Dibs: In Search of Self – Critical Analysis

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Dibs is a five year old boy who has troubled his teachers and parents. He doesn’t talk, and he often times throws a tantrum. When he is in school, he stays along the periphery of the classroom, crawling on the floor and hiding under tables. He prefers to play by himself and read books. His parents are determined that he is mentally retarded, and have come to believe that he is just a hopeless case. Virginia Axline, under the reference of his teachers, agreed to do what she could to help Dibs become a fully functioning child.

Virginia Axline used play therapy as her only method of helping Dibs. Axline is the founder of modern day Play Therapy. She outlined eight principles of Non-Directive Play Therapy, which she used in her sessions with Dibs. The chief principle displayed in her sessions with Dibs was the principle that states that play should not be directed by the therapist, but rather the therapist should follow the child’s actions. This is a huge concept and the defining nature of this type of Play Therapy. Non-directive Play Therapy allows the child to have control over the session and communicate what the child needs to in his own way without pressure from another authority figure. As described in the book, she allowed Dibs the freedom to do as he pleases. She merely observed and interacted when needed. Axline “wanted him to take the initiative in building up this relationship. Too often, this is done by some eager adult” (page 29). If Dibs wanted to bury the toy soldiers, she allowed him to. If he wanted to remove all the walls from the doll house, she allowed him to. If he wanted to sit quietly, she allowed him to sit quietly. The only direction she gave was when it was time to go and he didn’t want to leave.

Another principle is that the therapist is alert to the feelings the child is expressing and reflects them back to gain insight into his or her behavior. All throughout all of the sessions with Dibs, Axline is constantly doing this. She narrates his play in a way. For example, on page 43 Dibs was writing and reading aloud the colors of the crayons as he pulled them out. As she watched, she tried to respond verbally to him in his attempt to communicate with her in this activity. She said, “You are going to spell out the names of each color and print it in that color. Is that correct? I see. R-E-D spells red, doesn’t it?” She does this constantly throughout the sessions with Dibs. This is a way to communicate to Dibs that he is free to communicate to Axline whatever he needs.

One of the other principles asserts that the therapist must maintain a deep respect for the child’s ability to solve his or her problems and give the child the opportunity to do so. It states that it is the child’s sole responsibility to make choices and to institute change. She demonstrates this with Dibs, in particular, when he wants to take off his hat and coat after he walks into the playroom for his session. She doesn’t prompt him to do so; rather he does it of his own accord. If he wants assistance he asks for it, and she helps him. It is also displayed when he gets into the sandbox. He usually wants to take his shoes off, so he takes it upon himself to make the change by either doing it himself or asking Miss A to help him. She never outright offers her help to Dibs. She always waits for him to tell her what to do. This allows him the freedom to solve problems on his own, while also allowing her to observe his capabilities.

Another principle that Axline describes is that the therapist must not rush the therapy along. It is a gradual process, and the therapist must recognize this. Axline demonstrates this by just allowing Dibs to be himself during the sessions. She doesn’t prod him for the answers that she wants, although she desperately wants to know what is going through his head. However, she realizes that many others have attempted to get through to him that way with no success. Dibs will open up to her and tell her what he wants when he is good and ready to let her into his mind to know what he is feeling and thinking. On more than on occasion in the book, Axline explicitly stated that she had to refrain from interrogating Dibs on what he meant by whatever behavior he did or comment he made. During the first play session they had while at school, they were walking down the hall to the play room and Dibs made a comment under his breath. She was very curious as to what he said, but did not ask him to repeat it. She also did not question him about why he was willing to go away with a stranger and why his hand had a tight grip on her hand. Axline is allowing Dibs to feel comfortable with her, and she hopes that he will eventually open up to her.

The therapist must only establish limitations that are necessary to anchor the therapy to reality, and to make the child aware of his or her responsibility in the relationship. Axline demonstrates this in her sessions with Dibs by not making promises. On page 46 in the book, Dibs became distraught at the prospect of him having to go home at the end of the session. While he was crying, Axline felt like it would have been easy to hold and console him. However, she said “He needed to develop strength to cope with his world, but that strength had to come from within him and he had to experience personally his ability to cope with his world as it was” (page 46). After their first session at the school, she purposely did not say “see you again”, so as to not communicate a promise to Dibs that she will become a regular person in his life. Her goal was to assist Dibs in developing emotional independence. Therefore, she didn’t want him to become so dependent on her as a support system that it would hinder his complete emotional development.

One of the basic principles also states stresses the therapist’s responsibility to develop a warm and friendly relationship with the child. This principle is also exhibited by Axline narrating Dibs’ actions. She also just asks him to tell her what he is doing. This opens up the channel for communication, and lets Dibs know that he is free to communicate with her. Establishing a warm relationship with Dibs creates a safe environment for him to freely express himself in whatever way he needs. She also always greets him in the lobby with a smile and a warm hello. At one point in the book, Dibs came down with the measles and wasn’t able to make it to the session that week. The following week he came back and thanked Axline for the card that she sent that told him to get well soon. Dibs told her that it made him happy. That card and then his positive reaction to it very clearly displays a warm and friendly relationship between Axline and Dibs.

Axline also stresses in the basic principles of play therapy that the therapist must accept the child as he or she is. Axline does not question Dibs as to why he does not speak to anyone else or why he does any of the stuff he does that is out of the ordinary. This tells Dibs that she is not condemning his behaviors, and therefore accepting him completely. In Dibs’ case, Axline not accepting him and condemning his behaviors would only add to his emotional disturbance that he already has, which would be counterproductive. By accepting him completely, Axline is allowing him to build confidence to develop the emotional independence that she is striving for with these sessions. At one point during one of the sessions Dibs asks Axline what therapy is. She says to him that therapy is “a time when you can be the way you want to be. A time when you can be *you*” (page 120). This is very explicitly telling Dibs that she accepts him the way he is without limitations.

The final principle states that it is the responsibility to establish a feeling of permission in the relationship so that the child feels free to express his or her feelings completely. This principle relates to the non-directive part of the principles of her play therapy and accepting the child as he or she is completely. She does not hinder his behaviors in the session. Without the therapist directing the therapy, the child would be able to freely express his or herself completely in any way they see fit. An example in the book that portrays this principle is in chapter 13. Dibs comes in and notices a new paint color and begins to sing about them. When he gets to the colors red and yellow, he expresses anger and contempt at the colors. Axline does not tell him that it his associations of these feelings he has with the colors is wrong or question it no matter how much she wants to know more about it. She just lets it be. Axline allows Dibs to communicate with her in his own time. The lack of judgement that Axline demonstrates with him opens up the pathway for future expressions of his thoughts or feelings.

Dibs is obviously an emotionally disturbed child. For most of his life it seems as though he has experienced a lack of warmth from his parents. His parents did not want a child at the time his mother became pregnant with Dibs. It seems he has been emotionally neglected. This only got worse when Dibs began displaying unusual behaviors and stopped communicating with people. He had constantly heard that his sister is a perfect child from his parents. With Dibs I would consider the diagnosis of Reactive Attachment disorder. Dibs has had a pattern of insufficient care shown through emotional deprivation from his parents. He was unable to develop an attachment to either of his parents. His father is not around much, and his mother believes that something is wrong with him, so he stays in his play room for the majority of his time at home. Reactive Attachment disorder is characterized by inhibited and emotionally withdrawn behavior toward caregivers. Dibs does not respond at all to his parents or teachers. He has no social responsiveness. When his teachers would talk to him or invite him to participate in an activity he would just ignore them. In school, he spent most of his time reading or walking around the periphery of the room. He also displays irritability, sadness, and fearfulness when it is time for him to go home. He throws a tantrum, in which he oftentimes hits and bites and scratches the caregivers attempting to get him ready to go home before he eventually just gives up fighting all together. Dibs also has limited positive affect. During the initial interview when his teacher first called Axline, she said that she had never seen him smile or laugh not once. His behaviors had been going on since before he was age 5. Therefore he meets all criteria, according to the DSM-5, for Reactive Attachment Disorder.