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### BOOK CHAPTER

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## CHAPTER FOUR

## The Young Child Observation seminar: new steps in developing the observer role

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This chapter is an exploration of aspects of Young Child Observation and, in particular, its relationship to its older sibling, Infant Observation. It draws on my experience as a young child seminar leader on the Tavistock Observational Studies course (M7). The chapter seeks to investigate how the complexities of sibling feelings in both the observers themselves and in the observed family influence the way in which students establish the observer role as they struggle to find a place for themselves with the young child—a place that is neither so neutral that it risks being seen as dismissive by the child, nor so involved that it leads to a confusion of roles and boundaries, in relation to both the young child and their parents. The chapter also seeks to explore some of the ideas the young child will undoubtedly have about the observer. Who is this person who comes every week and doesn't play—at least, not very often?

I also discuss how the dynamics in a child observation group may be different from those experienced with Infant Observation because an awareness of our own sibling relationships frequently adds complexity to becoming an observer of a young child and also adds to the often intense dynamics of the seminar group. In addition, for many students, at least initially, the Young Child Observation can feel as a second-best option, a poor relation to their first love of Infant

Observation. Why is this? Is it connected to a prevalent wish to be an only child and the anxiety about feeling second-best when the new baby arrives in the family, or the anxiety about losing one's special place as an only child when wondering why there aren't any more siblings? Is it that we see the study of sibling and peer relationships as second-best, preferring to concentrate on the baby's relationship with the parents? It may be that autobiography plays a greater part in the study of Young Child Observation and in the group dynamics of the seminar. Prophecy Coles (2003) has written about how, in her view, the autobiographies of both Freud and Klein may have affected the emphasis they placed on sibling relationships in their theories. Coles claims that Freud's difficult relationships with his siblings may have led him to downplay the importance of siblings in his writings, particularly the more loving aspects of sibling relationships, whereas Klein, who seems to have had a loving relationship with her brother and much loved older sister, not only writes about feelings of sibling rivalry, but also explores sibling love (Klein, 1937).

### *The world of the young child: some general observations*

Winnicott captured the state of flux in a young child's world when he wrote: "Each child of four is also three and also two and also one, and is also an infant being weaned, or an infant just born, or even an infant in the womb. Children go backwards and forwards in their emotional age" (Winnicott, 1964, p. 179). Just thinking about the emotional work involved in all this to-ing and fro-ing is exhausting, but this is the everyday psychic work of an ordinary 3- or 4-year-old. This is the world of feeling included and excluded, the oedipal world that coincides with rapid but uneven development, both physical and psychological.

All this forward-and-backward motion between feelings, perhaps especially acute for the 2-year-old but still very relevant for the child of 3 and 4, contributes to their characteristic wobbliness—not just on their legs, but in their states of mind. One minute so full of intense feelings of progress—I can walk, even run and climb—and the next a fall. This makes for a precarious state of mind, this being faced with the limitations of being a very young child—with frequent moves between omnipotence and profound dependency. In this world there are tremendous upsurges of admiration and of jealousy. Alongside all this wobbliness is the need to develop a sense of potency and autonomy, to explore

the world and its possibilities, including the world of sexual difference, through the imagination and play. Struggling to be not too big or too small is perhaps a struggle to find the place, like Goldilocks with her three bears, that is just right. Within this oscillation issues of sibling rivalry, both conscious and unconscious, are played out, and there is the tormenting phantasy of the perfect sibling who has it just right—the sibling who is just perfect in the parents' eyes. The work of being 3 or 4 doesn't stop there, for then comes the task of finding one's place in the wider social world, beyond the family—at nursery, for example. In the many Nursery Observations we hear, this striving is frequently done with very little adult help. All this makes up the exciting world of the young child, and yet, somehow, historically in the psychoanalytic context, it hasn't attracted the same level of interest and exploration as Infant Observation. Perhaps this is changing.

Memories of the thrill and excitement of beginning Infant Observation are often referred to. That was the context in which we began to know about the value of close observations, the beauty of getting to know a baby and his family through weekly visits, and the satisfactions of developing an observational stance. The discussion of our weekly observations in a seminar group and hearing about the other babies at a similar stage of development are large learning experiences for most of us. For many, Infant Observation remains like a first love, or even a first-born. Then, a year or two later, students begin their Young Child Observation. (This is the course structure at the Tavistock, but it varies elsewhere, as discussed in the Introduction.) This can appear to the student like second-best, even a poor relation, notwithstanding that in beginning Young Child Observation they are entering the dynamic world of a child's oedipal development, the world of the struggle to share and to handle more aggressive or competitive feelings within a social context, and the world in which we appeal to our parents or others in loco parentis, like the nursery worker, to restore fairness and calm when there are disputes of snatching and difficulties in sharing. This is also the world in which peer relationships and friendships begin to be richer, opening out a new arena for loving relationships outside the family, providing the difficult work of being able to maintain contact with a good internal object can be sustained in the face of the separations inevitable in a 3-year-old's life.

I say "we" because one of the striking facets of Young Child Observation is how present are the observer's own thoughts, feelings, and childhood memories stirred by the observational experience. In the

general population, too, interest and emotion are readily aroused by observing young children. The most watched video on YouTube (apart from professional music videos) is about two young brothers, and it has been watched by an astonishing 389 million people. It even has its own Wikipedia entry. (To give an idea of the scale of this audience, the population of the United States is approximately 312 million.) The video, entitled "Charlie Bit My Finger—Again" ([www.youtube.com/user/OBlgSz8sSM](http://www.youtube.com/user/OBlgSz8sSM)), captures in very general terms the sibling world of love and rivalry and the familiar appeal to a parent to restore justice and make things better. The clip shows two brothers. The older, Harry, aged 3, definitely feels superior. He projects any vulnerability into his younger brother Charlie and feels quite sure that he is in charge and dominant—he even sticks his finger into Charlie's mouth, as if to say, "look at me, I'm big, I'm in control". But Charlie bites back. . . . At first the older boy is bewildered by the audacity of his younger brother's assertive protest and is outraged. And at first the younger child Charlie is rather taken aback by his capacity to bite and looks quite worried. Then he laughs infectiously. Whenever I show this clip, the audience always laughs too. We all understand the deliciousness of being aggressive to our siblings—especially if there is a mum or dad there who can quickly restore good-enough family relationships so no one gets very hurt.

Coles (2003) writes about the importance of sibling order. She comments that "sibling position may be the most important factor in determining the way we conceive the world" (p. 5). Summarizing the observations and writing of Neubauer (1982), Coles writes: "It was observed that, though the birth of a sibling increased the aggressive drive of an elder child, if all goes well, the elder child learns how to manage better its aggressive drives" (Coles, 2003, p. 81). Coles goes on to posit that "rivalry and jealousy are not the fundamental bedrock of sibling rivalry. They are just a part of the sibling experience" (Coles, 2003, p. 81). Within this context, one can imagine how the younger child admires the elder, and this may act as a spur to the younger child to accommodate the older child's aggressivity, motivated by the wish to be loved and accepted by the older (Coles, 2003, p. 85). This can only happen with the help of a thinking parental mind who has space in her mind for both children—a parent who is actively capable of managing oedipal difficulties on the children's behalf and promoting the relationship between the siblings. I would like to suggest that we, as teachers of Infant Observation and Young Child Observation, need to consider

more carefully our relationships to each other, and perhaps actively help our students to be thinking about the relationship between Young Child and Infant Observation in their experience as students on a course, where both elements are included.

Young Child Observation, more than Infant Observation, gives us the opportunity to get to know the social world the child inhabits. It holds a mirror to the social relations of the child and a window into family relationships. Observations are usually full of the vibrancy of the rapid development of the young child. Its relevance to clinical work is immediately apparent: for example, Hindle's paper (2000) describing the crucial role of observations in making complex decisions about the placement of siblings together or apart in foster care. The young child, from the outset of the observation, nearly always makes use of the observer in some shape or form distinct to each child-observer dyad. In Infant Observation, the presence of the mother or father, or another family member, means that the issue of managing boundaries is not usually so present—whereas this can be of central significance in a Young Child Observation. But not only is the world of Young Child Observation dynamic from the perspective of the observed young child's lived experience, the observer, too, is bringing conscious memories of their own childhood that add a complexity to developing the observer role in Young Child Observation and contribute to the group dynamic within the seminar.

Sternberg (2005) gave numerous examples, from interviews with students, of how in Infant Observation there is a stirring up of personal feelings in the observer. This is no less true for the student of Young Child Observation. Indeed, it often happens that the world of Young Child Observation, with its focus on love and rivalry within sibling relationships, stirs up both unconscious memories of infantile feelings and conscious memories of relationships with sisters and brothers. It is interesting in Young Child Observation seminars to note how often observers refer to their own family history (probably more so than in Infant Observation), refer to themselves as a bossy big sister, or the baby of the family, and so on, and are aware of how these feelings impact on their observation.

Many observations are inevitably painful as the child struggles to separate more from the family and join the world of the nursery. Students are often taken aback at how hard this experience can be. The student is observing a time in the young child's life that usually coincides with the beginning of their own conscious memory. Waddell (1998) writes:

Bearing separation and loss will be helped by having mentally and emotionally available, enough of the time, a "thinking breast", a mother who, in that she is herself able to bear loss and, ultimately, the fear of dying, can understand those same fears in her child, and can discriminate need from greed in his desire for her presence. [p. 69]

We might add that the observer's capacities to bear separation and loss are also relevant in the development of the observer role in relation to each specific child. The understanding and support of the seminar leader in relation to the group of young child observers is also vital. Just occasionally it may be that the seminar group's experiences of separation and loss are so overwhelming that they go beyond what can be contained in an ordinary work group: for example, an overwhelming preponderance of conscious memories of parental divorce, or of being in the present a lonely foreigner in a new country.

#### *Re-defining the observer role in Young Child Observation*

In the introduction to this book, Adamo and Rustin set out many of the distinctive areas of Young Child Observation, and they point to the "specific challenges, and adjustments of technique" confronting the observer of a young child. These involve the dynamic nature of the observer role in Young Child Observation and the need for very active reflection on how this is being played out and experienced by the observed child: every young child will have some ideas about what is happening week by week as this observer visits. Because of this, part of an understanding of the observer role necessitates the observer being able to imagine how the young child perceives the observer, which is rather different from the observer's impact on a baby in an Infant Observation.

From the very first meeting there is an active and live relationship with the child. How does one introduce oneself to him or her? What should one say—if anything? Frequently when the observer has to relate directly to the young child without the "protective filter of mother's presence", for example at nursery, this becomes an unavoidable issue. This is why it is so important to meet the family before the observation begins, so that the child has the experience of the mother or father introducing the observer to him or her. In seminars one sometimes hears of observations set up on the telephone with a mother who suggests meeting with the observer at the nursery. But this meeting does not always materialize—or perhaps only a long way into the observation.

Perhaps some parents abdicate their parental responsibility for the child while at nursery, as if all that happens at nursery is nursery business and they do not need to be too concerned about it. Or perhaps some nurseries convey a feeling of taking over from parents and excluding them, or parents believe that even if it is not the reality. In many cases the issues of intimacy and distance in establishing the observer role persist, and the student is left wondering how to introduce themselves to the child. Every observer has to negotiate the right temperature and distance for the child under the influence of the abstract ideal of the non-participating observer. But that is the point. This stance is something of an ideal: it is not actually attainable or even desirable. Many students at the outset of Young Child Observation experience this more involved observer role as inferior to the ideal of the non-participating observer, so that the observational stance required in many Young Child Observations comes to be seen as second-best. Then interactions with the child are seen as regrettable or a mistake, a belief that reading a book or slotting together pieces of the railway track will be judged harshly by the seminar leader, who represents the fantasized ideal of non-participation.

For students who have struggled hard to establish a less participatory role in Infant Observation, coming to Young Child Observation can be confusing. Just as a mother had to work hard to find in her mind the space for two children with quite distinct needs, so the observer has to find mental space for two distinct approaches to the observer role, and this seems far easier for some than others.

There can also be scope for splitting between the Infant Observation and the young child seminar. Some students become so identified with the baby and the family in Infant Observation that starting another observation seems too difficult, even painful, and they may feel resistant to finding a young child to observe. In Young Child Observation there is not the same invitation to identify with the wanted baby, or to become part of the family. Sometimes the Young Child Observation seems to be experienced as the birth of a new sibling who unconsciously is not really wanted and may be seen as a rival to the existing baby. Does Young Child Observation more easily find a lively place in the student's mind if it is not set alongside Infant Observation, with the risk of poor relation status?

Giving up an identification with the idealized chosen baby to begin a second observation can often occur before the position of being an infant observer is firmly established. Sometimes, for a variety of reasons, students have to begin to look for another observation family before they feel ready. Students who had difficulties in finding a baby

to observe and in establishing themselves in the role of observer can feel reluctant to begin the experience of looking for a family all over again because it feels daunting. This occasionally impacts on the capacity to understand the distinctiveness of the observer role with a young child. Students often want to discuss how active the observer should be, especially at those moments when there is not the protection of the mother's presence, when the child may be alone with the observer. They have to work out moment by moment where to place themselves within the continuum of being over-involved to being under-involved when they run the risk of being perceived by the child as uninterested or even neglectful. This negotiation frequently mirrors the child's oedipal struggles.

Can it be, too, that sometimes observing in an institution can put too much pressure on the observer? Observing in too difficult an institutional context might be akin to the situation of observing where there is maternal depression or some difficulty in the family which can threaten to overwhelm the observer. In such situations it is harder to establish an attuned observation—that is, observation based on the noting of detail and a feeling response to the child's emotional communications. This means observation rooted in oneself and not done on the basis of projective identification with some analytic figure. Such an identification can lead to inflexibility, making the observer unresponsive and rigid as she clings to this version of a two-dimensional observer role.

### *Anna*

An example of an observation rooted in attunement comes from a student who brought a Nursery Observation of a 3-year-old girl called Anna. Anna and her family had recently arrived in this country, and she only understood a limited English vocabulary and spoke even less. By coincidence, the observer spoke her mother tongue but did not think that the little girl knew this. In the observation seminar we discussed what it would mean to this little girl if the observer spoke to her in their shared mother tongue. Not surprisingly, the group was divided between those students who felt the observer should let the child know they spoke the same language, and those who felt that this would compromise the observation and a fuller understanding of the child's experience at nursery. One day the children were playing, and the observer felt acutely the pain of Anna's bewilderment as she could not understand the instructions being given by the nursery worker to all the children. But the observer decided not to "help out"

by explaining the rules of the game to Anna. A few minutes later it was time to go outside, and the nursery worker told the children to get their coats and put them on. Anna got her coat, but struggled to put it on, and then the observer "found" herself kneeling down to help button up the child's coat. Perhaps at this point she felt she wanted to contain something more about this child's experience of being an outsider to the group and wanted to protect her from the "cold".

This observer was observing from a position of attunement, wondering all the time about what the experience of being observed meant to the child. She used the observer position to understand the child's experience and did not immediately act to take the painful experience away—even though her own autobiography informed an understanding of what it is like to be an outsider because of language difficulties. But she was also aware of the limitations of her role and yet ultimately wanted to be a benign presence for this child and not add to her difficulties. When she could quietly add to Anna's experience of containment within the nursery group, she did so, and when this observation was reported to the seminar, the group was very touched by her account.

### *The role of theory and the seminar group*

The seminar leader has to act as a container for many of the intense feelings stirred up by the observations and needs to be aware of the intense group processes that can occur in the group. Because there is usually less idealization of Young Child Observation compared to Infant Observation, group processes in the seminar can be more acute. The impact of cultural difference, race, and class is very immediate when discussing the lives of 3-year-olds as attitudes to discipline, food, bedtimes, play, are all very culturally determined. Often the seminar leader has a maternal function and a regulatory function too, which can help the group become increasingly able to formulate their thoughts. This is especially important as most Young Child Observation groups have students with very varied academic backgrounds. Some students feel at home discussing abstract and theoretical ideas, others have less confidence. The maternal and regulatory (paternal) function of the seminar leader ensures that everyone is heard, and once the students feel more held in the seminar, this contributes to the growing capacity to capture the details of the weekly observations.

Discussions in the seminar have an important role in integrating theory and observation. But what is the place of theory? Many papers written by the students are full of theory, often used in a way that

pathologizes the child. Why is this? Could it be that sometimes there is a confusion in the student's mind between a theoretical model of mind and ideal development and the observed young child? Theory is an adjunct to understanding but can be debased and used to decode the "true" meaning of the interactions observed. An unintegrated use of theory readily leads, for example, to the idea that all separation is bad, unbearable, and detrimental. It is hard to be in touch with the bitter-sweet experience of being small; of course there is pain in being little, but the young child also experiences the power and "sweetness" of rapid growth and development. For many young children the sense of a growing imagination, the increasing creativity of play, and the greater capacity to think about things both from their own point of view, but also from another's, is liberating. This is vividly captured in many children's stories. For example the mouse in *The Gruffalo* (Donaldson & Scheffler, 1999) is frightened by being on his own in a hostile world—the proverbial wood. But he starts to use his imagination and, in a way that thrills and delights most 3-year-olds, he playfully conjures up (and so controls, at least at the outset!) the monster, the Gruffalo. Perhaps as seminar leaders we should encourage our students to read children's stories and keep in touch with the popular culture of film and television for young children to help them stay in touch with the imagination of the young.

Let's now turn to two Observational examples that illustrate some of the complexities of establishing the observer role.

### *Molly: observing a child cared for by a nanny*

At the start of the observations Molly is just 3 years old. She is the middle child of three—her older brother James is 6 and is usually at school at the time of the observations, and she has a younger sister, Amy, who is just 2. Both mum and dad work, and so the children are looked after every day by a nanny. Although the observer did originally meet with mum and dad before commencing the observations, most of the earlier observations took place just with the nanny present. The nanny is new to the job, so not only is the nanny working hard to establish her new role, the observer is also having to think hard about the observer role and often finds herself thinking about the "newness" of the nanny and is highly sympathetic to the nanny's task of establishing herself in a parental relation to the children. Although the observer met the parents, children, and nanny all together before the first observation, this interview hardly prepared her for the experience of the first observation!

James picked up a ruler and began poking me on my bum and hips, encouraging Molly to do the same—"poke her, poke her!" he exclaimed excitedly. Molly located a large wooden stick and began prodding me, laughing in a slightly hysterical fashion. She kept looking at James, as if seeking guidance. They continued jabbing and began circling me. Molly joined in the chanting "Poke her, poke her." Amy looked on, also laughing, and let out a shriek of excitement. I tried to remain calm, fighting against the frenzied mood. I was relieved when Jess the nanny eventually intervened, instructing them to stop.

In this first observation, the nanny hasn't yet established a parental position with the children, and a lack of parental containment allows the children to gang up against the newcomer, the observer.

In the following observation, the nanny is still new, but there is some evidence that the children are accepting her more as a maternal substitute, and in Molly's play of threading the beads (given to her by her mother and stored in one of her mother's bags) there is a sense of the little girl using the nanny to keep in touch with the good internal object of the mother. However, this acceptance of the nanny is still precarious, and once three visiting children arrive with their nanny, all parental thinking is abandoned—in both the children and the nannies. Instead, the maternal function is projected into the observer, who finds herself full of feelings about the children's safety and wants to take charge, become the parent, making it very difficult for her to maintain her observing position.

There was a large pot of plastic beads in the centre of the table. Jess asked Molly if she would like to make a bracelet. In front of Molly was a piece of cord/string. As Jess was talking to Amy, and looking down at her on the floor, Molly picked up a pair of scissors, which looked worryingly large and not child-friendly. I felt a sense of panic as I saw Molly put her fingers in them and begin moving the scissors to cut the string. In the split-second I was debating how to react, Jess looked up and said, "No, Molly, those are adult scissors. Here let me help you." I felt relieved.

A little later:

Suddenly the doorbell rang. I remember thinking that it was probably Jess's nanny friend with the children she looks after. At the sound of the doorbell, James immediately ran to the door, and so did Amy. Molly's reaction was more subtle. She looked up in the

direction of the door with a slightly thoughtful look on her face, then looked back to her necklace and continued carefully threading the beads. Everyone had left the room except for me and Molly, who continued making her necklace.

The observation continues describing how the two nannies animatedly gossip about mutual acquaintances, their boyfriends, and lack of sexual fidelity, while five children tear about the kitchen. A few minutes later the observer writes:

The two nannies were still leaning on the breakfast bar chatting. But the conversation had moved to how one of the children who the visiting nanny looks after had just given her a card he had made for her at nursery. Jess commented that Molly doesn't make her things unless she suggests it but then added that Molly did make her a key ring once. Jess turned to Molly at this point to include her in the conversation. "Remember, Molly?" she asked. Molly looked up but didn't really respond. The two nannies continued gossiping, and while the other children played, Molly remained at the table, a rather lonely figure making her necklace. As the conversation went on, the visiting nanny made a slightly sexual reference. The other children were out of earshot, but I remember feeling protective towards Molly. After another few minutes Molly got down from the table, saying that she had finished. She walked over to Jess and handed her the necklace, she smiled quite shyly and said softly, "I made this for you!" handing the necklace to Jess.

In this observation it is possible to consider that Molly is using the threading of the beads taken from her mother's bag as a way of staying in touch with a good-enough mother in her mind. Interestingly, being in touch with the good internal mother allows her to be more accepting of and generous towards her nanny, Jess. It may be that the observer is also experienced as a containing presence—and a great deal of the need for a protective maternal container is being projected into her. The containing presence of the observer may help to support Molly's wish to stay in touch with a good-enough parent, and it may be this that allows her, bit by bit, to accept the substitute parental authority that Jess does gradually provide. Perhaps the observer provides Jess with another option in terms of forming a couple to look after the children: either she can pair with the visiting nanny, almost as an adolescent girl group, or she can link with the observer to hold the children, especially Molly, more in mind. Magagna (1997) writes about the importance of a



shared internal image between a nanny/childminder and the mother so as to present as a supportive couple to the baby or young child.

*Shaun: the arrival of a new baby and the ending of an observation*

This observation occurs shortly after Shaun's fourth birthday and shortly after the birth of his baby half-brother. Shaun has a great deal to cope with and frequently has to manage without an adult mind who can attribute meaning to his experiences. Indeed, it appears that Shaun has the experience that during mother's pregnancy his infantile needs are neglected—and this, too, may contribute to the second-best, poor-relation feeling. His mother has met a new partner—and during the course of the observation Shaun has been seeing less and less of his own biological father. Mum and step-dad are very loving towards the two children, but Shaun seems to be given very little help by them with his feelings of being second-best and displaced by the arrival of this new sibling. At times, unconsciously, both mum and step-dad join Shaun in his fantasized aggressive attacks on the new baby. For example, while mum was pregnant, everyone referred to the baby in utero as "bubbles". Mum, step-dad, and Shaun all played a computer game in which bubbles are popped and destroyed—much to the manic glee of Shaun. But at night, Shaun is terrified of ghosts and baddies and has problems sleeping. During the day he often defends himself against his persecutory anxieties by rushing around frantically or by being completely transfixed by the television screen, either watching a programme or playing a computer game. He seems either full-on or rather lost in his computer world. The observer often feels that Shaun is only waiting to get back on the computer.

This observation, which is in fact the observer's last visit to the family after a year of observation, starts with everyone in this busy family being together. Granddad is there, and a cousin Corrine (aged 5) is visiting. They have all been watching television. Then Shaun wants to go upstairs and leads the observer by the hand to show her his car racing track. Corrine follows them, but Shaun tells her in no uncertain terms that she can't play. However, after a while Corrine does manage to get a turn.

Shaun starts the race again and Corrine tries to copy him, pushing the car to the finish line. "Nooooooooo!" Shaun yells at her. "Hey, you're cheating!" Granddad tells him, but Shaun snatches the

track back from Corrine. It breaks, and she attempts to put it back together. Granddad jokes about how competitive they are and then takes Corrine downstairs to have a snack, telling Shaun to tidy his room. Shaun comments "what about me?" and Granddad replies that he will save him some food.

Shaun and I are left, just the two of us. He picks up the broken track and tries to stab me with it. I tell him to be gentle. He informs me "this is my sword!" and as I move the remaining pieces out of the way, he tries to engage me in a sword-fight. "You can kill with swords", he lets me know. I nod and watch to see what he'll do next. He then notices other pieces of the track on the window sill, and as I help him move them, I become aware of lots of photos scattered on the window sill, lying down in their frames rather than standing up. They look old and faded, as if they have been in the sun. Shaun is a baby in them. "These are nice", he murmurs. Shaun then discovers that a photo frame has come apart. "Can you mend it?" he asks quietly. I put the pieces back together, and he seems pleased but still leaves the photo flat down with the others.

A few minutes later, Shaun goes downstairs. I sit at the bottom of the stairs next to mother. Shaun bounces up to her, jumps on her, and attempts to give her a big hug. Mum gives him a cuddle back, but he turns and bites her on the chin. "Owwwww" she screams in pain. "What's that for? That really hurt me, Shaun" she adds crossly, and Peter shouts at Shaun across the room, "what have I said about hurting mummy?" Shaun walks off to sit with granddad.

Shaun appears overwhelmed in this coming-and-going world in which he feels very uncertain of his place, perhaps especially on this last day of the observer visiting. He probably has a sense that the observer has been very interested in his experiences of having to give up being the baby and the difficulties experienced in his rapidly changing family and the loss of contact with his own father. Oscillating feelings of inclusion and exclusion overwhelm him, making him feel aggressive and then frightened of the damage he can inflict, but he does wonder if the observer can help with all this—"can you mend it?" he asks her. Feeling unsure of his place in his mother's mind, especially now there is a new baby, and struggling on his own with the absence of his biological father, he crashes onto her lap, and this aggressive enforced closeness then leads to a bite. There is an expression of an angry wish to attack but also to have more of mum inside him, but this can only be achieved



through an aggressive taking in. And, of course, the observer is sitting close to mum. Many of the same feelings could be equally directed at the observer.

Shaun often loses contact with the good internal mother. His use of computer games allows him to express his aggressive phantasies unchecked, but they don't provide him with the same opportunity of working through an experience as may be offered with more imaginative play. Indeed, the repetition without resolution in a computer game may add to his fears. In Shaun's computer game the player just increases his score, the number of bubbles burst, rather than there being a narrative that involves a working through of complex feeling. It is as if the shooting of the bubbles is like the projection of feelings, whereas in imaginative play the feelings are maintained within the role play, explored from different perspectives (roles).

This observation exemplifies an observer working hard to stay in role but wondering all the time how she appears to the child. What would it have meant to him if she hadn't fixed the frame on this day—her last visit? Should the observer have referred Shaun back to his parents for the help he needs rather than succumbing to doing some of the fixing herself? Perhaps she should have said something like "Oh, yes, it does need fixing, but perhaps your mum or Peter can do that a bit later?" But one could also suggest that the observer did not step too far out of role and avoided assuming the rather omnipotent stance of being the one who can fix things. On this last day of the observation, feelings were running especially high. After all, although Shaun was pleased that she fixed the frame, he also felt the limitations of her intervention. He left the photo face down on the window sill, along with the other pictures.

### *Conclusion*

Using one's judgment in moments like the two just described is hard work for observers—the need to consider how they appear in the child's mind in order to constantly re-define how they will express the observational stance within each specific observation. When a child is busily engaged in a good-enough encounter with their own mother or nursery, this is less pressing, but we hear many observations where the child is experiencing a truly difficult world. Blessing (2012) developed a helpful metaphor for thinking about the stance needed to sustain an observation without succumbing to becoming over-involved or over-flexible. She writes:

Sharing what we actually do in the privacy of our seminar rooms allows us to look at situations in which modifying an aspect of our technique might be not only warranted but desirable. Rigid adherence to form can lead to reification and shut down thinking. Like the sway factor built into the construction of skyscrapers, a little give can actually preserve the structure. How do we determine which situations require give, and which require holding firm? [p. 34]

This was written as a reflection on adapting technique in situations where there is a difficult and worrying Infant Observation, but it is no less applicable to thinking about Young Child Observation. "Sway" is a very useful metaphor in explaining what we mean by attunement in thinking about a young child's use of an observer. The similarities and differences between Infant and Young Child Observation require us to continue to refine our sense of what a proper structure might be for each.

### *Note*

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