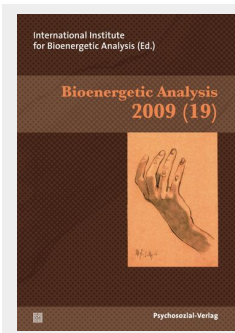


*Dennis McCarthy*

# Helping Children Discharge Negative Aggression



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# Helping Children Discharge Negative Aggression

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## Summary

This article examines the need for children in treatment to be able to discharge negative aggression and describes various means of helping them do so. Through case material and anecdote I focus on the capacity for dynamic play therapy to facilitate pulsation, obvious in the child's play configurations and their bodies in movement. Every child I work with engages in the expression of negative aggression to some extent and this aggression is often in and of itself a significant component in solving the myriad problems they bring with them. This text is largely influenced by the work of Dr. Alexander Lowen as well as the thousands of children I have worked with.

Keywords: discharge, pulsation, sandplay, filter, monster.

## A Case of Working with Aggression

The seven-year-old girl sitting beside me at a small wooden table is making a figure out of clay and smashing it repeatedly with a large rubber mallet. I have invited her to do so and she has taken to it with enthusiasm. She alternately has imagined the figure was her twin brother or her father. She is clearly thrilled by this unbridled outpouring of rage. She laughs loudly, not something this once very serious child was prone to do. In the next session it

will be a girl at school or perhaps her teacher, who “smiles at the class when she is angry” that bites the dust. Her smashing of clay figures eventually will evolve into smearing the clay into the table with great intensity and this action will be pivotal to the resolution of her problems.

At around five years of age she had developed a phobia of dogs that had become quite severe. The phobia arose without any obvious provocation from the outside world. I would say it arose as her organism’s means of crying out for help. Then she began periodically biting her brother and this precipitated her parents calling me. Her parents described their daughter as seeming self-possessed but cut off from others. She was also prone to unprovoked outbursts of rage. She was content to play by herself for hours on end and seemed uninterested in or intolerant of other children. Her father, an admitted control freak, found his daughter’s stubbornness hard to take. Her mother admired the innate strength she saw in her daughter, wishing she had been more so when she was a child, but she was aware that the episodic explosions it manifest in didn’t really satisfy her. Her daughter’s usual serious, rigid demeanor and lack of friends also concerned her.

Anna’s initial play sessions took place in the sandbox where she made elaborate worlds with the miniature figures I have on hand. In sandplay the child is encouraged to manipulate the sand and then add figures to it to depict a world. This world may come to life, evolve or even fall apart once it is made. Anna’s initial scenes reflected her intelligence and creativity, yet the worlds depicted therein had rigidity to them despite their strength, just like her. They were filled with potential, depicting different aspects of life such as play, work, war, commerce and even mystery in separate sections all circling a central lake. She gave them titles such “The World” and then “The Whole Wide World”. As the titles increased in size, the scenes became fuller of life and potential. Yet something fundamental was missing that would integrate the fragments of life shown and really energize the scenes.

With the introduction of clay and permission given by me to smash it, the missing or suppressed life force began to show. It was her smashing of clay figures that shifted everything, especially when she reached the smearing stage. During this smearing phase she began to fight with her father at home and picked fights with me in her sessions. She began to assert herself with her brother with words rather than in the infantile manner of biting. She was struggling to integrate the power of the smearing and needed to

push against others in order to do so. Her father tolerated this with my support and came to admire her for it. I encouraged it in our sessions. The intensity of her smearing and the catharsis it represented was at the same time playful. Unlike an adult experiencing and expressing a similar rage, hers was accompanied by great laughter as well as pent up fury. I would say it was furiously triumphant.

This paralleled a phase in her sandplay where the worlds melted and blended slowly into one soupy mess. She had regressed, loosening the rigid structure of her body along with it. When the worlds she had created and dissolved eventually reorganized they were more dynamic, less symmetrical. In her life, she became more consistently assertive, more able to make mistakes and more content with herself and as a result with her peers. Her musculature had both softened and solidified. She was no longer phobic of dogs, but rather came to like them, as she had integrated the aggressiveness of the dog bite into her person. One could conjecture much about her symptoms and her family situation, but ultimately what changed things was her ability to rage, aggress and then let it go. It is important to note that Anna did not experience her regression as disturbing, nor did it manifest as such. She regressed in the service of the ego and she immediately benefited from this, aggressing in her life as a result.

## Safe and Satisfying Aggression: The Boy with Wings

In my play therapy practice with children I find that the bulk of my efforts and the key to my frequent and dynamic successes comes from encouraging and facilitating the safe and yet satisfying expression of negative aggression. Every child I see, regardless of their symptoms, their family situations, or their age and gender, spends a fair amount of time in the course of treatment in pounding, smashing, tearing, and in other active forms of discharge. It comes out in everything they do once they are certain that I really welcome it. This is done in the context of play and usually has an element of humor and often results ultimately in a purely creative expression. Often times an image will emerge literally from the playful discharge that is positive and powerful.

One boy with a potentially terminal neuromuscular disorder, after being

told the prognosis, spent many sessions venting his fury about his possible demise. Then in one session he asked me to help him draw a large pair of wings, with brightly colored wing tips. We made them collaboratively and in total silence. After they were done he had me hide them away in a safe place. The shift in him was amazing after this event, with a new positive attitude and a resolution to do everything possible to survive. But these wings came out of weeks of negative discharge that was quite brutal at times. For children who have been abused, neglected, or otherwise traumatized or children with neurological issues the phase of negative discharge can take much longer and it may need to happen again and again. Our ability as therapists to encourage, tolerate and help contain this negativity is of course central to its efficacy.

## Play Material

### Drawing Monsters

I begin treatment by inviting each child to make a drawing of what they would look like if they turned into a monster. I encourage them to imagine they have drunk a magic potion and that their body is transforming from the inside out into that of a monster. Then I ask them to draw this monster they have become. This is always embraced readily even by the lost timid and fearful of children. The walls of my office are decorated with the results of this query. These monsters are in and of themselves a form of discharge, and are also a portal into the inner world of the child. The monster speaks their language and they respond in kind. I am inviting the child to bring all of themselves into the therapy space and relationship, including the ugly, scary parts.

### The Deep Sandbox

There are several play materials that offer effective means of discharging negative aggression, as well as helping children express and integrate the

new energies that arise when this aggression has been expressed. A sandbox that is roughly 1 and one-half feet deep and 2 and one half feet wide offers a means of constructing, destroying and reconstructing forms. It is not only the scenes and stories that children create in it that have meaning but also the actual shaping and use of the sand itself. The shallow box used in traditional sandplay does not allow the expression of deeper emotions as easily in my experience. When children are truly engaged in the process, the sand's depth can be used to replicate the depth in the psyche and in the musculature, and then they can access the defenses and blocks that have been erected. As they manipulate the sand, children often have a very obvious physical reaction to it. They pass gas, sweat, and sometimes they even pant. Just the act of squatting by the sand and putting their hands into it deepens their breathing. They often have to run to the bathroom. Things get stirred up.

Scenes can be created with the use of miniature figures and these may express in pictorial images and stories the pent up negative emotions, giving rise and form to them in children who have been unable to express them. The sand offers a grounding material for these emotions that helps solidify the new energies rising to the surface. So many children fear that their rage will destroy the whole world if unleashed; yet in the sandbox, the world can be made and destroyed and re-made. The sand being contained in a box actually intensifies its effectiveness, helping to contain what happens therein. The material itself is like a filter, a version of the psycho-muscular one all children need to develop in order to self regulate and in order to be a self. Lowen talks about the need for the filter that self-assertion creates in children. (Lowen, 1970) The sandbox is a great space in which children can develop this filter.) The entire process of expressing negative aggression activates this filter. Because children prior to puberty become what they play, each experience potentially affects all of who they are, both body and psyche. The division between the two is still thin in most children, even in guarded ones like the girl above.

Many therapists focus too much on what all the many little figures that children select and use in their sandplay may mean. They get lost in interpreting them, missing the energy that these symbols contain and what they help the child access. The stories these figures are used in and what these might allude to is of course of interest but their ultimate meaning is in the aliveness they bring to the surface.

## Clay Facilitates Transformation

Clay is a frequently used material in my work as it too is both self-affirming in its use and allows for the “form to formlessness to form process” so crucial in therapy with children. This form shifting is an expression and experience of pulsation for children, and this often is apparent in the shapes they make as well as the effects it has on them organismically. One popular form of clay play involves the child and myself each making monsters out of clay and doing physical battle. Although this allows for a great deal of vengeful play on their parts, the very nature of clay allows for a continual **regeneration**. The forms can be made and remade endlessly. Children become less afraid of their impulses and their anger.

## Drawing Replicates Pulsatory Experience

Drawing, if used creatively, can replicate this pulsatory experience as well. My office walls are covered with monster drawings in which children have imagined themselves as monsters and drawn them. I think these monstrous images are what make most children comfortable when they come into my office for the first time. Rather than being put off by these monstrous images children sense that the monstrous parts of themselves are also welcome in the space, perhaps the only place in their life where this is so. Because the monster is often one of our first creative acts as children, we are attached to them even as they repel and frighten us. In observing a series of monster drawings by the same child over time I often witness an expansion and contraction of the form. It is quite amazing to see how this impulse towards pulsation emerges again and again. I have devised numerous drawing games that allow for negative aggression to be expressed, and as with clay and sand, the destructive play always eventually becomes a creative expression and experience.

## Physical Play

More purely physical play activities allow for a variety of means of discharge and expression. I offer gross motor forms of expression such as pounding,



leaping, stomping and storming. I also offer fine motor forms of raging, such as chopping clay using a butter knife or a miniature guillotine, which is the most popular item in my miniature collection.

## Fear of Thunderstorms

Recently a child began therapy with a terror of thunderstorms, a fairly common fear that can easily become a phobia as it had for this boy. I invite children who have developed such a phobia to “become the storm” using movement, percussive instruments, and movement. They experiment with being the thunder and especially with being the lightning. I invite them to climb on to chairs and leap down with a great crashing thud as I accompany them with drums and rattles. As they learn to tolerate the energetic charge of the storm, which they do remarkably quickly, other aspects of their lives change as well. They take up more space. They calm down but at the same time increase their ability for self-expression and communication. Children rarely think it odd that I am asking them to storm. It makes complete sense to them.

This particular boy had a variety of problems that all stemmed from his mother’s post-traumatic memories of sexual abuse that surfaced while she was pregnant with him. The boy struggled to accept his own aggression, unconsciously associated with his mother’s negative experience of male aggression. He was also afraid of ghosts and of roosters, which one could easily associate with his mother’s childhood. His storm phobia was the most immobilizing symptom so we tackled it first. It abated immediately upon his storming with me. The ghosts he so feared began to disappear as he drew them for me and they took form, increasing in elaborateness as they decreased in their negative grip on him. In giving form to the formless he came to be less afraid of his own imagination. The roosters also lost their charge when the boy’s own aggression became more integrated.

## Combining Play Material and Physical Play

Many children will use a variety of these materials and forms while others will focus exclusively on one. But it is the job of the therapist to sense

what is needed and what most satisfies this need and then to facilitate this through permission, containment and even at times provocation. The safe and satisfying discharge of negative aggression is an essential element to in-depth work with children that most therapists either don't use or openly discourage. There is a tendency, at least in the U.S., to ask children to "talk" about their feelings and then get over them. Any aggression is deemed counter-productive. Dynamic play therapy involves working playfully with the symptoms, the thwarted impulses, and the blocked aliveness present in all children with problems, and meeting the child where they are rather than asking them to meet us where we are.

## The Case of David

Eight-year-old David began therapy in the midst of his parents very ugly divorce. He entered my office in our first meeting with weighed down shoulders and great sorrow etched in his face. I asked him to draw himself as a monster and after sitting with his paper and pencil for some time he drew a huge dragon-like creature with multiple rows of teeth. He was excited by what he had made. Then he used clay to express the aggression and rage that the monster drawing had stirred up. The level of fury of his clay play surprised me. Over several weeks he made numerous figures out of clay and devised ever more intricate ways of torturing them. He chopped up sticks and pounded them into various body parts. He made coffins out of clay lined with sharp sticks and then embedded clay figures in them. His parents, who often saw the results of his play when they came in afterward, were shocked by such sadistic impulses. Where had all this fury come from they wondered. Yet with very little help they realized that their son had felt similarly tortured by their fighting. They understood that he had felt poked and stabbed by the vicious and cruel things they said to each other. It woke them up and as they made efforts to curb it, David's play lost its intensity. His body had changed drastically. Not only were his shoulders relaxed, but also he moved more loosely and seemed to take up more space as he strode into the room. His face reflected confidence rather than sorrow.

## Aggression and Regression

### The Boy Who Stopped Eating

The word *aggress* is the opposite of *regress* so we must assume that some if not a great deal of aggression will be expressed along the way. Even alluding to play that expresses aggressions and/or rage satisfactorily can bring about a shift, such is the power of this with children. One very angry and very blocked young boy had basically stopped eating in a battle of wills with his parents. He used a guillotine in his first sand scene without realizing what it was. He thought it was a food slicer. When he learned it was a device for chopping heads he was initially very shocked. He was very proper and proper children did not use such things. While he held it in his hand, hesitating for some time over whether to use it, I mentioned that some children actually made their sisters out of clay and used it to chop their heads off. I knew that the birth of his younger sister had precipitated his angry but constricted state. He replied that he would never do such a thing, but with a smile on his face he put it back in the sand and incorporated it into his scene as just what it was, a head chopper. He went home that day and began to eat again. It was a first step towards resolving his issues but a significant one. Done in the spirit of play, each aggressive or rageful expression or even, as with this boy, the allusion to aggression can shift the child energetically.

This type of play facilitates discrimination, that all-important ability to distinguish what is us from what is not us. It allows for the “no”.

“The no functions like a psychological membrane, such as the skin, in its purpose. No prevents the individual from being overwhelmed by outside pressures. It allows for discrimination. It allows for impulse control. It defines the ego boundaries of an individual. It helps filter out what is good from what is bad for the organism. It affirms what is “I” from what is “not I”. Lowen (1970)

### Baby Talk in the Service of Growth

Unlike therapy with adults in which naming the emotion and understanding its origins is important, it is imperative that children express and discharge

this aggressive fury in a playful form. When done properly this can bring about brief regressions. I often find that children leave my office and for a few hours or even a day may speak “baby talk” at home. As I warn parents that this may occur and that it is in the service of growth, they are usually not too concerned and are sometimes even thrilled as it is often accompanied by a reduction or disappearance of symptoms.

Play therapy that allows for the discharge of negative aggression facilitates pulsation. It is often apparent in the child’s play configurations as well as in their facial expressions, their pallor, and their movements. In play, once a child has begun to unblock, the structure of their creations actually moves session by session or sometimes within one session between contraction and expansion. One boy brought toy figures with him each time he came to see me that he never actually used. They served some totemic function. Each week they got larger, until one day he came in carrying a dragon that was bigger than him. Then they began to shrink in size until he stopped bringing them all together.

## Pulsation

### Pulsation in the Sandbox

Pulsation may happen in a child’s use of the sandbox. Their play may slowly spill over the edges and out into the room and then suddenly contract back into the center of the box. There is always a shift in the story line when this happening or the appearance of a new character or symbol or form. This expanding and contracting is quite awesome to witness and very frequent when play is therapeutic, though often not noticed by many therapists. For example, I saw a series of slides by a sandplay therapist of sand scenes made by a four-year-old girl who had been sexually molested. The therapist was very attentive to the need for the child to express rage, although she did not offer a direct means of venting it. And yet in this girl’s scenes one saw week by week the configuration of the sand and the figures in it move from a contracted use of the central space to a wide-open expanded use of the whole sandbox. It looked like slow motion explosions! During this

period there were obvious signs of healing in her life as well. Interestingly, she would create a sand scene that was full of snakes preceding the expansion in the play configurations. Snakes are for most children a symbol of positive instinctual energy moving in them in new ways, as in the concept of kundalini in yoga. They often appear in the sand or in clay when real movement is happening within the child's body and psyche.

## Pulsation and the Twin Brother

In the midst of writing this article I had a dynamic session with an eleven-year-old boy who had spent much of his time pounding on the mattress in my office. When our time was up we went into the waiting room where his twin brother was waiting with his mother. This twin has a very serious seizure disorder and had recently had brain surgery to attempt to correct it. He was lying exhausted on the couch but my patient urged his brother to come in and try using the racket. He assured him he would think it was "cool". The twin dragged himself in and began to pound on the mattress. It immediately revived him and we all watched in amazement as he leapt into the air prior to each pound. His mother assured me with tears in her eyes that her son had never exhibited such behavior. She was thrilled to see him act so dynamically.

The boy began to alternate his pounding by including a conga drum that stood nearby: two hard hits on the mattress and one very gentle tap on the drum. He was like a mime or a dancer as he switched from aggressive to gentle movements. What began as a purely aggressive exercise ended in a purely creative one. He left refreshed and happy.

## Aggression and Play

This paradoxical mix of humor and fury, of negative aggression and positive play that coexist often in the same moment are what I think makes play therapy hard to fathom for most therapists. They aren't sure where to look or what to make of this or how to allow the two opposite impulses to be entwined. Yet they are for most children. Again, the beauty of play

therapy is the potential for children to “play” with new ways of expressing and experiencing themselves just as children play with weight shifts and balance when they learn to walk. Falling down and getting up again are a central part of the process. All growth happens more easily when done in a spirit of play. Even the expression of rage in the right context with a therapist who can contain and redirect the energies therein can be a playful, and even joyful, endeavor.

## True Playfulness

In his book *Toys and Reasons*, Erik Erikson cites Plato’s *Laws* as formulating the best definition of play. It is an apt description in the context of these pages. He sees the model of true playfulness in the need of all young creatures, animal and human, to leap.

“To truly leap you must learn how to use the ground as a springboard, and how to land resiliently and safely. It means to test the leeway allowed by given limits, to outdo yet not escape gravity. Thus wherever playfulness prevails there is always a surprising element, surpassing mere repetition and habituation, and at its best suggesting some virgin chance conquered, some divine leeway shared. Where this happens it is easily perceived and acknowledged.”  
Erikson (1977)

## Parents Response to Children’s Aggression in Therapy

I find parents never challenge my encouraging their children’s expression of negative aggression. Perhaps it is because happier they always emerge from my office in a happier state. Perhaps they are relieved themselves by their child’s discharge, which can create an opening, a possibility of change even in them. Since I work in private practice the bulk of the children I see come from families that are less dysfunctional. The children’s problems may be severe and yet the family is more capable of tolerating and even supporting change. But I have in the past worked in clinical settings with more low functioning children and this type of play applies to children who show up there as well. The process is simply slower and

often impeded by inconsistent visits and/or interference from the family. But the capacity to discharge negative aggression along with the strong emotions embedded in it and recover or discover one's sense of self as a result is the same.

## How Modern Culture Constricts Discharge in Children

I have noticed a very large increase in children's need to discharge over the past ten years and I attribute this to the fact that children spend almost no time out of doors in spontaneous play. When children did, they had the possibility to discharge through normal play, which is one of the functions of it. This obviously did not solve all problems but it did help. It gave children greater access to their bodies and the positive sensations that arise when we are moving freely. But as children spend virtually no time outside and very little if any time in active, unstructured play, they become more bottled up than ever. Public schools limit children's time outside, often insist that children have no physical contact with each other and even limit how they move, all in the service of crowd management and aggression control. The use of video games and cell phones in ever younger children as not simply a desire to fit in on the part of both child and parent but also as a means of keeping children contained, further cuts children off from themselves. The result of all this constriction on the child's developing body and psyche is obvious, resulting in children with a far greater need to discharge negative aggression safely.

## The Innateness of Aggression

Aggression is a fundamental part of being human, much maligned and thwarted but ever present regardless. In Konrad Lorenz's epic study *On Human Aggression* he documents the innateness of aggression in the human psyche *a priori*. It doesn't have to be provoked by inner frustration or outer threat. He proposes that aggression erupts spontaneously and requires some form of regular discharge. He also found that the ability to form something akin to a personal bond occurs to the degree that aggress-

sion is felt and expressed between fellow human beings. Lorenz believes the ability to bond with others and the ability to express aggression are a part of the same pattern. Certainly in my experience with children this has been consistently true.

## Anna's Psychic Filtration

When Anna, mentioned in this article's opening paragraph was able to aggress she did in fact form stronger bonds with her parents and brother and began to form healthy peer relations. She was also more connected to herself. After smearing clay and making a soupy mess in the sand she went on to create a very moving scene in the sandbox. She made a well in the midst of a village. The well led underground to the nearby ocean and it was a filter for cleaning the seawater by funneling fresh water into it and taking out the bad water. She described in remarkable detail how this filter worked and made the sea unpolluted. She was describing a psychic filtration device created in herself by her playful yet deeply cathartic aggressive discharge.

## Controversy over Cathartic Play in Therapy

The idea of cathartic and/or aggressive play is very controversial. Many therapists strongly discourage it, seeing it as encouraging out of control behavior rather than functional adaptation. In a recent issue of the *International Play Therapy Journal* there was an article condemning the use of something called a "Bobo doll" in clinical settings as a means of venting violent negative emotion. (Drewes 2008) The article also condemns all forms of cathartic play in the process. There is no mention of Bioenergetics in the article or in the many references, and it seems that the intention of most of the studies cited was to disprove the approach. It may be that beating a Bobo doll is not a good idea, especially if done with the wrong children by the wrong therapists in the wrong setting.



## Discussion

I do think that to encourage the type of play I have been describing is not to be done lightly. Engaging in one's own dynamic therapy process is important. The child needs to feel safe and sheltered in the therapy space and in the therapeutic relationship. And the therapist needs to be in control of what happens, guiding it and even provoking it, while remaining focused on integration and grounding. I feel my way with the child, sensing what they need and what they can handle as well as how best to engage them. Understanding the paradoxical nature of play therapy is essential, in which humor and deeply disturbing emotions can be present together and in which the child moves from aggression and destruction of form to creation with the support of the therapist. The materials used need to offer the capacity for grounding, such as sand, clay and movement. To engage in this type of play with children who are too disturbed to benefit from it would be unwise, but when we are really attuned to the child we will not make this mistake.

Because I work in private practice the parents who bring their children to me are doing so of their own volition and usually because they care and/or their child's symptoms have become loud enough that they have heard the cry for help which symptoms often are. But I do work with many children with serious problems or potentially serious ones, and most of the children I see can handle some form of aggressive play and benefit from it immensely.

All children need to discharge negativity as well as to find a healthy means of expressing the positive aggression that is part of their aliveness.

Therapy with children should not only make room for this but I believe it should potentially be the centerpiece of the entire process. If we encourage children to not be afraid of themselves, to view the various emotions, instincts and impulses they struggle to master as part of what makes them human, then they are free to be themselves. True compassion and love, so absent in our world, arise out of this.

“The essential requirement to cure psychic disturbances is the re-establishment of the natural capacity to love.” (Wilhelm Reich)

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## About the Author

Dennis McCarthy is a licensed mental health counselor in New York State with over thirty years experience working with children and adults. He was initially trained as a dancer and a dance therapist. He studied Bioenergetics for many years with Al Lowen and Anthony Rullo among others. He is the author of numerous articles as well as two books, “*If You Turned into a Monster*”... *Transformation through Play: A Body-centered Approach to Play Therapy* and *Speaking about the Unspeakable: Non-Verbal Methods and Experiences in Therapy with Children*, both published by Jessica Kingsley.

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