaster, with the incumbent feelings of danger, anger, jealousy, defeat, and victory, but also show compassion and empathy. While first accompanied by magical thinking and fantasies, more realistic and logical solutions are found as children develop, leading into integrating abstract themes, such as embracing fairness, kindness, empathy, justice, and morality.

Inherent in development is the realization of “good guys and bad guys.” Mommy might be the first “bad guy” when she says, “No!” to more candy or Daddy might set limits on throwing things when the child is angry. Parents coregulate strong emotions until they can be expressed safely. The idyllic omnipotent all giving parent begins to fade as children discover their own desires and separateness. “Bad guys” also appear at nursery school when told you have to share, that is, give up your toy, or another child just grabs it. So, the seeds have been planted and transform into cultural symbols from powerful kings, kind fairies, to pirates, dragons, evil kings, and monsters, all with magical powers for better and for worse. By four or five years, children create their own ideas as they discover the power of their ideas and defeat the bad, or turn bad into good, and have the dead come back to life, often depending on such superheroes as Superman, Spiderman, and Batman. Soon they venture into space to take sides in *Star Wars*.

### **Reality testing**

By this developmental point, children have been launched into testing reality. They need control and power to keep climbing up the ladder as they continue to develop and begin to understand the bigger world. Their language has developed, and they now may employ it to negotiate, detect deceptiveness, and assess trust in the service of defeating their enemies and exercising their power, be they a king or wizard or superhero, or a fairy godmother or queen or Wonder Woman. This is crucial, as pirates, giants, witches, and monsters await, ready for battle. Stories become

more elaborate and coherent, with a beginning, middle, and end, with multiple characters, and with movement through time and space. All symbolic forms pitch in, and children use toys, drama, drawing, movement or dance, art and music, or some blend of all of them. The specific characters do not matter, but what they symbolize is everlasting and essential for understanding what is real or not real, what is me or not me, and the mastery of the full range of emotions, with imagination to discover the unknown and move forward until judgment and reality testing become well established.

### **Developmental anxiety: When symbols are bigger than “life”**

Throughout development, psychological and emotional transitions generate expectable anxiety related to growing awareness of self and others and facing the unknown. Consider infants who realize that they are looking at someone they do not know, or 3-year-olds having to separate from their parents at nursery school. Whereas most children master these anxieties with limited stress, some tend to be hypersensitive to sensations and experience affect intensely. Some are overly fearful and reactive to body damage, aggression, and unpredictable events. Others are thrown into panic when they turn around and do not see their parent and feel lost in space. Some have catastrophic reactions to not finding needed objects or to thinking something has broken. Others feel helpless or frustrated when they cannot organize a task and especially when they do not understand what is being said because they are so anxious or because comprehension fails them. Still others live in dangerous environments or have witnessed violence.

As development advances, anxiety can stem from the child’s imagination when symbols become greater than life. Symbols elicit feelings where inside and outside meet. Images and labels become embellished with powerful affects that can be positive with princesses, kindly godmothers and fairies, benevolent kings and leaders, or negative with monsters,

dragons, and witches that feel all too real. With this polarization, magical thinking turns alligators, dinosaurs, and other frightening images into “bad guys” in countless stories, as adults moderate the anxiety. Verbal reassurances may work partially, if at all, and may have to be repeated again and again. Daddy may have to check under the bed, search the closet, and throw out the scary lions and monsters night after night. If children do not yet have access to magical thinking where they can defeat their enemies and create the safety they need, or a parent is not there to coregulate their fears, anxiety ensues. If a parent dismisses a child’s fears or overreacts to a child’s anxiety, the children may feel overwhelmed and may not get the reassuring reciprocal interactions that can help them form the symbols they need to understand their feelings. Children then have difficulty using affective interactions to regulate; they may be unable to read and respond to soothing calming affective signals; and they may act out aggressively or withdraw and become constricted. This is evident when a child becomes avoidant of emotional themes and restricts play to safe dependency themes or will not play pretend. Others may stay immersed in their fantasies, but rarely as the “bad guy,” and hold onto control, having difficulty judging cues, recognizing deception, or interpreting affects. Counterintuitively, it is useful to “deepen the plot” of themes the child starts and then pulls away from. This provides more time to grapple with motives, what the other side is thinking, explore alternative solutions, integrate more emotions, and appreciate that symbolic play is all about ideas and feelings, not actions, danger, or disapproval. Without symbols and symbolic play or conversations, anxiety may persist beyond what is expected developmentally; the child may become stressed, constricted, and act out, and these reactions can take precedence over reasoning because anxiety can derail logic and reality testing.

### **The power of symbols**

In symbolic play, a child can have power, make the rules, practice different solutions,

come back to life, and experiment again. The more children play, the more they will realize they are creating the ideas and choosing the symbols that they can change, leading to flexibility and resilience. Most children love to play, embracing the complexity with many enjoying the mix of excitement and fear that they overcome by winning. Play also promotes building of executive function because, in play, children have to organize and sequence ideas and be able to take someone else’s perspective. Developmental anxiety thus provides the tension and opportunity to test what is real or not real, what is inside and outside, and what can be shared and negotiated with others.

Although children can enjoy playing by themselves, and can be heard speaking to themselves at such times, to reach its heights, symbolic play requires reciprocity and depends on interaction with a parent or caregiver who expands on the children’s ideas, encourages communication, and assumes roles to help them elaborate, thus supporting their abilities to explore a wider range of feelings. When a child plays with another person, it is easy to guess who the “bad guy” always is. The interaction supports the child’s emotional regulation of feelings and impulses, as well as comprehension, perspective taking, and empathy. The level of symbolic play is related to parental willingness to engage in games of fantasy, tolerate emotional themes, and facilitate creativity. Alternatively, parental intrusiveness, depression, and anxiety are associated with reduced rates of symbolic play (Singer & Singer, 2005). Not all parents join their child’s spontaneous symbolic play and prefer other ways of playing, such as sports, construction, or board games that are also important avenues for dealing with emotional and social development. Similarly, play experiences with other children can help discern the perspectives of others who may agree or disagree and have different intentions and motives. Play with friends, siblings, and school mates also helps children learn the “rules” of social play and games as they develop self-regulation and understand risk and competition.

## **DO CHILDREN WITH AUTISM ENGAGE IN SYMBOLIC PLAY?**

Whether children with autism engage in symbolic play and how their play compares with children with developmental delays and typical children has been debated over many years. The play of children with ASD has been described as simple, stereotypical, and relying on sensory manipulation of the toys, as well as lacking in affect and theory of mind. Impaired symbolic play was once even considered a symptom of ASD, and more severe symptoms of ASD were associated with lower symbolic play ability, along with lower cognitive and language development. Like so much of the research in autism, most studies have been limited to examining autism symptoms and cognitive or language level, rather than addressing the multiple domains of development involved in symbolic play and what it represents. Attempts focused on answering whether symbolic play advances cognition, or whether a certain level of cognition or language was needed to advance symbolic play, or both, could not be ascertained. Past research has been variable with regard to levels of play, kinds of autism, numbers of children studied, whom they played with, different settings, and so forth, and, therefore, inconclusive (Thiemann-Bourque, Brady, & Fleming, 2012).

Furthermore, assessments such as cognitive or language tests usually do not focus on play. Intervention efforts to address play tend to be directive or focus on skills and do not help children expand or generalize, let alone address emotional meanings. In some approaches, the play may be unrelated to the interests of the child or have little meaning to the child. Such reasons suggest why the potential benefits of symbolic play interventions have not been reached in treating autism. DIR is the exception.

Recent advances in early intervention have brought attention back to play, but not always as a targeted outcome. The Early Start Denver model included play interventions and

reported gains in cognition, language, and reduction of autism symptoms, but the researchers did not examine symbolic play in their outcome studies of 18- to 30-month-olds, nor in their 6-year follow-up (Dawson et al., 2010; Estes et al., 2015). In contrast, Kasari et al. (2013) did target play as an outcome, but primarily using short-term interventions and outcomes. They questioned the view that children with autism were not competent or did not understand pretend play, but rather hypothesized that they may rarely engage in play with adults and may not have had enough adult support to shape and support their play skills. Although functional play (i.e., using toys as intended) and pretend acts can be prompted, such play does not automatically turn into the creative, spontaneous, and enjoyable experience of pretense. With limited play experience that is not matched to the child's developmental readiness to learn to play, pretend roles and thematic play may not be attained. Kasari and colleagues' JASPER program (Joint Attention, Symbolic Play, Emotional Regulation) first targets joint attention and engagement to establish developmental readiness for symbolic play. Following this, higher levels of play are supported by using the child's ideas and prompting to expand the diversity of play skills, encouraging longer play periods. Kasari, Paparella, Freeman, and Jaromi (2008) found significant gains in joint attention and joint engagement. Additionally, a longitudinal study of 3- to 4-year olds showed these gains related to language outcomes at 8-9 years of age (Kasari, Gulsrud, Wong, Kwon, & Locke, 2010). These studies of underlying precursors related to symbolic development advanced the field of behavioral interventions, which now include more naturalistic play paradigms in early intervention (Schreibman et al., 2015). Beyond this, there is recognition that more longitudinal research is needed on the level of a child's play as a diagnostic feature, how play skills unfold over time, and increased focus on play in intervention to study multiple domains (Stanley & Konstantareas, 2006).

### Assessing symbolic competence

Although helpful, the emphasis in the interventions discussed thus far has not been on symbolic play or emotional themes as intended targets, but on skills often taught in behavioral modes; nor has the development of relationship capacities that support symbolic function, a core deficit of autism, been part of those investigations. Although infants and toddlers now are screened as young as 9 months of age, and diagnosed at risk for ASD as early as 18 months of age, they are not necessarily screened for the precursors of symbolic competence.

In the DIR model, relationships are central to development, where sensitivity and responsiveness support tailoring interactions to individual differences. Clinicians working in the DIR model, including the author, report observations of how individual differences have great bearing on play, as seen in the many children with ASD who play and communicate differently (Wieder & Wachs, 2012). Extensive practice-based evidence in the form of case reports, case studies, and observations of children as they advance emotionally and symbolically are observed in the following and later examples. Because of individual differences, some children with ASD present with verbal capacities and strong auditory memory. They may be able to repeat whole books and label countless items but be unable to use language meaningfully or to have conversations, lacking comprehension or the ability to retrieve what they want to express even though they have symbolic ideas. Other children with ASD may have relatively stronger motor and visual capacities; for example, they may line up their toys or love marble runs, construction, board games, or puzzles that have specific destinations and strategies but may be unable to engage in motor-based interactive problem solving that is unstructured, as required in symbolic play. They may have ideas but not the executive function skills to organize and sequence their thoughts or intent into symbolic play or tales. Those who have more significant difficulties may present as aimless. The

potential for changing such patterns, which may be masking higher symbolic potential, can be assessed by increasing interactions attuned to more subtle signals and providing the affect to support emotional symbolic expression, while also treating underlying sensory, language, motor, and regulatory challenges.

Recent randomized controlled trial (RCT) research on interventions using play with parents and children (e.g., Casenhiser, Binns, McGill, Morderer, & Shanker, 2014; Solomon, Van Egeren, Mahoney, Quon-Huber, & Zimmerman, 2014) have shown that, when relationship-based intervention focuses on developmental capacities with interactions tailored to the individual profile of the child, such as in Floortime (Greenspan & Wieder, 2006, 2007), children may be able to develop capacities for symbolic play, communication, and thinking, even when development is uneven. More importantly, researchers have begun to focus on the core deficits in autism, relating and communicating, rather than the typical outcome measures using IQ and language skills tests.

Recent RCT studies based on Floortime, called play and parent-mediated interventions, have used methods related to the DIR model with children with ASD as old as 5 years of age. They have shown that when parents provide play interventions coached by consultant experts (with demonstrated fidelity), autism symptoms and severity significantly reduce, and functional emotional developmental levels advance (Solomon et al., 2014). Solomon's PLAY project compared outcomes for 128 children in a year-long intervention in five sites receiving coaching in play to improve caregiver-child interactions, plus community service, with outcomes for children randomized to receive community services only. The outcomes showed large treatment effects for parent and child interactional behaviors as well as significant improvements on a standard measure for diagnosing autism, although no differences were found for language and IQ scores. Mothers in the experimental treatment using play also were found



to be less directive and to experience less stress and depression (Solomon et al., 2014).

In another play-based RCT intervention for autism, which focused on the effectiveness of social-interaction model, Casenhiser et al. (2014) reported significant improvements in autism symptoms, social communication, and parent-child interactions in the intervention group but not in language skills when measured by standardized language assessments. By analyzing their data with a focus on communicative acts, the researchers showed that children in the group whose parents were coached in how to play with their children outperformed the community treatment group. The authors noted that these results underscore the importance of functional language measures reflecting conversational ability and the importance of parent-child interactions in guiding and evaluating treatment for children with autism.

In another large RCT, Pickles et al. (2016) reported on a 6-year follow-up of PACT (Parents and Children Together), a parent-mediated intervention with 152 children with autism. This research team also found evidence of the importance of teaching parents how to play with their children with ASD. The treatment group of parents received feedback on how to interact more effectively while watching their videotaped play with their children. Parents played daily with their children in addition to standard care. Results indicated that parent-mediated interventions significantly reduced autism severity scores. Children in the experimental treatment condition initiated more interactions with their parents and showed better receptive and expressive language communication after 1 year of intervention, with continued effects 6 years later (Pickles et al., 2016).

Studies showing the effectiveness of parent-mediated interventions with children with ASD that are focused on the core deficits of relating and communicating support the importance of working with parents relationally to carry on their daily playful interactions to help their children advance in the most important ways. This added component to standard

care is an essential ingredient in these studies, with play providing the opportunity to reach higher symbolic levels and improve relating and communicating. But even the year-long interventions did not fully examine the long-term development of symbolic capacities and how these capacities relate to emotional development. Although not yet part of the existing research base, observations from long-term clinical intervention by this author and other experienced clinicians provide insight and illustrate that children with autism can advance symbolically across a range of emotional experience when symbolic development continues to be supported through interactive play and conversation as children grow older (Delahooke, 2017; Greenspan & Wieder, 2006; Wieder & Wachs, 2012).

## CASE ILLUSTRATIONS

The following four vignettes of symbolic play represent children who have different DIR profiles common in ASDs. All received comprehensive DIR intervention, which helped them develop capacities for shared attention, relating, preverbal communication, and social problem solving—in other words, the foundations for symbolic play. The children in these examples are composites of multiple children. All were impeded by the unevenness of their development and exhibited different rates of progress with variations in language, visual-spatial abilities, motor planning, and motor and executive functions. Despite these delays, all of the children moved forward using their relationship and emotional capacities to cope with inner and outer experiences. When poor comprehension, poor reality testing, and social stress impinged, they had symbolic resources to keep advancing with the help of symbolic function in play and conversations with parents and other caregivers.

### Suzie

Suzie teases her mom by withholding the piece of play pizza she asks for, and she pleads again. She holds out a piece and sees her

Mom's glee but then pulls it back and watches her dismay. Suddenly she appears worried and throws it at her. Somewhat surprised, Mom notices the alarm in her eyes and instead of reacting, smiles gently and warmly says, "Let's share it!" and they each take a pretend bite, repairing the rupture. Suzie then offers her a drink, holding out a red block, and takes another for herself. The vivid signaling, pauses, gaze, tone of voice, and even alarm are the important elements of affect expressed in this 40-s interaction by this playful mom who sees the benefit of Suzie's assertiveness but also her ambivalence. She sensitively repairs their pizza party and recognizes her relief and appreciation. At 4 years of age, Suzie still has few words but she can name pizza and say, "no" and "here." She can pretend to eat the pizza and substitute an object, which would have given her "credit" in typical assessments of presymbolic functional play. But this would not have captured the flow of back and forth interactions, thinking and feelings she actually shared with her mother as she experimented with her power, or her ability to recognize her mother's signals to self-regulate. These are the essential play experiences that will support a trusting relationship and Suzie's emotional and symbolic development.

### **Sam**

Sam is a tall 7-year-old boy who always wears red shirts and who loves small Disney and Sesame Street figures. He enters the playroom, rushes to the drawer he expects them to be in, and does not find them. He appears utterly frantic, his eyes darting and glazed, and he is unable to process directions and has no sense of how to look around the room. Once figures are placed in his hands, Sam plops down on the floor and starts arranging the toys, rarely moving from the spot. His mother sits immediately in front of him so that he knows exactly where she is. When he feels calm, Sam begins to share an idea. At first, he names the characters, with each defined by appearance; so Ernie is not just Ernie but Ernie catching a ball or Ernie in the bathtub, suggesting that Sam is unable to separate the

character from his perceptions of it. One day Sam decides that the figures are going swimming in an imagined pool in the space in front of him. He "drops" each into the pool one at a time. He keeps describing the figures in fragmented phrases and waits for his mom to acknowledge each one. Suddenly, Elmo refuses to jump into the pool. Mom asks Elmo what is wrong and he says, "I can't swim." When mom tries to reassure Elmo that Big Bird the Lifeguard will help him, he says, "Lifeguards don't swim" (he has never seen a lifeguard in the water). Mom offers other figures who might help Elmo, but he despairingly says, "No one can help me!" When mom asks whether he is afraid, he nods. She then asks Sam whether he could help Elmo and he says, "Do this!" as he makes frantic swimming motions with his arms, still not moving off his spot. Suddenly, he notices Super Grover wearing a cape (like Superman) and asks, "Super Grover, will you help me?" with a sigh of great relief. Sam's story continues as these small figures converse, trying to resolve Sam's fears.

Mom knew that Sam was very worried about going to camp because Sam would be asked to swim, and she sensitively supported his problem solving, using play to practice. His language was fragmented, he felt lost in space, he did not move, he was visually bound to the appearance of the figures, and he preferred the small figures with whom he felt secure and which he loved as a younger child and still clung to. So many sensory, motor, visual spatial, and language challenges constantly confronted him and curtailed his progress. Yet, Sam could use play to tell a story about his fears, which he initiated and persisted as he actively tried to solve his problem. Sam's mom did not correct his perceptions or direct his actions but kept the conversation going, providing affect cues while talking to his little figure friends. She asked simple questions or echoed his feelings and gave feedback when ideas did not make sense. Mom let Super Grover "save the day," after which Sam felt all was not lost, and he told Elmo, "You can do it!" The next day Sam did go into the pool.

Sam's was the play of a child with autism. The DIR-based treatment started when Sam was 2 years of age, as his multiple challenges became apparent and a comprehensive intervention program was put in place. It was not clear how long it would take, when he would talk, climb, run, play, or how he would think. His arousal level was low, he was poorly coordinated, had limited language, and did not know what to do with toys. He clung to his little figures, which escorted him for many years, and as he advanced, so did they. The intervention followed basic principles of shared attention, engagement, and 2-way communication, building on the playfulness, joyful affect, and excitement that he and his mother could share while therapies and inclusion proceeded. Sam's relationship with his mother flourished, and he progressed to becoming symbolic with his little figures where every word he uttered was meaningful. At 7 years of age, he knew how he felt and he knew how others felt, displaying capacities for abstract thinking, empathy, and theory of mind. Sam's rate of progress increased and he was included in regular education.

### **Daniel**

Daniel wants to be a king, but what is a king to a 4<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>-year-old? He puts on a cape and crown and holds onto a magic wand (his scepter) as his parents sit nearby. He looks in the mirror for a moment and backs away, abruptly asking his father to make the king disappear. Although not quite sure why his son asks him to do this, Daniel's father prompts him to say the magic words, and Daniel recites, "Abracadabra, hocus pocus, make the king disappear!" Dad swiftly swipes the crown off the king's head and puts it behind his back. Daniel sees this and begins to reach behind his back for it, when Dad again asks him to say the magic words to get it back. Then Daniel offers a crown to his Mom, and they repeat the drama. Mom reassures Daniel that she is mommy again when he uses the magic words, and his relief is palpable. Daniel then decides to try his magic on himself and tilts the crown

off his head with his scepter and declares, "Now I am not the king anymore, I'm Daniel!"

Simply put, Daniel used play to explore new roles and "magic," experimenting with how he could be himself and yet also enjoy pretense, so important for a little boy now facing the bigger world. Pretending to be someone else appeared to concern him when he first looked in the mirror dressed as a king and he wanted to be sure he could undo this, hence the request to make the king disappear. The magic his father gave him invested him with power, but he was not quite sure he was ready for this or even understood it yet. His parents dramatized bowing to the king with great pride to show him the honor due a king. But Daniel wanted a partner and turned to his mom to be his queen, again reassured when she declared she was mommy again. Although somewhat anxious, Daniel persisted and tried again, this time in charge. This experience supported by his attuned parents allowed Daniel to think about who he was and what meaning this had. It was not just "dress up" and a "play act," but emotional experience that gave him mastery to imagine himself as a king in relation to others, which expanded into many ideas over time.

These moments of transformation advanced Daniel's symbolic level and he began to take on more powerful figures drawn from such stories as *Alladin* and *Toy Story*. But it took the security of relationships and lots of play with his parents to advance Daniel, who had apraxia and preferred to be a play actor in his dramas to manipulating multiple toys. His curiosity led him to ask the Genie to go into the magic lamp and, when he played Buzz Lightyear, he thought he should go to jail for lying to Zurg, but then he turned Buzz into a baby so he would not have to stay in jail. He used symbolic play to understand and explore his emotions and advanced ideas as he became more logical.

### **Benny**

Benny begs his mother to buy him a suit and tie. He is wearing his Superman shirt and already wears dark boxy glasses. "Why Benny?"

With stumbled words and lots of gestures, he shows mom how he would swipe open his shirt and jacket, take off his glasses like Clark Kent, and be ready to “Save the Day.” He will be Superman! Benny has no doubts this will work. Asked what “save the day” means, he repeats the words like a mantra and finally says, “I will help people, be nice to people.” In his mind’s eye, he is soaring through the sky to reach pirates who want to steal his Shopkins (small toy foods you shop for), or stop the robbers escaping the Paw Patrol (small puppy police characters who keep you safe), or put the bullies in jail, allowing just a glimmer of reality to sink in. As Superman, he could save his own day and the social anxiety and bullying he sometimes encounters. Month after month, Benny alternates between Superman, Batman, and Spiderman, ever victorious in defeating evil and defying anyone who dares block the Polar Express. Superman is his favorite. After all, he has dark hair, brown eyes, and glasses just like him. At bedtime, he sometimes threatens to become invisible, so he never has to relinquish his power and fight for justice.

Is this pretense or something more? The meanings of Benny’s symbols are obvious, but he is 5 years older than most children on this mission. He expresses his fantasies clearly and repetitively. He navigates so many levels of symbols from little Shopkins to feed the world, to yelping puppies who bounce and bite to bring down their tormentors, to the invincible superheroes who defeat evil and save the day. As he climbs up and down and up again on the symbolic ladder, Benny is contending with the challenges and angst of his own life. Does he not yet understand reality? He actually does, but his grasp is inconsistent and fractures when comprehension fails, and his naiveté and wish to be friends with and as competent as his peers lands him in a pool of confusion and vulnerability. His symbolic pretense provides respite and the time he needs to still be the little guy wishing to fight back (his Paw Patrol) but still must be rescued by a superhero, and he plays both roles. The sensitive responses of his mother and therapists

help Benny reflect on his stories and wishes and consider ways to play with friends.

A year later, Benny brings history lessons into his play, explaining how the colonists won the Revolutionary War, but then he becomes distressed when he realizes that so many British soldiers died. He wonders whether we should have shared the victory, full of compassion as he identifies with the weaker force. By the time he reaches the civil war, Benny is still very empathic, but now he can use logical and abstract thinking to understand the reasons for the war. For Benny, symbolic play also gave him a way to think through and understand history and literature as he advanced.

### **Summary of how the DIR model advances emotional development in these examples**

All these children were on the autism spectrum and demonstrated symbolic play capacities that advanced their emotional development, sense of self, resilience, empathy, and logical and abstract thinking. Each one’s narrative reflects an inner journey and attempts to cope with the underlying stress inherent in development and a life often fraught with social, learning, and environmental challenges. But each narrative is also coupled with the strength of relationships with parents, teachers, and therapists who share this journey and provide the security and encouragement to advance.

The DIR model provided the vehicle that enabled all of these children to keep climbing the symbolic ladder. Not every child reaches the same capacity but integrated intervention nurtures every child’s potential. Clinical experience with symbolic play over many years offers insights that are difficult to capture in RCTs but demonstrate that many children with autism can, in fact, engage in symbolic play, especially using the DIR model, where emotional development and symbolic development are targeted explicitly and where they go hand in hand (Wieder, 1996; Wieder & Greenspan, 2003).

The question is not whether children with autism can play, but what challenges might get in the way and how to strengthen and increase the child's abilities for pretense. There may be deficits in developmental capacities or individual differences in sensory motor processing that can be treated, such as auditory processing or praxis. But clinical and research evidence confirms that parent-child interactions are important for progress, and symbolic play provides the essential interventions to develop emotional, social, and abstract thinking capacities. It is important to understand all children from the point of view of emotional and developmental levels.

## CONCLUSION

"If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales" (Albert Einstein, Library of Congress Blogs, 2013). Perhaps Einstein was capturing the notion that fairy tales hold the magic for children to decipher their emotions and problems, understand people representing different views and feelings, and open their minds to imagination, discovery, and intelligence. Fairy tales are symbolic play tales, certainly not all happily-ever-after stories; rather, their protagonists each find unique solutions for life's unfolding challenges and victories.

In this article, I set out to describe the role of emotions in symbolic play for all children and to illuminate how play interactions with parents or other partners reflect the child's ideas, concerns, feelings, and desires. Symbolic play is a powerful vehicle for supporting

emotional development and embracing all developmental capacities. Development has its own time table and so does symbolic development, so it is important to support all forms and levels of symbolizing as the child develops. Symbolic function includes play, as well as conversations, drama, art, music, dance, and movement. Furthermore, it is not possible to discuss play and symbolism without also recognizing their role in the development of language, narrative, and literacy. Play offers the opportunity to create ideas and stories, interacting with others. This sets the foundation for understanding history and literature, as well as for playing and working with peers.

In all its forms, symbolic play offers a safe way to practice, reenact, understand, and master the full range of emotional ideas, experiences, and feelings. It provides distance from real life and immediate needs, so that children can differentiate self from others (i.e., through different roles in play) and self from the environment (i.e., not bound by time and space). The goal is to elevate feelings and impulses to the level of ideas and to express these through words and play, supporting emotional regulation and self-control. Through play, the child develops abilities to transform reality into symbols or images that reflect their meanings and provide the opportunity to explore and differentiate the full range of emotions. In play, the child defines his emotions in his stories, organizes the sequence, and determines the outcomes. This abstract level of symbolic thinking leads to a differentiated sense of self and others, bringing along capacities for empathy and reflection, and preparing the child emotionally and intellectually for the future.

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