THE TIME MACHINE TO NEVERLAND:

A MULTIPLE-CASE STUDY EXPLORATION OF THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN ON CHILDHOOD AND DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown of 2020 impacted the world profoundly, both on global and individual levels. In many respects, the world returned to "normal" in the ensuing years. However, what does "normal" mean for a child whose development was interrupted by lockdown, depriving them of experiences that they would have otherwise encountered on their developmental trajectory? How might the impacts of such an interruption manifest in subsequent years? This thesis explores some such potential consequences, utilizing a multiple-case study design to explore the intersection between early childhood developmental theory and the impact of the Covid-19 lockdown of 2020. For this study, individual therapy sessions were conducted with two fourth graders (aged 9-10) throughout the course of their academic year. These children experienced lockdown in early childhood, a developmental stage during which new forms of play and socialization are typically explored in collective settings. Findings indicate that deprivation of peer interaction in early childhood as a result of mandatory social isolation and school closures have potential to impact emotional regulation, academic capacities, and one's relationship to rules and boundaries in middle childhood. Lastly, this thesis offers further directions for exploration in an effort to mitigate further stress on children, teachers, and caregivers.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

A New Normal

"I've never seen behavior like this before!"

"These kids just don't know how to be in a classroom."

"I've been teaching for fifteen years, but this might be the last one for me. It's just getting worse and worse since 2020."

If there's one thing I've learned from my experience as a clinical social worker in a school environment, it's that you're not just there to support the children. The teachers also have a lot to share, and they aren't shy about doing so! As I embarked on my new internship role, comments such as the ones above were abundant. A casual conversation with a teacher would quickly reveal exhaustion, dismay, and frustration at their students' inability to meet their expectations. These teachers reported an increase in angry outbursts, low academic achievement, and students' startling incapability to tolerate distress and engage in healthy, productive conflict resolution. In an effort to understand a fuller picture of my own clients' experiences, I engaged in several classroom observations as well as close attention to overall behavior in the hallways between the classrooms. My observations aligned neatly with the teachers' laments. I watched as the elementary and middle school students pushed, pulled each other's hair, yelled, and cursed. I had no cause to question the teachers' frustration. However, I did have many other questions. Namely, why now? Why are teachers from multiple grade levels visiting my office in droves, unanimously reporting that behavior is worse now than it has ever been?

As I considered what might be different for this generation of children, I began to wonder if the notable uptick in behavioral outbursts and lack of distress tolerance could be connected to the experience they had during the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic and, more specifically, the lockdown of 2020. I became particularly interested in the impacts of this unprecedented interruption of childhood for children who would have otherwise been attending preschool. Extensive research and numerous theories indicate that early childhood, around the age of 5 or 6, is a pivotal time in which children develop crucial developmental milestones and learn important life skills (Bodrova & Leong, 2005; Franklin, 1998; Gray, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). This is when, through the medium of individual and peer play, children build the muscles of conflict-resolution capacities, distress tolerance, understanding of social relationships, and a sense of order through rules and boundaries. However, children who experienced this early childhood stage during the lockdown of 2020 did not have the opportunity to exercise these muscles. They did not go to playgrounds, they did not socialize with children their age, and they did not engage in any group activities, including schools, which would have introduced them to structures, sharing, or transitions. This deprived them of the chance to develop a host of foundational skills that would have otherwise been part of the expected progression of early childhood. What, I began to wonder, would that mean for children today? Could they still be impacted by the experiences they had, as well as the experiences they lacked, during this window of their early development? Could their unprecedented childhood experiences be connected to the unprecedented behavior that teachers report seeing today? Through the lens of clinical case studies and developmental theory, these are the questions that I hope to explore through this thesis.

My role

In my role as the clinical social worker in an elementary and middle school in Manhattan's Lower East Side neighborhood, I manage a caseload of students ranging from 5 to 14 years of age. In an effort to understand the fullest possible context for each child's environmental circumstances, I am also responsible for completing an extensive intake process in collaboration with the child's family and teachers. From there, I develop a treatment plan and provide therapeutic counseling services for each child on my caseload. Sessions are generally 45 minutes each, and depending on the child's needs, I either meet with them once or twice per week. I am also responsible for maintaining collateral contacts with the children's families and teachers, closely monitoring progress and challenges.

My sessions take place in a large unused classroom that I have decorated and populated with toys, games, and art supplies. My clients are given free rein to use the space and the items in it as they desire. Some children opt to sit at the table with me, never touching any of the toys, fidgets, or kinetic sand in front of them. Others like to run around and play soccer or basketball with me. Many enjoy folding origami and paper airplanes, some like to play rule-bound games such as Uno or Connect Four, and others enjoy mixing animal figurines with play-doh or Lego structures of varying complexity. My door is an eclectic art gallery decorated with paintings, drawings, and origami shapes created by my clients during our sessions together (with, of course, their enthusiastic consent to display their artwork!).

Methodology

For this thesis, I will be utilizing case study data from two of my clients, "Jack" and "Kate" (names changed). Jack and Kate are both in fourth grade and were born within two

months of each other in 2014. They are both in the middle stage of childhood, as they each began our sessions at the age of 9 and turned 10 during the course of our work together. This means not only should they currently be at similar developmental stages, but they were both around the age of six during the height of the Covid-19 lockdown. Both of these children also had been receiving counseling from another provider during the previous school year. While Jack and Kate differ in gender, home environment, personality, and presenting behaviors, I believe that the uniformity between their ages and prior exposure to counseling help control for some elements of variability.

All data and anecdotes that I present throughout this thesis will come from therapy sessions and collateral contacts with Kate and Jack's parents and/or teachers. I did not engage in any activities or interviews that were outside the scope of my typical work day. Many direct quotes have been pulled from process recordings, as required by New York University's internship protocol.

In the following introductory section, I will offer a brief overview of my two case studies. Each child will be presented and assessed in greater detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

Meet Kate

Kate is a cisgender girl whose home environment comprises herself, her mother, and two older sisters (one lives out of state). Kate's father is involved in her life and her mother describes them as amicably divorced. Kate is the youngest in her family by a large margin, with a full decade separating her from the second oldest sibling in the family. Kate's mother describes her own upbringing as extremely strict. She was raised by pastors and was exposed to harsh discipline, including frequent physical punishment and yelling. She was similarly strict with her

first three daughters (the first of whom was born when she was fourteen years old), but she has taken a different approach with Kate. This time, she is far more lenient. “She’s the youngest, so I let her get away with a lot,” she explained to me. Kate’s mother sets few boundaries at home, and she wants to make sure Kate is enjoying her childhood.

Kate’s presenting challenges center on her difficulty with accepting and adhering to rules and boundaries. She was identified as a child who would benefit from a smaller environment with extra individual attention, and as such, she was placed in the school’s 12:1 classroom. Both Kate’s teacher, Ms. G, and her mother described her as “unbearable” last year, but after working with another counselor they have noticed significant improvements in her classroom and home behavior. Following descriptions of Kate’s interactions with her peers as “mean” and “aggressive,” as well as her defiant refusal to complete any work or stay on task, Kate’s teacher agreed that she would benefit from services twice per week for 45 minutes each.

Meet Jack

Jack is a cisgender boy whose home environment is composed of seven other people, including his parents, siblings, and grandparents, in a one bedroom apartment. He has described his home environment as very loud. Of his family members, I have only met his mother, who is energetic, actively involved in his school life, and quick to answer questions on his behalf, even when they are both in the room together.

In school, Jack was placed in the typically structured class, which contains roughly thirty children and two teachers at a time. In conversations with his two math teachers and two humanities teachers, I learned that they had observed a dramatic change in his behavior over the past few years. One of these teachers had worked with him in second grade, during the

2020-2021 school year, and she described him as quiet and sometimes seeming sad. She did not work with him last year, but this year she has expressed shock at his behavior in the classroom. She, as well as his three other teachers, described him as “very defiant,” “aggressive,” and “extremely academically low.” They have relayed anecdotes of him refusing to follow simple instructions. For example, when a teacher had told him to sit down at his seat, he had moved his face close to his teacher’s, narrowed his eyes in a manner that she interpreted as threatening, and declared, “You can’t tell me what to do!” Other teachers have agreed that this is typical of his behavior. They have also shared interpersonal struggles as he frequently finds himself in fights with his classmates, and when he becomes upset, he is likely to yell, kick, and hit–sometimes objects, such as desks and chairs, and sometimes his peers. Academically, his teachers have observed him as “never doing any work” and refusing to accept help when it is offered. They agreed that he, too, would benefit from two sessions per week at 45 minutes each.

Chapter 2: An Overview of Play in Development

When catastrophe strikes and survival mode kicks into high gear, adults recognize that sacrifices must be made. These sacrifices, most likely, will come from one's leisure activities, including socialization and other such enterprises that are considered "fun." Leisure, fun, and play are interwoven ideas in an adult's hierarchy of priorities, and we accept that in times of crisis, this is the category that will be the first to suffer. However, for young children, the impact of compromising play and socialization opportunities is significantly more severe than what adults experience. Rather, they are critical cornerstones of development ((Bodrova & Leong, 2005; Franklin, 1998; Gray, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). While adults are able to withstand a lack of what we consider "play" as little more than a frustrating inconvenience, an interruption or deprivation of a child's access to play and socialization can have lasting effects on a child's social, emotional, and cognitive capacities. Gray (2011) summarizes the value of play through five primary categories: he notes that through play, children are able to (1) cultivate intrinsic motivations and interests; (2) practice decision making, problem solving, rule following, and the exertion of self control; (3) practice emotional regulation; (4) develop friendships and social skills; and (5) experience joy. The process of childhood play, therefore, generates lasting effects on a child's development and future mental health.

The experience of play looks different for every child, which makes it challenging to define in a comprehensive way. Yogman, Garner, Hutchinson, Hirsh-Pasek, and Golinkoff (2018) offer the definition of play as "an activity that is intrinsically motivated, entails active engagement, and results in joyful discovery" (p. 2). This process is enjoyable, often spontaneous, and unencumbered by extrinsic goals or compulsory activities. Play is an activity whereby

children can not only have fun, but also take risks, test boundaries, and experiment. Put another way, the Museum of Modern Art's 2012 exhibit "The Century of the Child: 1900-2000" asserted that "play is to the 21st century what work was to industrialization. It demonstrates a way of knowing, doing, and creating value" (Kinchin, 2012). Given the expansive definition and numerous benefits of play, this chapter will explore a few key elements of its impact on children's development, namely within the spheres of academic learning and capacities of social interactions.

Cognitive Foundations

While we might conceptualize play as a reprieve from academic exploits, it is quite the opposite in early childhood: when a child is playing, a child is learning (Gray, 2011; Kinchin, 2012; Vygotsky, 1978; Yogman et al., 2018). The process of how we learn, rather than the specific content, is what is known as executive functioning (Yogman et al., 2018), and this is an essential benefit of play. Executive functioning is characterized by "cognitive flexibility, inhibitory control, and working memory" (p. 6). With these capacities in place, a child develops the muscles by which focus, self-regulation, and problem solving can flourish. These skills are foundational for academic success later in life, and the process of play during one's preschool years is exactly what puts them in place. Vygotsky (1967) refers to play as "a particular feature of preschool age" (p. 17) whereby childhood play does not disappear with one's childhood. Rather, it is integrated into later life. School age play, he asserts, "permeates the attitude toward reality," noting that "it has its own inner continuation in school instruction and work" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 104). In other words, the foundations set by early childhood play are key indicators of a child's future academic exploits.

To conceptualize this link, consider a six-year-old who finds a stick on a playground. The child might decide that this stick is now a sword, a horse, a person, a broom, or any number of other items with which they can interact. This imaginative use of props allows for an object to be something other than its literal self, but rather a representation of a separate idea or entity. The process might look like frivolous fun, but such activities foster the child's cognitive capacity to explore symbolism. In this sort of play, the child begins to explore the concept of meaning and symbolism. Through play, "word meanings replace objects, and thus an emancipation of word from object occurs" (Vygotsky, 1967, p. 13). This is the very cognitive muscle that sets the foundations for literacy and mathematical comprehension, as it is the beginning of the process by which a child organizes and consolidates knowledge (Franklin, 1998). Through developing this mental process of symbolism and representation, a child will be capable of understanding that a particular combination of lines and curves drawn on a piece of paper can represent something else: a letter. That letter, in turn, represents an audible sound (sometimes even a variety of different sounds!), and when those lines, letters, and therefore sounds are drawn in succession, they form words. Similarly, the ability to understand that the word "three" and the symbol "3" represent a tangible, quantifiable amount is another result of the muscles developed during a child's exploratory and imaginative play (Bergen, 2002; Bodrova & Leong, 2005). The developmental connections between this sort of representational play and more "serious" academic capacities are strong, and they are critical. Moreover, a child's transferrable classroom skills comprise more than academic learning. Concentration and the ability to pay attention are also foundational cornerstones of the classroom environment, and they, too, are developed through imaginative play (Bodrova & Leong, 2005). A child's focus on making sure their stick (whatever it may represent) is performing and interacting with their imaginary world exactly

right might not look or feel the same as the ability to focus on an academic lesson. However, the foundational muscles are the same, and from the roots of play, they can be developed over time into necessary classroom skills.

Peer Play

The development and transferability of internal cognitive muscles are invisible to even the most watchful adults, but what about a child's social skills? The fundamentals of socialization, stress tolerance, and communication might be easier to track through observation, but much like the foundations of cognitive development, the links to play in early childhood are critical. Play and early learning are fundamentally social activities that fuel the development of thought, language, and social-emotional skills (Yogman et al., 2018). When children play together, they have the opportunity to explore and cultivate a plethora of interpersonal skills, including collaboration and negotiation (Franklin, 1998). These are skills that go beyond the process of making friends and having fun. This is where children begin to explore the concepts of rules, boundaries, and conflict resolution (Vygotsky, 1978; Yogman et al., 2018). In play, rules and boundaries might encompass those that are adult-imposed, such as limits connected to safety and time restrictions, and child-imposed, such as how to use what toys and what roles each child might represent. Through interactive peer play, children are free to set their own rules, and within this process, they are able to explore what rules mean to them on an individual and age-appropriate level (Vygotsky, 1978). Moreover, they have the opportunity to practice communication skills as they set boundaries with their peers. Through experiential trial and error, they learn what sorts of communication styles are well received and what sorts of behaviors facilitate adherence to their rules. Additionally, Yogman et al. (2018) note that guided

competition through rough-and-tumble play allows everyone the opportunity to practice winning and graciously losing. Children naturally engage in rough-and-tumble play within a safe environment amongst their peers. This process fosters the growth of multiple skills, including communication, negotiation, and empathy. It is also worth noting that such rough-and-tumble play often takes place in outdoor settings, such as a playground at recess. Outdoor play, in addition to fostering the aforementioned social and emotional skills, also promotes sensory integration and motor skills (Yogman et al., 2018). It is therefore unsurprising that "countries that offer more recess to young children see greater academic success among children as they mature" (p. 3).

With this in mind, let us return to the critical components of conflict-resolution and emotional regulation, both of which are also explored and developed through peer play (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Franklin, 1998, Yogman et al., 2018). Imagine, for instance, one child wants the stick to represent a pony, and the other child imagines it to be a sword. What then? Such a scenario offers opportunities for each child to experience the discomfort of not getting exactly what they want. These feelings might be unpleasant and difficult to negotiate. Children are not born with an innate understanding of compromise and distress tolerance. These are learned skills, and peer play is the environment in which such learning occurs (Vygotsky, 1978; Yogman et al., 2018). In the above scenario, one or both of the children might crumble under the distress of their frustration and disappointment at not getting what they want. They might cry, they might yell, and they might abandon the play. However, through that experience, children learn to recognize that others hold viewpoints that are different from their own, such that the next time they experience a similar scenario, the feelings that they experience will be more familiar. This, in turn, will mitigate the perception of distress over time. Eventually, they will learn to tolerate

their feelings and utilize communication and compromise to reach solutions, which will allow their play to continue. While adults can act as pivotal guides and models of successful conflict-resolution and distress tolerance, these skills cannot be developed solely through explanation or instruction. Young children need active, personally relevant experience in order to internalize these critical skills (Vygotsky, 1978).

Play At Home

It is worth noting that while a child's interactions at home with caregivers and/or siblings also comprise critical components of development, they do not serve as an equivalent substitute for peer play outside of one's family (Rubin, 1980). After all, within one's unique family system and relationship, a child will develop patterns related to rules, relationships, and boundaries that, while not necessarily predictable, are at least dependable on a certain level. A child might not know exactly what a sibling or parent might do next in a play scenario, but they have already internalized a framework for how to behave within the home and familial environment.

Moreover, Piaget notes that a child will experience and engage in conflict differently with an adult than they will with a peer (Berk & Winsler, 1995). Adults represent a natural source of authority in a young child's life, and therefore, a child might be more likely to unquestioningly accept an adult's perspective. On the other hand, when a child comes into contact with a peer who has a different style of communication or conflicting expectations, this is where play can offer new opportunities for social development. Piaget notes that such a "clash of peer opinion, combined with cognitive maturity, leads to a decline in the egocentrism believed to underlie the illogical thinking of children in the preschool years" (p. 18). Through peer interactions, a child can experience and engage with new relationships, along with all of the feelings, enjoyable and

challenging, that arise within them. This paves the way for a child to reflect on their own experiences and cognitions and learn to adapt to others' perspectives in a way that is not replicable within a family unit (Rubin, 1980).

Another example of social interactions that differ from within and without the family unit is in a parent's instinct to scaffold and praise a child's learning experience. When a child plays with a caregiver, such as by completing a puzzle together, an adult caregiver might support the process by rotating a puzzle piece to help the child recognize its proper place (Yogman et al., 2018). If the same child were attempting to complete the same puzzle with a peer, they would not receive the same scaffolding. Perhaps the child might manage to complete the puzzle through peer collaboration and negotiation, or perhaps the child will become frustrated and give up. Either way, they would encounter a different emotional and cognitive experience than the one at home, which poses an opportunity for additional growth.

Moreover, a child's caregiver is likely to praise and encourage creative exploits at home (Rubin, 1980). A peer, on the other hand, might tell that same child that they think their drawing is ugly. This might ignite feelings of anger and confusion for a child who has internalized a message, supported by their family unit, that all of their drawings are beautiful. Through such an interaction, unpleasant and upsetting though it may be, a child has the opportunity to learn new lessons: other people have different opinions, other people might hurt my feelings, and other people's responses are not predictable. While the home sphere and family unit is not to be underestimated in a child's development, the ability to flexibly incorporate these lessons in early childhood is afforded through peer play.

Chapter 3: During Covid

In this chapter, I will briefly explore the potential ramifications of the Covid-19 lockdown of 2020 on early childhood development. This will include a combination of exploratory studies, research, and speculation. It is impossible to know exactly how today's elementary school students, such as my own case studies, spent their time in early childhood, particularly in the midst of lockdown. The children themselves are unlikely to be able to recall a great deal of their day-to-day activities, and moreover, they are unable to articulate any points of comparison between their experience and that of a typical five-year-old during an uninterrupted year. However, by combining what we can glean from individual anecdotes and global studies, perhaps we can begin to put some pieces together. After all, there are certain consistent experiential elements that we do know: we know that children were not at school, nor were they playing with peers at a local playground. Therefore, they were not receiving any of the aforementioned benefits of such play experiences. Children may have been playing at home, but we know that their opportunities to explore new environments and engage with peers were limited, if not entirely eliminated, for a stretch of time. We also know from animal studies that when rats are deprived of opportunities to play, they demonstrate decreased problem-solving skills and limited behavioral flexibility (Einon et al., 1978). Such findings have been further reinforced by Panksepp, Burgdorf, Turner, and Gordon (2003) in their neurological experiments to evaluate impacts of play in rat development. In this case, the results indicated that rough-and-tumble play for young animals leads to increases in behavioral inhibition. While animal studies are not necessarily indicative of firm conclusions regarding human development, it is worthwhile to consider that a decrease in play for children is likely to have adverse effects

on similar domains. Additionally, in order to adequately reflect on the experience of the children in my case studies, it is crucial that we recognize that "children's cognition is contextualized; it emerges out of and derives meaning from particular activities and personal experiences" (Berk & Winsler, 1995, p. 18). Today's children experienced a highly unique context, and their experiences are unlike those we have seen in other circumstances. In order to understand today's children, it is pivotal that we explore the context in which their early experiences took place.

Beyond Academics

During the peak of lockdown beginning in March 2020, the world experienced a severe disruption in routines in all facets of life, including home, work, family, and school. In an unprecedented interruption to the American education system, these school closures removed 50 million children from their classrooms (Editorial Board, 2023). The ramifications of such a large-scale disruption are still being felt and explored. One particularly conspicuous and predictable impact of school closures is in the sphere of education. Audrey Azoulay, the Director General of Unesco, stated that such a prolonged interruption "could threaten the right to education" (UNESCO, 2020), and the New York Times' Editorial Board has estimated that students' progress in reading and math has been set back by two decades (Editorial Board, 2023). However, while these statements indicate the potential scale and severity of school closures, they do not make any distinction between the particular impact on specific age groups. An eleven-year-old, for example, experienced a different impact than a kindergarten-aged child. The varying developmental and cognitive capacities, such as the ability to understand the very concept of a pandemic or operate (and engage meaningfully with) various technologies, are vital to differentiate when examining such impacts. With this in mind, in an effort to assess the

potential trajectories of my own case studies, I will largely be focusing on the experience of children who were roughly five to six years old during March 2020.

For all age groups, though particularly in early childhood, education extends beyond academics. The play-based psychosocial component forms a critical foundation for later learning. Schools align with this value, as they provide services accordingly (Riley et al., 2012). The school environment becomes something of a home away from home where children can explore and develop numerous skills connected to both physical and mental health. In addition to the many benefits of play and peer-to-peer social interaction, young children in school are also afforded the opportunity to run around outside. The lack of access to outdoor physical activity, combined with an increased use of technology and screen-based learning and entertainment, has led to detrimental health outcomes, including a disruption in healthy sleep patterns which is a foundational element of well-being (Ghosh, Dubey, & Chatterjee, 2020).

Children without access to a typical preschool classroom were also not afforded the opportunity to build relationships with their teachers. This relationship offers children the experience of exploring appropriate and effective ways of interacting with a non-familial adult, as well as a breadth of different play-based activities. Kindergarten teachers often combine child-led and teacher-led activities, along with a wide assortment of manipulatives, to instigate and facilitate play in a school environment (Riley et al., 2012). During lockdown, children may have had access to toys, parental engagement, and even interactions with teachers over a digital platform, but these modalities are not equivalent to the experience of a school setting. The lack of face-to-face interactions with peers and teachers, as well as decreased personal space within the home, are often overlooked. However, these deficiencies are consequential in children's development. This complex reciprocity and interplay between these psychosocial stressors and

lifestyle disruptions have a cumulative effect over time (Ghosh et al., 2020). Yogman et al. (2018) note that when a child lacks access to play and nurturing relationships, the development of executive function and prosocial behavior can be interrupted by toxic stress. Perhaps we think of stressors as components that we can notice and strive to remove, but stress can also derive from a lack of support and play.

Studies & Findings

In one Turkish study (Duran & Ömeroğlu, 2022), families whose children were between the ages of three and six during 2020 were interviewed over the phone (due to social distancing guidelines) in semi-structured interviews. Parents in this study reported that during the time that their children were unable to go to school, play with their friends, or engage in face-to-face communication outside of the home, they recognized that their roles would need to expand. Thus, they became not only their children's parents, but also their teachers and playmates. Parents took on additional duties as educators, lending support in various educational activities, such as reading. They also reported playing numerous games and engaging in art projects and dramatic play. They made a strong effort to ensure that nobody became bored during the lockdown. These findings were consistent with another study conducted by the National Institute for Early Education Research, or NIEER (Barnett et al., 2020). This study also compiled data from a selection of parents with at least one child aged three to five in the household. These parents reported an increase in educational activities at home compared to data from a similar survey from 2019. These included such activities as reading, storytelling, and teaching letters, words, or numbers. Similarly, parents also engaged more frequently in play-based activities at home, such as arts and crafts or games, but the amount of time spent playing indoors (68%) was

higher than outdoors (45%). In fact, the amount of time spent playing outdoors was almost the same as the amount of time spent watching TV (42%). Parents also noted an increase in time spent playing video games amongst five year olds.

Duran & Ömeroğlu (2022) also noted several trends related to parental stress and changes in children's behavior. Parents expressed a great deal of difficulty keeping up with all of their new responsibilities and the changes that were taking place in their households. Between work, childcare, education, and a desire to prevent boredom while being stuck at home, parents described themselves as feeling "terrible, bored, exhausted, tired, stressed, and scared" (p. 22). Moreover, they described new behavior problems emerging from their children, and, in fact, different behaviors than they had demonstrated prior to the pandemic. Disagreements at home increased, as did a propensity for bothering their siblings. Parents noted an uptick in aggression, anxiety, anger, and violence in their children, as well as complaints of being bored and more frequent crying. Parents also observed changes in their children's energy levels as the pandemic progressed, as indicated by more requests to go outside and fluctuations in bedtime routines. Overall, parents in this study expressed that this period of time had produced overall negative effects on their children's behaviors.

Chapter 4: Jack

In this chapter, I will begin by analyzing Stuart Shanker's notable distinction between misbehavior and stress behavior. I will also introduce elements of neuroscience as a way to understand the presentation of certain behaviors. This will serve as a lens through which I will explore a few anecdotes from my work with Jack. Following these case study narrations, I will present my own assessments of his behavior, as well as a reframing of the expectations to which it is reasonable to hold Jack.

Further Developmental Theory: Shanker & Stress Behavior

In his book *Self-Reg,* Stuart Shanker (2016) enumerates the distinctions between misbehavior and stress behavior. In essence, misbehavior is behavior in which a child engages willingly, knowing that they could make a different, better choice. Stress behavior, on the other hand, is behavior over which a child has no control. In other words, they might not be making the choice that an adult in the room wants them to make, but they are making the only choice that is available to them in that particular moment. The behaviors and actions that are characteristic of misbehavior and stress behavior might look similar from the outside, but their internal driving forces are completely different. This is a critical distinction. When one fails to recognize an action as stress behavior and treats it, instead, as misbehavior, it is likely that the problem will not only not improve, but worsen.

Stress and the Brain

In order to understand stress behavior, it is helpful to understand the human brain. This, naturally, is a highly complex and nuanced system, but we needn't unpack every intricacy in order to understand the components that underpin stress behavior. In short, we can think of the brain as divided into "thinking" and "feeling" sections (Shanker, 2016; Siegel, 2017). The "thinking" section is housed in the top part of the brain, which is developmentally newer than the parts that lie beneath it. This "thinking" section is called the prefrontal cortex, or PFC. When the PFC is engaged, logic and reasoning capacities are available. You, for instance, are connected with your PFC right now as you are reading these words. You are focused, and your body is likely in a state of relative calm. Your heart rate is regulated and stable, and you are engaging thoughtfully. Perhaps, in the back of your mind, you are also experiencing other impulses. Maybe someone has upset you, and you'd like to tell them what you really think, or maybe there's a piece of chocolate cake in the refrigerator that seems tempting. However, you are able to recognize that this is not the time to give into those impulses, perhaps because your logical mind can recognize potential future consequences, such as saying something you regret or ending up with a stomachache. You have a degree of control over your mind and your urges, and you can refocus on continuing to read these words.

Beneath the PFC, we can find the "emotional" brain or limbic system (Shanker, 2016). The limbic system is in charge of memories and their emotional associations, as well as our survival instincts. Our limbic system is connected to the older, more primitive part of our brain, and we can thank it for our continued survival as a species. On a reptilian level, this is the part of the brain that is wired to recognize threats in the environment and respond accordingly by fighting the threat, retreating from the threat, or freezing, such as by "playing dead" in order to

evade the threat. In a dangerous environment where predators might threaten daily survival, the limbic system is responsible for a species' ability to react quickly enough to evade the danger. This, Shanker notes, is a markedly different process than one might find with the PFC. In the case of an immediate threat to its livelihood, the brain recognizes that it doesn't have time for PFC-led logic. Accordingly, the brain responds to the threat by releasing adrenaline and cortisol into the body, which leads to a rise in heart rate, blood pressure, and energy. One's breathing rate also increases in order to take in more oxygen, and reactivity becomes faster and stronger. In an environment in which one's survival is being actively threatened, these quick, involuntary responses could be the difference between life and death.

It is important to note that while the logical PFC and emotional limbic system are contained within one brain, they are not accessible simultaneously. Dr. Daniel Siegel (2017) utilizes a "hand model" of the brain to help create a visual representation of the connection between these two functions of brain activity. In his explanatory video, he suggests that you imagine your hand in a closed fist as a representation of your whole brain. If your thumb is underneath your top fingers, consider that the thumb represents the limbic system. Your top fingers are the PFC. When your brain is in this position, you have full access to your PFC and all of the logic and reason that comes with it. However, when your brain senses danger and ascertains that it needs to go into survival mode, it needs to access the limbic system. In Siegel's hand model visual, this means that the top fingers, representing the PFC, are lifted. This exposes the core of the limbic system, allowing the brain to access its critical survival responses. However, it is clear from this image that the connection between the two parts of the brain is lost when it is in this "flipped up" position. The PFC is, effectively, offline. The brain is unable to access both parts at the same time. In the example of your ability to read these words right now,

imagine that you were currently in a state of panic or high agitation. Imagine that you felt furious or terrified for your life. Would you then be able to sit still, focus, read, and comprehend? Furthermore, would you still be able to resist other impulses as easily, or would you be more likely to give into them? Maybe in this state of agitation, you will be more likely to say the thing you don't mean or eat the cake that you meant to save. You're still you, but your capacity to complete calm, logic-based tasks has been diminished in a way that is neurological, survivalist, and outside of your control.

This brings us to the idea of self control and its distinction from self-regulation. According to Shanker (2016), "self-control is about inhibiting impulses; self-regulation is about identifying the causes and reducing the intensity of impulses and, when necessary, having the energy to resist" (p. 7). The notion of controlling one's impulses is one that is frequently misunderstood, and moreover, connected to a sense of shame or failure. This conception of self control as an indicator of one's character dates back thousands of years, even as far as Plato's time (Shanker, 2016). This belief dictates that an inability to control and inhibit one's impulses is a sign of weakness, moral failing, and a lack of desire or effort. Therefore, when children behave in a way that is counter to what is appropriate or desired within a given circumstance, onlookers (and moreso, adults who are directly impacted by the undesired behavior) may be quick to blame and chastise them, which reinforces the idea that they have failed in some way. However, if we are able to pause and reflect on what is physically and neurologically occurring in the child's brain and body, we may be able to uncouple the ideas of "misbehavior" and "failure." The misbehavior that we witness in children may, in fact, not be misbehavior at all. It might have absolutely nothing to do with self-control. We might be observing stress behavior, which requires a different approach.

Jack: Preparation & Session Overview

Let's return to Jack, my client whose classroom behavior is characterized by explosive outbursts when things don't go his way. Prior to beginning our sessions together, I joined the class to stand in the back and survey the scene. In my first observation of Jack's classroom environment, he did not stand out to me. In fact, nothing in particular did. All I noticed was a general sense of chaos. Children in this fourth grade class were screaming, cursing, pushing, and pulling each other's hair. Jack was not among the loudest children in the group. He blended into the background. It wasn't until lunchtime that I got a firsthand look at the behavior that had been described to me. From my position a few feet away, it looked like an ordinary, energetic lunchtime experience with all of the kids grouped together around a long table. Suddenly, I saw Jack leap to his feet and begin shouting at the child across from him. His voice was loud, and his words flew from his mouth at rapid speed as his hands smacked the table in fury. There was no visible escalation. It was as if a switch had been flipped or a volcano had erupted. I never learned the cause of this particular outburst, but I was told that this was typical of his behavior.

After we started our work together, his teachers would occasionally bring him into my room, his eyes teary and his shoulders slumped: "Do you have a minute?" The teacher might ask shakily. "His team lost a game at recess, so he started yelling and kicking and punching. It's just a game, Jack! We can't behave like that when we lose a game!" Sometimes, a teacher would pop by without Jack: "We offered a prize if someone got the right answer, and he raised his hand, but we called on someone else. He already won the prize last week! It was someone else's turn! But he yelled, kicked his chair, and threw his pencil case across the room. Now he's at his desk crying. Can you come to the classroom? I don't know what else to do with him! This is

unacceptable behavior!" Other times, I would hear stories after the fact, and they all followed the same pattern: something happened that Jack did not like, and he immediately engaged in behaviors such as yelling, crying, kicking, and punching.

Prior to meeting him, I had imagined that I would be working with a child who presented as angry, surly, and/or highly energetic. After all, his teachers had described him as "aggressive" and "disobedient." Despite his small stature, it even seemed like they were almost afraid of him. To my surprise, I found Jack to be quiet, patient, and meticulous during our sessions together. With the exception of moments during which he was in the middle of an outburst, he consistently presented as friendly and polite. He wanted nothing more than a quiet space to complete puzzles and fold origami, and despite the fact that I had never asked him to clean up after himself, he consistently did so on his own accord. How could this be the same child who exhibited such disruptive and explosive behavior in his classroom?

Another element that I had contemplated before we began our work together was how he would respond when I directly addressed his angry outbursts. Would he become defensive? Would he lash out at me, or would he deny that there was anything to address? As it turned out, in discussing his outbursts, Jack demonstrated self awareness and reflective capacities. I quickly noticed a unique pattern in his conversational rhythm: almost every time I asked him a question, he paused for several seconds, repeated the question back to me, paused a little longer, and then supplied an answer. I stayed with him, working at his pace and repeating myself as needed. At the end of this winding conversational road, Jack supplied me with answers that exhibited simple vocabulary and an age-appropriate level of reflective capacity and internal awareness. He was able to calmly describe his feelings and behaviors at home and at school, relaying that when things get too loud at home, which they often do, he becomes very frustrated and angry and

begins punching and kicking things. Perhaps due to his previous experiences in counseling, he was consistently able to name his feelings of anger and frustration as well as the specific physical manifestations of them (i.e. “I kicked a chair”). In discussing these events with me, his assessment of what had happened generally aligned with what his teachers had relayed to me, but he always presented as calm and well regulated as he shared his experience. If I had not already witnessed his outbursts firsthand, it would have been hard for me to picture Jack in a state of dysregulated anger.

During our sessions together, I explored different interventions with Jack and found the introduction of Anger Management Skill Cards (Therapist Aid, 2021) to be most successful. These printable cards, which I pre-cut before the session, each offer an alternative behavior in which one can engage when angry. I thought that the process of allowing him to physically select the responses that resonated with him would give him a sense of concreteness and ownership over behavior modifications. He eagerly engaged with the cards, thoughtfully setting aside the ones that did not connect with him and separating the ones that he wanted to keep. His personal favorites included counting to 100, drawing a picture of his anger, or thinking a new thought (such as “It’s just a game” or “Mistakes happen!”). He started keeping a collection of cards in his backpack, adding to the pile when we discovered new strategies that he liked. With his consent, I also communicated to his teachers and his mother that when he became upset, they could tell him, “Go get your cards,” and he would know what it meant.

Time Machines & Origami

Some of our most successful sessions together were structured around an imagination-based “Time Machine” game. In this game, I asked Jack to identify a recent moment

in which he had lost his temper and behaved in a way that had gotten him in trouble. After selecting the incident, I invited him to join me in my time machine (complete with mime and some silly sounds to keep our environment fun and free of pressure) to revisit the moment. To ensure that we arrived at the correct moment, I would also draw a simple timeline, utilizing a strong intersecting line to represent the triggering moment.

"Okay, Jack," I would say. "We're back to yesterday after school. What's happening right here on the timeline?"

"What's happening here? I'm waiting with Fred."

"Okay, I'll write that down right here: 'waiting with Fred.' And how are you feeling here?"

"Calm. Happy."

"Perfect, we're feeling calm and happy while we wait with Fred. Then what happens right here? Where I've drawn this big mark?"

"What happens here?"

"Yep, right here on the timeline. What happened next?"

"Fred called me a loser."

"And how did you feel about that?"

"Mad."

"You felt mad! Yeah, that wasn't nice of Fred to call you a loser! I think that would hurt my feelings. I'd be mad too! So what did you do?"

"What did I did??" (Jack's sentence syntax and grammar often demonstrated elements of confusion and relatively low proficiency.)

"Yep, what did you do when you felt mad at Fred?"

"I kicked him. And I yelled."

“You got mad, so you kicked him and yelled. That makes sense. What happened after that?”

“I got in trouble.”

“I bet that wasn’t fun. You’ve told me before that you don’t like getting in trouble. Well, since we’re back here again, back in our time machine, maybe we can try again! Let’s go back to right here, where you’re happy and calm. Then Fred calls you a loser. What choice do you want to make this time?”

“I’ll tell a teacher.”

“Okay! Instead of kicking him, you’ll tell a teacher? You’ll ask a grown-up for help?”

“Yes.”

“That’s definitely a different choice. Can you think of any other choices you could make?”

“I could ask him to stop.”

“You certainly could! I bet you wouldn’t get in trouble then! But it can be really hard sometimes, can’t it? When you’re feeling mad, it’s hard to remember to do those things. What could you do to help yourself calm down? Do you remember the cards we talked about before?”

“I…I could count to 100.”

“Yes, that was one of our strategies! That could help you stay calm, and then you could tell a teacher or ask him to stop.”

This game, and variations of it, were present in many of our sessions. In each occurrence, Jack demonstrated patience, cooperation, and self reflection. Sometimes, he independently came up with his own ideas that we had not discussed in previous sessions. He even put the ideas into his own words, rather than parroting back my own phrasing, which indicated that he was internalizing the content of our work together. This version of Jack stood in stark contrast to the child that his teachers described, but in our work together, I recognized that the circumstances

were notably dissimilar. In our sessions, Jack was allowed to do whatever he wanted. He could play, he could draw, and he would never lose a game or not get his way. I began to wish for an opportunity to engage with him in a circumstance that could provide him with a low level of frustration. Would he be able to tolerate it, or would he be overtaken by one of the explosions by which his teachers had come to define him?

I encountered the occasion to find an answer to this question when Jack decided to try a more challenging origami shape than the ones he had already memorized. We looked up a YouTube tutorial, and we attempted to follow along. The first few folds were easy, but as the paper became smaller, he started to feel confused and frustrated. “It’s too hard!” he exclaimed, throwing the paper down on the table and walking away. I reflected his experience of feeling frustrated and noted that he had used his words to express himself, rather than his feet or his fists. For a few moments, he played with a marble game. Then, he returned to the origami to try again. I reflected his experience and behavior again, remarking that sometimes things get frustrating and we just need to step away and take a break. We repeated this pattern a few more times: he became frustrated, walked away, briefly engaged in another activity, and returned; meanwhile, I continued to reflect and name his experiences and commend him for navigating his frustration so seamlessly. Eventually, we encountered a breakthrough that supported both his origami success and our clinical work together: YouTube’s “0.5 speed” button. Once we slowed down the speed of the tutorial, Jack was able to successfully complete the shape with far less frustration. This gave me an idea: “Jack,” I began, “You know those moments when you get angry? When your body starts kicking and hitting? Do you think that happens quickly? Or slowly?”
“It’s fast,” he replied.

"That's what I thought. Wouldn't it be nice if we could just push a slow-down button inside your body? Like we did with this YouTube video?"

"Yes."

"Well, Jack, think of it this way: when you feel your body start to get angry, like it wants to start hitting or kicking, try and take a big, deep breath before you start counting to 100. That's basically a slow-down button for your body." He nodded, seeming to understand the analogy, and he agreed to give it a try.

Discussion

As I continued working with Jack and integrating his teachers' comments and descriptions of his behavior, I noticed that certain elements of their language and assessments weren't aligning with my own observations. "He's in fourth grade, he should know better by now" remained the common refrain. Their frustration and exasperation was clear to me, and I am certain it was clear to Jack as well. However, I never would have described Jack as a child who "didn't know better." Jack had engaged with me in numerous reflective conversations. His language was simple, his grammar was often discombobulated, and he frequently asked for repetition. However, our Time Machine trips illustrated a clear picture of a child who cared about not getting in trouble, felt motivated to handle his anger differently, and was capable of clearly articulating the choices he wanted to make. Moreover, his ability to navigate low levels of frustration at a difficult origami project indicated that he did possess the capacity to tolerate uncomfortable emotions. If Jack knew better, then why was it so difficult for him to do better?

The answer, perhaps, lies in the difference between misbehavior and stress behavior. Shanker (2016) paints a vivid picture of a child experiencing stress behavior. This child, he

expounds, "is highly impulsive or explosive, has trouble regulating his emotions, has frequent meltdowns or is highly volatile or irritable, [and] can't tolerate frustration" (p. 7). Add to this description that Jack demonstrates an awareness of what "good" behavior looks like, a desire to not get in trouble, and an arsenal of coping skills and strategies in his back pocket. However, his explosive behaviors persist, as if outside of his control or best intentions. This, too, is consistent with stress behavior. Jack is unable to access his better judgment–the part of him that "knows better"–because in triggering moments of stress and frustration, his limbic system is overtaking him. His prefrontal cortex is offline, and adrenaline is the driving force of what we are calling his "decisions." However, when stress behavior is in the driver's seat, his actions and behavior have nothing to do with his decisions at all. It's not that Jack doesn't want to make the right decision. It's not that he isn't trying. The problem is that in moments of stress, he loses access to those decisions.

If Jack's behavior is a byproduct of stress behavior, his teachers' responses also indicate clues as to why he is struggling. Shanker (2016) notes that when we can set aside our need for compliance, we are able to see a child more clearly. Perhaps this is why my sessions with him bring out his best decision-making capacities. In my counseling room, sessions are centered on what the child needs, not what I need. This is not a luxury that is afforded to a teacher with thirty other students in the classroom and a lesson plan to complete. His teachers are seeking compliance in a way that I am not. In doing so, they are only seeing Jack in terms of his externalized behavior rather than his desires, intentions, and capabilities. Moreover, in their assessment that Jack is exhibiting misbehavior rather than stress behavior, they have responded with punitive, shaming language. They have indicated that he needs to try harder, that he is not living up to expectations, and that his behavior is "unacceptable." It is true, through the lens of a

need for compliance, that his outbursts cannot continue. However, through the lens of self-reg, language that is shaming and corrective only serves to amplify stress behavior. The more Jack internalizes the message that his behavior is a sign of some sort of weakness or failure, the more difficult it will be for him to regulate in times of distress.

Shouldn'ts & Shoulds

The crux of Jack's teachers' complaints lies in the notion that he "should know better" by now. He is, after all, in fourth grade. By this point, his teachers ascertain that he should be able to tolerate the distress of losing a game or not getting called on. They also have determined that he should be capable of navigating interpersonal conflict without resorting to hitting or kicking his classmates or classroom property. Certainly, calmer and more compliant behavior would make their jobs easier, but by what metric have they determined what he "should" be able to tolerate? Perhaps, in their teaching experience, most fourth graders have exhibited different behaviors and levels of distress tolerance, so by this metric, Jack falls short. Perhaps, however, Jack's unique developmental experiences in early childhood indicate that he should be judged by an entirely different metric.

I would like to borrow a tool from my counseling work with Jack and invite you to step into my Time Machine, which we will direct back to 2020. Here, as in my sessions, much of our data will be speculative. However, by combining knowledge of early childhood development, general trends around the early days Covid-19 lockdown, and anecdotal information about Jack's life, we might be able to piece together an image of what we might find on the other side of our Time Machine trip.

Here, in 2020, we find a Jack who has recently turned six years old. He shares a bedroom with his parents and his two siblings while his grandparents sleep in the living room. Nobody is leaving the apartment or going to work. Jack is unable to attend school, and it is unlikely to expect that he, at the age of six, is receiving a high-quality education over Zoom. Academically, it is likely that he is not progressing at the same rate that he might if he were experiencing a typical school experience. After all, according to psychologist Georgene Troseth, PhD at Vanderbilt University, dozens of studies have indicated that "children learn better from a person who is with them face-to-face than from a person on a screen, even if it's the exact same person doing the exact same thing" (Pappas, 2020, p. 42).

Even in a typical school setting, Jack's academic pursuits would not be particularly rigorous at this stage of early childhood. Most of his learning would develop through play and peer-to-peer interaction. Recall that this is typically the age at which children explore representation and symbolization through play, which sets the foundations for academic learning later in life. This stage of early childhood is also the point at which children practice negotiation, conflict resolution, and distress tolerance through peer play. Additionally, Yogman et al. (2018) note the importance of play as a method to downregulate the body's stress response, which, in turn, may assist in modulating "impulsivity, aggression, and uncontrolled emotion" (p. 6) in the face of stress. We don't know the precise details of what Jack's day-to-day life looked like during the Covid-19 lockdown of 2020. We don't know what his homebound personal interactions entailed, nor do we know what specific toys and games were available to him. However, we do have an idea of the experiences he lacked: he did not have the opportunity to engage with peers his own age. He only had access to his family members. We also know that his home environment was cramped, loud, and unvaried, and he did not have access to playgrounds or

other age-appropriate activities outside of the home. Essentially, for roughly 20% of Jack's life, he did not have access to most of the opportunities that developmental theorists and researchers have determined are the essential, foundational building blocks of academic capacities and distress tolerance.

Returning in our Time Machine to our current timeline, let's place Jack into his fourth-grade classroom environment and examine him through the lens of self-reg. Shanker (2016) explains that the more a child is under stress, the more likely it is for the logic centers of the brain to go offline and for the limbic system to overtake the child's processing capacities. An increase in stressors leads to an increase in adrenaline, which sends signals of danger to the brain. When stressors flood the brain, the limbic system cannot tell the difference between a threat to survival and a minor classroom conflict. When I speak to Jack's teachers, it is clear that they perceive the classroom as a stressful environment. I can feel it in the exasperated look in their eyes, I can see it in the tension in their shoulders, and I can hear it in the pinched tones of their voices. Clearly, the fourth-grade classroom environment contains some degree of stress for everyone. What might this look like for Jack specifically?

One clear stressor for Jack might be the noise level of the classroom. This is likely a stressor for everyone to some degree, but in considering what we know about Jack, it is possible that it is particularly stressful for him. After all, he has described his home environment as "loud" most of the time, and he has expressed that this makes him feel frustrated and angry. It makes sense that this would be the case, especially since we know how many people occupy his small space. Let's imagine for a moment what it might have been like to be stuck inside a loud, cramped environment such as his, with no opportunity to leave, for the duration of the Covid-19 lockdown. What might that have been like for a six-year-old who did not yet possess the verbal

capacities or language for his experience? In lieu of processing these frustrations by running around in a playground, varying his environment, or playing with friends, how did he learn to process his distress? Perhaps the only way he knew how was by yelling, kicking, and hitting. Perhaps he engaged in those behaviors so many times that his body and brain learned to associate loud, hectic environments with these limbic-led instincts. Without outside environments, such as school, to challenge these instincts and teach new coping strategies, perhaps they became further and further cemented. Moreover, it is clear from his behavior in our sessions together that Jack prefers a quiet environment. He has verbalized this sentiment directly, but he has also demonstrated it in his behavior and ability to focus calmly when it's just me and him in a quiet room together. Yes, everyone in Jack's classroom experiences the same environment. However, with Jack's home life, developmental experience during Covid lockdown, and strong preference for quiet environments, it is likely that the noise level and chaotic energy of his classroom serve as a more weighty stressor for him.

Another stressor that Jack might be experiencing is his low academic aptitude. I have joined him for a few class sessions and sat beside him during the lessons. While his teachers are at the front of the classroom introducing a new math concept or reading passage, I watch his eyes glaze over, and he turns his focus to some sort of small, intricate craft on his desk, such as a knot to untie or a paper to fold. In these moments, I can understand why his teachers perceive and report that he "doesn't try." However, when the timing is appropriate to do so, I engage with him in miniature one-on-one tutoring sessions. Slowly and carefully, I review the material with him. I stay with him as he pauses and then repeats the question back to me or asks me to repeat myself. At that point, sometimes he is able to provide his own answer. Other times, he disengages again, which I interpret as my cue to try to teach the material another way. Eventually, it clicks. The

math concept makes sense, and he is able to complete the worksheet on his own. The reading passage begins to coalesce, and he asks me thoughtful, conceptual questions that demonstrate understanding of the base material. It is as if this world moves too quickly for him, and working with me is the only opportunity for him to press that "0.5 speed" button on his life. Academically, it appears that Jack is caught in a cycle: he is behind because he disengages, but he disengages precisely because he knows he's behind. In our one-on-one work together, he demonstrates a desire and a capacity to learn, but the foundations are wobbly and everything is moving too fast for him. This, too, is likely a major classroom stressor for Jack.

Imagine how it might feel to be in an environment in which you feel like you can't keep up. Your foundational basics are not strong enough to keep pace with everyone else, and everything is whizzing past your ability to comprehend. If you say the wrong thing, you might get teased. Maybe Fred will call you a loser again. If a teacher calls on you, she might criticize you for not knowing something that you "should" know or for not paying attention, even though you're trying your best. You might feel scared, alone, and ashamed. On top of it all, everything is too loud. Too chaotic. Just like it is at home. You never get a break from it all. You never get the quiet that you crave. What will you do with all of these feelings and stressors that you never got to practice tolerating earlier in your childhood? How much is too much, and when will you explode? By examining Jack's behavior through the metrics of stress behavior, combined with an early childhood that was uniquely deprived of experiences that could have helped him learn to tolerate stressors, his behavior is, in fact, exactly what we "should" expect.

Chapter 5: Kate

In this chapter, I will begin by introducing an overview of Kate's presenting challenges, goals, and overall presentation. Based on her demeanor and common behavioral patterns, I will delineate and explore my chosen intervention structure and its rationale. Next, I will analyze Vygotsky's theories of early stages of play, as well as the impact of play on subsequent development, which I will assess in conjunction with specific elements of Kate's style of play. Finally, I will return to Vygotsky's theories of child development, this time with a focus on the emergence of a child's relationship with rules. This will be followed by an anecdotal description and analysis of Kate's conflicted internal model of boundaries.

Kate: Preparation & Session Overview

When I first started working with Kate, I knew that we would be exploring her relationship with rules and boundaries. Her teacher and her mother had both shared with me that she struggled to conform to rules, particularly as they pertained to transitions between activities or participating in required activities that did not align with her mood or desires in that particular moment. This, likely, was connected to her earlier life experiences at home and in school. In addition to Kate's mother's decision to raise her in a lenient environment, Kate had also experienced few boundaries in her educational environment. Coming out of lockdown in the 2020-2021 school year, she had been placed in a play-focused hybrid classroom that imposed few boundaries or structural requirements. This mixed-age class was composed of only four children between kindergarten and second grade, and Kate was the oldest member of the group. The following year, her third grade class structure was completely different. Even in her 12:1

classroom environment, which afforded her more flexibility and attention than the standard class format, she was being tasked with brand new expectations related to structure, boundaries, and transitions. I imagined that for Kate, it must have felt like leaving a sauna and immediately and unexpectedly being plunged into a tub of iced water. It was a shock to her system, and she was unable to tolerate it.

I decided that in my work with Kate, I would structure our sessions based on the principles of Axline's (1974) play therapy. According to these principles, I established a warm and playful rapport, accepted her exactly as she was, followed her lead, and, importantly, established a permissive environment. Perhaps, on the surface, conducting therapy from a wholly permissive environment seems counterintuitive for the purposes of helping a child learn to tolerate rules and structure. However, I determined that based on Kate's behavior, her resistance to adhering to boundaries indicated that something wasn't connecting for her; perhaps she was working through some unresolved feelings, or maybe she was struggling to find her place in the world. Either way, I surmised that we could work towards uncovering the root cause of her behavior by exploring her feelings and relationships from within an environment that she could explore freely and on her own terms.

Further Developmental Theory: Play & Vygotsky

In infancy and very early childhood, children seek immediate gratification (Vygotsky, 1978). Prior to the age of three, it would not be reasonable to expect a child to plan ahead for future desires, even by just a few days. The gap between a young child's wish and the attainment of said wish is extremely short, and the tolerance for the discomfort of waiting is low. However, as children grow older, they begin to learn that certain desires cannot be attained as immediately

as had been the case in infancy and toddlerhood. This is when new forms of imaginative play begin to develop, and Vygosky believes that this is no mere coincidence. He asserts that play develops in part precisely because it can serve the role of immediate gratification in circumstances where fulfillment of a desire is not possible. In other words, the child begins to conceptualize that they cannot attain everything that they want in the exact moment that they want it, so they imagine and play out a world in which they can. Perhaps a child wishes they could play with an animal, and instead of playing with a real animal, they can satisfy their desire by playing with a representative toy. Perhaps another child wishes to occupy the role of an adult, and since this is not immediately attainable in real life, they role-play as an adult figure in their social sphere. The links between desire, wish fulfillment, imagination, and play are inextricable. In fact, Vygotsky goes so far as to assert that "if needs that could not be realized immediately did not develop during the school years, there would be no play" (p. 93).

Another development that takes place between very early childhood and preschool aged children is the changing link between external stimuli and interpreted meaning and motivation (Vygotsky, 1978). A very young child under the age of three is motivated only by the external world. An infant or toddler is unable to imagine a world outside of their immediate sphere, which means they cannot desire any element from an imagined world or future. During this early stage of development, the external items and circumstances around a child directly dictate the child's actions. If a child sees a toy, they will interact with it. If they do not see the toy, they will not yet possess the capacity to imagine a reality in which they can play with the toy. Perception is a direct and literal motivator of a young child's activity.

Vygotsky continues to assert that as the child enters preschool age, the items with which the child interacts in play become less of a literal driving force of activity. This is where

imaginative play begins to develop, and behavior is no longer directly tied to the child's immediate and literal perception. The process of representation and symbolization begins to emerge during this stage. The fusion between what the child sees (or what the item is) and what the child imagines or desires can, at this stage, begin to detach. During this stage of play, "thought is separated from objects and action arises from ideas rather than from things" (Vygotsky, 1967, p. 12), which is the process by which a stick can become a sword and a chair can become a horse. The child does not consciously recognize their ability to separate meaning from an object, but this is exactly the complex capability that imaginative play helps them develop. This, Vygotsky asserts, is one of two paradoxes of play: the child acts in a way that is true to a circumstance, but the circumstance itself is imaginary.

Kate's Play: Early Observations

During our first session together, Kate was excited to enter our therapy room. She had been working with another provider during the previous year, but the novelty of a new provider and new toys seemed to invigorate her. She spotted a container of Legos, dumped them all over the floor, and built a few structures. When she decided she did not want a particular piece, she threw it haphazardly over her shoulder. She built some Lego swords, invited me to engage in a jousting match, and when the Lego swords made contact and subsequently broke, she abandoned the activity. This pattern continued for all of the toys in the room. She would find a category of toys, throw the ones she didn't want over her shoulder, play with them briefly and without any throughline, and quickly abandon them in favor of something else. I wondered if this unstructured style of play would continue beyond our first session or if this was merely a response to a new environment. As time went on, I found that her patterns remained relatively

intact. Once she knew what to expect when she entered the therapy room, her play continued to be similarly sporadic and disconnected. In particular, her tendency to throw undesired toys over her shoulder or across the room persisted.

During the instances in which Kate engaged in role play with toys, the interactions between her characters exhibited little throughline or imagination. She particularly enjoyed playing with a pair of Peppa Pig figurines, as well as kinetic sand and toy animals. During these play sessions, the Peppa Pig figurine always represented Peppa Pig, and the George figurine always represented George. The characters frequently punched or hit each other, or they buried each other or various animals in sand. The sand always represented sand, and each animal always represented whatever animal it appeared to be (frequently a horse). The relationships never went deeper than the immediate responses to the punching, hitting, or burying, and the consequences of these actions were minimally explored. When I engaged with her in exploring how the characters felt in their circumstances, she usually was able to respond with a surface answer. However, if I attempted to pick up a toy to engage in collaborative or parallel play, she quickly took the toy from my hands and played with it on her own.

Kate's Play: Analysis

In these interactions, Kate's style of play struck me as developmentally below the play that I might expect to see from a 9-year-old. Kate appeared to be responding very literally to the world around her, and she did not engage with her toys in a way that demonstrated a great deal of narrative or imaginative capacity. She rarely sought out a particular activity; she mostly responded to the stimuli that were immediately within her line of vision, and she engaged with them very literally. Once she tired of one stimulus, she would throw it with careless abandon

across the room, despite being of a developmental age in which throwing toys would not be accepted within a typical classroom setting. Kate seemed to be responding to her environment in accordance with her impulses and desire for immediate gratification, and in this way, her play style resembled that of a child who was younger than her chronological age.

I suspected that Kate's relatively immature and disorganized play style was connected to her earlier social experiences, or lack thereof. During the preschool age at which Kate might have learned social play-based boundaries with her peers, she was kept in isolation due to Covid-19 restrictions. Without any similarly-aged children at home, she largely turned to YouTube and television for entertainment, as provided by her mother who enforced few rules or boundaries at home. Directly following lockdown, when Kate returned to school, she was placed in a 4-person play-focused classroom in which she was the oldest student. There, too, she encountered little structure, few rules, and minimal interaction with children her own age. With this in mind, let's revisit Vygotsky's (1978) notion that "if needs that could not be realized immediately did not develop during the school years, there would be no play" (p. 93). For Kate, all of her perceived needs were met within her limited environments during her early school years. At home, she was able to receive the instant gratification from boredom by watching TV, and in her small, play-focused classroom, she was likely not challenged to sit with a great deal of discomfort in anticipation of her desires to be met. This, perhaps, lends some insight into the immaturity of Kate's play.

Further Developmental Theory: Vygotsky & Rules

Another defining feature of play during preschool aged development is the exploration of one's internal representation of rules. Very young children, by nature, act initially on impulse. A

baby does not consider the consequences of their cries, and a toddler does not consider boundaries or rules as they move through the world. However, as the child continues to grow, their capacity to play, imagine, and symbolize coincides with their capacity to regulate impulse control. Vygotsky (1978) goes so far as to make a bold, sweeping statement: “There is no such thing as play without rules” (p. 94). Indeed, even from a child’s most limitless imaginative exploits, rules of play ultimately prevail over impulse. We can see this demonstrated in a game of freeze tag: A child wants to continue running (impulse, desire), but they are caught by whomever was designated as “it” (rules conflict with desire). The child, subconsciously, is then faced with Vygotsky’s (1978) second paradox of play: Do they follow their instinct to keep running, or do they deny their instinct in deference to the rules of the game? Vygotsky asserts that a child will take the path of least resistance by giving in to their impulse, but at the same time, they recognize that by following the rules, their pleasure will ultimately increase because they will be allowed to continue playing the game. They also learn to recognize that they cannot bully or dominate other players, as this too might put the game’s continuation in jeopardy (Gray, 2009). Other social games, such as “Simon Says” or “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes” also help children sharpen the skill of controlling individual actions or impulses, and moreover, they have been linked with improved executive functioning (McClelland, 2016). Vygotsky’s (1978) paradoxical process of reconciling internal conflict occurs quickly and without the child’s direct awareness, and it is through this challenge that the child begins to develop the skills to resist impulses and follow rules. A preschool child could not learn this skill from reading a book or from listening to a lecture. This lesson can only be learned through play, and through play, the internal desire to follow a rule becomes stronger than the initial impulse (Vygotsky, 1978).

The Rules of Neverland

One of the presenting issues that brought Kate to counseling was her refusal to adhere to rules, boundaries, or transitions. Her teacher, Ms. G., noted that she always offered Kate a series of classroom options in which to engage, but she made it clear that lying down in the middle of the room, for example, was not one of those options. Kate was rigid in her refusal to compromise and select one of the offered choices, and she usually resorted to crying or yelling at the teacher. I imagined that during our permissive, unstructured sessions together that she would find some relief in engaging in an environment in which she could do anything she wanted. I let her play with the toys however she wanted, even allowing her to throw them over her shoulder without cleaning up before moving to the next toy. She never had to share, and she never had to compromise. Frequently, especially in our early sessions, she explored the limits of her environment gently and collaboratively by inquiring, "What if I do this?" in connection with various toys and actions. This question mostly emerged when she had an idea that she recognized as potentially dangerous or inappropriate. In response, I used such questions as an opportunity to reflect her curiosity and explore her relationship with boundaries, cause-and-effect interactions, and compromise. Sometimes, I turned the question back on her: "What do you think might happen?" I also made sure to answer to any boundary with a rationale that she could understand, such as, "You can play with that toy if you play with it safely, like this. However, if you swing it or throw it, I'll take it away because that would be unsafe. You won't be in trouble, and it's not a punishment. I would only take it away because it's important to me to keep you safe." However, Kate still found ways to push against even the simplest and most minimal of boundaries. For example, when I once told her, "You're allowed to crawl on the floor like a cat once we get to our room, but you have to walk on your feet while you're in the hallway with other people," she

dropped to her hands and knees and looked up at me just a few steps before reaching the classroom. This pattern of taking just one step over the line and watching me carefully to see what would happen remained consistent in most interactions. Additionally, she struggled with ending our sessions on time. Sometimes she responded to the end of a session by refusing to leave, demanding tearfully that she get to keep the toys, and/or dumping toys all over the floor and throwing them across the room.

During one session, I asked Kate to relinquish an item that she had found in the room because I recognized it as a potential safety concern. Kate understood and even agreed with the safety concern, but she still refused to hand it to me. “NOOOOOOO!” she screamed as she ran away to the other side of the room, which placed a large table between us. Rather than participate in the fight and chase her, which would have increased my safety concern, I ignored the item itself and engaged with her in a direct conversation about rules.

“I think you don’t like it when there are rules,” I suggested.

“No! I HATE rules!”

“Tell me more about rules.”

“I want to do whatever I want! I don’t like when there are rules because I can’t do what I want, and it’s BORING!”

Kate certainly wasn’t shy about making her opinions known, and we continued to discuss the feelings that came up for her when she had to follow rules. Kate, unlike Jack, did not show any indication that her behavior was due to a lack of connection to her prefrontal cortex. Kate was able to clearly articulate herself from a regulated state, even when she was upset about being confronted with a boundary. In fact, in response to my reflection that it seemed like it was hard for her when people asked her to follow rules, she showed plenty of imagination: “Uh huh!” she

affirmed. “I want to go to Neverland!” “Neverland?” I clarified. “Yeah! In Neverland, there are no rules! You can do whatever you want all the time, and you never ever have to grow up!”

Kate’s declaration that she never wanted to grow up surprised me in its eloquence, but not in its content. Her style of play and interactions with the world around her were consistent with those of a younger child. Perhaps, on some level, she was still clinging to vestiges of her quickly disappearing early childhood years. I wished I could turn back the clock for her. I wished the time machine that I used with Jack could bring her back to being six years old again. Instead, I tried to offer the next best thing: “What if,” I proposed, “we lived in Kate-land? If we lived in Kate-land, and you were in charge of building your very own world, what would that world look like?” This began an imaginative exercise in which Kate eventually talked herself into the realization that, even in her imaginary world, rules would be necessary or “everything would get pretty crazy.” However, I told her that when she was in the therapy classroom with me, we were in Kate-land. She could do whatever she wanted, and there were only a few rules: We would end the session on time, and I would never tell anyone about our sessions unless she said that she was going to hurt herself, that she was going to hurt someone else, or that someone was hurting her.

By this point in our dialogue, Kate had long since dropped the item that had initially sparked this conversation. Just as I had suspected, it was never about the item itself. She had only been clutching it because I had asked her to put it down.

The Great YouTube Debacle

A few months later, Kate’s contentious relationship with rules reached an apex. She, with a practiced technological aptitude far surpassing my own, figured out how to connect the classroom television set to YouTube. She was delighted. YouTube was, by her own description,

her favorite pastime. With remarkable speed, she connected to the app and began watching a video about dogs. I contemplated how to proceed. I had established a permissive environment in which she had the freedom to do whatever she wanted, but I recognized that the content in which she wanted to engage would not be therapeutically valuable. I knew that I did not want to keep YouTube as an option for our work together, but I also knew that I didn't want to set a boundary without providing a reason that she could understand. Luckily, I quickly found my answer: I noticed that the app was not set up for children. The sidebar of suggested videos offered adult content, such as coverage of the burgeoning war in the Middle East. "Kate," I stated, "you can finish watching this one video, but after that, we are not going to use YouTube anymore."

"Why not?" she pleaded, her voice already brimming with distress.

"Well, this account isn't set up for kids, which means you might see something that is scary or upsetting for you. I won't have any control over what it shows you. And you know how you have to follow rules sometimes? I also have to follow rules. And one of my rules is that I have to keep you safe. I can't show you things that are disturbing or upsetting. If you're watching YouTube on a channel that's not for kids, then I can't do my job and follow my rules. I can't keep you safe. I know you're disappointed, but that's why we can't watch YouTube during these sessions."

I was surprised when she responded with agreement and understanding: "Oh yeah, once I saw something disturbing on YouTube, and I had a really bad nightmare! Mickey Mouse had a zipper for a mouth, and he was chasing me, and I was really scared!"

"Yes, exactly! I don't want you to see anything that would give you nightmares, and it doesn't sound like you want that either!"

I thought I had averted a potential crisis. However, when the dog video concluded and I turned off the television, Kate started to cry. "No! Don't turn it off! Why can't we watch

YouTube? I want to watch YouTube! I'm addicted to YouTube!" I attempted to explain the circumstances again, but her tears quickly escalated to anger. She began picking up toys around the room and throwing them as hard as she could, shouting about how much she wanted to watch YouTube. Because she was throwing the toys in a way that did not pose a risk of injury, I did not ask her to stop. I calmly reflected her anger and frustration, letting her know that her feelings were seen, valued, and normal. Eventually, she sat down on the floor. Her shoulders slumped with her head dejectedly in her hands, she looked like her world was over. I sat down next to her, continuing to reflect her physical state ("I can see that you're covering your face and looking down") and emotional experience ("You must feel really disappointed and sad"). I wished that I could take the pain away, but I knew that she needed to go through this. She needed to work through the internal conflict of cognitively understanding the reason for a boundary but struggling to tolerate its implementation. That's when things escalated.

"If you don't let me watch YouTube, I'm going to hurt myself."

This was the first time Kate had ever spoken of self harm, and from my assessment of her previous behavior and current tone, it did not seem like she was at great risk of following through on the threat. She sounded unsure, almost like she was repeating something from a script. I knew that I needed to take her words very seriously, but I opted to reflect the feeling behind the words rather than the threat itself.

"It sounds like you're really upset right now. This is very hard for you," I said calmly and softly.

"If you don't let me watch YouTube, I'm…I'm going to hurt myself. And then…then…I'm going to blow up the school. I'm going to get…I'm going to get a bomb. I'm going to make one. And then I'm going to blow up the school."

“Wow. You’re so upset that you want to blow up the whole school if you don’t get to watch YouTube.”

“Yeah. And I don’t even care if I go to jail. I don’t care.”

“Hmm. You know, you can’t watch YouTube from jail.”

Kate remained unmoved by my reasoning. I continued to give her an accepting, calm space to continue talking and crying, and I continued to sit beside her and reflect her emotional experience. In the interest of due diligence, I also asked a few clarifying questions about her violent intentions, such as methodology and access to weapons. It was clear from her answers that she possessed neither access to any dangerous implements nor a clear understanding of the gravity and implications of her threats. Eventually, when she had calmed down a bit, I circled back: “So Kate, I need to ask you something. Do you remember that I told you on our first day together that I would never tell anybody about what happened during our sessions unless you said that you would hurt yourself, that you would hurt somebody else, or that somebody was hurting you?” Kate nodded. “Well, you did say some of those things today. And I know that sometimes, we say things that we don’t mean just because we are upset and having really big feelings. And that’s okay. So I have to ask you: Did you really mean those things that you were saying? Or were you just saying them because you were feeling upset?” Kate’s answer surprised me. “I meant it,” she stated flatly. “I’m really going to hurt myself. I’m really going to blow up the school.” Her words sounded hollow, empty, and devoid of intention or understanding. However, they were very clear, and therefore, so was I: “Well,” I continued with the same calmness and gentleness as before, “that does mean that I will have to tell other people, like your mom. Because I have to keep you safe.” She became upset, but not nearly as upset as she had been when I had turned off the television.

Following this session, I immediately consulted with my supervisor. She agreed that it did not seem like anyone was truly in danger and that Kate did not demonstrate understanding of the weight of her words. However, I held the boundary that I had set. I told her teacher (who also agreed that she did not pose a credible threat), and I called her mother. In the following session, Kate inquired about watching YouTube. I gently and simply reminded her that we would not be using YouTube during our sessions together. “But isn’t it Kate-land?” she countered. “Yes, it is,” I replied. “But the WiFi in Kate-land is down.” She looked at me with surprise, as if she did not expect such a reasonable response. She did not push the point further. Periodically, in subsequent sessions, she brought up the subject of wanting to watch YouTube, and each time, I patiently held the same firm boundary. While Kate continued to demonstrate difficulty with adhering to rules and occasionally engaged in behaviors such as throwing toys and crying, she accepted the YouTube boundary. Moreover, she never again spoke of physical threats to herself or others.

The Great YouTube Debacle: Analysis

This session with Kate is one that will stay with me for a long time. This was the first time I had ever been tasked with following through on my mandated reporter protocol, and it was startling to hear such violent thoughts spoken aloud. In particular, it was shocking to hear them spoken by a child who did not seem to understand the true gravity of what she was saying. In this case, it was not the words or threats themselves that were most salient in her experience. Rather, it was what they represent in terms of her relationship to rules.

From the moment that I introduced the boundary of turning off the television, I could see Kate’s agitation start brewing. When she agreed with me that YouTube could indeed be a scary place, I knew that she was able to comprehend the rationale behind my rule. The agitation, it

seemed, stemmed from her desire to watch YouTube coming into conflict with a rule that she understood to be reasonable. Had Kate been faced with this internal conflict through a low-stakes game of tag with her friends, perhaps it would have been easier to tolerate. However, since she faced this conflict with an adult in a school-based environment, even a permissive one nestled in Kate-land, she quickly became dysregulated.

When Kate began to speak of violence against herself and others, her voice sounded as if she was trying on words that did not belong to her. There was no conviction or specificity. It felt more like an exploration of where the boundaries were and what would happen if they were approached or crossed. Under different circumstances, this exploration of boundaries was one that she might have navigated in a classroom environment surrounded by peers in her early childhood. However, lacking that experiential learning, Kate remained curious and conflicted. In our first session, I had set a boundary of what could and could not remain confidential. Perhaps in Kate's mind, this boundary was a big red button, and she could not resist pressing it.

My job, as I saw it at that moment, was to offer Kate an experience that was neither yielding nor punitive; instead, I held the boundary while also offering her acceptance. I did not scold her for her behavior, and I did not react with shock, horror, or punishment in response to her threats. Perhaps another adult in her life would have admonished her and shut her down: "Don't say those things! You don't mean that! You shouldn't talk that way!" However, in my assessment, Kate needed to see this through to the end. For another child, perhaps this scenario would have been played out through the medium of representative dolls or toys. Yogman et al. (2018) note that playing in this manner encourages self-regulation, as collaborating within an imaginary environment of child-led boundaries and roles improves their capacity to think critically about hypothetical circumstances. However, this was not a method through which Kate

knew how to resolve her internal conflict. She worked through it with me, from within the safe and accepting space of Kate-land. She played out the experience of the only scenario in which I would break confidentiality, she saw it through to the end, and she never returned to it again. She had gotten what she needed.

The role of technology in Kate's life is also a significant component of this interaction. Electronic toys, particularly videos in which interaction is not encouraged, have been found to be less effective in the development of language and thought than traditional toys (Sosa, 2016). In addition, the American Academy of Pediatrics (2015) warns parents that "media use often does not support their goals of encouraging curiosity and learning for their children" (p. 9). This is likely because such activities pull time away from real play and person-to-person exchanges, which are the fuel of creativity and active learning. The use of media, according to Yogman et al. (2018), "often encourages passivity and the consumption of others creativity" (p. 8), leaving physical and imaginative activity behind. In conversations with Kate, she has made it clear that YouTube is her most common (and favorite) pastime at home. She has even gone so far as to describe herself as "addicted" to YouTube, which I can only surmise is a phrase that she has picked up and repeated from someone else at home. I will venture to make another supposition about Kate's life at home: her reliance on YouTube is likely connected to her unique experience of early childhood in lockdown. Opportunities to learn in person or engage creatively with peers at a playground are critical in one's preschool years, and these opportunities were not available to Kate. It is perhaps unsurprising that studies have found that children's use of screen time saw a dramatic increase between July 2019 and August 2021 (Hedderson et al., 2023). Particularly with the knowledge of Kate's family and home structure–her mother was working and she had no similar-aged siblings–it is understandable that YouTube was one of the few remaining options by

which Kate could be quickly entertained and calmed (at least in the short-term) during her preschool years.

What might Kate's interactions look like today if she had been able to resolve her internal conflict with rules and boundaries through the medium of peer play in early childhood? Would she still need to push so hard, and would she still become so dysregulated? How much compromise would she be able to tolerate now if she had moved through the discomfort of boredom during lockdown and found imaginative exploration on the other side, rather than having her desire for entertainment satisfied immediately with YouTube? Without Covid-related restrictions in her early childhood, would she have been able to access more fruitful forms of entertainment through play and socialization? Lacking a real time machine, we will never know the answer to these questions. Kate, with her headstrong and opinionated personality, might always have struggled with compromise and rules. However, based on developmental theory and what we know about the early childhood experience during the lockdown, I imagine that these struggles, if they persisted, might have presented differently under different circumstances.

Chapter 6: Flash Forward: Where Are They Now?

Jack

Throughout the first semester of the school year, I kept in close contact with Jack's mother. She stated that she wanted to advocate for Jack to get an IEP and transfer into a smaller classroom, and I affirmed that this would be a great move for him. By January, this adjustment had been made. Jack was transferred to Ms. G's 12:1 class, joining Kate in her calmer, quieter classroom which offered him more individual attention. I had collaborated with Ms. G. extensively in developing a treatment plan for Kate, and I knew that this would be a turning point for Jack. Every student in Ms. G's classroom was facing a learning need or challenge, and she led a patient, calm, and accepting classroom. She recognized that Jack needed to absorb the world at a slower pace than some of his peers, and she communicated with him accordingly. On a few occasions, when I was waiting for Kate to gather her belongings before joining me for a session, I had the opportunity to observe Jack in his new classroom environment. He appeared relaxed, happy, and engaged with Ms. G's lessons.

Jack's angry outbursts did not disappear. He still became dysregulated on certain occasions, such as when he lost a game, someone treated him unfairly, or an expectation had been set but not fulfilled. Disappointment and frustration continued to be difficult emotions for him to tolerate. One particularly dramatic outburst occurred during his after-school program, which, notably, took place in a significantly louder and more chaotic environment than his regular classroom. His mother reported to me that when she told him he couldn't behave that way, he had responded with exasperation, "I can't help it!" Personally, I am inclined to agree

with Jack's assessment. Right now, he can't always help it. However, he is continuing to try, and Ms. G. and I are continuing to work together to remind him of his toolkit of strategies.

Although Jack's outbursts have not disappeared, they have decreased dramatically. Whereas his teachers reported fits of kicking, hitting, and yelling at least once a week during our first semester of working together, by the time he joined Ms. G's class, he was able to last several weeks without any incidents. He even shared moments in which he recognized that he was becoming angry during class (Ms. G. affirmed that she could see the anger in his eyes), but he was able to calm himself down. In those instances, Jack explained to me that he had been able to regulate himself by taking a breath, counting to 100, or finding a quiet spot to sit and draw a picture of his anger. He also shared that he had told his brain "you don't need that" when he felt his anger escalating, and he had been able to find his way back to calm. I made particular note of this intervention because it was language that he had developed independently; I had never used that phrasing during our work together. Our sessions have decreased from twice to once per week.

Kate

Kate also experienced a dramatic turning point during our second semester together. One day in January, she arrived at our session with a different energy than I had seen previously. She seemed quiet and reflective, and even her style of play appeared more focused and measured. She shared with me that she had just gotten her first menstrual period. She expressed that she was not scared, but she was surprised. She seemed to have an understanding that this was something she would face one day, but she did not expect it to happen a few weeks shy of her tenth birthday. Moreover, her mother had responded with visible shock and tears, which had

further surprised and confused Kate. We spent our session unpacking these feelings and responses, and I asked Kate what she thought this new development meant for her. Her response was poignant in its honesty and simplicity: "It means I'm not a little girl anymore."

Naturally, this embodiment of physical maturation did not induce an immediate emotional maturation. Kate's sessions became somewhat less predictable. During some sessions, she would spend several minutes playing out a short narrative with the Peppa Pig figurines, occasionally even allowing me to voice a character and play with her. Subtly, her style of play was beginning to shift and develop more structure. However, on other days, she continued to struggle with her relationship with rules and boundaries. On one occasion, she sat on the floor with her head in her hands, just as she had done during our YouTube debacle. She was upset that I would not let her walk back to the classroom by herself. This rule had always been in place, and it had never before arisen as a point of conflict. I suspected that she was actually wrestling with a larger internal struggle and that this particular rule was simply the vehicle by which to explore and express it. As I sat beside her and reflected her frustration that she couldn't just do whatever she wanted, she eventually shared with halting contemplation, "I just…I'm gonna be ten soon. I'm gonna…after ten, I'm a teenager. So I just wanna be able to do whatever I want." That's when I recognized the deeper source of her struggle. She was caught in a tug-of-war between a heart that was clinging to childhood and a body that was hurtling toward adulthood. Kate needed to feel a sense of control, and she would grasp at it wherever she could. I noticed in this interaction that my own tone with her started to change. I spoke to her with a calm matter-of-factness that I might typically use in communication with an adult or teenager. "That makes a lot of sense," I affirmed for her. "You are growing up. Maybe it feels…I dunno, a little baby-ish for me to walk with you back to class. You just want to be independent and do it all

yourself." She was silent, but she seemed to be listening, so I continued: "You're right, you'll be a teenager soon, and then you'll be a grown-up. But can I tell you something? Even grown-ups have to follow rules. Even grown-ups don't get to do whatever we want. And it's hard for us too! Believe me, Kate, I wish I could just do whatever I wanted too. Even when you're as old as me, you have to follow rules. And sometimes, I feel sad about that too." Eventually, Kate was willing to compromise. We walked back to class together, and I followed a few steps behind her. In this interaction, Kate showed me that she was still struggling to tolerate rules and boundaries, but she certainly was growing up and learning to compromise. Maybe she was even on her way to releasing her dreams of Neverland.

About a month later, I noticed that Kate had started getting grumpy and resistant whenever I came to pick her up for her second session of the week. When I asked her about it, she stated firmly that she doesn't always want to go to our sessions and that she would prefer to meet just once a week. I did not tell her that I had actually been considering that she might be ready for this adjustment as well, and I had even spoken to Ms. G. about it at the beginning of the semester. I asked her to explain her position further, and she was able to articulate her experience and reasoning in a way that led me to believe that she was truly advocating for what was best for her. This did not feel like an instance of pushing back against a boundary just for the sake of control. I conferred with Ms. G, and she affirmed that her classroom behavior had improved dramatically this year and that one session per week seemed appropriate to her. With that, I thanked Kate for being so communicative with me, using her words to express what she wanted, and that this was an instance in which her preference could be accommodated. As with Jack, Kate and I have decreased our sessions from twice to once per week.

Chapter 7: Discussion

Imagine that you are building a house. Your deadlines are clear, and your schedule is set. Suddenly, without any warning and through no fault of your own, construction needs to be halted just as you are building the foundation. Construction stops for the next year and a half, and then you return. What do you do? Do you stick to your original timetable, following your thoughtfully constructed schedule? Do you begin constructing walls, doors, and a roof? If you do, your house is likely to collapse under the weight. After all, you did not finish building your foundation. Perhaps, you will decide instead to focus on strengthening the base before you add more structure above it.

Children, particularly in early childhood around the age of five or six, are in their foundational developmental stages. This is where they begin to establish social relationships, emotional coping skills, and a sense of play. However, children of this generation faced an unprecedented interruption in their developmental trajectory. Everyone did their best to adapt, but certain irreplaceable and fundamental experiences of early childhood, such as peer play and classroom exploration, could only be approximated to a minimal or delayed degree. It is clear that we cannot go back, but we also cannot move forward as if nothing has changed. We cannot continue to pile increasing weight on top of unfinished foundations and expect those foundations not to crack and crumble.

Indeed, the cracks have already been revealing themselves for years. In 2021, the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and Children's Hospital Association issued a joint statement to the Biden administration declaring that child and adolescent mental health had reached the point of "national emergency." "It is no

secret," they asserted, "that rates of anxiety and depression among school-aged children and teens in the US are at an all-time high…This worsening crisis in child and adolescent mental health is inextricably tied to the stress brought on by Covid-19." The Editorial Board (2023) agreed, stating that "since the beginning of the pandemic, many parents and educators have been raising the alarm about the effects of grief, isolation and other disruptions on the mental health of their children." Gray (2023) surmised that this phenomena was directly linked to children's lack of opportunity to "play, roam, and engage in other activities independent of direct oversight and control by adults" (p. 1), which are irreplaceable cornerstone features of early childhood development. The absence of such experiences left holes in the foundations of childhood. Therefore, the behaviors of today's children cannot be separated from the experiences they underwent during their 2020-2021 school year.

It is worth noting that it would certainly be careless and inaccurate to attribute every academic and behavioral difficulty solely to the events of lockdown. The specific impact was different for each family, and a wide variety of factors influence behavioral presentations and developmental progress. However, this pivotal moment in development is now a piece of each child's story, and if we fail to take this into account when we assess a child's behavior, we are failing to see the child as a whole.

Further Directions

In response to the major changes that have taken place in the world, as well as their impact on child development, several adjustments should be considered. One such adjustment could occur before a child even enters a school, camp, or counseling program: within the intake process itself. The comprehensiveness of intake assessments can lend enormous insight into the

strengths and challenges of a child and family. In light of the potential impact of the Covid-19 lockdown on development and family dynamics, it would be helpful to include specific questions pertaining to this period of time as part of standard procedure. Such questions could include open-ended prompts, such as "Describe your child/family's experience during the Covid-19 lockdown of 2020." Additionally, questions about specific elements of development could also be explored. These might include questions about observed patterns of play, socialization opportunities, levels of distress, and responses to the remote learning process.

In addition to updating intake processes to account for this generation's unique developmental experience, it is also worthwhile to consider a reexamination and potential overhaul of classroom curricula. If schools are still utilizing the same testing and curriculum measures as they were before education was so brutally and unexpectedly interrupted, then these benchmarks are likely out of step with current students' needs, both academically and emotionally. Adjusting the expectations of developmental and educational milestones could better align with children's capacities within a classroom. In short: if children are consistently struggling to meet the demands of an academic environment, the Department of Education should consider the possibility that the change needs to come from the environment first, not the children. By adjusting expectations and allowing more space for children's behavior to provide valuable information about their developmental, academic, and emotional needs, we could start to work toward an educational environment in which children are seen for who they are, rather than what they "should" be able to do.

This brings us to the subject of the classroom teachers themselves. In response to the changing needs of today's students, teachers also require a new level of support, training, and reframing. Shanker (2016) shares several anecdotes about the relationships between children, the

adults in their lives, and stress behavior. The overall takeaway from his findings is clear: many of the longstanding cornerstones of educational practice are worth challenging. One such practice is the laser-like focus on compliance as a primary goal. Yes, a quiet, calm environment is an important component of classroom learning, and such an environment is fostered by children's cooperation and behavior that one might classify as "good." However, how might the classroom environment change if the teachers operated from the framework that behavior is a form of communication, and stress behavior is different from misbehavior? What if teachers stopped asking, "Why can't you do this?" and instead started asking, "Why is this dysregulated behavior happening *right now*?" If compliance becomes less of a focus, and if teachers are willing to challenge the notion that self-control is taught through punishment and reward systems (Shanker, 2016), then we might start to see things start to change.

These adaptations, however, are unlikely to be feasible unless teachers are also receiving adequate support. From my observations, both within and outside the classrooms, it is clear that children are not the only ones who are under an unprecedented amount of stress. How can we expect teachers to help support children in finding a sense of regulation if they themselves are dysregulated? Establishing a system in which class sizes are smaller and teachers are compensated with increased salaries and vacation time is one form of intervention that is needed now more than ever. Children are not the only ones whose foundations are shaky after the pandemic. Teachers are also being tasked with challenges that are unprecedented in both content and quantity. We cannot continue moving forward as if the world is unchanged. Today's children need more support, and therefore, today's teachers also need more support.

Don't take my word for it. After all, the teachers already told us what we needed to know right from the start. It's time we listen:

"I've never seen behavior like this before!" No, you haven't. There might be a good reason for that: Children have never gone through experiences like this before.

"These kids just don't know how to be in a classroom." That's correct. They really don't. Perhaps there is a good reason for that too: they, through no fault of their own, missed a crucial opportunity to learn.

"I've been teaching for fifteen years, but this might be the last one for me. It's just getting worse and worse since 2020." Statements such as these make it clear that the way things are going right now is not sustainable. We cannot try to "return to normal." The children can't, and neither can educators. There was an enormous shift in the developmental trajectory of this generation of children, and they need a new framework. A new understanding. A new normal.

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