

A Turning Point

We had come to an impasse. Her dark brown eyes stared up at me, insistent. It took a certain amount of self-composure not to laugh at the determined, cross little creature with one hand on her hip, lips pursed, and her forehead wrinkled into a frown. But I knew behind that determination was a story, a set of circumstances that had been set in motion some time ago and now felt beyond her control. Only three years old, Clara had had her share of challenges. She had come to play therapy with her younger brother, Lucas, aged 16 months, and her mother, Nikki. Her small body stood strong and purposeful as she showed me the power of her personality, challenging me to back down. This tiny girl was boldly defying the request to help pick up the toys. I paused to consider the importance of my relationship with her in that moment. What was she telling me about what she needed? In the same moment, my mind turned to my relationship with her mother.

Clara's mother, Nikki was attractive, outgoing, and often insightful. She radiated confidence but could be somewhat flippant, hinting at the deep vulnerability and insecurity that she struggled to acknowledge. She busied herself around her children, fully focused on attending to their every perceived need. She had made it quite clear in previous sessions that she did not enjoy playing with Clara and Lucas. In fact, she resented it, but felt it was a parenting requirement. Parental play was something she had missed out on as a child, and she wanted so desperately to provide a different experience for her own children. She was extremely protective in one sense and overwhelmingly intrusive in another.

Nikki described parenting as one tedious task after another, sucking all the life out of her. This negativity centred around her strong dislike for Lucas, and at times, a crushing desire to abandon him. Nikki was acutely aware of these feelings towards Lucas, and stated, quite bluntly, that it would be easier to go back to parenting just one child. According to Nikki, Clara was "generally compliant", "calm", "sure of herself", while Lucas was "energetic," "whiney", and "needy".

It was heart-breaking to watch Lucas' desperate attempts to have his needs met by his mother. He was always at her feet, reaching out for her, crying if she made any attempt to move into another room. Nikki would often become exasperated with him. She confessed it was not uncommon for her to hide in her bedroom with the door locked, to escape from his cries and his constant need for close physical contact. Lucas was frequently left in his cot to cry for long periods of time, "for hours even", Nikki had quietly admitted, turning her face away at the immense shame of it.

With one hand perched on her left hip and the other arm draped around the little puppet theatre she had found in the storeroom, Clara stood firm. Between us, there was a toddler gate preventing her from dragging the theatre into the main room without my assistance. I opened the gate slowly and squatted down so that my eyes aligned with hers, and repeated the request:

"Miss Sarah has asked that we do not get any more toys out until we've packed up the others".

Clara let out a big sigh and glanced away for a moment, contemplating her options. The words 'bigger, stronger, wiser, kind', played silently across my mind as I watched Clara's body respond. Her shoulders dropped, and slowly her eyes came back to meet mine as she resigned herself to the task at hand: "Alright", she said, and dropped the puppet theatre where she stood before pushing past me, back through the gate, to join her mother, brother, and my colleague, Sarah.

Clara was used to having play activities revolve around her. Before Lucas was born, Nikki and Clara would frequently cook together, or sit for hours doing puzzles, reading stories, and drawing pictures for each other. Clara was the centre of Nikki's world. Life was simple. Lucas, however, was not the baby Nikki had wanted. Breastfeeding had been a challenge. He was a sickly child and never seemed happy. Nikki daydreamed about life-before-Lucas everyday.

During play therapy, Nikki was instructed to sit down and let the children explore the room.

She found this difficult, jumping up at every moment of potential conflict. Lucas typically followed Clara around the room. The two children would jostle for Nikki's attention, grabbing toys out of each other's hands, appearing to be interested only in what was held by the other. Nikki did her best, trying to encourage the children to share and to use their words, but her heart was not in it, her frustration and exhaustion evident in her verbal interactions with them. She was, however, very motivated to do better and had never missed an appointment in the playroom. Yet her continued negativity when she talked about parenting, and about Lucas in particular, had left us wondering if we could really make a difference in this play therapy space. Would an alternative intervention be more helpful for this family? When would Nikki begin to see Lucas in a positive light?

On this occasion, Nikki's ex-partner, Daniel also attended. Initially, his presence had made us apprehensive. What was he wanting to get out of the visit? Aware of the recent separation, we wondered if safety was something we needed to address. Daniel sat quietly, observing everything during the session. He did and said little but agreed that both he and Nikki wanted what was best for the children, regardless of the state of their relationship, and that consistency was their priority. Attending together today was part of establishing a consistent approach. Daniel said that he would not join every session but wanted to be able to come occasionally. He did not come again.

Motivated by her desire to play with the puppet theatre, Clara picked up the toys. Lucas followed, stumbling occasionally with his awkward toddler gait that suggested he had not been walking long. Nevertheless, he was desperate to keep up with his sister. Once all the toys were collected, Clara dragged the little theatre to the centre of the room. Sarah encouraged Nikki to bring Lucas to the couch to sit and watch Clara's show. Lucas was offered snacks, drinks, and toys to keep him still while Clara had her special moment. The little boy wriggled, appearing to show more interest in the food and a toy banana than his sister's puppet show. After about six minutes, Lucas slid down off the couch and made it clear that he had had enough. Sarah encouraged Clara to let Lucas have his turn with the puppet theatre. Clara paused to consider this suggestion, looking from the puppets to Lucas and back again before reluctantly agreeing. She climbed up next to her mother.

Lucas stood beside the puppet theatre with his toy banana. He held it high in the air and called out “nah-nah!”. Clara jumped down from the couch wanting to correct him. “That’s not how you do it!” she exclaimed. Sarah encouraged Clara to sit and watch: “Its ok, its Lucas’ turn now”, she said. Each time Lucas said “nah-nah”, Nikki, Daniel and Sarah would clap and shout “Hooray!” At first, both the action and reaction were small, but the more Lucas shouted “nah-nah” the bigger the reaction from the adults. Soon Clara also began cheering for her brother. There was much laughing and clapping as the attention of the room focused entirely on Lucas and his banana. After a time, he sat down behind the puppet theatre. The room quietened in anticipation, watching, and wondering.

Lucas started by opening the curtains to the theatre and poking his head through. Again, cheers and laughter broke out. Lucas tried this out a few times, and each time the reaction became a little larger, as did the grin on the little boy’s face. Lucas then stopped. He took a puppet, placed it on his hand, and poked it through the curtain, just as Clara had done a few minutes earlier. One by one Lucas changed the puppets and babbled a little story as he poked each one through the curtains. Both Nikki and Daniel continued to cheer him on. Lucas was centre stage, with Daniel, Nikki, Clara, Sarah, and me surrounding him in a semi-circle. The entire interaction must have been no longer than 10 or 15 minutes, but it felt like hours. Lucas shifted his attention between the adults but focused primarily on his mother. Nikki continued to respond positively, laughing, and praising Lucas in his play.

With everyone still watching, Lucas put down the puppets and took his banana over to his mother. Then he moved on to another toy and played quietly on his own for a few moments. Nikki noted: “It doesn’t surprise me he picked that up so quickly, he’s a really smart boy”. I agreed. He showed us what he can do and how well he can read the room. While Lucas had seemed distracted and disinterested during Clara’s puppet show, he was, in fact, observing and learning. He had thrived in the moments of attention, and Nikki had managed to sit and watch him without intruding, allowing herself to delight in him playing in his own way. She was learning to observe and be curious. We acknowledged this, and then paused to reflect on what this might mean for her and for him.

Lucas’ confidence and bright character had shown through in the puppet play. After a while, Sarah encouraged Lucas to join Nikki and Clara on the couch. She began reading a story to end the session, as she did every week, but today felt different. Lucas cuddled up to his mother and Clara relaxed her body into his, throwing her arm around his shoulders. The three sat together to listen, Nikki’s eyes on the book, as Sarah confidently read the words, laughing, and making silly noises. Daniel sat to the side, watching Sarah. I looked at this little family that had been broken and had started to heal. It was truly a turning point for each of them.

A few months later, when our play-work together ended, we could all see how their relationships had grown. While Nikki still had a lot of her own healing work to do, she was able to reflect on how she had come to love Lucas. Through play, Clara had also changed her

attitude to become more caring towards her brother. Nikki declared that she could not imagine her life without both her children. She no longer had a favourite, and despite her relationship breakdown, she felt her heart was full, fuller than it had ever been. Lucas was now a happy little boy making them all laugh, time and time again. Clara and Lucas were truly inseparable. When it was time to say "Goodbye" I felt sad but happy. This was not the end but rather the beginning for a mother and her children who had learned how to play.