Resource Guide

For trainers, counsellors, coaches supporting women

Partners

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Playful Paths

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The Playful Paths

1. About the project

The goal of this project is to strengthen the agency of women, who are reentering the labour force after years of being stay-home mothers.

While we cannot change the systemic failures and problems of the labour market, by strengthening women's control about their career and personal goals and personal competencies, as well as assist them in finding a better approach to work-balance harmony, we would like to empower them for a more conscious career planning.

There are already available methodologies developed for other fields of career and life coaching, which can be adapted to this target group: these are symbolwork, folk tale work ("meseterápia"), and also playwork, all of which will be described in the following chapters.

In order to reach this goal, we are plan to do the following:

- develop an online training curriculum for counsellors and trainers working with women, including modules that can be implemented directly with the stay-home women.
- collect and develop a resource guide on the methods as a part of the training material.
- run a transnational training-of-trainers event for the trainers of the participating countries.
- run national online training events for women and counsellors.

2. Re-entering the Workplace – challenges women face

Returning to work after maternity leave or an extended period of home stay can be both exciting and daunting for women. While many women are eager to resume their careers and regain their sense of independence, the transition back to work can be challenging, both emotionally and logistically. This can be especially true for those who have taken an extended leave of absence or who have been out of the workforce for a significant period.

One of the primary difficulties women face when returning to work after maternity leave is the loss of time spent with their children. Many mothers feel guilty leaving their child in the care of someone else, especially during the early months of a child's life when they are still highly dependent on their mother. Separation anxiety can be a significant source of stress for both mother and child, and this can make the return to work more difficult.

Another challenge for women returning to work after an extended absence is the feeling of being out of touch with their field. For those who have been out of the workforce for an extended period, the pace of change and advancements in their industry may have left them feeling unprepared to re-enter the workforce. This can be especially true in fields that are highly technical or require a specific set of skills. In addition, many women may have lost touch with their professional networks during their time away from work, which can make it more difficult to find job opportunities.

Another significant challenge for women returning to work after maternity leave or a period of home stay is balancing work and family responsibilities. Women are often expected to take on the bulk of household and childcare responsibilities, even when they are also working full-time. This can be a significant source of stress and can make it difficult for women to achieve work-life balance.

Despite these challenges, returning to work after maternity leave or an extended period of home stay can be an empowering experience for women. Many women find that returning to work gives them a sense of purpose and identity outside of their role as a mother. In addition, it can provide financial stability and security for their family.

Fortunately, there are many resources available to women who are considering returning to work after an extended absence. Many companies now offer flexible work arrangements, including part-time work, telecommuting, and job sharing, which can make it easier for women to balance work and family responsibilities. In addition, there are many support groups and resources available for women who are transitioning back to work, including career counseling and mentoring programs.

Research has also shown that employers who offer supportive policies and practices for working mothers can reap significant benefits, including increased employee satisfaction and retention, improved recruitment, and higher levels of productivity. By offering flexible work arrangements, on-site childcare, and other family-friendly policies, employers can help to create a more supportive work environment for working mothers.

In conclusion, returning to work after maternity leave or an extended period of home stay can be both challenging and rewarding for women. While there are certainly difficulties that must be addressed, there are also many resources and support systems available to help women navigate this transition. With the right support and resources, women can successfully balance work and family responsibilities, and achieve their personal and professional goals.

I. Our approaches

1. Working with symbols

„The world is a forest of signs and they need to be interpreted.“ (Umberto Eco)

With the help of symbols, we are able to provide people with an additional language when they cannot find the right words. In this context, symbols work similarly to an interpreter and furthermore, they transmit information one cannot or does not want to share.

What is the meaning of symbols in connection with consultancy work? According to individual experience, a symbol may have many if not infinite meanings and is interconnected with multiple feelings, depending on the matter. From the perspective of interplay between meanings and feelings there are no identical meanings corresponding to a symbol. Donald Sandner[i] describes a symbol as follows: „A symbol is something that can convey a concept. It can be a word, a mathematical formula, an act, a gesture, a ritual, a dream, a work of art, everything that can transport a concept of linguistic-rational, imaginative-intuitive or emotional-evaluative nature. The key is an effective transfer by the symbol itself. The concept is the meaning of the symbol." In his definition, Donald Sandner refers to an extensive and important work by Susanne K. Langer with the title "Philosophy in a New Key - A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art"[ii]. In this publication, there is a chapter with the title „The Logic of Signs and Symbols", which is especially relevant for our work.

In a nutshell, Symbol Work is about getting a person to reach him- or herself. The main goal is not the achievement of something. Furthermore, working with symbols is always about "grasping" something, in both meanings of the term. This is the essential and fundamental difference in comparison to other points of view.

Working with symbols means: To do something. I always am what I do. I do what I am. Any item can be used as a symbol. Items are selected by a person who is working with symbols; the choice is connected to a story or one or more feelings. This way we are able to approach queries and ambiguity and gain a quick understanding. This is why items, things, objects play a central role in Symbol Work.

Symbols stand in when there are situations that are hard or impossible to describe through other means of communication such as gestures or mimicry. One of the main interests of Symbol Work is to find out how people can act autonomously right from the beginning and how processes, including solutions and changes, can be accelerated or shortcut. This also refers to the processes and activities taking place during the training course. Participants refer to it as „getting to the point quickly". If one is neck-deep in the waves he shall better not hang his head.

In a real situation, this happens surprisingly quick. There are factors that prevent the participants from becoming emotionally overstrained in such situations. The single working steps are most successful if certain skills can be detected and experienced at an early stage.

Skills and strenghts (resources) are taken into consideration the same way as understanding a problem and setting clear goals. Symbol Work is constantly demanding the practical and committed use of these elements.

All Interventions and creative media have been created through practical work. These are the tools that can literally be „grasped" by the participants. The materials are suitable for all kinds of settings and for the use by people of all ages. They can be used for anamnesis, diagnosis, as therapeutical intervention as well as for supervision, team support/coaching, consultancy, training and prevention.

*(This introduction on Symbol Work originates from the working paper **"Grundlagen für die Arbeit mit Symbolen" (Fundamentals of Symbol Work), written by Wilfried Schneider in 2012.***

The materials and interventions used in our methodology are based on his approach of "Psychologische Symbolarbeit".

2. Folk Tales for supporting life narratives

Folk tale therapy has long been a topic among psychologists; the well-known psychoanalyst Professor Dr. Verena Kast had already written a book about it in 1964 called "Folk tales as therapy". She is convinced that "Folk tales convey an attitude to life". She translates this strong statement with the explanation (Kast, 1995)[iii]: "In Folk tales it sometimes goes quite strangely here and there, there are turns, which we do not consider possible, which we call then evenly "folk tale-like", or which we banish as too folk tale-like simply and simply into the area of the fantasy. With this we want to express that there is nothing to be done with it in the real, hard world: stories for dreamers. But can we be so sure? How would we be able to live if there were not always a hope that, against our better judgment, certain life situations can be overcome, that there are unexpected solutions in our lives, even unexpectedly good ones?"

It is not easy for young people to find their way! In the project - together with young people and career counsellors - we are looking at how we can use the "wisdom" of Folk tales to support young people on this path.

Kast elaborates that almost all orally told fairy tales tell their listeners that problems are solvable, or we are capable of evolving in a way that certain problems are no longer a burden. Courage for the future, not getting stuck in the past and living in the moment is the motto of many Folk tales. (Kast, 1995)

So, in a therapeutic setting she believes, by listening to Folk tales and putting in his/her own imagination, people can always relate to the challenges and problems the protagonists usually face at the beginning of the story. Folk tales are stories everyone can easily imagine visually. In her believe thinking about Folk tales and the appearing symbols within it equals thinking about life and thinking about existential questions. But especially about us, but in the mirror of a folk tale, which makes it much easier than just sit there and start thinking about life in a conservative way.

Barbara Walker Baumgartner has a slightly different approach. In her publication[iv] called "Folktale storytelling as an educational tool, with possible therapeutic implications", she understands the telling

of Folk tales more as an educational tool. She believes that fairy tales can be used in schools and other group settings to increase someone's self-awareness and self-esteem, as well as building a positive social growth through the excitement of the story. (Baumgartner, 1996)

She suggests that teachers, mental health professionals, and others can learn to be a storyteller by undergoing experiences that take them through the process of telling personal stories and retelling Folk tales. Furthermore, for this purpose, the 2nd part of their publication contains a storytelling workshop where more than a dozen activities are shown. "These activities: explore various aspects of oral communication; memory and visualization as tools for story-learning; and the use of music and art expression as part of the storytelling experience." (Baumgartner, 1996)

Ildikó Boldizsar[v], Hungarian folklore researcher and folk tale therapist says that actually Folk tales reflect upon different kinds of situations people face, and even more: all situations (life situations and conflicts) have their relevant Folk tales: "Our ancestors still had a close connection with the symbol system of folklore and therefore when a storyteller chose a story, people did understand what it meant: what situation the story hero (protagonist) faced and how s/he solved it."

This way folk stories worked (and still can work) as threads to solve personal problems, as patterns to learn from about connections and problem solving.

Indeed, if we look at Folk tales and dig deeper inside them, we can experience this: there are stories about leaving the paternal house, stories of marriage problems, stories of conflicts between brothers and sisters, or parents and children, stories of friendships and so on. People in these stories do solve their problems somehow: they develop their personalities to become kings or queens of their lives, their kill dragons of their own bad customs and attitude and collect magical objects of own competencies and skills. As the stories are not about dragons and magical wands – these are all stories of coping and connection, in which everything, every place, every person and being, every object is within our internal world.

3. Supporting the free play of children

Our third basic approach is to empower mothers to support their children's play, and also through these to allow themselves more focus while their children get more freedom.

Much is written about play and its importance for children and young people's overall development. Literature agrees how much play is an important factor of healthy physical and mental health development of children, as well as the development of different specific skillsets from dexterity through creativity to social skills.

When referring to play we will be referring to the notion of freely chosen play, as nature intended, in which the child is in control of their actions. "Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way for their own reasons. "[vi] (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group 2005) [vii]

There has been much written about the importance of children's freely chosen play to support the development of resilience. In a recent document by Russell and Lester (2008) evidence was collated

to support the idea that access to play in childhood was very important in the development of resilience. "A key and fundamental finding from the evidence presented…is that children's play provides a primary behaviour for developing resilience, thereby making a significant contribution to children's well-being. " (Russell and Lester, 2008:47)

Understanding the importance of children's freely chosen play as a biological and physiological necessity in terms of children and young people's development, guides us towards an understanding of appropriate adult interventions in play and the necessity of providing exciting, challenging and neophilic play spaces. "….the more a child plays in an experientially enriched space, the better s/he will be at solving those problems and at performing those complex tasks, essential to his or her continued survival and development. " [viii](Hughes, 2012:137)

In the UK, there is a profession called Playwork that involves the creation and maintenance of spaces for children to play. Playwork is also the support given by adults in an unobtrusive way to support children's freely chosen play. Playworkers assist a child if needed, but strive to be as inconspicuous as possible to allow the children to self-direct their play. A skilled playworker is capable of enriching the child's play experience both in terms of the design and resourcing of the physical environment and the attitudes and culture within the setting.

Playwork has its origins in Europe, when during and after World War II, children were observed playing in the rubble of bombed out areas climbing in the debris and building forts and play things out of found materials- wood etc. Lady Allen of Hurtwood was influenced by a Danish landscape architect, C. Th. Sorenson, who had recognized that children enjoyed playing with loose parts, such as sticks, stones, boxes, ropes, and other non-prescriptive materials, more than the traditional playgrounds he had previously built. He built a new playground in Emdrup, Denmark, in 1943, that he referred to as a "junk playground," a place where children could create and build whatever their imagination allowed. Lady Allen brought this playground concept to England and renamed them adventure playgrounds.

In the UK today there are a number of settings where playwork takes place including holiday playschemes, adventure playgrounds, hospital play rooms, out of school clubs and outreach playwork projects where playworkers work in parks and on mobile play bus projects. Over recent years, with the global recession and change of political leadership, playwork and the recognition of the value of play in children's lives has declined, however at the same time, due to European Union supported projects, playwork has spread to other countries in Europe, such as the one included in Playful Paths.

4. The basic pedagogical approach for Playful Paths

The practitioner's fundamental pedagogical approach is crucial for counselling. This approach assumes a belief in a client's developmental capabilities and aims at reinforcing the client's personal strengths. Development is possible in any situation, and clients are capable of assuming responsibility for their own development.

Systemic-oriented

Systemic-oriented counsellors assume the autonomy of the person seeking help and advice and view this person as a 'self-expert'. The unique experience of the individual is understood to be the subjective

processing of his personal history and emotional and cognitive experiences of relationships. In the fields of therapy and counselling, systemic practice is oriented towards the concerns of the client (customer) and dispenses with pathologizing and setting normative goals. Within the framework of care-oriented, social-pedagogical procedures, systemic practice links into the resources of the individual involved in order to achieve ethically justifiable conditions.

(https://systemische-gesellschaft.de/systemischer-ansatz/was-ist-systemisch/)

An open, client-centric basic attitude

Throughout the entire counselling process, the young people decide on the content of the work carried out together. They define the subject matter, together with the goals, objectives, and pace of the work, with the support of their counsellor and peers.

The practitioners run the risk of judging, categorizing, and failing to listen and perceive with an open mind. This causes them to focus on their own issues, hypotheses, value systems or goals, and force their ideas upon the clients. A specific time is, therefore, planned into the counselling for them to express their own theories, ideas and suggestions. The client listens to these and can decide which ones he will take on board and heed. He retains the responsibility for the content of the counselling.

An accepting, appreciative basic attitude

The young people are first and foremost to be accepted and valued for who they are – with their own stories and personal backgrounds, character traits, unique characteristics, skills, strengths and weaknesses. This may initially sound banal or simple, but happens to be a great challenge in practice. In addition to the accepting and supporting aspects, value also involves fostering and challenging independence and assumption of responsibility. The purpose of the counselling is not to relieve young people of their struggles or carry them through life, but to empower them to take the necessary steps themselves. At times, clients tend to avoid taking responsibility for their actions. They try to get the counsellor or the group to do the work for them. In such cases, it is important to push the ball back into the client's court and to motivate him to work. Resource- and solution- orientated as well as unpleasant, provoking, or confrontational questions can sometimes be helpful here.

When a young person violates the rules, or exhibits asocial behaviour or behaviour that is not conducive to achieving the goals, the person should still be valued, but his behaviour should be questioned. The person should be confronted with the existing agreements, rules, the opinions of others, and the consequences of his behaviour. This technique is part of an approach that values the client and takes him seriously.

A resource- and solution-oriented basic attitude

One of the goals of Playful Paths is to help women to discover (or rediscover) their abilities and skills and to expand on these. Playful Paths begins with these personal competencies and personality traits and brings in social, material, and infrastructural resources. Social resources include people from the client's family, friends and acquaintances, and people from his school, work and social environment; infrastructural resources include people, institutions, associations and public spaces from his living environment.

The basic assumption is that all behaviours make sense and are advantageous to the person exhibiting them. It is important to continue to appreciate the person even in the event of supposedly

incomprehensible or 'negative' behaviours. The counsellor should address the utility of these behaviours, and identifying and fostering any resources.

Key skills required for counselling and coaching

The International Coach Federation (ICF) defines coaching: *"… as partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential"*. (see https://coachfederation.org/about)

The description of the core skills of a Playful Paths practitioner (trainer) is based on a list of skills issued by the ICF, modified with regard to the requirements of Playful Paths trainers as coaches and counsellors. The core skills are grouped in four clusters. The groups themselves and the individual skills are not weighted, i.e. are not ranked in any way.

Setting the Foundation

Compliance with ethical guidelines and professional standards: Understanding of coaching and counselling ethics and standards and the ability to apply them appropriately in all situations.

Establishment of an agreement: this includes a clear understanding of roles, a professional level of intimacy with the client, and clear goal agreements. At the beginning of a counselling session, opportunities and limits, as well as the role of the trainer, should be clearly identified. Clear goals should be agreed while maintaining an appropriate level of intimacy throughout the counselling session.

Co-Creating the relationship

The ability to establish a trusting relationship with the client and create an appropriate group atmosphere: it is important to establish a safe, goal-oriented framework and to ensure respectful, trusting interaction.

Coaching presence: The ability to act consciously and remain mindful throughout the entire counselling process: it is important to observe, listen, and feel what the client is communicating and to feel one's own resonances and, if necessary, integrate these into the counselling process.

Communicate effectively

Active listening: The ability to concentrate entirely on what the client is saying and not saying, to understand the meaning of what is said in the context of the client's goals and desires, and to support the client's expressive ability.

Open, resource- and solution oriented, goal-focused questions: The ability to pose appropriate questions depending on the circumstances and phase of the counselling. Open-ended questions serve to facilitate understanding and foster productive work with the client; resource-oriented questions support the client in discovering skills and abilities, and solution-oriented, goal-focused questions allow solutions to be found.

Facilitate learning and goal achievement

Establish awareness: The ability to integrate several sources of information, assessing and interpreting these in such a way that it helps the client to achieve awareness, thus to enable him or her to reach his agreed goals.

Planning and setting goals: The ability to develop an effective plan of action together with the client, assign responsibilities to peers, and, if necessary, agree deadlines.

An extensive description of the core competencies can be found at:
http://www.coachfederation.org/icfcredentials/core-competencies/

II.   Tools for Playful Paths trainers and counsellors

1. Symbolwork

a)   General Structure of Symbolwork Sessions – The 5 Steps

For the sake of simplicity and easier reading, only the feminine form has been used for the individual categories of people.

Formulating a question
At the beginning of symbolwork counselling session, we always ask the client to summarize the story they would like to work with and find a question, for which they are looking for an answer. Usually they first go into a longer discussion, but through the counselling dialogue, the counsellor has to help the client to come up with a precise question.

Setting up the Symbol Scene
Within about 10-15 minutes time and without spectators, a client creates/builds the Basic Clearing or other Playful Paths Counselling Scenarios ("resource- / competence pathway", "planning pathway", "exploration of inner images", "exploration of islands of emotions" or "wheel of feelings and emotions") on her own.
When she has finished, everyone sits down around the client and her model.

Symbolwork counseling 5 steps:

STEP 1 - Presentation
The client: She presents the heading/ topic of her presentation. She talks about what she has displayed. The client always states which symbol she is talking about. (e.g. "this hand stands for...")

The group (if the group is too big, 3 persons will be selected): Everyone listens carefully to what is being told. They are aware of the client's presence. While she is speaking, the group observes her gestures, mimicry, posture, breathing, the pitch of her voice. Does she show emotions, does she touch a symbol, which one?

STEP 2 - Factual questions
The Group: The group (or the 4 selected persons) asks factual questions. These questions only refer to the symbols, to "what is visible". No "why"- or "how come"-questions are asked. This is not about interpretation but understanding only.

The client: answers to the factual questions.

STEP 3 - Perception

The Group: The group addresses the client directly , They describe everything they have perceived and everything they have observed while they were told the story. If someone detects emotions, he or she should be able to explain how they were perceived. (Mimicry, gestures, pitches of the voice etc.)

The client: listens attentively.

STEP 4 - Interpretation

The Group: The group talks about the client. They are thinking aloud, asking questions like "what is the problem?", "What should be different?", "What would she want to solve, understand, do?", "Where could be difficulties? Where not? "

The client: she listens attentively and does not respond for now.

STEP 5 - Agreement on actions

When the group has finished "thinking aloud", the client talks about her thoughts regarding the considerations of the group.

- What is true? What is not? Where are insecurities? Are there doubts?
- What does she like to hear? What does she not like to hear?
- What is especially important from the things said? Where would she like to begin?

Next steps and closure

After Step 5, the counsellor helps the client to formulate the next steps of action after the coaching session. What exactly will she do after?

It can also help, if she asks someone from the group as a "supervisor", to ask her in an agreed time, whether she made the step discussed.

When there is a clear agreement, the counsellor is closing the session.

b) Basic Clearing

The Basic clearing has been established to provide practitioners with a quick assessment tool to establish the needs of the client they meet. By the end of the assessment practitioners will have decided, in conjunction with the client, the need level of the client and if the use of symbols is applicable to them.

The intervention, basic clearing, follows the listed procedure.

Here the first step of formulating the question can be left out. The next step, making the symbol-scene

is done with the Basic Clearing work pad. On the work pad, the middle circle is about personal goals, while there are six further circles about: health, living conditions, support system, education background, job experience, and "anything else".
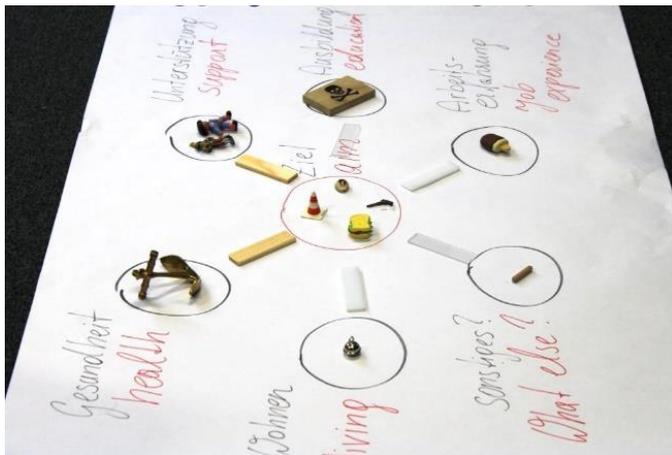
There are also 3 types of bridges to connect the areas and the goals: the transparent as "thin ice", the white, as "thick ice" and the wooden, which is solid. These are the ways how much the areas support the goal of the client.

c) Islands of Emotions

The intervention 'Islands of Emotions' is very well accepted by clients and can treat diverse topics like feelings, characteristics and goals. They can be used for clarification in the sense of 'I do not know what's going on at the moment', for diagnosis, decision-making, analysis of group situations or relationship aspects.

With the materials, access to the often difficult-to-verbalize theme of emotions is much easier.

The islands of emotion set contains the following materials: a piece of blue denim (about 150x150cm) is used as base to symbolize the ocean. There are 22 parts of plywood in the shape of islands. These islands are marked as follows:
Anxiety, anger, fear, depression, solitude, happiness, fright, serenity, luck, misery, love, lust, power, envy, guilt, worry, pride, shame, pain, yearning, grief, rage.
Their backs are painted in black slate. These sides can be written on with chalk and therefore used to add additional feelings or for the tasks "properties" and "life goals".

Other items of this set include a small wooden ship, 10 tokens, chalk and a buoy in yellow and black. The yellow side of the buoy stands for pleasant feelings and the black side stands for unpleasant ones. The tokens are used to symbolize persons. The ship serves for transport.

The course of the counselling sessions with the individual steps agrees with the ones described before, however at Step 5 we can use the buoy to clarify the feelings around the next steps.

d) Wheel of Emotions and feelings

The 'Wheel of Feelings & Emotions' can be used to determine the current client's emotional state. Initially, the client may try to avoid using the word "feeling," but feelings and emotions are generally a central point when making decisions, including career choices. At the same time, they serve as a breeding ground for misunderstandings. The wheel was developed over many years of experience to assist people in (re-)discovering their feelings and emotions.

The following terms can be found on it:
fear - anger - depression - serenity - happiness - love - shame - guilt - sadness – anger

The feelings are arranged randomly. This is also communicated to the client.

Feelings and emotions are generally a central point when making decisions, including when choosing a career. At the same time, they are a basis for misunderstandings. A common language is often missing. The wheel of feelings and emotions can be used to ascertain what emotional situation the client is in. In the beginning, the client often tries to avoid using the word feeling at all. This is often followed by a phase of emotional confusion. Misunderstandings are particularly caused by thoughts, assessments (e.g. loneliness, insecurity), body feelings (e.g. pressure, tiredness) or physiological symptoms (e.g. blushing, trembling) are named as feelings.

The intervention with the Wheel is different from the previous two procedures, but it can complement them in a coaching / counselling session.

First we invite the client to think about their situation, and describe it in a couple of sentences. In case we use the Wheel after another intervention, this step is not necessary, but we still shall leave some time to compile all what they have shared and learned.

Then we are slowly turning the wheel, and with each feeling we ask the following:

- Do you feel this emotion in this situation?

The answer can only be yes, or no, and we have to help until the client is coming up with a clear answer. We shall tell them, that the first reaction is usually the most punctual. All feelings are always queried, while the star is slowly turned so that the respective tip is pointing towards the client.

At the end we summarize the feelings, which were there present, and we can go on from here to a counselling session to work with the most important ones and come up with actions to deal with them.

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2. "If you want me, take me" – working with a fairy tale

a) The fairy tale

If you want me, take me!

Once upon a time, in a village behind God's back, there lived three brothers. They farmed together on the small piece of land left to them by their parents. But since they couldn't make a living from it, they wove bamboo baskets and sold them in the market.

But however hard they worked and lived as humbly as possible; they never had a spare penny to spare. Either they ran out of salt, or oil, or their one old teapot had a hole in it, and that was just when there was not a single hole in the house.

The worst times came when the end of the year approached and they had to pay their debts. One day, Saburo, the oldest of the brother told the others:

"It cannot go on like this anymore. I'm going somewhere to serve. You two can farm on your own until I earn some money and come back."

The other two brothers agreed, and Saburo went off to look for work. He managed to find a job in a distant town: a rich merchant hired him as a coachman. For six months, Saburo drove horses from market to market in wagons loaded with salt, tea and other goods. The merchant was pleased with his new coachman, and when his term of service was up, he offered to keep him on for the next year. Saburo politely thanked him, but did not accept the offer: "The end of the year is coming, and my brothers are waiting for my savings to pay off all our debts."

So the merchant paid his wages, and Saburo carefully tied the copper money in a shawl and hurried home.

He walked quickly, a long way, but he had to pass through a dark forest before dusk fell. Saburo was reluctant to venture into the woods, but he was looking forward to what his brothers would say about his bringing money to the house. They must be impatient, with only one day left before the end of the year. But even if they didn't, he'd have nowhere to stay for the night. So he took a deep breath and resolutely entered the dark forest.

He was in a great hurry, looking neither to right nor left, only at the narrow strip of sky above the canopy of trees, for it showed the way. The forest was silent, and Saburo made his way more and more boldly.

"I am more than halfway along the path. Soon I would be home. What could happen to me? It's quiet and peaceful here, so why should I be afraid" - he thought. Suddenly it seemed to him as if there was a brightness hovering at the side of the road. What could it be? - he was frightened, but he gathered his courage:

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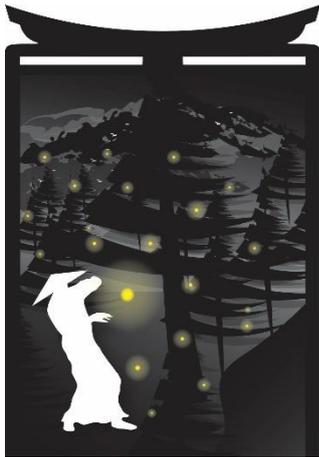
"Am I just beginning to believe in tales of ghosts?" - still, he slowed his steps and watched what was happening in front of him. And then he noticed that there was not one but several little lights wavering in front of him. There were more and more of them, floating along the road, circling in the trees, and slowly, silently, they came closer and closer to him. Then Saburo heard a rustling sound that slowly grew into a growl. Almost petrified with fear, he stopped, and out of the throng of mysterious lights that circled and swayed, he heard clearly: 'If you want me, take me away! If you don't want me, leave me! If you want me, take me, if you don't want me, leave me! – the voice kept repeating and the little lights came closer and closer.

"Leave me alone!" - Saburo cried in terror, and began to run away, run home as quickly as possible.

Choking and wide-eyed with fright, he rushed straight into their room, forgetting to take off his sandals at the door.

"Finally, I'm home!" - he sighed, and sank down on the besides the table. Her brothers were eating dinner, each with a bowl of millet porridge in front of them.

"Why are you so frightened that you don't even greet us? And look at how you've soiled the carpet!"

Saburo slipped off his sandals and carefully, very carefully, closed the door.

"My dear brothers, you don't know the danger from which I have escaped," he began, now a little calmer.

"In the woods, about half-way from the town, I was suddenly attacked by some shining spectres. I was all alone, and there was nowhere to hide from them. They circled around me, shouting loudly, 'If you want me, take me away! If you want me, take me away!' I barely escaped them."

"And they did nothing else?" asked Hachiro, the youngest brother, who was famous for his strength and courage

"I was glad they didn't take me! "

"Strange ghosts,"- said the middle brother, Sichiro, and thoughtfully added: "If they said, 'if you want me, take me', then perhaps they should have been taken. Then that would have stopped them. You must have been so frightened because you were so surprised. You say it happened halfway to town? I'll tell you what, I'll go over there and take a look around."

The middle brother went out into the evening twilight. He walked further and further into the dark forest, barely able to see anything, and when he was about halfway to town, he noticed something glimmering in the gloom of the forest.
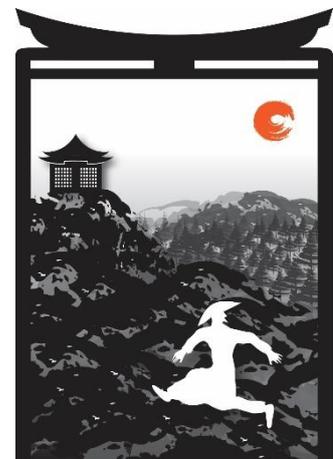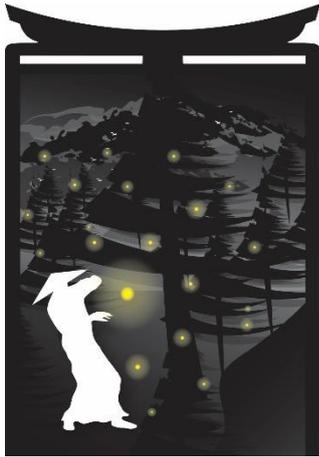
Sichiro stopped, looking intently at the spot, but saw nothing but twinkling lights. So he went closer, and then he heard some murmuring. Then he took a few steps again, and so he understood quite clearly what the little lights were saying: "If you want me, take me, if you don't want me, leave me!" The little lights, meanwhile, were coming towards him, encircling him, and the circle was narrowing around him. A terrible terror seized Shichiro, and he almost saw the little lights about to pounce upon him.

He turned on his heel, plugged his ears, and fled backwards towards home until he was completely out of breath. When Hachiro, the youngest brother, saw the pale face of his middle brother and heard his gasps, he said in a firm voice:

"You are both cowards. Cowards. Nothing has happened to you, and you have only heard words. Now I will try my luck."
He went into the chamber and brought a rope.
"I'll see if the ghosts will still shout at me to take them away if I go to them with a rope."
It was getting dark, the moon had not yet risen, and it was so dark, that Hachiro knew the way only by memory, he could not see it. When he reached the place of which his brothers had told him, he saw the wavering, flashing lights.
They flew around in a glowing circle, and as Hachiro bravely continued on his way, he was soon completely surrounded. Then a clear voice struck his ear:

"If you want me, take me; if you don't, leave me! If you want me, take me, if you don't want me, leave me!" Hachiro felt the whole forest tremble at this mysterious whispering:
" If you want me..."
"Of course I want you!" - cried Hachiro, and held his back:
"Well, then, hop! Jump up, and let me see whose son-of-a-bitch you are!"
At that moment the lights disappeared, the whispering ceased, and Hachiro suddenly felt a terrible weight on his back, as huge as he almost collapsed under it, but finally he managed to stand. "I am very strong. There's hardly anybody who dares to cross me."

He untied the rope around his waist, threw it over the strange weight on his back, and pulled it tight. He straightened himself, regained his balance, and started for home.
It was pitch dark, but the strange spectre on Hachiro's back was so bright that he could see the road as bright as day.
The burden on his back grew heavier with each step, and Hachiro, though renowned far and wide for his great strength, could hardly carry it home. He was delighted when at last he entered the courtyard, and wanted to throw the burden off his back. But in vain did he untie the rope, in vain did he struggle, turning to right and left, the burden remained on his back, as if stuck.
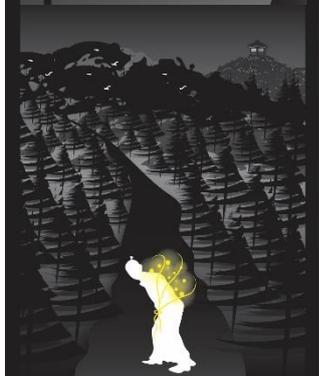
- You think you won't let me go? - Hachiro got angry. - I wanted you, but not on my back! Just you wait, I'll show you!

He went quickly into the kitchen and threw himself back against the wall. A

clear ringing sound rang out, but the burden remained on Hachiro's back.
-
"Don't think you can handle me!" shouted Hachiro, now even more furious, and he backed out into the back room, ran into it and threw his back with all his might against the central pillar supporting the ceiling.

The blow sent him to the ground, but at the same time there was a merry jingle, and gold was scattered all over the floor. There were so many that some even rolled out into the courtyard, and the brothers discovered gold coins in slits and crevices long afterwards. Their joy knew no bounds when they saw what a fortune they had made, and the two older brothers shouted over each other, praising the youngest for his courage.
-"Hahaha!" they laughed long after the gold had rolled away. "Golds that longed to be among men!"
After that they lived together in contentment and harmony in their little house, and still do to this day, if they are not dead.

This Japanese tale is something different from the ones, we got used to in Europe, although the beginning is very typical. Three brothers, left by their parents, and have to solve their living, and the oldest goes off to probe his luck, later joined by the middle, and finally the smallest. There are several such tales, because the life situation is also a very "typical" one – we have to make our own way of living. The how is the interesting difference in this fairy tale.

Several fairy tales work with the issue of the parental legacy – here, by the beginning of the tale this legacy is already processed and found lacking. The farm itself, even with other incomes, is not enough for a full family to make a living. This is a well-known situation for several families, and usually one of the main reasons why both parents have to go (back) to work. The sentences of the tale: "It cannot go on like this anymore. I'm going somewhere to serve (work)" are familiar with several of us.

Fairy tales are usually showing us a guide to solve this situation, not a very concrete guide, but rather the main steps which have to be taken. Here, in this tale, the solution is coming quite quickly: Saburo goes off, finds a job, earns money, but at the end, this money is just enough to make ends meet by the end of the year. Still, a lot of us – including Saburo – find this level of safety enough. Even when the opportunity presents itself, it seems frightening, and we run away, and stay with what we have.

In all "three brothers try their luck" type of fairy tales the brothers have to pass trials of bravery, and that's the same here, but in this case it is not a monster, a dragon, or a witch, but lights wispering, not even too frightening, and also maybe lightening up the darkness of the forest.

There are opportunities in our lives as well, coming sometimes and whispering, and it is up to as, how to react. To find the right way of reaction, we have to know ourselves, and that is also what the Japanese brothers have to know. The eldest son got afraid and run home from the forest. The middle one first carefully assessed the sight, but still got frightened. It had to be the youngest, who knew of himself, what he is capable of, to finally stand up for the challenge and the opportunity: "I am very strong. There's hardly anybody who dares to cross me."

In fairy tales, being in the forest often represents the place of learning about yourself. When you are alone, in the dark, your fears intensify, and for fighting your fears you have to be able to trust yourself and your strength. The trial of the brothers here is the trial of being able to fight the fears that we cannot stand up to the coming challenge, and being able to trust ourselves, that whatever is coming, we can carry that on. This is the trial, only the youngest of the brother passed. And this is a challenge, a woman reentering the workplace has also be able to pass.

However three brothers taking the same trial in fairy tales means the opportunity of correcting our mistakes. It might happen, that we back out of a challenge once. It might also happen, that next time we assess more carefully, and still back out. Still there is an opportunity to try third time and win over.

The fairy tale is not selling cheap goods: just being able to take the opportunity (or the lights) does not mean that it will be an easy way home. Hachiro has a very hard road coming forward, where the burden is heavy. In these cases the step to be done: straighten yourself and regain the balance, and then start to take the road home. How do we straighten ourselves and regain our balance? How do we carry very heavy loads? Family and work together is a very heavy load. We need to take care and find the good balance to be able to carry on, until we reach home.

Where a new challenge is waiting for Hachiro: getting rid of the big bag from his back. Aren't we all face also that it is not that easy? It is hard in the everydays, and even harder when we finish / close some bigger project, or trial, studies, workplace.

Saburo runs into the space, making havoc, dirt, and frightening the brothers. Hachiro also arrives, and already wants to take off the burden outside, and not take in, however it is not possible. It is a hard job to get offloaded, so hard, that the blow sends him down to the ground. But when he stands up, he can see, that golden coins cover the ground, and as we just get to know, some of them will just pop up here and there in the future too.

It proved to be worthy to fight the fears, take the lights, regain the balance, make the hard road, the even harder offloading.

c) Working with the tale yourself

Working on ourselves through a story is an exciting task, but it is not at all straightforward. In a fairy tale, order is restored by the end, the hero of the tale takes the journey and through that he develops.

This is our task too - to interpret the turns and 'codes' of the fairy tale for our own lives, to find the steps that will help us to become better and to find our golden coins.

When we begin to work with ourselves through the "If you want me, take me" fairy tale, let us first listen to or read the story, then sit back and let the mood of the tale wash over us. Even with our eyes closed, we can find a taste, a smell, an image from the story. What would we get out of the story if we could? Where in the story are we, and what role are we playing?

Then take a pencil and write down your answers to the questions (on the cards or on a paper). Focus on the questions that speak to you most. Not all questions may be relevant to us, but those that are, are worth thinking about at length, or even talking about with others - parents, friends, peers, or even helpers.

In what way does this happen? Probably some character, some place, some object captures our imagination. The elements in a fairy tale are not necessarily the same for everyone, and in fact, when we work on the story with ourselves, we interpret the situations, characters, etc. that appear in the story completely for ourselves.

Let us first look at the characters in the story. Each character has a message. Each has its own strengths, its own role, its own message:

- Saburo is the oldest. He is responsible, and he is the one, who makes the first decision of leaving the family home. He is also a good worker, a good employee. However he is going for safety. Not wanting promotion, not wanting opportunities. He wants to go only home, and deliver what he earned.
- Sichiro is the middle one. He is the one assessing information, before making decisions. He is running the home while Saburo is gone. He is naturally taking the task after the eldest is not completing it.

- Hachiro is the youngest. He is the strongest and the bravest too. Not analysing too much, going and doing what he thinks to do. Taking up the challenges. Talking his mind ("you are cowards"), and walk the talk. No backing out of the challenge, carrying it, and also able to get it down, when it is finished.

Which characteristics are familiar to us? In a tale having three siblings, usually we have to understand, that they represent different aspects of the same character. What do we find in ourselves from the three? What characteristics to strengthen, what to let go?

We can also have a look at the scenes of the story. If the landscape of the story is also the landscape of our own story, where are we?

- The family home, at the beginning. Safe, warm, but not enough. Maybe financially, maybe intellectually, maybe physically we find it restraining. We want more. Are we ready to leave? Are we ready to face the outside world?
- The workplace, the coach-driving position of Saburo. It is good for a while, taking him (and us) to new places, but it does not prove to be enough either. Do we have similar experiences with workplaces? What was good in it? Why did we stayed there until we stayed? What weren't enough? What were our issues, problems? What would we avoid in the next place?
- The first half of the forest, which is where we face ourselves. The space of self-reflection. Who am I? Am I strong enough, brave enough, … enough? What are we afraid to see from ourselves? Saburo has to talk to himself that nothing bad can happen. Still, we often fear to get to know ourselves better, as we fear to face what we can meet there.
- The clearing with the lights within the forest. This is the place, where the opportunity presents, and also where our fears are the highest. Is that real what I see? Are these lights / golds or specters, wanting to take me and hurt me? What could go wrong?
  Several times our fears prevent us from taking the opportunities, however our fears can also help us to prevent being hurt. Our previous experiences – and most probably Saburo had the most of these – can make us more cautious, but how much caution is enough. Can it happen, that being cautious rids us from opportunities?
- The road home. Here Hachiro has to straighten, regain balance, and carry the heavy, increasingly heavy burden. Do not give up. Although it is only a couple of lines in the story, this is the longest period in our own lifestories. Are we resilient and strong enough not to give up, and take the burdens until they need to be carried? Whatever project, idea, learning, new beginning, or even new hobby we start, there will be a time, when it will only seem to be a burden. How can we regain our balance, and carry on?
- Home again, getting offloaded. This is also a crucial state. To be able to finish, to take off, to close whatever we started. Several people are stuck, and unable to leave their burdens, let it be a too large house, a too commending job, a non-working relationship, or a non-working family structure. We often get the advice of "just let it go", but in reality letting it go is often a very hard and painful job. Hachiro has to hit himself several times to different places to be able "to let go". What is our own strategy to let go? We can make a ritual, we can make a rational decision-making process, we can have direct instructions to ourselves, what to do, when we reach the point what we wanted to reach.
  However for this we also need to know, when is that point. What do I want to reach? How does it look like? How will I not put more effort than is necessary? How will I finish and close off?

Objects in the story can also help. Objects in fairy tales represent resources that can help us to solve the problems in the fairy tale. In this story, there are three representative objects to worth to have a look at:

- The copper coin, what Saburo gets for his yearly work. This coin represents the basic needs which can be met. It is covering, what is needed, but it is not enough for anything else. It is worth to see, what is / how much is our own copper coin. What is that, what we have to make, and reach in order to avoid falling apart (and into debts)
- The rope. This is the tool, which helps Hachiro to carry the weight and not to loose it (strengthening to his body). It represents the resource we have to take ourselves through the challenges we face. Let's write up the knots of your rope: what are those resources which can help you to carry the weight? We can collect as much as possible, and we can always add some more. The rope can be our personality straits, our connections, our objects, our skills. Never forget to build an ever-stronger rope.
- The lights, which turn out to be golden coins. They represent the opportunities (which are sometimes false), but actually they also represent the results. When we look at the opportunities, we have to think about the results as well. What opportunities do we have around us? Even if they seem to be frightening at first, when we assess the opportunities, we should not let us to be critical. Just collect all the possibilities we are facing, on the area of our lives where we want change: it can be finding a new job, going to study something new, moving to a different city or country, starting a new relationship, or starting living alone. What are we afraid regarding these opportunities? What can go wrong? What are the challenges, the burden they will mean if we get them on? Do we have a strong enough rope to tie them unto our back? Will we have enough strength and cunningness to get rid of them when we think so? What are the golden coins waiting for us at the end of this road?

It seems that we can start from several directions when we work on ourselves with the story. There is no one, linear approach, although the locations and the tasks set out there are explicitly sequenced, but we can work on the other themes in roughly any order.

We may not get to the end of a tale too quickly. Sometimes it takes years before you can really take control of your life. The task here is to formulate the steps to get there, and to check from time to time that we are going in the right direction, to let the golden coins to jump on our back (of course, only if we want them), and also if we are ready to let them go and only nurture us back.

d) Working with Individuals with the story

When you want to work with the story as a coach, the first step is to work with the story yourself - that is, to think through the steps in the previous chapter.

It is necessary to have a "subjective" interpretation of the story, an interpretation of the story for our personal lives, before we start working with the story as a counsellor, as it is very important not to try to impose our own interpretation on the clients. To do this, we need to know what our own interpretation is. On the other hand, it is also important to interpret the fairy tale in relation to our

own lives, so that we do not run into questions and topics that trigger an emotional reaction in us while working with the client.

At the same time, however, we also need to interpret the story itself, to think through the possible interpretations from the client's point of view.

Ildikó Boldizsár calls these two approaches the objective and subjective story matrix. In the objective matrix, we interpret the story, while in the subjective matrix we examine ourselves in the light of the story.

The objective matrix of the "If you want me, take me" tale:

a) Who is the hero of the tale? - The hero is the one who develops, who faces the challenge. This time it's Hichiro.

b) What is the life situation? – A desperate need to change, as what we have is not enough.

c) What is the challenge of the tale? - The main challenge is whether the brothers can face their fears, collect their resources, and stand up for the opportunity, which occurs to them.

d) Who/what are the helpers? – In this story the only helping character is the owner of the coach where Saburo works. He helps for the survival level, and actually tempts Saburo to stay at that level for long. However he also lets him go without any issues afterwards.

e) Who is the opponent? – The opponent is their fears of the unknown, and their fears if they are enough.

f) What is the solution? – To face our fears, take on the opportunity, make the hard way of implementing it, and be able to close and put it down.

The subjective matrix of the "If you want me, take me" tale:

a) Who am I in the story? Which of the brothers? Or maybe the coach owner? Or the golden coins?

b) Where am I in the story? I might be myself in the clearing to face my fears and take on the burden. Or I already took on, and carry a heavy load. Or I am already taking it off, and enjoying the harvest.

c) What is my role here? What is my job in this place?

d) What is my own internal adversary that I must overcome to move forward?

e) What is my inner help, my own resources for change?

f) What object would I bring out of the story for myself?

g) What is the very concrete thing I need to do to move forward in this situation?

After a thorough reflection on the story, we can begin to work with our client(s) on the story. If we are working with the client in an individual helping process, the main question is really where we start, in which location, at what stage of development our client is. We may have already found this out along

the previous conversations, but we may give them the story, or they may listen to it and determine this for themselves.

Then, based on the client's interpretation and the interpretations made in the previous sessions, go through the questions formulated in the previous sessions and on the cards during the facilitation process, which may sometimes take several sessions. Not all questions need to be worked with, some are relevant, others less so. It is possible that new questions will arise from the questions on the card, and we will move on from there. There are mainly questions on the cards, however sometimes the reader is clearly given a problem to solve.

Sometimes you may come across a topic that is no longer in the scope of this story. We can then continue with another story and return to this one later.

The aim of the process is to find the opportunities, and also to find and face the fears of our clients.

In the following, we also give suggestions on how to engage with the story in groups.

e) Working with Groups

The purpose of the folk tale work group: to explore and mobilise inner resources in order to strengthen the participants to face their doubt, fears and take the opportunities and go on with them.

Target age group: women restarting their carrier after being stay-home mothers

Duration: 60 minutes

Number of participants: no more than 20

Preparation of the venue:

The setting for the story group should be prepared according to the atmosphere of the story. It is important that participants can sit in a circle - perhaps not on chairs, but on cushions. There should be a clear point of entry, which could be the door to the room, but if this is not possible or the room is too large, then a 'gate' should be set up.

There should be sufficient but not too much lighting. If there are tables, place them at the edge of the room, they can be useful for individual work. If there are no tables, bring drawing boards or folders for participants to write or draw on.

Next to the 'gate', already inside the space, make symbol cards that participants can choose from on entry and can take their place by making their choice. These can be OH cards, Dixit cards, or even your own collection of pictures or postcards, the main thing is that they express different situations and feelings, and should be at least one and a half to two times of the number of participants, so that everyone can choose.

In the centre of the circle, it is worth putting a colourful scarf, perhaps a flower or a symbol related to the story. In the case of our Japanese story, this could be coins, or small candle lights.

Outside the circle, close to the facilitator, place any other props you want to use, including the folk tale cards, and the contours for colouring and writing.

If storytelling is done using video, the computer, projector, screen/wall surface, speakers should also be prepared and tested so as not to hinder the process.

If the group is assembled in the room when we start, ask everyone to leave the room and display the symbol cards, scarves, symbols only when the group is waiting outside.

Tools needed: A scarf or material for the center of the circle, decorative items, symbol cards, writing pads if needed, pens, colored pencils, drawing tools, the Folk tale cards, and enough copies of the outlines printed for each participant.

Possibly: computer, projector, screen/wall space, speakers

Script: (times are approximate, group dependent)

1: Entrance

Duration: 5 minutes

Allow group members to enter, preferably one at a time, and give them each the following task:

- What are your biggest doubts / fears when facing a new opportunity? Choose a card that expresses this and then take a seat with this card.

When everyone has made a choice and is seated, let's join in.

2. Get in the mood

Duration: 10-15 minutes

Discuss the cards chosen by the participants. Don't go round in a circle, not everyone necessarily has to share their card, however give enough time for sharing for everybody, who would like to. It might happen to stay in silence, giving enough space for reflection.

3. Storytelling

Duration: about 10 minutes

At the beginning of the storytelling, ask the participants to close their eyes and relax. You can even lead a short relaxation exercise, to have them silenced and turn their focus inside.

The best way is to tell the story with our own words. If we don't feel comfortable with that, we can also listen to an existing recording, or read up the story from paper.

At the end of the story, again ask participants to close their eyes and, allowing enough time to activate their own internal imagery, give the following tasks:

- Pick a colour from the story!

- Pick a smell from the story!

- Pick an object from the story!

- Look around you, where are you in the story? What surrounds you, who surrounds you?

- What is your task there?

4. Processing:

Duration: 35-40 minutes

After everyone has returned from the story, discuss who has taken what out of the story, what landscape they found themselves in. You don't have to answer, everyone can volunteer to speak if they want to. Then lay out the drawing tools and boards, and give them the pictures to colour and write on, giving a short time for individual work.

1) The first task is to work with the copper coin. Tell them, that in the story, the copper coin was the earning of Saburo, which covered the debts for the brothers.
Let them think about what minimal needs and requirements they have that they want to meet in the the future.

2) The second task is to work with the rope. Tell them, that in the story, the rope gives a feeling of strength to Hachiro, and also works to help to strengthen the load on his back, as well as to carry it.
Let them think about those personal skills, objects, relationships, other resources, which serve as a rope in their lives.

3) The third task is to work with the golden coins. Tell them, that in the story, the golden coins represent themselves first as frightening unknown lights, but in the end they provide long-term nurturing and opportunities.
Ask them to collect the opportunities, which are around them at this level. Which are frightening? Which can be nurturing in the long run?
Give them the homework to work with their "lights and golds" further at home.

After a short individual work - while you can still continue drawing and writing - we can open the possibility for whoever wants to share what they have written.

5. Closure / Exit:

When our time is up, there will still be people drawing, colouring, working. We will conclude the session by having everyone exit the story space for the next few minutes. You will go out to the gate and meet whoever is ready, one by one.

There, you ask him to tell you one of the golden coins they identified and they would like to get. Then wish them strength and luck to pursue their gold-hunt.

3. Supporting your children – supporting play

As professionals working with parents, it's important to recognize the benefits of free play in children's development. By encouraging free play, we can support children's creativity, problem-solving skills, and social development. Free play allows children to explore their interests and make their own choices, leading to a sense of self-direction and confidence.

As practitioners, we may be tempted to suggest structured activities or direct children's play. However, research has shown that free play is crucial for children's development. It allows them to practice decision-making, learn to self-regulate their emotions and behavior, and build social skills through interaction with peers.

By promoting free play, we can also support parents in finding time for self-care and other activities. When children are engaged in self-directed play, parents have more time to focus on their own needs.

So, how can we encourage free play in the families we work with? It's important to provide information on the benefits of free play and suggest ways parents can create a safe and stimulating environment for their children to explore. We can offer advice on limiting screen time, following a child's lead, and encouraging creativity with open-ended materials like blocks, playdough, and art supplies.

By prioritizing free play, we're not only supporting children's development but also promoting positive and empowering environments for families. So, let's work together to encourage free play and see the benefits for ourselves and the families we work with.

a) Loose parts play = everyday play!

Loose parts play is a type of play that involves open-ended materials that can be moved, manipulated, and combined in various ways. These materials, called "loose parts," are often natural or recycled objects such as rocks, sticks, shells, fabric scraps, and wooden blocks. Loose parts play allows children to explore their creativity, problem-solving skills, and social development through self-directed play.

The beauty of loose parts play lies in its open-ended nature. Unlike structured play, where children are given specific instructions or rules, loose parts play allows for endless possibilities. Children can experiment with different combinations of materials, create their own games, and engage in imaginative play.

Loose parts play has been shown to have numerous benefits for children's development. It promotes creativity, as children are encouraged to use their imaginations and think outside the box. It also supports problem-solving skills, as children must figure out how to use the materials in new and innovative ways. Loose parts play also helps develop social skills, as children learn to communicate, negotiate, and share with others.

In addition to its benefits for children, loose parts play can also be beneficial for the environment. By using recycled and natural materials, children learn about sustainability and the importance of caring for the planet.

Overall, loose parts play is a valuable and engaging type of play that allows children to explore, create, and learn in their own unique ways. It supports children's development in numerous ways and promotes a sense of wonder and curiosity that can last a lifetime.

b) Supporting play with loose parts on a daily basis

Children are full of play and ideas. Here are a few things adults can do to help:

Play with simple things. Provide a few everyday items such as scarves, boxes, pots, cardboard tubes, jar lids, buttons. Add things like pens, pegs, string and tape for added creativity.

Provide space to play at home. It doesn't need to be a big space or a whole room. If there is anything fragile or something you don't want played with, put it out of the way. If you have lots of toys, try putting some away.

Make time for play. Try not to rush or overschedule your child's time. When they invite you to play, try to join in. Playing and laughing together builds positive relationships.

Playful Paths

Watch and learn. Let children take the lead in what they are doing, you will learn lots about their interests. Young children should be supervised while playing but if they are busy and safe, it's ok to step back.

Enjoy some messy and noisy play. Play can sometimes feel messy, noisy or a bit chaotic. Try to provide opportunities that work for everyone. Put down a towel, old newspapers or plastic sheets to protect surfaces. You could try playing with soapy water, ice cubes, sticky 'gloop' made with cornflour. Children may like to bang pots and pans or to squash old boxes and cartons.

Get outside. Whether you have a garden or visit a local green space, children will find natural loose parts like leaves, flowers and sticks. Outdoors, children's natural curiosity is stimulated, they are physically active and can challenge themselves. Noisy, messy play can be easier outdoors than indoors.

Tell them they are brilliant! Share what you have noticed about children's interests or activities. Your attention shines a light on children and makes them feel good.

Playful Paths

c) Facilitating play – skills to put into practice

On this page, you will find prompts to help you consider your own responses to children's play.

- **Wait to be invited to play**. Are you sensitive and careful not to take over? Do you organise play activities only when children want you to?
- **Enable play to occur uninterrupted**. How do you protect children's space and time for play? Do you think carefully before you interrupt the flow of play?
- **Enable children to explore their own values.** Do you support play in a way that recognises that children explore and understand values through playing and sometimes make mistakes?
- **Leave children to develop skills at their own pace**. Do you support play in a way that recognises play is a way children develop their own skills, abilities and judgement? Are you conscious of allowing children to play at their own pace and to learn through trial and error?
- **Leave the content and intent of play to the children**. Do you avoid directing and shaping the content of children's play?
- **Let children decide why they play**. Do you respect that play is behaviour without goals or rewards? It is a process. Do you steer clear of offering prizes or rewards for play?
- **Enable children to decide what is appropriate behaviour, within safe limits**. Do you enable children to explore and develop boundaries? Have you discussed safe limits, what these are and how you judge? Do you steer clear of complex rules in favour of shared understanding and simple guidelines?
- **Only organise when children want support**. Do you avoid organising children's play? Are you ready to help invent something to do or find resources when children need you to?
- **Thinking about our responses to children's play:**
  Stop yourself before you respond to, or stop, children's play

    Look and listen to what is happening. What are children doing?

      Think - are children managing any risks? What might be the impact of adult involvement on children's play?

        Act - now you can respond in a thoughtful way, rather than by reflex.

          Reflect - was your action the correct one? What have you learned?

d) Understanding play cues

Understanding and recognising play cues is another important skill that supports practice, especially inclusive practice. Adults can gain a better understanding of children's play by looking out for play cues and responding appropriately. The concept of the 'play cycle' containing 'play cues' and returns within a 'play frame' was developed by UK play thinkers Gordon Sturrock and Perry Else.

A *play cue* can be verbal, a gesture or an action and invites others to join the play. A *response* to a play cue creates a *play frame*.

Children generally respond to each other's play cues naturally. Some children might have difficulty recognising cues or responding to them in the way other children do. This can result in difficulties such

as being left out of play or repeated upset because they have misread cues. For adults, understanding and recognising play cues is a skill that helps us respond appropriately to children's play.

A **play cue** is a hint or an invitation to someone to join in and play. Children communicate these invitations to play in different ways, sometimes verbally but often through gestures, posture or expressions. For example:

- tap on shoulder and run away laughing
- make a funny face at someone
- wink
- throw a ball to someone
- move closer to someone with things to play with
- allocate roles, for example "you can be the dragon"
- make space in a group foír someone to join.

The **return** is a positive and equally playful response to a recognised cue, which can also act as a further cue – an indication to take the play further.

The **frame** can be:

- **physical** – a place or space, which could be as small as a cardboard box or as large as a playing field and which might be visibly indicated by mats, stones, rope, tyres, clothes, a hedge or fence, or a structure, platform, den, room or corridor.
- **narrative** – a new or a favourite storyline, a song or a piece of music, or a set of agreed rules. Any of these can give the reason for playing and hold the play together.
- **emotional** – when play is exploring a feeling such as fear, grief or triumph, so the props, the action, the place and the story can keep changing because it's the experience of the feeling that holds it all together.

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