To be or not to be separate: The Meaning of Hide-and-Seek in Forming Internal Representations

Anni Bergman, Ph.D. Φ

Suddenly I come out from my hiding place. I do him the favor of being born. He sees me, joins in the game, changes expression, and raises his arms to heaven: I fill him to overflowing with my presence. In a word, I give myself.

—Jean-Paul Sartre

Hide-and-seek is a universal childhood game that I hope to show serves an important function in the task of every human being to create an internal world with a variety of self and object representations. In a recent paper entitled "Self-Other Action Play" (Bergman and Lefcourt, 1993) I, along with Irene Lefcourt, describe the earliest play experiences between mother and baby that promote the baby’s most rudimentary sense of self and other. These games of early infancy create a mutually regulated action dialogue between mother and infant, which in turn provides the foundation for what we call self-other action play. This is play in which themes of self, other, and self-with-other predominate and in which the formation, transformation, and interrelatedness of self and object representations take place. We believe that such play contributes to the formation and integration of self and object representations in a unique way. Self-other action play eventually leads to the capacity for role play, which requires at least rudimentary ability to take the perspective of an other.

I would like to thank Maria Fahey for her help in formulating the ideas in this paper.

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Hiding and being found are exciting and pleasurable activities, which begin with the earliest peek-a-boo games and last in ever more highly elaborated forms throughout early childhood and beyond. Even in adulthood one may, consciously or unconsciously, hide one’s true self from another and experience a very special joy when one is discovered and recognized. Babies and toddlers never seem to tire of hiding and being found by their mothers, a game played idiosyncratically by each mother-child pair. One little boy in the separation-individuation studies (Mahler, Pine, and Bergman, 1975), Peter, used to duck down behind a partition separating the mother’s area from the children’s play area and wait for his mother to say, “Where’s Peter?” at which point he would jump up joyously and together they would exclaim “There he is!” The particular form of his game, ducking down and popping up, was connected with his mother’s way of comforting him when he was being weaned from breast-feeding by bouncing him up and down on her lap. Thus Peter internalized his mother’s way of comforting him and made it into an active game in which he controlled the pleasurable movement by bouncing up and ducking down in his particular version of a very early hide-and-seek game, actually a game on the border between peek-a-boo and hide-and-seek. Peek-a-boo, originated by the mother and later taken over by the baby, is a game of appearance and disappearance. McDevitt (1975) observes that at 15 months a child will initiate a game of peek-a-boo in anticipation of mother leaving the room. This indicates that the baby has some rudimentary knowledge of what is about to happen, namely that mother will leave and then come back.

Peek-a-boo is a self-other action play originating in the differentiation subphase in which the external self-other action often changes as mother and baby interchange roles of hiding and finding (Bergman and Lefcourt, 1993). Characteristic of these games that deal directly with disappearance and appearance (i.e., peek-a-boo and I-throw-it-away, you-pick-it-up) is the fact that they are accompanied by crescendos and decrescendos of excitement. The increase and decrease of arousal is mutually regulated and results in an experience of fluctuating, moment-to-moment state sharing (Stern, 1985). The reappearance after brief disappearance evokes the joy of refinding, that is, rediscovering mother. Furthermore, the experience of “making” mother retrieve the lost object enhances feelings of...
the self as agent. At a time when babies are increasingly confronted with feelings of loss and separateness and are just on the brink of becoming capable of more independent activities, in particular locomotion, the emergent experience of self as agent and highlighted experiences of state sharing, that is, attunement (Stern, 1985), may be particularly exciting.

As these first peek-a-boo games develop into ever more elaborate games of hiding and finding, certain characteristics remain constant. These are the need to repeat the game over and over again, the excitement with which the game is played, the manageable amount of anxiety about being found and not being found or about finding and not finding, the surprise that exists even if the result is well known and repeated over and over again, and finally, the joy of reunion. These games in normal development are played to master the object loss that is entailed in the process of separation-individuation and the achievement of self-object differentiation. However, these games continue throughout childhood and maybe throughout life. We might ask what other purpose is served in continuing to play hide-and-seek?

With the achievement of a measure of object constancy (which we assume to be achieved as the rapprochement crisis is negotiated at the age of about two and a half to three years), the child begins to be able to take the perspective of the other—one of the hallmarks of the achievement of object constancy (McDevitt, 1975). Hide-and-seek games further the establishment of self-other differentiation, but at the same time they can only be played after the relationship to the mother has become securely enough established so that her return after a separation can be anticipated. In the case studies that follow we see that hide-and-seek games serve the purpose of mastering separations (Frankel, 1993), but that they could only begin to be played at a point in treatment at which the holding environment with the therapist had been securely enough established to form a home base from which the child could leave and to which he or she could return. It is interesting that even if these games are played by older children who have achieved self-object differentiation, certain characteristics of the game as it is first played seem to remain intact. One of these characteristics is that the games are repeated over and over, often with the child hiding in the same place again and again, waiting to be found even if the child knows that the hiding place is known to the seeker. In this way it seems that the child temporarily and voluntarily gives up the ability of taking the perspective of the other and accepts the seeker’s searching for him or her as genuine, which makes possible the excitement, surprise, anxiety, and joy at being found. We might wonder what the meaning of this could be. It has been quite accepted that hide-and-seek games serve the purpose of mastering the loss inherent in every child’s growing up and becoming more independent. It would seem that the giving up of an already achieved ability serves yet another purpose and that hide-and-seek games stand on the border of separateness and union with the loved one. The child gives up the knowledge that the other already knows where she is in order to reexperience a state of not having to recognize the other as so separate. And yet the other has to be separate enough to play along with the illusion that the child is hidden and has to be found. This duality is demonstrated by a four-year-old boy in therapy who, when playing and replaying his hiding game, would occasionally become so overwhelmed with the joy of refining his therapist that he would jump out of the box in which he was hiding and run to his therapist for a hug before being able to continue the game. This goes along with the notion that emotional object constancy is never fully achieved, but is a lifelong task which is always resisted by that part of the self that would like to preserve forever the bliss of being fully at one with another.

Developmentally, hide-and-seek becomes possible only when a certain amount of separateness has been achieved. The achievement of the sense of self separate from the other rests on the sense of security achieved earlier, during the symbiotic phase in which the child living in reasonably nurturing circumstances learns to know the primary caretaker as being different from all others—the one who can be relied on to fulfill both physical and emotional needs. To risk playing hide-and-seek one has to be able to take for granted that the reunion will occur and will be pleasurable.

Hide-and-Seek in Therapy: Clinical Examples

Having understood hide-and-seek in terms of self-other action play as it occurs during the separation-
Individuation process, I would like to give some examples of hide-and-seek in the therapy situation

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In cases where the separation-individuation process could not proceed in a normal fashion. One of these was my child patient at the Masters Children's Center, one of a group of symbiotic psychotic and autistic children. The other children described are selected from a group of children referred to the City University Child Center for severe language delays.

Rachel

Rachel, a symbiotic psychotic child, came to Masters Children's Center in the early sixties where she was part of a research project studying the natural history of childhood psychosis under the direction of Margaret Mahler and Manuel Furer (Bergman, 1971). The psychotic children in this study received intensive treatment four times a week and at the beginning were seen together with their mothers using the tripartite treatment design (Mahler, 1968).

Rachel was four years old when she was brought to Masters Children's Center. She presented a typical picture of the symbiotic psychotic child. She clung desperately to her mother, seemingly in an attempt to coerce her to serve only the function of fulfilling her needs. There was no pleasure in closeness for either mother or child. Rachel was rigid and panic-stricken, breaking into piercing screams at the slightest frustration. She could not tolerate her mother to converse with anyone, either in person or on the telephone. Rachel showed a mixture of symbiotic and autistic defenses. She never used language for direct communication but rather quoted from books, records, songs, and television commercials. Since everything she said was merely an echo, the reversal of personal pronouns was a natural consequence. She used quotations as a way of conveying her feelings with astonishing accuracy. When angry with her mother she might say "the poisoned apple" or "she's dead, of course," taking the words from fairy tales and folk songs. Rachel was a pretty child, clean and neatly dressed, her face set in a tight smilielike grimace. She had the broad gait of a toddler and walked cautiously with small steps, climbing steps one at a time like a two-year-old. She would never run and was unable to climb, swing, throw a ball, or use her hands at any manipulative play. She was always either bouncing from foot to foot or jumping and waving her arms. She showed no interest in toys except as objects to chew on. When given a doll, she would undress it and then throw it away. She spent many hours listening to records or looking at a particular book that caught her fancy. When she was unsuccessful in her attempts to shut out the world, she reacted with anger and fear. If anyone tried to interest her in a new toy, she would ignore it. If not allowed to ignore it, she would knock it down, drop it, and break into loud shrieks. She refused to look at a new book, listen to a new record, or wear new clothes. Her mother had found only one activity that interested Rachel: the spelling of words usually had a soothing effect. Rachel had innumerable fears: of strangeness and strangers, of children, of riding in cars, of any kind of household machine (mixer, blender, vacuum cleaner, washing machine). She tried to climb on her mother, tearing at her body, seeming to clamor for something that the mother could not provide. Mother said that Rachel had never accepted warmth or closeness, even as a baby. Mother herself was stiff and proper, perplexed and desperate, trying to make her child behave in a more normal manner and keeping her at a distance because she was not able to interpret Rachel's distorted behavior as a need for closeness. Mother and daughter lived alone together, the parents having separated when Rachel was two and a half years old. However, the father was involved with Rachel and eventually came to therapy sessions regularly.

Rachel had been seen at several treatment centers but would not separate from her mother as these centers required. Both Rachel and her mother responded well to the demands of the intensive treatment design. They were in sessions four times a week for one and a half to two hour sessions. Both responded rapidly to the initial phase of therapy, the creation of the symbiotic milieu. Angry shrieking stopped within the first few weeks and was quickly replaced by pleasure and physical closeness and the simple games one might play with an infant. She loved to be held, fondled, rubbed, carried about, and covered up, which she called making cozy. She also liked to play in the water with all her clothes off and then to be wrapped in a towel or sheet. This surprised Rachel's mother, who said that Rachel had never liked being held. As we understood it, symbiotic closeness with her mother meant to Rachel being overwhelmed. Although the wish for symbiosis created a state of panic in Rachel, it became less threatening in the tripartite treatment.
setting. Rachel's symbiotic needs were met while the symbiotic demands placed on her by her mother were reduced. The symbiosis was diluted by the introduction of a third person, the therapist. Much of the early treatment consisted of introducing slowly and abundantly the kinds of experiences that happen naturally and almost imperceptibly in normal development, paving the way for the gradual discovery of self and other. Before the separation-individuation process could begin, a pleasurable, gratifying symbiotic relationship had to be established. This meant that experiences of mutuality could begin to take place.

After this atmosphere of safety had become established, Rachel spontaneously began to initiate games of hide-and-seek. Usually she hid in the closet and enjoyed my elaborate attempts to find her and eventually the reunion upon being found.

The City University Child Center

The children referred to the City University Child Center for severe language delays, mostly from inner-city backgrounds, have suffered major deprivations and trauma. They show severe disturbances in attachment. For example, most of them come to the all-day program showing no reactions to separation from their families, no fear of strangers. The therapeutic classroom, as well as the individual therapy, are geared to promoting attachment, and to helping the children achieve self-object differentiation and the capacity to express their needs for love and nurturing. Primary attention is given to affective interchange and expression based on the conviction that these are necessary for any meaningful learning to take place. Many children who come almost without language become linguistically fluent in less than a year. Others remain language-delayed but nevertheless progress in the capacity to play and the capacity to form meaningful attachments (Bergman, 1992).

We have found that many of these children go through a period in which various forms of self-other action play become an important avenue of communication and interaction between themselves and their therapists. These games are an important way in which they learn to form internal representations of a caretaking other and of separations and reunions over which, at least in play, they can have a measure of control even though in their lives they rarely

have the opportunity to be in control or even to have reliable love objects available for identification and internalization.

Often the classroom serves as home base that the children must leave with their therapists and return to after their therapy sessions. Sometimes the negotiation of this journey is as important as the therapy session itself.

What many of these children have in common is a mother who cannot allow the child to gradually separate and become a person in his or her own right. Often the mother has intense symbiotic needs of her own and will experience the child's inherent need for distancing and the unavoidable periods of back-and-forth movement as traumatic abandonment, which probably replicates abandonment that they themselves have experienced as children in their own families. Such mothers respond to their individuating toddlers unpredictably and often by retaliating against the child for the child's beginning moves at becoming separate, which the mothers experience as catastrophic abandonment.

Tomas

Tomas's therapist reported that at the beginning of therapy, when he was four years old, he spoke in one- or two-word phrases and often whispered unintelligibly. He did not respond when spoken to. He displayed a wide variety of bizarre behaviors and his limited speech included the repetition of television commercials. He was often quiet and withdrawn, apart from his classroom group, and unable to make a connection to the other children or the adults around him.

The first playful interaction between Tomas and his therapist was the game of peek-a-boo, which was played by Tomas climbing into a large toy chest while the therapist sat in a nearby chair and watched. Contact between them was established nonverbally by smiling. After a while Tomas would say "bye-bye" and disappear into the toy chest, closing the cover over himself. Therapist waited a moment, knocked on the lid, and said, "Where's Tomas?" In response, Tomas would throw open the lid in delight, smile, and then vanish into the toy

and that the game focused on his leaving the therapist, not being left by her.

A new significant play sequence emerged that involved Tomas turning on and off the light switch. He would turn off the light, lie down on a rest mat, and request that the therapist also lie down quietly. He would not allow the therapist to speak. What seemed of importance was that he created darkness and light as a way of creating disappearance and reunion. The darkness may have represented in part his worry that he would in fact disappear if he could not be seen. The therapist says:

*Thus the darkness Tomas created was essential in working through this facet of his separation fear, as he was able to use the symbolic absence and real presence of the therapist to integrate the frightening aspects of aloneness with the growing capacity to internally represent the comforting aspects of togetherness.*

Another important game involved a giant blue ball that was rolled back and forth between Tomas and the therapist, who sat at opposite ends of the long playroom. As the game advanced, he would roll the ball to the therapist then run and hide, waiting for the therapist to roll the ball back before jumping out of his hiding place to catch it. In this play sequence the therapist's function was to serve as an affirming partner for his increasingly independent actions.

As the therapist supported his wishes to direct and control the game and affirmed his growing sense of competence and mastery, his affect became increasingly joyful and his play increasingly expansive. His joy and darkening reflected the important developmental strides in the areas of relatedness and integration of self-other representations. The play was predictable, safe, and gratifying, and this permitted both an experience of himself as continuous and sustained and a gradual internalization of the relationships as consistent and reliable. The game seemed to have important undertones of a practicing subphase of separation-individuation during which infants become enthralled with the world around them and with their own rapidly developing physical abilities. It seemed that for Tomas the giant blue ball came to represent the invisible thread by which he could remain in contact with the therapist. He regulated the distance, increasing it symbolically by hiding, yet

controlling it by verbally commanding the ball-therapist to return to him. The therapist's responsiveness to Tomas's strivings towards agency and mastery provided a stepping-stone toward a more consolidated sense of self, which permitted a dawning recognition of the therapist as a whole person separate from Tomas yet connected by way of a mutually shared history of reliable and pleasurable exchanges. Tomas's capacity to relate to the therapist as a whole person became evident initially by way of his dramatic and sudden interest in her physical presence and appearance. He began to initiate more physical contact, especially after a genuine connection had been made, such as by playing the ball game.

A play sequence emerged and became central to the therapy for several weeks. On the day of Tomas's birthday the therapist brought in a new toy, a dump truck. Together they decided to keep the dump truck in the drawer of a file cabinet. The truck and file cabinet became an integral part of the therapy for several sessions. When entering the playroom Tomas would look for the truck in the cabinet. He then discovered that the bottom drawer of the cabinet was empty: It became his to fill upon entering the play room in the morning. He carefully put his lunch box, hat, mittens, jacket, and snow pants into the drawer. One day after playing with the drawer, he decided to hide in the drawer himself, curled up on his jacket.

**Blossom**

The therapist described Blossom as a tiny, well-proportioned little girl, striking in her ability to play alone for significantly long periods of time. While playing alone she conveyed such a sense of self-containment that others tended to leave her to herself. She attached herself to adults in a rather indiscriminating way reminiscent of autistic children, engaging them in playing with her and following her nonverbal directions. Blossom first came to life in the gym room, which is filled with action toys and climbing equipment. There she demonstrated an extraordinary energy level and good gross motor abilities, as well as an ability to get other children to follow her lead in riding bicycles and racing around the room. In play therapy the dominant theme at the beginning was the dumping of toys and in particular, the dumping of a little baby doll out of its crib. During her first semester at our center, she never missed a
day even though she was often ill and sometimes slept through the morning. During the second semester, when she had become well adjusted to the therapeutic nursery and indicated that she loved to be there, her mother kept her home a good deal of the time, very possibly as punishment for what she considered bad behavior.

An early gain in therapy was Blossom’s ability to express her feelings about being left by her mother, both directly and indirectly. Toward the end of a session she began to cry and call for her “Mommy.” Soon after that she cried through a whole session and was not able to play. She was able to express these feelings of sadness when she had developed enough trust in her therapist to know that she could be comforted. She showed her need for comforting by putting her head on the therapist’s lap. When her mother came to a play session Blossom was very clingy and seemed wary of the therapist. The session following her mother’s visit, Blossom did not want to leave the classroom with her therapist. Her therapist says:

I sort of kidnapped her onto the elevator. She was clearly disappointed, angry, and upset about being separated from the other kids. When I acknowledged the feelings she was having, she cried and wanted me to carry her to the playroom. Blossom’s play took a shift after this incident in which I acknowledged her feelings.

The therapist reports that after this session Blossom became much more animated and began to initiate new play, namely many variations of peek-a-boo and games in which she invited the therapist to mirror her excitement and enthusiasm. The therapist also describes that after this her play became generally more elaborated, that she stopped dumping the baby out of its crib, and that she started to finger paint. Hiding and being found became an important part of each session, along with being able to play more constructively, for example with blocks. She handed blocks one by one to the therapist. The therapist built a tower, and Blossom had great pleasure in knocking it down and repeating the same all over. Two sessions later she put the baby doll on a chair at a table and put other family figures around. Then during the last session before a holiday she played a new variation of hiding and being found. Blossom hid under the table. This time instead of wanting to be found by her therapist, she invited the therapist to hide with her. Blossom indicated that they were to be extremely quiet. She then emerged from the hiding place, took all the toys from the window sill and piled them up in front of the door, thus indicating that she did not want the session to end; she did not want to be left by her therapist. Finally, she became very low-key and asked her therapist to carry her from the playroom back to the classroom. The therapist says:

This was the last session before the break. Her behavior suggests to a remarkable degree that she was aware that we would not be meeting for a while and that she wished we could stay together.

Tanja

Tanja’s therapist remarked that when she first met her, Tanja took her hand and went instantly with her to the therapy room. The therapist felt she was a child who craved attention and was willing to have her needs met by anyone who showed interest in her. After a few weeks there was a shift and Tanja refused to go with her therapist, wouldn’t make eye contact with her, and turned away from her. On the way to the therapy room she cried and called out for Mommy. Following this, Tanja began to show signs of growing attachment and reluctance to separate at the end of sessions. As the attachment to her therapist grew, she began to be able to express her fears about being left. She started to have great difficulty in leaving the playroom and began to show feelings of anger, sadness, and resentment. Leaving therapy sessions became more and more difficult with each passing session. Finally, she just refused to leave and was able to show her therapist that she was afraid that she would not see her again. The therapist says:

The only way I was able to get her to leave the playroom was by carrying her. Initially once in my arms she no longer seemed angry and hateful. On the contrary, she acted like a placated child who expressed her satisfaction by settling into my arms, nuzzling her head into my shoulder, and cooing.

During this time Tanja began to play hide-and-seek games with her therapist. She asked to be put down and then would run away and hide. When she was found she had a big smile on her face. The therapist felt that this game was very reparative for Tanja. It allowed her to control the separation and to be found and settle in the
arms of her therapist, who would then carry her the rest of the way to the classroom.

Discussion

All the cases described have certain important characteristics in common even though each child finds a unique way to play the game and has a unique moment in which the game begins. The common element seems to be that before the game begins to be played, the child has to establish a unique attachment to the therapist and to feel safe. Feeling safe means knowing that the self that wants to be out in the world away from the therapist will be accepted and that the therapist will be an affirming partner for the child's independent actions. Feeling safe also means that the therapist's arms will be open to welcome the child back into the closeness of the holding environment. Leaving the nest does not mean that the nest will be threatened; it does not mean that the nest will collapse or disappear when the child wishes to return to it. Thus, Rachel only begins to hide in the closet after a pleasurable relationship to her therapist has been established. Both Blossom and Tania begin to play after pain of separation has been acknowledged and they allow themselves to be carried in the therapist's arms. Tania begins therapy a very needy little girl who Hunger's for attention from anyone who will give it. Only as she gets attached to her therapist can she then fully experience longings for her mother and begin to experience separations from her therapist, now a beloved and reliable person, with pain and resentment. She will leave the play room only when carried in her therapist's arms, and only then can she begin pleasurably to play hiding games.

Another theme in these hide-and-seek games is that the hiding place is usually an enclosure, a claustrophobic line, which is different from hiding behind an object or another person, as in the example of Peter hiding behind the partition. Rachel hides in the closet; Tomas hides in the file drawer; and Blossom hides under the table. In the case of Tomas, there is a clear connection between the truck given to him by his therapist on his birthday that he keeps in a filing cabinet drawer and himself eventually curling up beside his truck in the same drawer. This makes the hiding place very

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suggestive of a womb from which he emerges to be "born" and wishes to be welcomed by his therapist.

Blossom begins to be able to express feelings about separation from her mother as she becomes attached to her therapist. Later she does not want to leave the classroom, which may symbolize the mother. The words the therapist uses to describe what happens are interesting: "I kidnapped her into the elevator and acknowledged her feelings." Blossom then asks her therapist to carry her. Was it significant that the event took place in the elevator? As a claustrophobic par excellence, the elevator perhaps signifies the therapist's womb, thus the therapist's full acceptance of her as a baby. After this incident, in which the safety of closeness seems to become established because her feelings are fully acknowledged, she spontaneously begins to play peek-a-boo and hiding games. Her favorite hiding place is under the table, a claustrophobic with a full view of the outside world from which she can be born and reborn to the delight of her therapist.

What seems to be universal is the appearance of the hiding games after a close, safe relationship has been established, which gives the child, possibly for the first time, a therapist-mother who can be fully absorbed with the child and provide a safe holding environment. It is interesting to contemplate that the child leaves this holding environment and runs to find a hiding place that is a womblike place, a claustrophobic. Thus, on the one hand the child runs from the therapist's arms to show his or her independence, which is to be enjoyed by the therapist. On the other hand, the child leaves the therapist to hide and enact a symbolic birth experience — a fantasy of being back inside the mother's body and then emerging, the birth to be celebrated by the mother-therapist.

Notes

1 I would like to thank David Abrams for drawing my attention to Sartre's description of emerging from his hiding place in The Words.

2 Observation by Manuel Furer, M.D.

3 I thank my students and their supervisors for the work they have done and for allowing me to use their clinical accounts. In particular, I have drawn on the work of Anne Adelman, Ines de Costa Esteves, Shelley Hoose, and Mara Sil-
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