

Dibs in Search of Self



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF VIRGINIA AXLINE

Axline was born in Indiana in 1911 and raised in Columbus, Ohio. After teaching elementary school for several years, she enrolled as a graduate student at Ohio State University, where she collaborated with Carl Rogers on person-centered therapy. In 1945, Axline became Rogers's research associate at the University of Chicago Counseling Center, where she developed her approach to child counseling. She gradually developed non-directive play therapy, and later, child-centered play therapy. In 1947, Axline published *Play Therapy*, which enumerated her theory of child psychotherapy. In 1950, Axline completed her Doctor of Education at Columbia University. She taught for six years at NYU's School of Medicine and School of Education, and for seven years at Columbia University. She then returned to Ohio. In 1964, Axline published *Dibs in Search of Self*, which is still hailed as one of the most influential books in the field of play therapy. Axline died in 1988 in Columbus, Ohio.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Axline's development of non-directive play therapy was adapted from the work of Carl Rogers's, who created person-centered therapy in the 1940s. Person-centered therapy's goal is to create an empathetic environment in which patients can learn to accept themselves and achieve personal fulfillment. It is now recognized as one of the major schools of psychotherapy. Axline worked under Rogers in graduate school, applying basic principles from person-centered therapy to children in play environments. She believed that not only should the therapist be empathetic and non-judgmental, but that they should also allow children to self-direct their play and set the therapy's pace. Person-centered therapy builds on humanistic psychology, which grew in opposition to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory (established in the early 1890s) and B. F. Skinner's behaviorism (established in 1938). In *Dibs in Search of Self*, however, Axline repudiates both of these therapeutic methods.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In 1947, Axline wrote *Play Therapy*, which outlined her philosophy on non-directive child play therapy—the method she uses with Dibs in *Dibs in Search of Self*. Eighteenth-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau also wrote about some of the foundational principals of play therapy in his book *Emile*, and Friedrich Fröbel emphasized the importance of symbolism of child's play in *The Education of Man*. Gary Landreth's *Play*

Therapy (1991) details various developments in the field of play therapy since 1947. For case studies in child psychology, *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog*, written by child psychiatrist Dr. Bruce D. Perry, focuses on several stories of children dealing with trauma and immense stress as they develop, detailing how their brains have the capacity to heal. Other popular child psychology books that detail how to deal with children's emotional struggles include *The Whole Brain Child* and *No-Drama Discipline*, both written by Daniel J. Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Dibs in Search of Self
- **When Written:** 1954–1964
- **Where Written:** New York, New York
- **When Published:** 1964
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Nonfiction; Psychology
- **Setting:** New York City
- **Climax:** Dibs and Axline visit a church during his final play therapy session
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Required Reading. *Dibs in Search of Self* is often used as a foundational text in counselor training programs, especially courses focused on working with children and families.

The Test of Time. Although there have been developments in the field of play therapy since the mid-20th century, the practice is still largely based on Axline's work.



PLOT SUMMARY

Author and clinical psychologist Dr. Virginia Axline visits a private school on New York's Upper East Side to observe a five-year-old boy named Dibs. Dibs rarely interacts with others, and he often lashes out at his teachers and throws temper tantrums. The teachers have a hard time categorizing him: they think he might be mentally disabled, though at times he seems highly intelligent. He may even know how to read. After observing Dibs at school, Axline also meets with Dibs's mother and father. His mother is cold and resigned to the situation—she doesn't think that Dibs can be helped. Nevertheless, Dibs's parents agree to bring him to weekly play therapy sessions with Axline.

During Dibs's first few sessions, he is tentative and afraid. Axline is patient with Dibs, simply acknowledging what he's doing rather than judging him. She doesn't try to lead his activities; instead, she allows him to take the initiative. Axline also sets clear parameters for their meetings and empathizes with Dibs when he gets upset. With Axline's help defining and expressing his anger and disappointment, Dibs is better able to cope with these emotions.

As Dibs continues his therapy, he also begins to show his intelligence: he reads advanced words, fixes broken toys, and paints skillfully. Axline notes that Dibs uses his intelligence to avoid his emotions. At the same time, he often exhibits infantile behavior, like sucking on a **nursing bottle** or asking Axline for help taking off his hat and shoes. Over time, Dibs becomes more open about his feelings toward his family, expressing hostility and even violent thoughts toward his father, mother, and sister Dorothy as he plays.

After Dibs's fourth session, Dibs's mother meets with Axline to explain some of Dibs's background, admitting that she's never understood him and that she and her husband never planned on having children. When they began to think that Dibs was mentally disabled, they cut him off from the world because they were ashamed of him. A neurologist couldn't find anything wrong with Dibs, and a psychiatrist told Dibs's parents that *they* were the problem, and that Dibs was emotionally deprived. Dibs's mother acknowledges that Dibs does seem to be getting better: he doesn't throw as many tantrums, and he talks more. Axline tells Dibs's mother that she doesn't think Dibs is mentally disabled. This reassures his mother, and Axline thinks that Dibs's mother needs empathy and non-judgment just as much as Dibs does.

Over Dibs's next few sessions, he seems happier. He also speaks with more sophisticated language and is more open about his thoughts—even though they are often still violent and hostile. Dibs tells Axline how much he likes the playroom where they have their sessions—it's a place where he can just "be." He also tells Axline about his grandmother and the family gardener, Jake, both of whom are kind to Dibs.

At his ninth session, Dibs pretends to hold a tea party with other children. When Dibs accidentally spills one of the cups, he harshly berates himself and calls himself stupid. Axline reassures him that it was just an accident, which helps Dibs gradually acknowledge that, while he may have been careless, he's not stupid. The following week, Dibs plays with the dollhouse in the playroom and pretends to **lock** the doll family in the house. Then, he pretends that the doll family is trapped in a house fire. While Dibs does this, he sobs about all the times his parents have locked him in his room. After acknowledging these emotions, Dibs then pretends that the little boy doll rescues the rest of the family.

The following week, when Dibs's mother picks him up, he

exclaims excitedly that he loves his mother, which makes her cry. Dibs's mother meets with Axline the next day, very touched by Dibs's improvement and his expression of love. She thanks Axline for all the work she's done, and she confesses that she always believed Dibs was intelligent. Dibs's mother then recounts more of Dibs's early childhood: she'd wanted to prove that Dibs could learn and that she could teach him. But this meant that his mother was constantly testing his abilities and failed to form a real bond with him. Axline then gets a call from Dibs's teachers, Miss Jane and Hedda, who report that they have also seen an improvement in Dibs.

Toward the end of Dibs's sessions, Axline observes that while Dibs still has some hostile feelings, he's now able to work through them. After Dibs and Axline return from their summer vacation, Dibs requests one more play session. Axline notes that he has become completely relaxed, happy, and talkative. For their final session, Dibs says goodbye to the playroom and the objects in it. He says that the nursing bottle gave him comfort when he needed it—but then he hurls it against the radiator, and it breaks. Then, Dibs asks if they can go over to the **church** across the street, and Axline agrees to take him. Dibs is awestruck by the church's beauty but a little afraid of the loud organ music. Back in the playroom, Dibs says a final goodbye to Axline.

Two and a half years later, Dibs and his family happen to move to Axline's neighborhood, and they see each other on the street. Dibs remembers Axline, recalling that he was initially afraid during their sessions, but that he appreciated how Axline made him feel secure and allowed him to have fun. Axline observes that Dibs learned how to believe in himself, which freed him.

Years later, Axline's friend, who teaches at a school for gifted boys, shows Axline a letter that 15-year-old Dibs wrote in the school newspaper, defending a friend who was caught cheating. The letter illustrates that Dibs isn't just bright—he's also morally upstanding and courageous.

Axline adds a final note to her book: a week after Dibs's therapy sessions ended, Dibs tested with an IQ of 168 and a reading score that was years beyond his age and grade level. Axline concludes that because Dibs and his mother were both able to express themselves to Axline without fear of criticism, they became freer and better able to handle their emotions.



CHARACTERS

Dibs – Dibs is a five-year-old boy whom Dr. Axline treats for his behavioral issues. At the beginning of the book, Dibs is withdrawn, rarely speaks, and lashes out at other children at school. He doesn't participate in any of the class's activities, but he throws bad temper tantrums when his teachers Miss Jane and Hedda tell him that he has to go home. At other times, the

teachers note that Dibs may actually be highly intelligent and able to read, which is why they call in Axline to help determine what his problems may be. Axline conducts weekly play therapy sessions with Dibs, and over the course of the sessions, Dibs improves markedly as Axline builds trust with him. Gradually, Dibs and his mother reveal some of the circumstances that have led to Dibs's poor emotional and social skills: she and Dibs's father did not want to have a child and were upset when they thought Dibs might be mentally disabled. Dibs's mother constantly tried to teach him and test him without building an emotional bond between them. His parents also judge him harshly when he makes mistakes or doesn't live up to their expectations, and they frequently **lock** him in his room as punishment for his emotional outbursts. As a result, Dibs is highly distrustful of everyone around him. Dibs also has little capacity to deal with his emotions at first: either he retreats from them, or he becomes completely distraught. Over time, as Axline empathizes and builds trust with Dibs during their sessions, she helps him understand his emotions and work through them. As his emotions are coaxed out into the open, Dibs reveals extreme hostility and violent thoughts toward his family—but as he learns how to express those emotions without judgment, he's better able to move past them. By the end of the book, after completing his therapy with Axline, Dibs has become a happy, carefree, and confident child—as well as an intellectually capable one. His classmates begin to accept him as he interacts with them more, and he builds a strong relationship with his parents and sister Dorothy.

Dr. Virginia Axline – Dr. Virginia Axline is the author and narrator of the book; she's a clinical psychologist who works with children in non-directive play therapy. The teachers at Dibs's school call Axline in because they aren't sure exactly how to diagnose or treat Dibs's problems. After observing Dibs and speaking with his mother and father, Axline conducts weekly play sessions with Dibs in which she allows him to take the initiative in whatever he wants to do. She outlines her goals for the reader: first and foremost, she wants to provide a nonjudgmental, empathetic environment for Dibs in which he's allowed to make his own decisions. Axline does this simply by acknowledging rather than evaluating the activities Dibs engages in. She also wants to help Dibs express and understand his feelings, which she often does by repeating statements he makes, so that he is better able to understand his own emotions. Furthermore, Axline tries to instill trust between them and foster Dibs's security in himself, giving clear parameters for their sessions and helping him accept rules and limitations. Yet while Axline wants to create a supportive atmosphere, she also helps Dibs accept that some parts of his world are beyond his control, and that Dibs can find security in himself as well as his environment. When she starts to observe that Dibs is extremely intelligent, she still prioritizes his emotional and social development, knowing that without those skills, his intelligence cannot be fully expressed. In Axline's

conversations with Dibs's mother, Axline also emphasizes that all people need empathy and understanding. Because she doesn't judge Dibs's mother, his mother gradually accepts her mistakes in raising Dibs and further improves their relationship. Axline's methods prove successful: by the end of the book, Dibs's behavior, moods, communication skills, and relationships have dramatically improved.

Dibs's Mother – Dibs's mother is initially described as a cold, emotionally withdrawn woman. She is a former surgeon who gave up her job when Dibs was born due to his developmental difficulties. Dibs's mother reveals that she and Dibs's father never wanted a child and were ashamed that their child might be mentally disabled. She also compares Dibs to his younger sister Dorothy, whom she calls a “perfect child” and uses as proof that Dibs's developmental issues are not her fault. At the beginning of the book, she is resigned to Dibs's situation: she isn't very empathetic toward him and views his problems scientifically rather than emotionally. Over time, as Dibs becomes happier, his mother reveals to Dr. Axline that she often tested Dibs growing up to prove that she could teach him and that Dibs could learn. She acknowledges, however, that this built an emotional wall between them—and indeed, in Dibs's therapy sessions with Axline, he often parrots his mother's critical words. In a later session, Dibs's mother also tells Axline that they once took Dibs to a psychiatrist, who told Dibs's parents that they were to blame for Dibs's emotional deprivation, which made Dibs's mother even more upset. This experience contrasts with Axline's emphasis on empathy in her clinical practice, since the psychiatrist's critical evaluation only made Dibs's parents more afraid and detached from others. As Dibs becomes more relaxed and confident over the course of his therapy with Axline, his mother grows happier as well, and they become more accepting of each other.

Dibs's Father – Dibs's father is strict man who's often critical of Dibs. He dislikes Dibs's emotional outbursts, and rather than responding empathetically, he frequently **locks** Dibs in his room. Dibs's father often calls him an “idiot” or a “stupid, careless child.” These harsh insults make Dibs very upset, which only worsens his tantrums. In play therapy sessions with Dr. Axline, Dibs expresses a great deal of anger and resentment toward his father. He often uses soldiers or the father doll in the dollhouse as proxies for his father. At times, Dibs knocks over the soldier he designates as “Papa,” threatens to shoot the father doll, or locks the doll in his room or in a jail that Dibs builds. Once, Dibs describes how the mother and father doll are locked in a house that's on fire, and Dibs cries because he remembers how sad he was when his own mother and father locked him in his room. This illustrates that Dibs simply wants a greater degree of empathy from his father, because he feels that his father doesn't fully understand the sorrow that he caused in Dibs's life. Over time, as Dibs continues his therapy and becomes more confident, these hostile feelings toward his

father diminish, and he and his father build a stronger, more open relationship.

Dorothy – Dorothy is Dibs’s younger sister. Dibs’s mother often describes Dorothy as a “perfect child,” and she and Dibs do not get along. Because of this, Dibs’s parents send Dorothy away to a boarding school during the week. Dibs expresses hostility toward Dorothy during his play sessions, as well as toward their mother and father. He sometimes wishes that Dorothy would get hurt, and he talks about poisoning her. Over time, however, Dibs becomes more empathetic toward Dorothy, explaining that it’s probably lonely to spend so much time away from the family. By the end of his sessions, he also takes the **nursing bottle** and holds it up to the “sister” doll’s lips, illustrating a new sense of responsibility and deep care for Dorothy.

Jake – Jake is Dibs’s family’s gardener. Jake is very kind to Dibs: when Dibs’s father asks Jake to trim a tree outside Dibs’s window, Jake saves the tip of the branch because he knows that Dibs liked to touch the branch. He also tells Dibs stories, like that of the last leaf on the tree which flew around the world and came back to tell Dibs about where it went. In his therapy sessions with Dr. Axline, Dibs explains that Jake had a heart attack and doesn’t often come around the house anymore. Nevertheless, Axline recognizes the value of the empathy that Jake showed Dibs.

Dibs’s Grandmother – Dibs’s maternal grandmother is one of the few people who empathizes with Dibs early on in his life. Unlike Dibs’s mother, who constantly tests Dibs, Dibs’s grandmother simply lets him be himself—and as a result, they have a good relationship. In his therapy sessions with Dr. Axline, Dibs often describes how much he loves his grandmother. Towards the end of the book, he even gives her the special branch that Jake gave him—an indication of his trust in her and her understanding of him.

Hedda – Hedda is one of Dibs’s teachers at school, along with Miss Jane. Hedda in particular takes an interest in Dibs’s well-being, as she worries about how his mother and father treat him at home. When Dibs starts to improve as a result of his therapy with Dr. Axline, Hedda and Miss Jane meet with Axline and are excited about his progress, particularly when he participates in a school assembly.

Miss Jane – Miss Jane is one of Dibs’s teachers at school, along with Hedda. At the beginning of the book, she and Hedda care deeply about Dibs but have trouble fully understanding his behavioral problems, which is why they call in Dr. Axline. Miss Jane tells Axline that she and the other teachers are unsure of how much Dibs absorbs from them, but she is excited when Dibs starts to make progress.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



THE THERAPY, EMPATHY, AND NON-JUDGMENT

Dibs in Search of Self follows author and psychologist Dr. Virginia Axline’s work with a five-year-old boy named Dibs. Dibs begins the book as withdrawn, combative, and generally uncommunicative: his teachers aren’t sure if he is mentally disabled or emotionally challenged, which is why they enlist Axline’s help. But over time, Axline and Dibs’s weekly play therapy sessions allow Dibs to open up about his thoughts and feelings. Even when he express severe sadness or violence, Axline never judges or punishes him; instead, her empathetic responses help Dibs understand and cope with his own emotions rather than isolate himself from others out of fear or anger. Axline’s approach suggests that children (and people in general) can benefit from non-judgmental therapies, because being heard and understood by others enables them to understand and work through their own emotions rather than be tormented by suppressed feelings.

Axline establishes Dibs’s withdrawn tendencies to illustrate how his unempathetic home life has left him emotionally deprived, to the point where those around him even believe that he’s mentally disabled. When Axline interviews Dibs’s teachers for the first time, they hint at Dibs’s home life: his father never picks him up from school, and his mother often sends her chauffeur in to collect him, particularly when he is throwing a tantrum because he doesn’t want to go home. The teachers note that his mother seems embarrassed and fatigued by his outbursts. Because Dibs’s parents do not have a desire to engage with or empathize with Dibs’s feelings, he mistrusts those around him and withdraws from the teachers and students at school. When Axline visits the family’s home, Dibs’s mother seems resigned to the situation—she comments that she doubts Dibs can be helped. Instead, she hopes Axline’s work with him will further Axline’s understanding of human behavior and perhaps help other children in the future. In the same interview, Axline hears faint screams from Dibs shouting, “No lock **door!** No lock door!” in another room. The stoic, scientific way in which Dibs’s mother describes her son as a research specimen, coupled with her indifference to his screaming, reinforces his emotional deprivation. Without any attempt from his parents to understand him or support him, Dibs is left feeling alone and afraid.

Axline then illustrates how her approach with Dibs aims to

create a non-judgmental environment, so that Dibs will be able to express emotions more freely and with a greater sense of safety. When Dibs begins his hour-long play therapy sessions, Axline tells him that he can choose what he wants to do with that time. At first, Dibs touches the objects in the room and names them. Axline makes placid comments like, “There are many different things in this room, aren’t there? And you have touched and named most of them.” When Dibs expresses a desire to take his hat and coat off and starts whimpering, Axline asks, “You would like to take them off, but you want me to help you? Is that it?” Rather than make judgements, she simply expresses an understanding of what Dibs is doing, conveys empathy for his feelings, and helps him recognize his emotions and desires. Later, Dibs starts to become more creative in his play, and he makes Axline a painting. She doesn’t say thank you or praise him for this, so that Dibs can “add more of his thoughts and feelings and not be abruptly cut off by [her] response and involvement and values or standards of behavior.” Through this method, Axline illustrates how even positive judgments can defeat her purpose: instead, she aims to help Dibs identify his feelings.

Gradually, Dibs’s play and Axline’s empathetic responses help Dibs express negative feelings about his family and move past them, illustrating the value of a non-judgmental environment. In one of Dibs’s sessions, he plays with a dollhouse.: he pretends that a fire breaks out and that the mother and father figures aren’t able to get out of the house because the doors are locked. Dibs begins to cry because he feels “The hurt of doors closed and locked,” and Axline puts her arm around him. After confronting these feelings, Dibs says that the boy doll goes to save the parents. Because Axline reacts empathetically and without criticizing Dibs for acting out his parents’ deaths, Dibs is able to resolve the issue internally. She notes that when Dibs leaves the playroom, he leaves behind “the sorrowful feelings that he had uprooted there.” Only through this compassionate and safe environment can he begin to heal from his painful experiences growing up. Dibs further confronts his feelings about his father when he plays with Axline’s tape recorder, saying explicitly that he hates his father. Dibs also builds a prison for the father doll, explaining that he’s punishing the father for all the things he did that made Dibs sad and unhappy. Then, Dibs brings the boy doll over and digs his father out of prison, and the father says that he is sorry and that he loves and needs Dibs. Through therapy, Dibs is able to express his emotions but also work through them and extend empathy to his father. Dibs has the same experience expressing feelings about his sister Dorothy: in a later session, he says that he is going to poison the sister doll because she is a “brat” who “screams and scratches and hurts [him].” However, he also says that his relationship with Dorothy has improved. When Axline prompts him again, saying, “so that is poison for the sister?” Dibs replies that he won’t give it to her yet. Again, being prompted to evaluate his thoughts and having a non-

judgmental listener allows Dibs to identify the negative feelings about his family and move beyond them.



PARENTAL EXPECTATIONS VS. SELF-DETERMINATION

Throughout five-year-old Dibs’s play therapy sessions and in conversations with his mother, psychologist and author Dr. Virginia Axline discovers that the way Dibs’s parents treat him is often based on whether he meets their expectations. This causes Dibs, who is actually a highly intelligent child, to hide his abilities: he doesn’t feel free to be himself, and he worries about being punished for not meeting his parents’ expectations. The book thus illustrates how parental expectations and evaluation can weigh heavily on children; instead, allowing children to develop at their own pace and be themselves enables them to be happy and reach their full potential.

Dibs’s mother describes her constant critiques of Dibs growing up, ultimately acknowledging that this led to his stunted emotional development. After a few of Dibs’s play therapy sessions, Dibs’s mother spends an hour with Axline and explains their family history: she reveals that she and Dibs’s father never wanted to have children, and that Dibs’s conception was a surprise. Then, when they believed he was mentally disabled, they hid him from the world because they valued intelligence over all else and were ashamed of him. In this way, Dibs’s inability to live up to their expectations left him shut off from the world even from birth. In a second interview, Dibs’s mother relays that during Dibs’s first few years, she was always testing him as a way to prove that he was intelligent and that she could teach him. She admits, “I don’t think any child was ever so tormented with the constant demands made upon him that he pass this test and that test.” Dibs’s mother sees that in setting high expectations for Dibs, she built an emotional wall between them, depriving her son of the love that’s necessary for a child to develop properly and be happy.

Dibs’s frustration with being constantly evaluated comes up in his play therapy, illustrating how heavily his parents’ expectations—and his failure to meet them—still upsets him. In one session, Dibs acts out a tea party with other children. But when he accidentally tips over a cup that he imagines has water in it, he says that the tea party is over and harshly berates himself. When Axline says that the spilled tea was an accident, Dibs yells, “stupid people make accidents!” and says that “it was very stupid of him to be so clumsy,” referring to himself in the third person. These words—which are implied to parrot those of his parents—illustrate his anxiety over common mistakes, and it shows that his parents’ criticism has deprived him of joy. In another session, Dibs recalls a time when he ran into the house too quickly, bumped into a table, and nearly knocked over a lamp. His father called him a “stupid, silly, careless boy,” and said that he was ashamed of his son. The fact that Dibs can

recall these stories so vividly shows how impactful and upsetting this treatment from his parents is, and how it reinforces his sense of being evaluated and unloved when he accidentally makes childish mistakes. Axline determines that this is why Dibs often acts like a baby around his father and refuses to respond when his parents speak to him: “Dibs was an expert at withholding speech as a way of getting back at his critical father.” He has learned to use his father’s expectations against him by isolating himself and diminishing his capabilities. The more Dibs acts like a baby or makes mistakes, the angrier his father gets, and the more Dibs withdraws in revenge—all of this leads to a harmful cycle of emotional deprivation.

Play therapy helps Dibs understand himself better and not be confined to the expectations that his parents set for him, allowing him to develop a freer, happier version of himself. Throughout their early sessions, Axline notes the “conflict [Dibs] had between expectations of his behavior and his own striving to be himself—sometimes very capable, sometimes a baby.” Dibs finds comfort in sucking on a **nursing bottle** or curling up as though he is in a crib. Axline understands that this behavior is Dibs’s way of expressing his desire to be “respected and loved for *all* his qualities.” In acting like a baby, he is attempting to subvert his parents’ high expectations and be cared for even though he is capable. In one session, Dibs mischievously mixes up jars of paint and the brushes that correspond to the jars, so that every color has an incorrect brush. Then, he corrects the brushes. When Axline asks if either way is okay, Dibs says, “In here, it’s all right just to be,” smiling and patting Axline’s hand. This observation, coupled with an unusual show of tender emotion, demonstrates the freedom that Dibs finds when he’s given permission to be who he is and do what he wants during play therapy. Dibs reiterates this idea in one of his final therapy sessions, after he has become more relaxed. He said that the therapy playroom has always been “As I said I wanted it,” a phrase that he repeats a few times. He calls the playroom “wonderful” and whirls around it, laughing. This suggests that Dibs appreciates the freedom and self-determination that he has been allowed in the playroom, and Axline illustrates clearly how this has made Dibs a happier child.

Axline concludes Dibs’s story with these words: “Yes, Dibs had changed. He had learned how to be himself, to believe in himself, to free himself. Now he was relaxed and happy. He was able to be a child.” Instead of being constantly compared to his parents’ expectations, Dibs’s ability to be himself and determine his own actions is what allows him to be that happy child.



TRUST AND SECURITY

When psychologist and author Dr. Virginia Axline meets five-year-old Dibs, she notes Dibs’s hostility toward those around him. She consequently

recognizes the importance of cultivating mutual trust and security between herself and Dibs, so that Dibs can feel more relaxed and open in his life. Axline makes sure that Dibs understands their sessions’ parameters (one hour a week in which Dibs can determine what he wants to do) and tries to communicate her confidence in his abilities. Through his trust in Axline, Dibs also finds security within himself as he comes to understand that he can handle changes and emotions rather than depending on others to provide him with security. While children’s security in their environments and the adults in their lives are crucial for their development, Dibs’s journey suggests that it’s even more important for children to feel secure in themselves.

In Dibs’s initial sessions, Axline establishes how Dibs’s mistrust of his environment and the people around him causes him emotional distress. In Dibs’s first play therapy session with Axline at his school, he barely looks at her, instead focusing on the objects in the room. Axline describes how Dibs averts his eyes if their glances meet. This distrustful instinct plays out in Dibs’s other relationships, as he lashes out at other children and cuts himself off from his teachers and parents. Axline demonstrates that when any new experience is instantly met with distrust, children rarely feel safe. Also in their first hour, Dibs says, “No lock **doors**,” over and over again—and Axline notes that he says this with “a sob in his voice.” Dibs’s inability to control the locked doors in his life—both figurative and literal—has led him to be cut off from others, adding to his distrust of unknown people and situations. Without personal freedom, Dibs feels insecure, which causes emotional distress.

Axline then illustrates how building up mutual trust and security between herself and Dibs helps Dibs overcome his hostility and uncertainty. Axline first demonstrates her trust in Dibs—not only by allowing him to pick his own activities during their play sessions, but by giving him greater responsibility. In her initial visit to Dibs’s school, she sees that the teachers have to hold Dibs’s hand to bring him into the classroom. But when Axline brings Dibs back from the playroom, she only walks him halfway to the classroom and then asks if he can make it the rest of the way on his own. She notes that when Dibs walks alone, he seems proud of what he accomplished when he reaches the door. This illustrates how Axline’s trust in Dibs helps ease his insecurity on the whole. Axline also notices that Dibs throws tantrums at school when he has to leave for the day. To counter this, Axline explains to Dibs that he only has an hour to spend with her in their play sessions; she helps him accept this reality by telling him when he has five minutes left. She notes, “A child gets his feelings of security from predictable and consistent and realistic limitations.” Consequently, for the first time, Dibs doesn’t put up a fuss with his mother when he has to leave for his session, affirming how these boundaries give Dibs greater security and help him counter his distress.

Dibs consequently learns to find security not just in his

environment or his relationship with Axline, but in himself—and Axline suggests that this kind of security is even more important, because it allows Dibs to be independent and responsible for his own emotions. In Dibs's third therapy session, he doesn't need Axline's help to put on his clothes or walk to the lobby, nor does he need any prompting about leaving at the end of the session. As Axline notes, "responsible freedom grows and develops from inside the person," and she sees that Dibs is fostering that "responsible freedom." This enables him to act independently and gain confidence in himself. Later, during Dibs's fourth session, he discovers that his toys were moved, even though he asked Axline not to move them. He grows upset, but Axline tells him that she did not promise that they would not be moved. She helps Dibs understand his anger and sadness and also allows him to realize that the outside world is always changing—and that, often, people have little control over these elements. While Dibs found security in the toys, Axline hopes to help him "utilize [his] inner resources" and "carry [his] security around with [him]." Sure enough, Dibs learns to cope with that disappointment and continues to play rather than letting his emotions get the better of him. In their final two sessions, Axline observes that Dibs has a "feeling of deep security inside himself" and takes responsibility for his feelings. And with this confidence and security, Axline finds, Dibs is "no longer afraid to be himself." Only by developing security and confidence within himself is he able to use his intellect and emotions appropriately, rather than shut himself off as he had done at the beginning of his sessions. When Dibs and Axline meet two years after they have finished their sessions, Dibs is happy, confident, and sociable. He confesses that he was frightened when he started the play therapy sessions, but he recalls that Axline said, "This is all yours, Dibs. Have fun. Nobody is going to hurt you in here." Axline never, in fact, said these things to Dibs, but his recounting of these words illustrates how she nonverbally communicated that feeling to him. Through his trust in Axline and a safe environment, Dibs was consequently able to find security in himself and carry that new confidence throughout the rest of his life.



INTELLIGENCE VS. EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL SKILLS

Throughout Dibs's early life, his teachers, psychiatrists, and parents have difficulty understanding his withdrawn, hostile, and at times infantile behavior. When author and psychologist Dr. Virginia Axline conducts play therapy sessions with Dibs, she observes that he actually has an impressive intellect—but at the same time, she notes that his social and emotional skills are severely lacking, to the point that people question his intelligence and believe he may be mentally disabled. Axline thus demonstrates how superior intelligence isn't very valuable, nor can it be to be fully

understood, without social and emotional skills; all three are necessary for a happy, well-rounded child.

When Axline first meets Dibs, Dibs's intelligence is entirely obscured because of his emotional difficulties, illustrating how intelligence cannot thrive without social skills. When Dibs's teachers first brief Axline about Dibs, they explain that, at times, he seems to be mentally disabled because of his withdrawn nature and temper tantrums. One of the teachers, Hedda, explains that Dibs often looks at books "as though he could read"—but whenever teachers approach him to ask about his books, he throws them away from himself. The teachers aren't able to identify Dibs's intelligence, which demonstrates that intelligence alone does not make a fully functioning child. Later, Dibs's mother tells Axline that she constantly tested Dibs's intelligence over the years but never really formed an emotional connection with him. Axline observes, "his intellectual abilities had been used to test him. They had become a barrier and a refuge from a world he feared. It had been defensive, self-protective behavior." In this way, Dibs's social skills and intelligence have always been at odds with each other: prioritizing one at the expense of the other has left Dibs feeling isolated and deprived. In Dibs's play therapy sessions, Axline finds that whenever Dibs is confronted with stress, sadness, or anger, his language becomes confused, and he reverts to an infantile state, often sucking on a **nursing bottle** even though he's five years old. One day, when Axline tells Dibs that he has to go home, he grows very upset. Axline notes, "Here was a child very capable of great intellectual achievement, whose abilities were dominated by his emotional disturbance." In other words, it doesn't matter that Dibs is smart—because he is unable to deal with his emotions, his intelligence remains under wraps.

Axline reinforces in her own notes that she doesn't want to focus too much on Dibs's intellectual abilities, because it's more important to help him develop his social skills. When Axline learns how much pressure Dibs's parents put on his intelligence, she notes, "This kind of exploitation of the child's ability, to the exclusion of a balanced emotional life, could destroy him." In starkest terms, she recognizes that fostering intelligence isn't the only important factor in a child's development. Axline even asserts this point when she discovers that Dibs is tempering his intelligence in class. After many sessions, she meets with Dibs's teachers Hedda and Miss Jane for a progress report in school. They excitedly tell Axline that Dibs is now writing rudimentary sentences and painting very basic pictures. Axline is surprised by this, because she knows that Dibs can achieve a lot more. However, she understands that social development is more important for Dibs at this stage than making sure he displays his skills at reading and writing. She asks rhetorically, "What advantage is there in high intellectual achievement if it cannot be used constructively for the good of the individual and the good of others?" While Axline

understands the importance of helping Dibs feel comfortable showing his capabilities, it is more important for him to first feel accepted by and connected to his classmates and teachers. Only by fostering these emotional and social connections can Dibs then grow comfortable expressing his intelligence.

Indeed, Dibs's only fulfills his intellectual potential after he's gained more emotional intelligence and social skills. In one of Dibs's final sessions, after developing tools to help understand and cope with his social and emotional isolation, Dibs plays with a toy set that allows him to build his own city. He is excited to build "a world full of friendly people"—a far cry from the hostility he showed to others when he began his sessions. Axline describes how Dibs "[builds] a well-organized world, full of people and action. His plans showed high intelligence, a grasp of the whole as well as the details of his concepts. There was purpose, integration, creativity in his design." She implies that these two things are tied: without Dibs's improved social skills and his newfound excitement about interacting with others, he could not have displayed this intelligence.

Years later, when Dibs is 15 years old, Axline receives a note from a friend who teaches at a school for gifted boys that Dibs now attends. Axline's friend explains that Dibs wrote a letter on behalf of a peer who was caught cheating and dismissed from the school. Dibs passionately argues that his friend was only trying to verify his work's accuracy and that examinations should not be used to humiliate students who are simply trying to succeed. Axline's friend says that Dibs is "a brilliant boy. Full of ideas. Concerned about everybody and everything. Very sensitive. A real leader." This upholds Axline's earlier assessment that intelligence isn't very valuable unless it's used constructively for the good of others. Here, Dibs uses his intellect to stand up for what is right on behalf of a friend: it is the combination of his intelligence and social skills that prove him to be a truly brilliant child.

other people, as doors and locks constantly appear in his play therapy with Axline. He draws a lock on the door of the dollhouse in the play therapy room, and when he paints a picture of a house, he also includes a lock on it. Dibs is clearly preoccupied with doors and locks, which highlights his lack of security in his environment—he's never sure when the doors and walls around him will be used to isolate him. Dibs's intense fear additionally illustrates that he doesn't want to be so separated from the world; instead, he yearns to remove the walls in his life. He often literally does this with the dollhouse, removing the walls and the doors so that it is open and exposed. This action symbolizes Dibs's wish to improve his social skills and be accepted by those around him.



THE NURSING BOTTLE

The toy nursing bottle represents Dibs's progression from insecurity to confidence. A nursing bottle is quite literally a marker of infancy, as it mimics the experience of breastfeeding and provides babies with nourishment and comfort. Dibs often drinks from the nursing bottle in the playroom, particularly in his early sessions with Dr. Axline, and he sometimes pretends that he's lying in a crib as he does so. Acting like a baby seems to be a way of hiding from the burden of his parents' high expectations for his behavior—and in this way, the nursing bottle enables Dibs's insecurity and gives him a degree of comfort.

At other times, Dibs affirms that he doesn't need the nursing bottle, suggesting greater maturity and security in himself. But Dibs does recognize that it's okay to drink from the nursing bottle if he wants to, even as he does so less frequently, indicating a greater acceptance of his more infantile tendencies. In this way, he learns that he is happier when *he* can determine what he wants to be and do, rather than trying to live up to his parents' ideas of how he should act.

Finally, at the end of Dibs's last session, he says that he doesn't need the nursing bottle anymore; he hurls the bottle away from him, and it breaks. This suggests that Dibs no longer needs the nursing bottle—and, by extension, he no longer feels the need to hide behind an infantile persona. He's grown more mature and confident in himself through his therapy sessions, and he now feels comfortable acting however he wants to.



WIND

Wind symbolizes Dibs's freedom and confidence. In Dibs's seventh therapy session with Dr. Axline, he tells a story about how the wind whispers to the trees, and how the trees are jealous of the wind because the wind can go wherever it wants to, while the trees are lonely and sad. This story reveals Dibs's own feelings, as he identifies with the solitary and stationary trees and envies the carefree wind. Dibs



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



DOORS, WALLS, AND LOCKS

Doors, walls, and locks symbolize Dibs's alienation and lack of acceptance by others. In Dibs's very first therapy session with Dr. Axline, he expresses how much he doesn't like locked doors—and gradually, Axline discovers that this is because Dibs's parents often punish him by locking him in his room. In this way, doors and walls literally separate Dibs from others. And on a figurative level, they remind him of the fact that he doesn't live up to his parents' expectations and therefore isn't accepted by them.

Dibs is painfully aware he is of how disconnected he is from

also explains how his family's gardener, Jake, gave Dibs the last leaf from the tree outside his window, which Jake told him was blown all over the world by the wind and then returned to Dibs. Dibs identifies with this leaf, suggesting that he wants to be freer and less isolated—moving with the wind—even though the leaf is a part of the lonely and stagnant tree.

However, by the end of the book, Dibs's teachers Miss Jane and Hedda tell Axline that Dibs played the part of the wind in a school assembly, which indicates that Dibs's therapy sessions have given him a newfound sense of confidence and freedom. The teachers also describe how other students enjoyed watching Dibs playing the part. In this way, the wind both literally and figuratively mitigates Dibs's isolation, frees him from his fears of rejection, and enables him to connect with others.



THE CHURCH

The church represents Dibs's self-determination and willingness to pursue the unknown. There is a big church across the street from the Child Guidance Center, where Dibs has his play therapy sessions with Dr. Axline, and he often looks at it out the window of the playroom. He comments during several therapy sessions that his mother and father do not go to church, but his grandmother and the family's gardener, Jake, do. Dibs expresses a desire to go to church and believe in God, which shows his willingness to break from his parents' expectations, even though he acknowledges that he doesn't fully understand God.

At Dibs's final session, he asks to go to the church, and he and Axline go together. This is a sharp contrast to Dibs's first session, when he primarily looked around the playroom and named all of the objects in it. Whereas that activity was intended to maximize his safety and comfort, here Dibs shows that he now feels confident and secure enough to explore and discover something unknown. At the church, the music scares Dibs a little, but he's also awestruck by its beauty. Ending with the visit to the church thus represents Dibs's transformation into much more self-determined and courageous child than he was when he began therapy and still felt beholden to his parents' expectations. Even though Dibs still has fears, he's now able to overcome them and try new things on his own terms.





QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Ballantine edition of *Dibs in Search of Self* published in 1964.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ At one time he seemed to be extremely retarded mentally. Another time he would quickly and quietly do something that indicated he might even have superior intelligence. If he thought anyone was watching him, he quickly withdrew into his shell. Most of the time he crawled around the edge of the room, lurking under tables, rocking back and forth, chewing on the side of his hand, sucking his thumb, lying prone and rigid on the floor when any of the teachers or children tried to involve him in some activity. He was a lone child in what must have seemed to him to be a cold, unfriendly world.

Related Characters: Dr. Virginia Axline (speaker), Hedda, Miss Jane, Dibs

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

Before Dibs's school brings in Dr. Axline to observe his behavior in the classroom, Dibs's teachers Miss Jane and Hedda provide background on how Dibs usually acts. Their assessments establish Dibs's many behavioral problems—and most importantly, they establish the tension between Dibs's intelligence and his social skills. By the end of the book, it is clear that Dibs is incredibly intelligent, particularly when he tests with an IQ of 168 (a genius IQ). Yet here, his lack of social and emotional skills completely obscured by his cognitive abilities. Several times over the course of the book, Axline points out that when Dibs is emotionally distressed, he reverts to infantile behavior and has a difficult time using his intellect properly. That pattern plays out here, to the point that Dibs isn't able to utilize his intellect at all. This demonstrates one of Axline's major arguments: that intelligence alone does not make for a fully-functioning, well-rounded child.

This description is essentially Dibs's starting point, and it's striking when compared to his behavior after undergoing months of therapy with Axline. Here, Dibs feels insecure about his environment or the people around him, and he therefore shuts himself off from his surroundings out of fear. But as Dibs progresses in therapy, he finds security in Axline, in the play therapy room, and most importantly, within himself. He is then able to hold onto that sense of security when he's in less predictable environments, like his classroom.

Chapter 2 Quotes



●● He clasped his hands tightly together against his chest and said over and over again “No lock doors. No lock doors. No lock doors.” His voice took on a note of desperate urgency. “Dibs no like locked doors,” he said. There was a sob in his voice.


I said to him, “You don’t like the doors to be locked.”

Dibs seemed to crumple. His voice became a husky whisper. “Dibs no like closed doors. No like closed and locked doors. Dibs no like walls around him.”

Obviously he had had some unhappy experiences with closed and locked doors. I recognized the feelings he expressed.

Related Characters: Dibs, Dr. Virginia Axline (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 29-30

Explanation and Analysis



When Dr. Axline observes Dibs at his school, she takes him to a separate playroom for an hour, and Dibs expresses his deep-seated hatred of locked doors. These become a recurring symbol throughout Dibs’s play sessions, as he often incorporates closed and locked doors when he plays with the dollhouse or paints pictures. Yet, even though Axline doesn’t fully appreciate the symbolism of the closed and locked doors yet, here they clearly represent Dibs’s intense lack of security in his environment. His parents often punish him by locking him in his bedroom, separating him from the outside world because they’re ashamed of his behavior. Thus, the real locked doors in Dibs’s have led him to be literally cut off from others. They also cut him off figuratively, as they emotionally isolate him and make him fearful of new people and environments.

In this exchange, Axline also introduces her therapy methods: that of empathy and nonjudgment. Rather than try to question Dibs about the locked doors in his life, she simply acknowledges and empathizes with his feelings. Her goal is not to push Dibs to address things that hurt him; instead, it is to help him understand his feelings. Her observation that Dibs is literally “crumpling” shows how bottling up these emotions is even physically debilitating for him. But by providing an environment in which Dibs feels comfortable expressing these fears, Axline hopes that she can help diminish them.

●● I did this because I hoped Dibs would gradually become more and more self-sufficient and responsible. I wanted to communicate to him my confidence in his ability to measure up to my expectations. I believed he could do it. [...] I would have gone all the way to the door of his room with him, if he had seemed to need that much support. But he went by himself. I said, “Goodbye, Dibs!”

He said, “That’s right!” [...] He looked surprised—almost pleased. He walked into his room and closed the door firmly behind him. It was the first time Dibs had ever gone any place alone.

Related Characters: Dibs, Dr. Virginia Axline (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis



After Dr. Axline and Dibs spend an hour together in the playroom at Dibs’s school, Axline lets Dibs walk halfway back to his classroom by himself. As Axline explains in this quote, her goals touch upon two of the major themes in the book. First, by allowing Dibs to walk back to the classroom on his own, Axline is communicating her trust in him as a capable person. And in noting that Dibs looks “almost pleased” with himself—the first expression of happiness that she has seen in him—she illustrates that this trust allows Dibs to build his own confidence in turn.

However, Axline also emphasizes that her approach is meant to help Dibs become more self-determined, but not to evaluate him. She explains that if Dibs needed it, she would have gone all the way to the door with him. Her suggestion is therefore not meant to be a test, which provides a contrast with how Dibs’s parents often treat him. Instead, the goal is to help Dibs make his own determinations about what he can and cannot do, or what he does and does not want to do. Only by assessing these things can Dibs fulfill his own potential and become a person in his own right—and this is the first baby step toward that goal as he recognizes his own abilities.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☝☝ I attempted to keep my comments in line with his activity, trying not to say anything that would indicate any desire on my part that he do any particular thing, but rather to communicate understandingly and simply, recognition in line with his frame of reference. I wanted him to lead the way. I would follow. [...] I didn't want to go overboard and exclaim about his ability to do all these things. Obviously he could do these things. When the initiative is left up to the individual, he will select the ground upon which he feels his greatest security.

Related Characters: Dr. Virginia Axline (speaker), Dibs

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 44



Explanation and Analysis

At Dibs's first session with Dr. Axline, Dibs begins by touching and naming the objects around the room, and Axline acknowledges each object as he does so. This is a key part of Axline's therapy strategy throughout the book, as it is a major way of being empathetic and non-judgmental. As she implies here, having a strong reaction to Dibs's ability to name each of the objects might seem condescending and imply that she didn't expect Dibs to be able to do these things. Instead, Axline simply wants to show Dibs that she understands some of his thoughts and feelings—she hopes that this, in turn, will make him feel freer to express his feelings.

Creating security is also another important aspect of Axline's therapy. Here, Dibs is trying to establish some security in his environment by understanding what lies within it. He is also attempting to establish security and trust between himself and Axline, as he doesn't yet know exactly what she's going to do. Just after this, Axline notes that this activity is likely Dibs's way of establishing verbal communication between the two of them. Thus, it's important for Axline to express recognition of Dibs's activities, but not to try to push him toward anything. In this way, Axline's goal (as the book's title implies) is to help Dibs figure out who he is and what he wants.

☝☝ If I could get across to Dibs my confidence in him as a person who had good reasons for everything he did, and if I could convey the concept that there were no hidden answers for him to guess, no concealed standards of behavior or expression that were not openly stated, no pressure for him to read my mind and come up with a solution that I had already decided upon, no rush to do everything today—then, perhaps, Dibs would catch more and more of a feeling of security and of the rightness of his own reactions so he could clarify, understand, and accept them.

Related Characters: Dr. Virginia Axline (speaker), Dibs's Father, Dibs's Mother, Dibs

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 45-46

Explanation and Analysis

During Dibs's first session with Dr. Axline, Dibs asks Axline to help him when a stack of blocks falls over—but when Axline asks him what he needs, he simply stands silently and thinks. Here, Axline introduces another of her primary goals with Dibs: to enable him to be more self-determined. She describes how she doesn't want Dibs to live up to some kind of unknown expectation in her head. Her description of the different expectations she might possess also reinforce her empathy for Dibs, as she knows that he might be stymied by trying to read her mind. Axline acknowledges that expectations can sometimes be confusing for children, and that children like Dibs are constantly trying to adhere to rules they may not always know. Yet Axline brings up these possibilities merely to demonstrate what she's trying to avoid in the therapy sessions—she wants to communicate to Dibs that she has no expectations.

This will become a key contrast between Axline and Dibs's parents, who constantly force Dibs to prove that he can meet their expectations and punish him when he does not. Rather than evaluating him, Axline simply wants to help Dibs become more decisive and confident in his own actions. This also plays into Dibs's security in himself: while his parents may not ever change their expectations of him, part of Dibs's development is for him to understand that his wishes and desires are more important than his parents'. Only then will he be able to build confidence in himself outside of their evaluation.

Chapter 5 Quotes

“You want to give me that, do you?” I said, gesturing toward his painting. He nodded. The purpose of this response, rather than an expression of thank you’s and praise, was to keep our communication open and to slow it down. Then, if he wanted to, he could add more of his thoughts and feelings and not be abruptly cut off by my response and involvement and values or standards of behavior.

Related Characters: Dr. Virginia Axline (speaker), Dibs

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 55



Explanation and Analysis

At Dibs’s second session, he paints a unique picture of a house, the sky, and grass. Then, he indicates that he wants to give the painting to her to Dr. Axline. Here, Axline elaborates on her reaction, which is not that of praise or thanks—emphasizing again how her primary therapeutic tactic in dealing with Dibs is one of nonjudgment. Her goal is not to involve her own evaluations or to try to place her standards on Dibs. Instead, the goal is for him to understand his own feelings, which is why Axline directs a question at him rather than a statement (and why she often defers to questions in general). Asking Dibs questions helps him process what he is thinking.

Again, Axline’s list of the reactions she *could* have illustrates the many different kinds of frameworks that adults put on children. She acknowledges that adults are constantly communicating their values, standards, and desires—but even positive judgments, as she notes here, could defeat her purpose. Instead, Axline’s goal is simply to allow Dibs the freedom to express himself.

He twisted his hands together and turned around toward me, looking very miserable and unhappy. “Miss A say it paint one picture of a house and then it leave you,” he said huskily. I noted how confused his language had become. Here was a child very capable of great intellectual achievement, whose abilities were dominated by his emotional disturbance.

Related Characters: Dibs, Dr. Virginia Axline (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of Dibs’s second therapy session, he becomes upset when Dr. Axline tells him that their hour-long session over. Axline sets a clear boundary for their time together in order to give Dibs a sense of security—she wants to make sure nothing happens that Dibs isn’t expecting. She even gives him a warning, telling him that he can paint one picture before he goes, in order to help him accept this reality. Despite Dibs’s emotional distress, he clearly understands this and is learning how to deal with parameters that he dislikes. And even though he is unhappy, he demonstrates progress by not throwing the kind of tantrums that he previously did in similar situations at school.

Axline also notes Dibs’s confused language, which highlights the relationship between Dibs’s intelligence and his emotional and social skills. This is a prime example of how Dibs’s intelligence is entirely obscured by his emotional instability. It doesn’t matter that he has great intellectual capacity—without the proper tools to cope with his emotions and express himself, his intelligence isn’t able to flourish, and his language becomes increasingly infantile and ungrammatical. Axline is aware of these issues, which is why she chooses to focus on coaxing out Dibs’s confidence in their sessions. Consequently, she can foster Dibs’s emotional and social skills, which will then bring out his intelligence.



“Come on Dibs. Put your arms into your coat sleeves.” He did. “Now sit down while I put your boots on.”

He sat down muttering “No go home. No want to go home. No feel like going home.”

“I know how you *feel*,” I told him.

A child gets his feelings of security from predictable and consistent and realistic limitations. I had hoped to help Dibs differentiate between his *feelings* and his actions. He seemed to have achieved a bit of this.

Related Characters: Dr. Virginia Axline (speaker), Dibs’s Mother, Dibs

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of Dibs’s second therapy session, he grows very upset at the idea of going home. Dr. Axline continues to reinforce her major strategies in treating Dibs here: she

wants to be empathetic with Dibs, so when he becomes upset, she tries to communicate that she understands his feelings. In this way, Axline puts herself in Dibs's corner, demonstrating that she is there to support him even when he reacts in a negative way. This contrasts with Dibs's circumstances at home and at school, where his parents and teachers often tune out his temper tantrums. Axline also supports Dibs in a tangible way by helping him put on his coat and boots. She simply makes her expectations for Dibs clear, without pushing him to do anything else.

This leads into one of Axline's other tactics: she tries to establish the "consistent and realistic limitations" she references here by telling Dibs that they only have an hour together and warning him when they have five minutes left. Even though Dibs initially reacts negatively, Axline's strategy proves effective: for the first time, Dibs walks back to the reception room without putting up a fuss with his mother. In this way, Axline's efforts to build empathy and trust between her and Dibs help Dibs feel less distressed and more willing to accept the parts of life that he cannot change.



regresses into infantile behavior, and his true intellectual capacity is obscured. Axline's observations make the point that intelligence alone isn't enough for Dibs to flourish—he needs to be able to resolve his inner emotional conflicts in order to fully utilize his intellect.


Axline also begins to evaluate Dibs's inner conflicts. She recognizes hints of the fact that Dibs's parents often place high expectations on him—a burden that runs throughout Dibs's play therapy sessions and is confirmed by his mother in a later chapter. This constant pressure makes Dibs want to prove his capabilities, as he does by reading, counting, and solving problems. But at the same time, he is tormented by the constant tests to which he has been subjected. This is why sucking on a nursing bottle seems to soothe him: it allows Dibs to escape from other people's expectations of him and revert back to a simpler, more infantile mindset. Through their play therapy, Axline hopes to help Dibs determine and act on his own desires rather than worrying about what others want him to do. This is an important skill for Dibs to develop, as it will allow him to feel freer and happier over time.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☝☝ I was interested in the manner in which Dibs had been displaying his ability to read, count, solve problems. It seemed to me that whenever he approached any kind of emotional reference he retreated to a demonstration of his ability to read. Perhaps he felt safer in manipulating intellectual concepts about *things*, rather than probing any deeper into feelings about himself that he could not accept with ease. Perhaps this was a brief bit of evidence of some conflict he had between expectations of his behavior and his own striving to be himself—sometimes very capable, sometimes a baby.

Related Characters: Dr. Virginia Axline (speaker), Dibs's Mother, Dibs

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

During Dibs's third therapy session, he sucks on the toy nursing bottle before reading the label on a box of counting blocks. In these actions, Dr. Axline observes the conflict between Dibs's intelligence and his emotional and social skills. When Dibs begins to feel negative emotions, he

Chapter 7 Quotes

☝☝ "It is gone," he said.

"And you feel angry and disappointed because of it don't you?" I asked.

Dibs nodded in agreement. He looked at me. I looked at him. What would ultimately help Dibs the most was not the sand mountain, not the powerful little plastic duck, but the feeling of security and adequacy that they symbolized in the creation he had built last week. Now, faced with the disappearance of the concrete symbols I hoped that he could experience within himself confidence and adequacy as he coped now with his disappointment and with the realization that things outside ourselves change—and many times we have little control over those elements, but if we learn to utilize our inner resources, we carry our security around with us.

Related Characters: Dibs, Dr. Virginia Axline (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

When Dibs returns for his fourth therapy session, he is incredibly upset to discover that some of his toys were moved in the sandbox, even though he asked Dr. Axline not to move them. This is another key lesson and development



in Dibs's play therapy. Axline explains that she never promised Dibs that she wouldn't move the toys, but at the same time, she continues to empathize with him. In this way, Axline remains on Dibs's side while also imparting the lesson that some aspects of life are outside of both of their control.

While Axline wants to create a safe and secure environment for Dibs (by setting up clear parameters for him or building trust with him), she also wants to show him that his world isn't completely static. More important than the security Dibs finds in Axline or in the room is the security that Dibs can build in himself—and this lesson helps Dibs foster that security. Even though he gets upset, he quickly overcomes this disappointment and continues to play, illustrating the effectiveness of Axline's strategy. Axline also broadens her analysis, providing a lesson not just for Dibs but for all children, and perhaps all people. The most important security, she emphasizes, is that within ourselves—with it, we can *all* be freer and happier.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☝☝ Her failure to relate to her child with love, respect and understanding was probably due to her own emotional deprivation. Who can love, respect, understand another person, if they have not had such basic experiences themselves? It seemed to me that it would be more helpful for her to have learned in this interview that she was respected and understood, even though that understanding was, of necessity, a more generalized concept which accepted the fact that she had reasons for what she did, that she had capacity to change, that changes must come from within herself, that all changes—hers, her husband's, Dibs'—are motivated by many accumulative experiences.

Related Characters: Dr. Virginia Axline (speaker), Dibs's Father, Dibs, Dibs's Mother

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

After Dibs's mother visits Dr. Axline's office for the first time and expresses her worries about Dibs, Axline provides these concluding thoughts on the meeting. Axline connects Dibs's mother to Dibs in two key ways: first, she illustrates that Dibs's mother suffers from many of the same problems as Dibs. She hides behind a keen intellect as a way of shielding herself from emotional insecurity (and Axline surmises that Dibs's father does the same). This is a


problem not only for Dibs, but also for Dibs's mother: neither of them is fully able to flourish without becoming more in tune with their emotions and being more expressive and loving. However, Dibs's mother does allow herself to be vulnerable and emotional with Axline—a clear step toward improving her relationship with Dibs.


In addition, Axline uses the same therapeutic approach with Dibs and his mother. Even though Axline assesses their behaviors and motivations, she does not express these assessments. Instead, she aims to provide empathy and a nonjudgmental environment for both of them to be more open. As Axline notes here, the most important thing she does in the interview is to make Dibs's mother feel she is "respected and understood." In this way, Axline demonstrates that the values and goals of play therapy are applicable not only to children, but to adults as well.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☝☝ "I keep that leaf," he said. "It is very tired and very old. But I keep that leaf. I mounted it and framed it. And I imagine some of the things it must have seen, flying all around the world with the wind. And I read in my books about the countries it saw."

Related Characters: Dr. Virginia Axline, Dibs (speaker), Jake

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 112-113

Explanation and Analysis

At Dibs's seventh therapy session, he recounts a story that his family's gardener, Jake, told him about the last leaf on the tree outside his window, which got blown all around the world and returned to Dibs because it liked him the best. Dibs's continued connection to the leaf, which Jake gave to him as a gift, shows how much he valued empathy even before meeting Dr. Axline, and even before he really understood what empathy meant. The story of the leaf is interesting on a symbolic level, as trees generally represent Dibs's isolation. He connects with the tree outside his window whenever his parents lock him in his room, and he described in an earlier story that trees are sad because they can't go anywhere—just like Dibs.

The wind, on the other hand, represents freedom, because it has the liberty to travel anywhere it wants to go. The leaf in the story therefore represents the link between these

two ideas. The leaf is part of a tree, and Dibs recalled how it felt bad about being left behind. However, it is able to fly around the world alongside the wind, and so Dibs's association with it indicates that he, too, may find freedom. It gives Dibs hope and motivation to connect with the world around him, which he did by reading about the different countries. Meanwhile, the very fact that Jake told Dibs this story implies that he understands Dibs' loneliness, and that he wants to help Dibs connect with the outside world.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☹️ “It was an accident,” I said.



“Stupid people make accidents!” He shouted. There were tears in his eyes. “The party is over. The children are all gone! There is no more party.” [...] He kicked over a chair. He swept the cups from the shelf. “I didn't want a party,” he shouted. “I didn't want any other children around.”

“It makes you angry and unhappy when something like that happens,” I said.

Dibs came over to me. “Let's go down to your office,” he said, “Let's get out of here. I am not *stupid*.”

“No. You are not stupid.”

Related Characters: Dr. Virginia Axline, Dibs (speaker), Dibs's Father, Dibs's Mother

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 133-134

Explanation and Analysis

At Dibs's eighth therapy session, he acts out a tea party with other children but stops abruptly when he accidentally spills tea. Dibs's reaction here shows the severe impact of his parents' expectations. During the tea party, he imitates his mother as he scolds himself for not pouring tea correctly and warning other children to sit quietly. And when he makes the common mistake of spilling tea, his reaction grows even worse: he berates himself, demonstrating his intense anxiety over something as minor as spilled tea because of the harsh reaction that his parents would have in this situation. It also demonstrates how their criticisms often deprive Dibs of joy: the mistake makes Dibs lash out and feel like he never wanted a tea party in the first place. This constant worry about failure likely infiltrates much of Dibs's life and prevents him from connecting with others. However, Dibs and Dr. Axline's exchange again emphasizes the importance of her empathy and non-judgment toward

Dibs. In contrast to his parents' criticisms, Axline approaches the mistake with compassion, explaining that Dibs didn't mean to tip over the cup. She also makes an effort to understand his emotions: she knows that Dibs is simply acting this way because of the burden of his parents' expectations. This empathetic approach is effective, as it affirms Dibs's self-worth and helps him calm down. He recognizes how to make himself feel better—going to Axline's office—and pursues that course of action. The self-determination and confidence that Dibs demonstrates here are key factors in his improvement.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☹️ “Oh no, Dibs!” I exclaimed. “That's scouring powder. Not good to taste!”

He turned and looked at me coldly. This sudden reaction of mine was inconsistent. “How can I tell how it tastes unless I taste?” he asked with dignity.

“I don't know of any other way,” I told him. “But I don't think you ought to swallow it. It isn't good to taste.”

Related Characters: Dibs, Dr. Virginia Axline (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 145

Explanation and Analysis

At Dibs's ninth session, he takes a can of scouring powder from above the sink and puts some of it into his mouth. His and Dr. Axline's subsequent exchange represents a counterexample to many of Axline's usual strategies and goals. Whereas usually Axline acts with empathy and non-judgment, here she very clearly doubts his choice, because it's for his own safety. In this way, Axline breaks some of their mutual trust, because she illustrates that she doesn't *fully* believe in Dibs's ability to make smart choices. This is why Dibs reacts so “coldly”—because Axline's reaction is such a reversal from their normal dynamic.

However, this episode still demonstrates some of Dibs's progress. In responding “with dignity,” Dibs shows a newfound confidence and self-assuredness. Even though Axline may not fully trust him with the scouring powder, Dibs has begun to trust his own actions. While their mutual trust is crucial for Dibs's development, the episode still proves Axline's assertion that the most important security for children is that which lies within themselves.


Chapter 15 Quotes

“I weep because I feel again the hurt of doors closed and locked against me,” he sobbed. I put my arm around him.

“You are feeling again the way you used to feel when you were so alone?” I said.

Dibs glanced back at the doll house. He brushed away his tears and stood there breathing heavily. “The boy will save them,” he said.

Related Characters: Dr. Virginia Axline, Dibs (speaker), Dibs’s Mother, Dibs’s Father

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 154

Explanation and Analysis

In Dibs’s 10th therapy session, he acts out the death of his mother and father: he pretends that there’s a fire in the dollhouse, and that the doll family can’t get out because all the doors and windows are locked. As Dr. Axline notes here, Dibs play helps him confront his own deeply sorrowful feelings about the way his parents treat him—but it is Axline’s response that enables him to do so. Instead of criticizing Dibs or punishing him for this violent fantasy, she extends empathy to him. Rather than even commenting on what he said, Axline simply puts her arm around him—both to comfort him and to demonstrate her understanding of his feelings.

Dibs also displays the pain that his parents’ expectations have brought him over the course of his childhood. He has stated many times in his therapy sessions that he doesn’t like locked doors, gradually revealing that his parents often lock him in his bedroom when they don’t like his behavior. In this way, locked doors symbolize Dibs’s lack of acceptance by others (particularly his parents), as they isolate him from the outside world.

Additionally, the fact that Dibs wants to retaliate with an equivalent punishment illustrates his recognition that his parents don’t empathize with him. If they did, they wouldn’t lock him in his bedroom, because they would understand the pain that he feels when this happens. In this way, Axline demonstrates the value of this empathetic therapy for Dibs, because he doesn’t feel the same compassion from his parents. As illustrated here, engaging in this play enables Dibs to then set aside the sadness that he felt during the exercise. Because Axline is nonjudgmental, Dibs doesn’t have to feel ashamed of his negative emotions; instead, he is able to express them and overcome them.

Chapter 16 Quotes

“Oh come, Dibs, fix them right,” he said lightly. “There is a correct way to do everything and you get them all in their proper order.”

“Do you think they should always be in a certain order?” I asked.

“Oh yes,” he said with a grin. “That is unless they all are mixed up.”

“Then either way is all right?”

“In here,” he said. “Remember, in here, it’s all right just to be.”

He came over to me and patted my hand. “You understand,” he said with a smile.

Related Characters: Dr. Virginia Axline, Dibs (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 161

Explanation and Analysis



During Dibs’s 11th therapy session, he mixes up the paint brushes that correspond to certain paint jars before he corrects the brushes. This exchange illustrates how Dibs is becoming more at peace with the idea that he can do what he wants. The idea that everything should be in a certain order derives from his parents’ expectations. Dibs’s ability to deviate from this expectation indicates that he no longer berates himself for mistakes or childishness, as he did at his pretend tea party in an earlier session. While Dibs generally follows his parents’ wishes, he is also starting to recognize himself as an individual who can make his own choices.


Dibs’s show of emotion, and his tentative physical contact, also demonstrate how much he has improved as a result of his therapy. His security with Dr. Axline—prompted by her understanding, as Dibs notes here—gives Dibs more confidence in himself. He knows that Axline doesn’t harbor the same expectations that his parents do, nor does she judge him when he makes mistakes or acts childishly. Dibs’s improvements over the course of his therapy prove that when a child can develop at their own pace and not be overburdened by parents’ expectations, they’ll be happier, freer, and better able to achieve their full potential.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☝☝ Always testing him. Always doubting his capacity. Trying to get closer to him and all the time only building a wall between us. And he always did just enough to keep me at it. I don't think any child was ever so tormented with the constant demands made upon him that he pass this test and that test—always, always he had to prove that he had capacity. He had no peace. Except when his grandmother came to visit. They had a good relationship with each other. He relaxed with her. He didn't talk much to her. But she accepted him the way he was and she always believed in him. She used to tell me that if I relaxed and let him alone he'd come out of it all right.

Related Characters: Dibs's Mother (speaker), Dibs's Grandmother, Dr. Virginia Axline, Dibs

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 165

Explanation and Analysis

As Dibs's mother tells Dr. Axline how she would test Dibs's intelligence growing up, she acknowledges how Dibs must have felt tortured by this constant doubt of his abilities. Her repetitive language implies the severity and continuous nature of his torment. By this point, Axline recognizes that Dibs is an unusually intelligent child—but this story illustrates that cognitive ability isn't the only important factor in a child's development.

As Dibs's mother describes here, without emotional support and social skills, Dibs was unable to express his intelligence fully. The fact that Dibs's mother refers to the "wall" that she built between them recalls the doors, walls, and locks that Dibs fears and often brings up in his play therapy. Without building an emotional connection between him and his mother, Dibs didn't feel fully accepted by her, and his isolation became more acute.

Dibs's mother also sets up a contrast between herself and Dibs's grandmother: Dibs's grandmother never placed the same kind of expectations on Dibs that his parents did. Because she let him be himself, she and Dibs were able to build a good relationship—much like Axline's empathic treatment of Dibs in their therapy sessions helps them develop trust and security in their client-patient relationship. This contrast highlights the importance of allowing children to determine the pace of their own development, rather than overburdening them with expectations.

Chapter 18 Quotes

☝☝ Dibs should learn to accept himself as he was and use his abilities, not deny them. But socially and emotionally, Dibs was achieving new horizons for himself. They were fundamental to his total development. I felt confident that the ability Dibs used in the playroom and at home would spill out into his other experiences. His intellectual abilities had been used to test him. They had become a barrier and a refuge from a world he feared. It had been defensive, self-protective behavior. It had been his isolation. And if Dibs did begin to talk, read, write, draw, in ways far beyond those of the other children around him, he would be avoided by them and isolated for his differences.

Related Characters: Dr. Virginia Axline (speaker), Hedda, Miss Jane, Dibs

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 174



Explanation and Analysis


Toward the end of Dibs's therapy sessions, Dr. Axline meets with his teachers Hedda and Miss Jane for a progress report—but she is surprised to find that Dibs is still tempering his intellectual capabilities in front of others. While Axline understands that Dibs still has progress to make in terms of utilizing his intelligence, her assessment makes clear that his emotional intelligence and social skills should be prioritized. As Axline illustrates here, overly focusing on Dibs's intelligence is what led to his loneliness and behavioral issues in the first place—thus, the adults in his life should instead focus on making sure that Dibs can relate to others.

Axline acknowledges the fact that Dibs is probably hiding his intelligence because openly expressing it could further isolate him from his peers. In other words, Dibs's loneliness and insecurity are what's hindering his performance at school. This affirms the idea that helping Dibs feel more socially confident and emotionally secure will help him integrate his intellectual and emotional selves. The "new horizons" that Axline describes will only be possible if the adults in Dibs's life can help him feel more secure and less afraid of other people—this is the only way that Dibs's intelligence can truly shine.

●● But he joined the circle and volunteered to do a dance one day. He made one up, much to the delight of the other children. He wanted to be the wind. He went blowing and swaying around and the children all decided that he should be the wind in the school program. Dibs agreed. He did his part very well. Suddenly in the middle of the dance he decided to sing. He made up the words and the melody. It went something like this. "I am the wind. I blow. I blow. I climb. I climb. I climb the hills and I move the clouds. I bend the trees and I move the grass. No one can stop the wind. I am the wind, a friendly wind, a wind you cannot see. But I am the wind." He seemed to be unaware of his audience. The children were surprised and delighted. Needless to say, so were we.

Related Characters: Hedda (speaker), Dr. Virginia Axline, Miss Jane, Dibs

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis



When Dr. Axline meets with Hedda and Miss Jane, Hedda describes how Dibs volunteered to play the part of the wind in a school assembly. This description demonstrates the immense progress that Dibs has made in his play therapy sessions. On a symbolic level, it shows that Dibs is now feeling a greater sense of freedom and even power. Earlier in the book, Dibs told a story in which trees were jealous of the wind, because the trees were alone, while the wind had the freedom to go wherever it wanted to go. In this scenario, Dibs clearly aligned himself with the lonely trees. But here, in taking on the role of the wind, Dibs demonstrates that he now feels liberated. His song, describing that no one can stop the wind and that he has the power to move the environment around him, symbolizes the power he feels in his life: he is now acting of his own volition.

On a more literal level, Dibs acting as the wind shows the strides he has made in his social skills. No longer does he fear his classmates and retreat into himself. This is the kind of inner security that Axline hoped to foster within Dibs, and she also illustrates that this helped Dibs be accepted by his peers. Through the other students' encouragement, Dibs was then able to display his creativity and talent in front of an audience, demonstrating again how social skills are necessary for a happy and flourishing child.

Chapter 20 Quotes

●● As Dibs stood before me now his head was up. He had a feeling of security deep inside himself. He was building a sense of responsibility for his feelings. His feelings of hate and revenge had been tempered with mercy. Dibs was building a concept of self as he groped through the tangled brambles of his mixed-up feelings. He could hate and he could love. He could condemn and he could pardon. He was learning through experience that feelings can twist and turn and lose their sharp edges. He was learning responsible control as well as expression of his feelings. Through this increasing self-knowledge, he would be free to use his capacities and emotions more constructively.

Related Characters: Dr. Virginia Axline (speaker), Dibs

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 188

Explanation and Analysis

At one of Dibs's final sessions, Dr. Axline observes how Dibs's play therapy sessions have been able to foster inner security, responsibility, and freedom in him. The image of Dibs's raised head implies that he now has a confident posture, whereas before he used to avoid eye contact and hide in corners or beneath tables. This illustrates Dibs's newfound security even before Axline fully describes it, underscoring how inner confidence can affect how a person carries themselves and presents themselves to the world.

Throughout this paragraph, Axline uses polar opposites, explaining that Dibs has both revenge *and* mercy; both hate *and* love. This device does not suggest that Dibs no longer has negative feelings—instead, therapy has enabled him to properly express those negative feelings and temper them. The conflicting emotions actually imply a sense of balance that reflects Dibs's balanced emotional state overall. Likewise, the image of Dibs making his way through the "tangled brambles" of feelings emphasizes that his feelings aren't necessarily scary, just confused—and that sorting through them can help a person progress and move past them, just as Dibs does.

On the whole, Axline sums up the importance of providing Dibs with a secure environment that enables him to work through his feelings. This, and his newfound trust in himself, is what made the difference in his mental health as and helped him become a happier child.

Chapter 24 Quotes

“At first the playroom seemed so very, very big. And the toys were not friendly. And I was so afraid.”

“You were afraid in there, Dibs?”

“Yes.”



“Why were you afraid?”

“I don’t know. I was frightened at first because I didn’t know what you would do and I didn’t know what I would do. But you just said ‘This is all yours, Dibs. Have fun. Nobody is going to hurt you in here.’”

“I said that?”

“Yes,” Dibs said decisively. “That is what you said to me. And gradually I came to believe you. And it was that way. You said for me to go fight my enemies until they cried out and said they were sorry they hurt me.”

Related Characters: Dr. Virginia Axline, Dibs (speaker), Dibs’s Father, Dibs’s Mother

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 212

Explanation and Analysis


When Dibs and Dr. Axline coincidentally meet each other again, two and a half years after Dibs’s therapy sessions have ended, Dibs reflects on becoming more comfortable in the playroom. The irony of Dibs’s recollection is that Axline never actually said the things that he so “decisively” recalls. However, the fact that she imparted these feelings onto Dibs illustrates how important building trust and security was for him in the playroom. It freed him from the fear that people might hurt him, as he says, or that Axline might judge him. Instead, she gave Dibs the confidence to fight his enemies—namely, his parents’ judgment and lack of acceptance while he was growing up. Axline gave Dibs the ability to determine what *he* wanted to do.


The fact that Dibs is able to express these things at all also shows his immense progress. With little prompting from Axline, Dibs is able to assess his feelings and express them, and to understand how he has changed. The tools to understand his feelings were immensely valuable to Dibs in the playroom, and this exchange illustrates how he will carry those tools with him for the rest of his life.

Epilogue Quotes

“There are things far more important in this world than a show of authority and power, more important than revenge and punishment and hurt. As educators, you *must* unlock the door of ignorance and prejudice and meanness. Unless my friend is given your apologies for this hurt he has received to his pride and self-respect and is reinstated then I shall not return to this school this fall.”

Related Characters: Dibs (speaker), Dibs’s Father, Dibs’s Mother, Dr. Virginia Axline

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 217-218

Explanation and Analysis

In the Epilogue, a friend of Dr. Axline’s shows her a letter that 15-year-old Dibs wrote in his school paper, defending a friend who was caught cheating. Dibs’s words here display his brilliance and leadership. Although 10 years have passed since his play therapy sessions with Axline, Dibs still references the parts of his life that caused him such trauma: the doors and locks that isolated him from the world and made him feel like he wasn’t good enough. By invoking that symbol, Dibs recalls how his parents punished him for not living up to their arbitrary evaluations, and he calls on the school not to make the same judgments about a student who is simply trying his best, even if he makes mistakes. Dibs is able to use a terrible memory from his childhood to fuel his desire to help others, illustrating the same empathy for his peer that Axline showed him in therapy.

Dibs’s words also show how powerful his intellect is when used in combination with emotional and social skills. He is persuasively arguing for the good of the students as a whole, which recalls an earlier statement that Axline made: she rhetorically asked what value intellectual achievement has, if it is not used for the good of others. Through this combination of emotional intelligence, social skills, and intellect, Dibs is able to show his brilliance not only as a writer, but as a moral leader who can improve the lives of those around him.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

This is a true story of a boy named Dibs finding a strong sense of self through psychotherapy. Dibs' experience in therapy helps him to grow up, understand himself, and discover that he himself can create a sense of stability and security in his life. Psychologist and author Virginia Axline notes that while Dibs's background is unique, his story is universal.

Through Axline's non-judgmental therapy practices, she and Dibs build trust, which helps him to express and understand himself in a more constructive way. Axline also suggests that this process of building inner strength and learning to express oneself without fear of criticism goes beyond Dibs's experience—it's applicable to everyone.



CHAPTER 1

Every day at school, when it is time for Dibs and his classmates to go home for lunch, Dibs throws a temper tantrum and refuses to leave. He crouches in a corner, and when his teachers, Miss Jane and Hedda, try to coax him to put on his hat and coat, he shouts and hits them. Sometimes Dibs stops fighting and simply cries as he goes with his mother. Other times, if he refuses to stop screaming, his mother sends in her chauffeur, who scoops up Dibs indifferently and carries him to the car.

Axline establishes a connection between Dibs's unempathetic home life and his inability to express and conduct himself properly. When his mother picks him up and ignores his cries, or when she sends in a chauffeur who is indifferent to his emotions, Dibs doesn't feel understood. Consequently, he withdraws from other people and acts out, unable to express or handle his feelings appropriately.



Dibs has attended this private school for two years. When he arrives each morning, he stands inside the door and whimpers until someone leads him in. Dibs doesn't talk or interact with the other children; he crawls around the edge of the room and hides from the others, rocking himself and sucking his thumb or lying rigid on the floor. Sometimes his teachers think that he might be mentally disabled, but other times, they believe that he might be very intelligent. Hedda says that Dibs even seems to know how to read. If the teachers try to force him to do anything, however, he throws a tantrum. Still, they get the impression that he is listening to their activities, though they're never sure.

Dibs's teachers' account describes the conflict between Dibs's intellect and his social skills. Dibs is unable to cope with his emotions or socialize, to the point that he reverts to infantile behaviors rather than verbally communicating. Even if Dibs is highly intelligent, as his teachers suspect, he isn't able to properly use his intelligence or express it. This demonstrates how all aspects of development—intellectual, emotional, and social—are necessary for a happy, well-rounded child.



The school psychologist and pediatrician tried to test Dibs once, but Dibs was wary of both of them. The school—a very exclusive institution on the Upper East Side of New York City—prides itself on having bright, sociable students. Dibs's mother used her influence with the board of trustees to get him in. Any time the teachers suggest that Dibs needs professional help, his mother insists that they give him more time. The teachers are constantly baffled by the five-year-old, wondering if he is autistic or simply unhappy.

Dibs's wariness of the school psychologist and pediatrician indicate that he has trust issues. It seems that Dibs distrusts any new person or experience in his life—and given the fact that changes and new situations are inevitable, this means that Dibs rarely feels safe. Dibs's mother's response to his teachers also hints at her own fear of judgment, as she worries about not having a "normal" child.



Dibs's father is a well-known scientist, but none of the teachers have met him. Dibs also has a younger sister named Dorothy, whom his mother claims is a "perfect child." The school staff have finally decided to do something about Dibs's behavior, so they invite Axline to observe Dibs before they make a decision about expelling him. Axline is a clinical psychologist who has experience working with both children and parents.

Dibs's mother agrees to meet with Axline—Axline has already heard from the teachers that Dibs's mother is difficult and cold. She and Dibs's father accept that Dibs is probably mentally disabled, but Hedda says that Dibs's parents only think this because they don't want to admit that they've emotionally deprived him. Miss Jane explains that she and Hedda care about Dibs and are frustrated with his parents, which strikes Axline as respectful and compassionate. She decides to meet Dibs for a series of play therapy sessions—if his parents agree to the idea.

CHAPTER 2

Axline writes that understanding grows from personal experience. Even if people can't always understand another person's behavior, they can grant that everyone has a meaningful private world. Axline is excited to meet Dibs; first, she plans to go to the school and observe him with other children. Axline wants to understand Dibs so that she can help him develop and use his abilities more constructively.

Axline observes Dibs's class as the children arrive for school. Dibs's mother speaks briefly to Miss Jane and then quickly says goodbye. Axline sees that Dibs is large for his age, and that he's very pale. Miss Jane helps take Dibs's hat and coat. Then, a little boy runs up to Dibs and asks him to play, but Dibs lashes out at him. Dibs then goes over to a small table where there are stones, shells, and minerals laid out, and he touches each of the objects. He glances briefly at Axline and then hides under the table. While Dibs is hiding, the other students gather around the teacher for story time. Instead of joining his classmates, Dibs begins to crawl around the room, staying close to the wall.

Dibs picks up a book and slowly examines every page—Axline can't tell if he's reading or just looking at the pictures. A teacher goes over to him and asks if Dibs wants to tell her about the book, but Dibs just hurls the book away and lies face down on the floor. Then, he gets up and continues to touch other objects in the room; the other students don't pay any attention to him.

The way Dibs's parents compare him to his "perfect" sister Dorothy introduces the troubled dynamic in their home life. Dibs clearly doesn't live up to his parents' expectations and standards, which contributes to his unhappiness, as he feels like they're constantly evaluating him and finding him lacking. They do not allow him to develop at his own pace or simply be himself.



Hedda and Miss Jane understand that Dibs's parents' evaluations of him contribute to his lack of emotional intelligence and social skills. But their assessment also foreshadows the fact that his parents do harbor doubt over whether they caused his condition—and they also fear that others will judge them for their parenting. And indeed, Hedda and Miss Jane's criticisms perhaps indicate that these anxieties are legitimate.



From the outset, Axline demonstrates that her main goal is to empathize with Dibs. While she may not fully understand Dibs's reasons for doing things, in simply recognizing him as a human being with dignity, she can help him come out of his shell. By attempting to understand Dibs, she can, in turn, help him understand himself.



Here, Axline gets a firsthand look at Dibs's severe lack of social skills. Dibs shuts himself off from everyone else—he even meets open invitations to play with hostility. Even though Dibs is aware of the people and things around him, he's distrustful of his surroundings, as demonstrated by his inability to look Axline in the eye. His desire to hide from the group also indicates a need to feel protected.



Dibs's dramatic response to being asked about his book foreshadows Axline's discovery that his parents are constantly evaluating him. Dibs has never been allowed to do what he wants at home without being questioned or doubted, and he's afraid of this same dynamic playing out at school.



When it's time for recess, Dibs says "no go out." But when Axline puts on her coat and says that it's a nice day outside, Dibs changes his mind and says "Dibs go out!" As Dibs makes his way outside, Axline notices that he walks clumsily—his coordination is very poor. While the other children play, Dibs goes off to a corner and scratches in the dirt with a stick. Axline and the teachers decide that, after the children's rest period, Axline will take Dibs down to the playroom at the end of the hall if he agrees to go.

After the rest period, Axline approaches Dibs and holds out her hand, asking him if he'll come down to the playroom with her. Dibs hesitates, but then he takes Axline's hand and walks with her to the playroom; Axline is surprised that he is willing to go. The room is full of toys, including a dollhouse, stuffed animals, cars, clay, paints, and a **nursing bottle**. Axline tells Dibs that they'll spend an hour in the playroom, and that he can decide what he wants to do.

Axline sits in a chair and waits—she doesn't want to imply any urgency for Dibs to do anything. Dibs stands in the middle of the room for a while, and then he tentatively walks around the room and touches the toys. He seems very unhappy. Dibs names each toy as he touches them—and each time he does this, Axline communicates her recognition of what he said. This is likely Dibs's way to begin talking to her, if cautiously.

Next, Dibs plops down on the floor, facing the dollhouse, and sits in silence. Axline doesn't prod him—she knows he has a reason for what he is doing. Then Dibs says, "No lock **doors**," over and over again. Axline observes aloud that Dibs doesn't like doors to be locked, which makes Dibs very upset. He takes the walls off of the dollhouse, yelling, "Take away all walls, Dibs!"

Again, Dibs appears to be developmentally stunted: he speaks in fragmented, babyish sentences and isn't even able to walk properly. This demonstrates how Dibs's emotional deprivation has completely obscured any intellectual capabilities he might have.



Axline demonstrates the importance of establishing trust. The fact that Dibs willingly goes with Axline illustrates his desire for a trusting relationship and a secure environment. Axline wants to provide this for him, which is why she establishes the parameters of their time together: they have an hour, and Dibs can do whatever he wants during their session. In this way, Axline sets up proper expectations for Dibs that head off any disappointment he might feel at the end of their session.



In this initial hour, Axline establishes two important aspects of Dibs's play therapy sessions: first, she communicates to Dibs that she has no expectations for him. Instead, she wants Dibs to be able to go at his own pace and determine his activities for himself. Axline also follows along with Dibs's naming exercise to acknowledge the way he perceives his surroundings, which helps to ground Dibs in his environment and reassure him that he's being heard.



Dibs's intense dislike of locked doors hints that perhaps his parents have punished him by locking him in his room. The fact that he takes the walls away from the dollhouse also indicates his desire to be more accepted and connected to others, as walls both literally and figuratively cut people off from the outside world. Part of Axline's strategy with Dibs is to help him forge the interpersonal connections that he clearly wants.



Axline tells Dibs when there are five minutes left in the hour, but Dibs doesn't move. After five minutes pass, Axline says that it is time to go. She deliberately doesn't ask Dibs if he had a good time, so that he doesn't have to evaluate the experience. Dibs takes Axline's hand, and they walk halfway down the hall. When the door to Dibs's classroom is in view, Axline asks if he can go the rest of the way to the room alone. He says yes and walks to the room by himself. Axline does this in the hope that Dibs will gradually become more self-sufficient; she also wants to communicate her confidence in his abilities. Axline notes that when Dibs gets to the **door**, he almost looks pleased with himself. Axline then waves goodbye to Dibs as he walks through the classroom door.

Axline explains that one of her objectives is to help Dibs achieve emotional independence. She doesn't want him to become too dependent on her; instead, she wants to make sure that he can develop inner security. It's clear to her why the teachers and other staff members have not written Dibs off yet—he is a courageous child.

CHAPTER 3

Axline arranges to meet with Dibs's mother at their family's home: a brownstone on the Upper East Side. When Axline arrives, she notes that the house is very beautifully furnished and well-kept; there are several staff members. As she's led to the drawing room, she hears the muffled sound of Dibs screaming, "No lock **door**!"

In the drawing room, Dibs's mother greets Axline and tells her that she and Dibs's father have resigned themselves to Dibs's situation: they doubt that he can get better. However, she hopes that Axline's study can help other children or further her understanding of human behavior. Axline is astonished to hear Dibs's mother describe him so scientifically and unemotionally.

Dibs's mother asks if Axline can study Dibs in his playroom at home, but Axline says that it would be better to see Dibs in the Child Guidance Center, once a week for an hour. Dibs's mother tries to offer a higher fee, but Axline refuses a fee entirely. Instead, Axline asks for Dibs's parents' written permission to record all of her interviews of the family. She says that all of their identifying information will be disguised.

Axline begins to build up mutual trust between herself and Dibs. She continues to establish secure parameters around their sessions, stating when they have five minutes left in order to help Dibs accept the reality that he has to return to class. And just as Axline wants Dibs to trust her, she also wants to illustrate her faith in him. Dibs's smile after he walks back to the classroom by himself indicates that Axline's confidence in him actually helps build his own confidence.



Axline has genuine empathy for Dibs—by recognizing that Dibs a courageous child, she is actively choosing to see the good in him. Much like Dibs's teachers want the best for him, Axline wants to help him overcome his emotional distance from other people and find security within himself.



Dibs's screams make clear in part where some of his emotional distress comes from. He is often punished for not fully adhering to his parents' expectations, and the locked doors again symbolize the fact that he is often shut out of his parents' lives and he lacks their emotional support.



Here Axline foreshadows her belief that much of Dibs's emotional deprivation stems from his mother's inability to fully express her own emotions or relate to Dibs. She also uses her intelligence as a shield to avoid her emotions, showing that intelligence and emotion are often in conflict with one another.



Dibs's mother's desire for Axline to see Dibs in their playroom foreshadows her shame over her son and the fact that she doesn't want to be judged for what she views as a failure in her family. She would rather keep him—and herself—isolated in order to avoid judgment.



Axline hands Dibs's mother a written statement of this agreement, and Dibs's mother says that she'll look it over with Dibs's father. Axline notes that Dibs's mother is very sad and remote. She also seems terrified; she tells Axline that she won't be able to come in for interviews herself, and nor will her husband. Axline says that she understands, but she adds that if Dibs's mother ever *does* want to talk to her, she should feel free to get in touch. The two women then make further small talk about Dibs's sister Dorothy, whom Dibs's mother refers to as a "perfect child." Axline notes that Dibs's mother seems more anxious in this interview than Dibs was in his first session. Dibs's mother says that she'll let Axline know as soon as they decide whether to allow Axline to hold play therapy sessions with Dibs.

After the interview, as Axline leaves, she thinks that Dibs's bedroom very likely has every toy money can buy—but it also has a **door** and a secure lock. She wonders why Dibs's mother is so terrified about the prospect of being interviewed. Axline hopes that she handled the interview in the right way and that Dibs's parents will agree to let her see Dibs.

CHAPTER 4

Several weeks later, Axline receives the release form from Dibs's parents, which grants her permission to hold play therapy sessions with Dibs and record them. Dibs's parents arrange for him to meet Axline on Thursday afternoons. Axline is relieved that they agreed to let her see him—she had been tempted to call Dibs's parents, but she refrained for fear that pushing for a decision would only scare them away.

At Dibs's first session, Axline brings him to the playroom. It is sunny and has the same toys as the playroom that was set up in his school. When Dibs enters, he walks around the room, touching and naming the materials. Again, Axline acknowledges his actions after he finishes his circuit of the room, affirming that he has touched and named most of the objects; she doesn't want to rush his exploration. Dibs then stands silently in the middle of the room.

Dibs's mother's terror at the thought of being interviewed hints at what she will later reveal about a previous experience that she had with psychiatrists. She doesn't want to be judged or evaluated for her parenting as she was in that instance. Axline connects Dibs's mother to Dibs, demonstrating how Dibs's mother is similarly anxious about being judged. Ironically, Dibs's mother then demonstrates how she constantly judges Dibs by comparing him to his "perfect" sister.



Axline again highlights the tension between Dibs's intelligence and his emotional capabilities. It doesn't matter that he has toys and books that can help him develop intelligence: the locked doors in his life prevent him from forging emotional connections with other people and allowing that intelligence to flourish.



Axline again compares Dibs to his parents. Just as she wants to let Dibs develop at his own pace and determine what he wants to do, she didn't want to rush his parents and force them to make a decision. She knew that it was best to let them make their own determination—that way, she felt more secure.



Axline continues to establish trust and security with Dibs. She wants him to be able to choose his own activities, and she wants to demonstrate to him that she understands his thoughts and feelings and won't judge him for whatever he decides to do.



After a while, Axline asks if Dibs wants to take off his coat and hat. Dibs says, “You take off your hat and coat, Dibs,” but he doesn’t move to do it. Axline encourages him, but he only whimpers. When she asks if he needs help, he agrees. She takes off his hat and coat, and he asks her to take off his boots and mittens, too, and so she takes these off as well. When she hands his hat and coat back to Dibs, he drops them, so Axline hangs them up.

After Axline hangs up Dibs’s hat and coat, she repeats that Dibs has an hour in the playroom and that he can do whatever he would like. Dibs walks over to the easel and arranges the paints so that they are in the correct order of the color spectrum. He then reads the label on the jar and spells out each color. After this, he takes out crayons, prints each color’s name, and arranges the crayons in a circle according to their color. Axline observes that he’s making a color wheel, and he says yes.

Axline attempts to only make comments that communicate recognition, rather than trying to pressure Dibs to do or not do anything. Axline wants to show Dibs that she recognizes what he is doing, but she doesn’t want to overreact to his abilities. She understands that he is doing things that are secure and safe for him to do. Axline does realize, however, that whatever Dibs’s problems are, he is not mentally disabled.

After Dibs finishes his color wheel, he climbs into the sandbox and lines up a set of soldiers. Suddenly, he starts to whimper, pointing to his shoes. Axline tells Dibs that he can take his shoes off if he wants. He says, “You will take your shoes off.” Axline then asks if Dibs wants her to help him take off his shoes. When Dibs nods, Axline helps him with his shoes. After Dibs plays in the sandbox for a bit, he moves to a stack of blocks. When the stack falls over, he asks Axline (whom he calls “Miss A.”) to help him, but when she asks what he wants her to do, he doesn’t respond.

Dibs sits in silence for a while. Axline doesn’t really know what Dibs wants, and she thinks that Dibs likely doesn’t either. She wants to communicate that she has confidence in him, that she understands he has good reasons for the things he does, and that she does not have expectations of his behavior. Axline hopes that Dibs will gradually feel more secure in his actions and reactions so that he can understand and accept them.

Dibs’s speech pattern reveals another aspect of his lack of social skills and emotional intelligence. He doesn’t have a sense of himself as an “I”—instead he refers to himself in the third person, as though he were not himself. He also doesn’t fully understand his own needs and emotions; instead, he appears to parrot someone else giving him commands. This indicates that Dibs rarely has the freedom to do what he wants to do; instead, he is forced to follow his parents’ expectations.



Dibs’s work with the paints and crayons demonstrates the immediate payoff of Axline allowing Dibs to do whatever he wants. By being patient and giving Dibs self-determination, Axline enables Dibs to be more open about his abilities. He confirms that he can read and that he likely has many capabilities that his teachers and even parents aren’t aware of, like understanding the color wheel or using organizational skills.



Again, Axline wants to communicate that she understands Dibs’s thought processes while not placing expectations on him in the way that his parents or teachers might. She knows that non-judgment and empathy—rather than praising him for his intelligence—will give Dibs greater security and freedom.



The intelligence Dibs is starting to display contrasts with his lack of social skills. He appears to repeat things that have been told to him, rather than fully recognizing himself as an individual who can articulate his own needs—he has a hard time framing his wants and desires as “I” statements, for instance. Meanwhile, Axline continues to establish their mutual trust. She doesn’t question his need for help; she simply provides support for him in whatever way he needs it.



Axline continues to emphasize her role as a non-judgmental presence in Dibs’s life. This contrasts with other adult figures in his life like his parents, who have distinct expectations for his behavior. Another of Axline’s goals is to help Dibs build trust in his environment and, most importantly, in himself.



When the hour draws to a close, Axline knows that it would be easy to give Dibs affection and sympathy and extend their time together, but that this would only add more emotional problems to his life. He has to go home, no matter how he feels about it. Axline knows that Dibs needs to develop strength, and this development can only come from within him. Axline helps Dibs dress to leave, takes his hand, and walks back to the reception room with him.

When Dibs sees his mother in the lobby, he kicks and screams about going home. Axline says goodbye to Dibs and his mother, who is embarrassed and aggravated by his behavior. Axline doesn't want to take sides with either Dibs or his mother, and so she leaves to avoid the situation.

Here Axline recognizes the limitations of therapy. Her goal isn't to provide so much support for Dibs that she replaces his mother or that he cannot function without seeing her every week. Instead, she recognizes that the most important source of security Dibs can find lies within himself.



Axline's desire to remove herself from Dibs's tantrum reinforces that one of her main priorities is empathy. That she doesn't want to appear as though she is taking sides proves that she knows Dibs's mother deserves just as much empathy and understanding for her actions as Dibs does.



CHAPTER 5

The following week, Dibs returns for his second session. Before going into the playroom, he reads the sign on the door: "Do not disturb" on one side and "play therapy room" on the other. When Dibs enters the room, he says, "You will take off your hat and coat." Axline knows that Dibs is referring to himself and tries to help him use the word "I," but the pronouns are confusing and she ultimately just helps him take his hat and coat off. Dibs then hangs the clothes on the doorknob by himself.

Dibs then goes over to the dollhouse. Noticing the house doesn't have a front panel, Dibs retrieves it from the cupboard and after several tries is able to hook the panel into the correct groove. Axline observes that he got it on and locked it. Dibs gives a brief smile and says, "I did." Dibs also draws a **lock** on the doorknob. Dibs then observes that the house wobbles a little, so he takes another partition and fits it under a corner to steady it. When the partition slips out, he says that Axline should put some wheels on it so that it doesn't wobble. Axline notes that Dibs has many unused words in his vocabulary and that he can observe, define, and solve problems.

For Dibs's next activity, he walks to the sandbox and lines up the toy soldiers. Dibs says that he got soldiers like these for Christmas. He then counts and groups the different figures. When Axline observes that they are all pointing the same direction, Dibs grows upset and assures Axline that they are not shooting at her, and she says she understands. Dibs then takes off his shoes to get into the sandbox.

Even at Dibs's second session, Axline illustrates how he is already improving, if minimally. Dibs still asks for and needs Axline's help taking off his hat and jacket, and he still has trouble verbalizing his own desires and framing himself in terms of "I." However, unlike the last session, Dibs hangs up his hat and coat, demonstrating a small step in gaining security and confidence in his own capabilities.



By recognizing his own ability to accomplish something, Dibs gains even more confidence and even starts to think of himself in terms of "I." No longer is he simply mimicking the language of others; he is actively acknowledging his wants and achievements. That Dibs draws a lock on the dollhouse's door continues to emphasize the impression that locked doors have made on him. It implies that he knows that virtually any environment could be used to punish him by locking him inside it, which instills a great deal of mistrust in the world around him.



Here Dibs shows a desire to build up mutual trust with Axline and even his own empathy for her perspective. Dibs acknowledges that Axline might have thought he was pointing the soldiers' guns at her. Thus, the more empathy she expresses for his perspective, the more he is able to relate to her in turn.



In the sandbox, Dibs buries three of the soldiers in the sand. The bells in the **church** on the other side of the street chime four o'clock, and Axline comments that Dibs will have to go home soon. Dibs takes out the finger paint, and Axline demonstrates how to use it. Dibs likes the paint, but he also gets upset at the mess and quickly wipes off the paint with a towel. Dibs instead turns to the watercolors. He uses the colors in order of the color wheel and paints a house, a tree, grass, sky, flowers, and the sun.

When Dibs is done painting, he says that the house belongs to Axline. Axline clarifies his statement, asking if he wants to give her the painting, and he nods. She doesn't say thank you or praise him so that he can focus on his feelings and communication rather than her evaluation. Dibs then draws a **lock** on the door of her house. Axline thinks that his art is creative and unique.

After Dibs finishes the painting, Axline tells him that it's time to go. Dibs ignores her, washing his brushes and the paint water out in the sink. When she repeats that he has to go, he looks miserable. His language becomes confused as he sobs, saying that he never wants to go home. Axline acknowledges that Dibs doesn't want to go, but she also says that no matter how either of them feels about it, when their hour is over, he must go home. Axline assures Dibs that she will see him next Thursday.

Dibs then asks if he can paint Axline another picture. Axline replies that Dibs can't paint her anything else today, and she helps him into his coat as he says he doesn't feel like going home. Axline explains that she knows how he feels. Axline writes that a child gains security from predictable and consistent limitations. She also knows that if the therapy sessions become too dominant in his life, then they won't be truly effective. She wants Dibs to learn responsibility for himself and to gain psychological independence.

As Axline puts on Dibs's boots, she notices that he is sucking on a small **nursing bottle** that was on the table. Dibs then asks to put the tops on the paint jars, but Axline assures Dibs that she'll clean up later. As Dibs leaves, he turns the sign on the door from "Do Not Disturb" to "Play Therapy Room." He then walks down the hall to reception and leaves with his mother without a fuss.

This passage introduces Dibs's ambivalence about messes. While he enjoys painting, his enjoyment has often been stifled by his parents' expectations that he won't make a mess. Still, he relishes the ability to do what he wants to do in the way that he wants to do it, and he finds freedom and self-expression in painting with the watercolors.



Rather than judging Dibs's painting (even positively), Axline simply wants him to experience the feeling of wanting to give someone a painting. In addition, the recurring lock emphasizes Dibs's fear of confinement and isolation. He doesn't have security even in the environments he creates.



Axline empathy for Dibs's feelings provides a contrast with the experience that Dibs gets at school, where few people (if any) fully understand or allow him to be upset about not wanting to go home. Instead, people like his mother and teachers judge him for the tantrums he throws.



Axline's statement that she knows how Dibs feels underscores her continued empathy for Dibs. At the same time, she wants to build structure into their relationship, explaining here that this generates feelings of safety. Her ultimate goal is not to become Dibs's main form of emotional support. Instead, she hopes that he can eventually find security in himself and his environment at home in order to be truly happy.



The fact that Dibs retreats to the nursing bottle when he is distressed reinforces how much his lack of emotional intelligence obscures his intellect—he reverts to much more infantile behaviors when he is upset. However, the fact that Dibs returns to his mother without a fuss for the first time illustrates that Axline's strategies are working: she is helping Dibs express, and thus cope with, his sad feelings.



CHAPTER 6

The next Thursday, at Dibs's third session, he notes that Axline replaced the paint lids. He then picks up the **nursing bottle** and starts to suck on it. Soon after, he tells himself to take off his hat and coat and does so without assistance, returning to the nursing bottle afterward. Axline asks if Dibs likes the bottle, and Dibs replies that he does. Dibs sucks on the bottle for a long time and watches Axline as he does so.

Next, Dibs reads the label on a box of counting blocks. Axline notes that Dibs often displays his intelligence as a coping mechanism for emotional distress. Axline also sees that there may be some conflict between expectations of Dibs's behavior and what he wants to be or do. Sometimes Dibs is very capable and sometimes he simply wants to be a baby. Axline wonders if Dibs feels his intellectual abilities are the only parts of him that others value, and she wonders whether he wishes to be loved and respected for all his qualities. Axline is amazed that Dibs has concealed so much of his intelligence.

Axline wishes she had more information about Dibs's family life, noting that there are probably many complicated reasons that his relationship with his parents is so deficient. Dibs continues to suck on the **nursing bottle** until he says, "Take off my rubbers." Axline realizes that he means her own shoes and she takes off her boots. Then Dibs takes the top off of the bottle and empties the water into the playroom sink.

Suddenly, Dibs stops and says, "I am thinking." Axline does not press him for his thoughts. She wants him to learn that he is a person with many parts: ups and downs, fears, courage, infantile desires and mature interests. She wants him to learn that he can take the initiative in relationships with people.

After Dibs finishes thinking, he says he will finger paint, play in the sand, and have a tea party. Axline guesses that he is planning what he wants to do for the rest of the hour. Dibs says that Axline is right. Dibs smiles and laughs—the first laugh Axline has heard from him. As Dibs fills the **nursing bottle** with water again, he says that he wants to take his snow pants off. Axline says Dibs can take his snow pants off if he wants to, but if he doesn't want to, that's okay too, because it's cold inside. Dibs sighs with frustration that he is told to take off his boots inside, but that he can leave his snow pants on because it is cold. Axline affirms that rules can be confusing.

Dibs's use of the nursing bottle is in some ways a test for Axline, as he watches Axline for her reaction to what he's doing. He wants to be able to retreat to infantile behaviors without judgment, and Axline grants him that self-determination and expression.



Here Axline foreshadows a central tension in Dibs's life: while he has intellectual capacity, he often feels trapped by his parents' expectation that he will be very intelligent, so he is rarely allowed the chance to simply be a child. This ties back to the incident in school when a teacher asked him what he was reading and he threw the book away. Even though he was capable of telling the teacher about it, he felt the pressure of constant evaluation and this made him conceal his intelligence.



As Dibs continues to retreat into his babyish behavior, he also loses some of the progress in his speech. Instead of using first-person pronouns ("I" or "my") to refer to himself, as he started to do in a previous session, he reverts to referring to Axline with a first person pronoun ("my") and himself with the second person "you." Even with his significant intelligence, he still has a difficult time relating to others.



Rather than evaluate Dibs or judge him for his thoughts, Axline's goal is simply to allow him to express himself—even internally. Her aim is not to force anything about their interactions but to give him freedom and confidence in their relationship.



Here Axline observes the deep impact that her recognition has on Dibs. In offering empathy and understanding, Axline is enabling Dibs to recover some joy in his life. Additionally, Dibs is more openly expressing his frustration with some of the parameters in his life. Because the rules about taking off snow boots and pants are inconsistent, Dibs feels apprehensive about what to do and when. This proves Axline's assertion in the previous chapter that children gain security from consistent and predictable rules.



For Dibs's next activity, he starts to play with a farmhouse in the sandbox. He asks Axline for her help, but then he sets up the farmhouse without assistance. Dibs talks freely about animals as he plays with the animal figurines. As he plays, Axline warns Dibs that he only has five more minutes. Dibs then buries three figures and a toy truck under the sand, creating a mound on top of them. After this, he takes a duck figurine and places it on the hill, asking Axline not to move the sand or the duck. Dibs then tells Axline to write down that he found the sand interesting and that he played with the house and the fighting men. Finally, Dibs picks up his coat and hat and walks out of the playroom, leaving with his mother without a word.

Dibs continues to make leaps and bounds in his confidence. The fact that he asks for help even when he doesn't need it is notable. It implies that Dibs trusts Axline—Dibs knows that she will help him if he needs or wants her assistance. Just knowing that Axline can provide Dibs with help, and will do so in a non-judgmental way, then paradoxically gives Dibs the security he needs to be able to do things on his own. Not only does Dibs set up the farmhouse, but he also leaves completely by himself and without prompting, again reinforcing how Axline's parameters provide Dibs with security even if he doesn't necessarily like going home.



After Dibs leaves, Axline goes into her office, amazed at Dibs's development and the new freedom he is clearly feeling. She doesn't want to analyze too quickly the symbolism of his play. The primary benefit of this kind of therapy is learning two things: that he knows his inner world better than anyone else does, and that responsible freedom develops from within himself. Dibs has to learn self-respect and dignity before he can respect others.

Axline prioritizes Dibs's self-determination because she knows that doing so will provide him with confidence. And by discovering freedom and security in a non-judgmental environment, Dibs can then maintain dignity outside of the therapeutic environment and in his world at large.



CHAPTER 7

When Dibs enters the playroom for his fourth session the next week, he notices that the sandbox is not the way he left it, and he asks where his duck is. Axline says that someone may have moved it, summarizing the situation to slow down Dibs's thoughts and feelings and to help him identify them. Dibs asks Axline why she didn't keep things in the same place; this makes him angry. Axline acknowledges that he is upset that the toys were not as he had left them, and she writes that she wants Dibs to learn that no part of his world is static and controllable.

Axline's actions here illustrate that her goal is not for Dibs to simply get what he wants all the time. Even though safe environments are important, they are not always guaranteed in the outside world. Instead, Axline wants Dibs to be able to experience his feelings without judgement; this way he can cope with them. By contrast, hiding feelings away as Dibs has done only compounds his pain.



Axline asks if she promised Dibs that she would leave things as they were, and he looks at the floor and says no. She says she understands that he feels angry and disappointed. Axline hopes Dibs learns that what will help him is not the duck or the sand mountain, but the feeling of security that they symbolize. She wants him to learn that he can cope with his disappointment. Dibs turns to the sandbox and starts to play with some of the figures.

Rather than punishing Dibs for his anger, Axline allows him to experience it and she empathizes with him. In this way, Axline helps Dibs cope with his feelings and move past them. Again her strategies prove fruitful, as Dibs is then able to overcome his anger and disappointment and continue to play.



When Dibs notices that one of the animal figures is bent, he tries to fix it with Axline's pencil. The pencil tip breaks, and Axline leaves the room to sharpen it. The playroom, she reveals, has a one-way mirror, behind which are trained observers who monitor the tape recorders and keep records of Dibs's behavior. When Axline is gone, Dibs digs in the sand and pulls out the soldiers he buried the week prior, commenting that he'll "gouge" the soldier into the sand. He notes that the soldier is standing there like "an old iron railing from a fence." He pushes the soldier into the sand once more, smiling and laughing.

When Axline returns to the playroom, Dibs asks if he should take off his coat and turn the radiator on, but Axline says that the furnace is out of order. Dibs suggests that she could find out what's wrong with the furnace by going into the basement and hanging around the action to hear what people are saying. Dibs says that Axline can learn lots of interesting things that way, and then he picks up the **nursing bottle** once more and drinks from it.

Next, Dibs checks all of the cupboards over the sink, but they are empty. He picks up a water gun and fills it with sand, but when he tries to shoot out the sand, it doesn't work. Then Dibs returns to the sandbox and starts to play with the animal figures. As Dibs plays, he talks about Marshmallow, the school's caged rabbit. Dibs says when no one is looking, he sometimes lets the rabbit out. Axline notes that this is Dibs's first reference to school, and she wonders if his behavior there has changed: Miss Jane and Hedda told her they would contact her if they had anything to report, but they haven't done so yet.

As Dibs plays with the animal figures, he builds a fence around them but also creates an open gate so that they can get out when they want. He then picks out some of the toy soldiers and sets them up on the edge of the sandbox. Independence Day is four months and two weeks away, he informs Axline; it falls on Thursday, he says excitedly, which means he'll get to come and see her that day. She comments that he must like to come to the playroom, and he replies emphatically that he does. Dibs says that on Independence Day, the soldiers are joyful, "unloading freedom and unlocking all the joy." Axline is amazed at his evocative language, and she's glad to see that he's gaining confidence and happiness.

Being in a supportive, non-judgmental environment allows Dibs to express himself through his play, as he does with the soldier. At the same time, Dibs only speaks and acts in this more sinister and violent way when Axline leaves the room, suggesting that he is still building trust in her. These secretive actions imply his worry that if he were to play in this way in front of her, she might punish him or judge him for it.



Dibs provides insight into his social strategies here. Instead of interacting with people and asking questions to gain information, he lingers around people, observing what they say and do without them knowing that he's paying attention. While this has certainly allowed him to gain a great deal of knowledge, it has ultimately been detrimental to his social skills, and as Axline has observed, he needs both to become a well-rounded child.



Dibs is starting to be more curious and inventive in his play as he trusts Axline and his environment more. In contrast to his first activity—simply naming and touching all of the objects—now he is taking more risks by trying out the water gun or exploring the cupboards. Additionally, Dibs's reference to Marshmallow recalls his intense fear of doors and locks, as he empathizes with a rabbit who is confined and isolated from the world. His account also proves his intelligence, as he is absorbing information and learning in school even while he doesn't fully participate.



Dibs continues to display his hatred towards walls, doors, and locks, making sure that his animals can get out of their fenced area. He also affirms his love of the playroom, demonstrating how much of an impact Axline has made in only four hour-long sessions. Dibs suggests that the playroom makes him feel free in two ways: first, by talking about Independence Day (a day associated with freedom), and second, by the mere fact that he is finally talking so freely and intelligently.



Dibs says that the room makes him feel happy, but he is sad when he leaves. Axline asks if Dibs takes any happiness with him, but he ignores her. Instead, Dibs buries soldiers in the sandbox. Axline then tells Dibs that he has five more minutes in the playroom. Dibs digs out a soldier he buried and calls it "Papa." He stands the figure on the floor, knocks it over with his fist, and stands it up again, repeating this cycle many times.

When Dibs has two minutes left, he notes that the next day is Washington's birthday, and he happily says he'll go back to school on Monday. Axline notes how much school means to Dibs, and she thinks that the teachers should be pleased with how much Dibs has learned and how integral it is to his life. Axline also thinks that Dibs is very intelligent, but she doesn't comment on this because his intellect isn't the only thing that's important to his development.

When the time is up, Dibs says that his father is picking him up today. Axline walks into the reception and greets Dibs's father, who looks uneasy. Dibs starts to talk about Independence Day again, but this embarrasses his father, who thinks Dibs is being weird. He pulls Dibs away and tells him to stop talking so senselessly. When Dibs and his father are gone, the receptionist comments to Axline about how unpleasant Dibs's father is.

Axline then returns to the playroom to clean up, and one of the observers tells her what Dibs said when she left the room to sharpen her pencil. Axline notes how perceptive Dibs's description of the soldier was: "like an old iron railing from a fence." Axline thinks about how Dibs's father was not listening to Dibs, and how much strength and personality Dibs has in spite of this emotional deprivation. She reminds herself that parents, too, have reasons for the way they treat others.

Because of Axline's non-judgmental reactions, Dibs is starting to express openly his feelings of hostility toward his father. Dibs doesn't worry about being punished for these feelings, and as such he is able to start to express himself and work through his complicated emotions.



While Axline continues to discover how smart Dibs is, she still emphasizes that her main focus is his emotional capacity. Without the ability to express his feelings and relate to others, his intelligence will never be able to blossom. Besides, Axline gets the sense that Dibs feels pressure to be smart and feels judged for his intelligence (or perceived lack of it), which is part of why he has shut down so much emotionally. Because of this, she thinks that not calling attention to intelligence at all—whether that is through compliments, criticism, or neutral commentary—might give him the space to develop his social and emotional skills without feeling threatened.



This exchange provides some insight into Dibs's home life. His father clearly has specific, narrow expectations about how Dibs should act and speak—a stark contrast to Axline, who has gone to great pains not to encourage or discourage any of Dibs's behavior, helping him gain confidence in his own choices and interests. Dibs's father is also clearly judging his son and making him feel inadequate or weird, and he's not even trying to understand what Dibs is saying. No wonder Dibs has so little confidence in himself!



Axline acknowledges how Dibs's play sessions are allowing him to work through his emotions about his family members. She also recognizes that, just like Dibs, she must have empathy for his parents, even when their actions are incomprehensible or despicable to her. If they feel threatened by her judgement, they, too, will resist Dibs's therapy.



CHAPTER 8

The next day, Dibs's mother calls Axline for a meeting, and later that morning they sit down together in Axline's office. It's important to Axline to make Dibs's mother feel secure, knowing that this meeting might be emotionally exhausting for her. Axline also knows that she can't try to rush Dibs's mother or drag out anything she wouldn't want to share.

Axline waits for Dibs's mother to start the conversation, even though she seems anxious. Dibs's mother says she doesn't know where to begin, and Axline acknowledges that these conversations can be difficult. Dibs's mother comments that Axline has a lovely view out her window, looking at the **church** across the street.

Suddenly, Dibs's mother cries out that she is worried about Dibs. She says that lately he is unhappy—he comes out of his room more, but when she speaks to him, he runs away. Crying, she says she feels that he is asking for something that she can't give. She has never understood him; she had no real experience with kids prior to having Dibs, and Dibs was a disappointment to her from his birth. Dibs's mother and father hadn't planned on having a child, and when Dibs was born, his mother had to give up her successful career as a surgeon—a career that she and Dibs's father were very proud of. When Dibs was born, she found him big, ugly, and unresponsive. He would stiffen and cry when she picked him up. She felt she failed miserably by having him.

Dibs's mother continues uninterrupted, saying she has to get this story out. She explains that she and Dibs's father were ashamed to have a mentally disabled child and gradually cut their friends out of their lives so others wouldn't find out about Dibs. They took him to a neurologist, but the doctor couldn't find anything wrong with him. They then took Dibs to a psychiatrist, who interviewed both parents as well. Dibs's mother felt that the psychiatrist's questions were very invasive, and the psychiatrist concluded that Dibs was not mentally disabled but that Dibs was the most emotionally deprived child he had ever seen. He said that Dibs's mother and father were the ones who needed help. They grew very upset at this evaluation, and they never spoke about the experience to anyone else.

Axline applies her therapeutic techniques not only to children like Dibs, but also to their parents. She recognizes that she has to build up mutual trust and security for Dibs's mother to be able to express herself, and that she can't appear to judge or criticize Dibs's mother when she's vulnerable.



Here, Dibs's mother seems a lot like her son; she's quiet and anxious, seemingly because she fears judgment and doesn't totally know how to express her emotions. Like Dibs, his mother retreats to naming objects before engaging emotionally with Axline.



Dibs's mother's story explains why Dibs and his parents have a strained relationship. Not only does Dibs's mother have a difficult time connecting with Dibs on an emotional level, but there is also a part of her that never wanted him in the first place. She suggests that even from birth, Dibs did not live up to his parents' expectations, placing a huge burden on him growing up because they judged every aspect of his development. Dibs's mother also suggests that Dibs made her feel that she did not live up to her own expectations that she would have a developmentally typical child, be a good parent, or be able to continue a successful career.



Dibs's mother's backstory provides some explanation for why she was so skeptical of meeting with Axline. The psychiatrist that she visited took an opposite approach to Axline: rather than respond to Dibs's parents with empathy and non-judgement, he criticized them harshly for their inability to support their son emotionally. As a result, they withdrew even further and Dibs had to suffer more. Now, Axline's method of allowing Dibs's mother to tell her story and making her feel understood enables her to recognize her emotions and cope with them, rather than keeping them bottled up.



Dibs's mother goes on, explaining that she had Dorothy in the hopes that another child could help Dibs socialize better. Because Dorothy was a "perfect child," she was proof that Dibs's problems were not his parents' fault. Dibs's mother says that the only person to whom Dibs connected was his grandmother. Dibs and Dorothy don't get along at all, which is why she sends Dorothy away to a boarding school near their home. Dibs seems happier alone.

Apparently Dibs's father was very upset that his son was "babbling like an idiot" when he picked him up from therapy. He said this in front of Dibs, and Dibs knocked over a chair and other objects and screamed at his father that he hated him. Dibs's father then carried Dibs upstairs and **locked** him in his bedroom. When Dibs's father returned, he started crying, which Dibs's mother had never seen him do before. He admitted that maybe they were wrong about Dibs being mentally disabled.

Dibs's mother asks Axline if she thinks Dibs is mentally disabled, and Axline says no. When she asks if Dibs will learn to act like other children, Axline says he probably will, and that she thinks Dibs's mother could probably answer that question, too. Dibs's mother acknowledges that she has noticed that Dibs has some ability, and that he's not having temper tantrums anymore. He's also not sucking his thumb anymore and he's being more verbal.

Dibs's mother then realizes that an hour has passed. She thanks Axline for meeting with her and leaves. Axline observes how complex human motivation is; many experiences intertwine to make up a person's behavior. Dibs's parents, like Dibs, learned to use their intelligence as a shield from their emotions. They, too, are the victims of their inability to relate effectively to Dibs.

Axline then explains why she didn't assure Dibs's mother that Dibs has superior intelligence: she doesn't want his parents to concentrate on this aspect of his development rather than developing his emotions. They likely chose to view him as mentally disabled just so that they wouldn't have to acknowledge that his behavior is the product of their own emotional inadequacy. Nonetheless, it is unlikely that Dibs's mother is completely unaware of his intelligence.

Dibs's mother underscores another way in which she and her husband evaluate Dibs: comparing him to Dorothy. In constantly calling Dorothy a "perfect child" in comparison to Dibs, they make it clear that Dibs does not live up to their expectations of how he should act. Dorothy also allows them to avoid others' judgment because, in their mind, she proves that they can raise a "normal" child.



This episode shows the impact of harsh judgment on Dibs. Dibs knows that he wasn't "babbling like an idiot"—he was actually saying something lucid and interesting, but his father refused to listen because he thought it was weird. These cruel words directly lead to Dibs's hostile and violent behavior. This is in contrast with how Axline treats Dibs, listening to him and treating him with empathy. The episode also shows how Dibs's father is being more open emotionally because of the change in his son. He acknowledges that he could have played a part in Dibs's stunted emotional development rather than deflecting blame by insisting that the problem is biological.



Dibs's mother understands how Dibs's therapy has been helping him, and the examples she gives prove the value of Axline's non-judgmental play therapy. Dibs is overcoming his hostile, anti-social, and infantile behavior. Even if there are times where he still lashes out, it is now in direct response to his father's harsh criticisms.



Dibs is not the only one who is limited emotionally in spite of his high intelligence. Axline observes that his parents, too, often use intellect to make up for their lack of emotional intelligence. This makes their relationships difficult and reinforces that intelligence alone does not make for a well-rounded human being.



While Axline could have emphasized his intelligence to Dibs's mother, she knows that it is more important to focus on improving his emotional and social skills. Assuring them of his intelligence could simply reinforce their desire for him to live up to their expectations on an intellectual level while continuing to ignore his emotional intelligence.



Axline suspects that Dibs's mother's inability to connect to her son is probably due to her own emotional deprivation. During the meeting, Axline wanted to communicate that she understood and respected Dibs's mother. She hopes that Dibs's mother understands that she has the capacity to change, just like Dibs.

Axline emphasizes the parallel between Dibs and his mother, showing how she takes the same approach with both of them. Just like children, adults need empathy and understanding, and she hopes that by providing this to Dibs's mother, Dibs's mother can work through her negative emotions and be more connected with Dibs.



CHAPTER 9

The following Thursday, at Dibs's fifth session, Dibs's mother arranges for him to arrive and leave 15 minutes earlier so he can go to a doctor's appointment. When Dibs arrives, he says he feels glad. He wants to paint, and when Axline affirms that what he does is up to him, he repeats this and says it is up to him. He starts to paint happily.

Dibs continues to demonstrate more independence as a result of the play therapy. In addition, Axline reinforces how Dibs's ability to determine what he wants to do not only makes him happy, but also allows him to reach his full potential and display his creativity and intelligence more openly.



When Dibs finishes painting, he looks at the mirrored wall and says that someone else's room is behind it—he knows because he heard people typing. Axline is amazed, explaining that this indicates how aware children are of the things around them, even if they don't comment on it at the time. Dibs also observes Axline's notepad in her lap. She was jotting down notes on his actions, and she used abbreviations to refer to the colors he was using to paint. He tells her that she should spell out the names of the colors, and when Axline asks why she should do this, Dibs says, "Because I say so." Quickly, he reverses himself, acknowledging that she can do it her way.

Dibs's observation of the people behind the mirrored wall illustrates Axline's point that just because someone doesn't always express their inner thoughts doesn't mean that they don't have a vivid and intelligent inner life. In addition, Dibs's statement that Axline can do things her way rather than his illustrates that he understands the value of self-determination. Even though his parents may have expressed that there is one right way to do things, Dibs is beginning to recognize the value of his (and others') own desires.



Dibs next removes the **walls** and the door from the dollhouse and buries them in the sandbox. Then he pushes a car around the sand while staying on the ledge of the sandbox. After some time, Dibs decides to get into the sand and takes off his shoes; he then tastes the sand and observes that he has holes in his socks. After Dibs gets out of the sandbox, he asks Axline for the **nursing bottle**. He pretends that he is in a crib and that he's a baby, sucking on the bottle.

Dibs's play shows great symbolic meaning. In burying the walls and the doors, he is getting rid of the objects that isolate him from the world and prevent him from being accepted by his parents. This not only demonstrates the pain that the doors and walls have caused, but it also illustrates a desire to avoid that isolation. Dibs's use of the nursing bottle also shows how sometimes he has a desire to be comforted like an infant despite his age and high intelligence, and he relishes having the space to do so without being judged for it.



Suddenly, Dibs gets up and sings a song. The melody is clear and sweet, but his words are harsh: he sings that he hates **walls**, doors that lock, and the people who shove him into those doors. He says he'll kill them all, describing violent ways in which to kill people. Then he explains how he would fly around as a bird and play in the sand in the playroom.

When Dibs finishes the song and asks Axline what she thinks, she comments that it was “quite a song.” Dibs looks at Axline’s watch and observes that there are 10 more minutes in the session. He runs around the playroom with an airplane, but then he suddenly stops, listens outside the room, and says, “There is Dorothy.” Dibs becomes very sad, explaining that it’ll be time to go soon, even if he doesn’t want to. He suddenly becomes helpless and asks Axline to put on his hat and coat.

After Axline helps Dibs into his coat, Dibs notices an animal cut-out in the trash and asks if he can have it. Axline says yes, and Dibs corrects her: “Say [...] ‘If it’s what you, Dibs, want, then that’s all right.’” When Axline repeats this, Dibs is pleased. He starts to leave, but then he says that it’s too early to go. Axline reminds him that he arrived earlier than usual, so he has to leave earlier—he’s already been there for an hour and he has a doctor’s appointment. She recognizes that he doesn’t want to go, and he replies, with resignation, that he’ll go.

Before Dibs leaves, he expresses his hope that the doctor will stick his needle into Dorothy and that she will scream and scream. Dibs will be glad if Dorothy gets hurt and he’ll pretend like it doesn’t bother him. He then says goodbye and walks into the reception room where his mother and Dorothy are waiting for him.

The disparity between Dibs’s melody and his words is striking, but it shows that Dibs finds value in being able to express himself openly and that he knows he can trust Axline to hear his hostile thoughts without judgment. The fact that Dibs transitions from this song to describing a flying bird suggests that Dibs finds expressing his emotions liberating, as flying around like a bird suggests a freedom of movement that contrasts with the confinement of the doors and walls.



Axline continues to act without judgment. Even though Dibs’s song may have been disturbing, only by expressing those feelings is Dibs then able to move past them. And again, Dibs demonstrates how his emotional insecurity impedes his intellectual capabilities. When he is distressed about leaving with his sister for the doctor, he becomes unable to dress himself. It’s not that he can’t do it—it’s perhaps that the idea of being back with his family makes him feel powerless, or possibly that he wants to ensure that he still has Axline’s empathy and support.



Dibs’s correction of Axline’s language shows his remarkable awareness of how much he values autonomy. He doesn’t simply want permission to take the animal figure home—he wants to know that, in this room, he can do whatever he wants. And again, Axline demonstrates empathy for Dibs’s desire to stay longer, but she continues to emphasize the parameters of their visits so as to maintain Dibs’s security in his environment.



Dibs continues to express hostility towards members of his family, as he does with Dorothy here. However, Axline illustrates how this freedom of expression then allows Dibs to act with less hostility toward his family in person. Only by having this non-judgmental environment can Dibs express and work through his feelings. Dibs’s desire to see his sister scream in public might also suggest his frustration with being constantly seen as the problem child—perhaps he wants to see the “perfect” child act out like he sometimes does.



CHAPTER 10

At Dibs's sixth session the next week, he is once again at ease. He takes a truck in the sandbox, fills it with sand, and makes a hill. Then he places the soldiers all around the hill. After playing with the soldiers for a bit, he remarks that the soldiers aren't able to get to the top of the hill, and he sadly brings each one back down the mountain. Axline wonders aloud if they felt sad that they couldn't get to the top of the hill, and Dibs agrees. He says, however, that just *trying* to climb the hill made them happy. Dibs explains that he once tried to climb a hill but he didn't get to the top of it; he then says that he thinks every child should have his own hill to climb.

Dibs then buries one of the soldiers in the sand under the hill, saying that this soldier didn't even get the chance to climb the hill. Afterward, Dibs says that that particular soldier was "Papa." At that moment, the **church** bells chime four o'clock, and Dibs starts describing different kinds of clocks. Axline notes that Dibs is retreating from his father's burial through his discussion of clocks, and she doesn't want to force him to talk about his feelings if he's not ready.

Dibs then looks out the window, observing the **church**. He says that "Dibs isn't church-size," and Axline comments that the church makes him feel little. Dibs replies that in the playroom he feels big. He then climbs back into the sandbox and starts talking about how he and his father went to a shoe repairman's shop to fix some shoes—but eventually he realizes that it's five minutes past the end of their session. (Axline didn't want to interrupt his story, so she did not tell him it was time to go.) Dibs gets his hat and coat and puts on his socks and shoes. He turns the "Do not Disturb" sign around on the door, saying that other people can disturb the room now.

CHAPTER 11

The following Thursday, Dibs returns for his seventh session. He briskly starts to construct a toy village, setting up **churches** and houses, and he evocatively describes the world that he has made, the seasons, and the **trees**. According to Dibs, it is a beautiful, comfortable town with lots of trees; he describes how the **wind** and the trees whisper to each other. One tree tells the wind that it wants them to travel together—the tree doesn't want to be alone and sad.

Dibs's invented story about the hill and the soldiers is symbolic of his own struggles. The inability to get up the hill it represents Dibs's inability to live up to his parents' expectations. However, in Dibs's mind, just trying to get up the hill makes him happy, regardless of whether he accomplishes it or not. The story underscores that children should be allowed to go at their own pace and not be constantly evaluated by others.



Axline again observes that Dibs's intellectual capabilities and his emotional capabilities are often at odds with one another; here, Dibs uses his intelligence as a retreat from his emotional distress when he starts talking about varieties of clocks in order to distract himself from thinking about his father. However, Axline does not want to push Dibs because she aims to help maintain Dibs's self-determination. She recognizes that eventually Dibs will express his feelings at his own pace.



Dibs's observations about himself and the church indicate his hesitation about new experiences. At this moment, the church feels too large for him, indicating his insecurity about confronting something so big and so unknown. However, his comparison of the church to the playroom illustrates how much progress he has made inside the room. He feels big in the playroom because he has confidence and security in his surroundings. His confidence is apparent at the end of the session when he gets his own hat and coat and puts on his own socks and shoes, making his own way out the door.



Dibs's description of the wind and the trees is also symbolic, and it foreshadows the story he describes later in the chapter. The story signifies Dibs's desire to be free like the wind, rather than being stuck in one place and isolated, like the tree. Dibs's play here also shows how much Dibs is improving in his expressiveness because of the play therapy.



Dibs then starts to work on a puzzle that was left on a table, and he brings it near Axline's feet, completing it quickly. He notices that the puzzle is of Tom Tom The Piper's Son, and he starts singing a song he learned at school from Miss Jane. When Axline asks if he knows other grown-ups, he says he knows Hedda, Jake (their gardener), and Millie (who does the laundry).

Dibs describes how Jake once trimmed one of the big **trees** in the family's yard—a tree that grew close enough for Dibs to reach out his window and touch it. Dibs's father wanted it trimmed, even though Jake tried to explain that Dibs liked touching the branch out his window. But his father wanted it cut off anyway, saying it spoiled the look of the tree and he didn't want Dibs hanging out of his window. He then put a metal safety screen on Dibs's window so he couldn't fall out. But when Jake trimmed the tree, he saved the tip of the branch and gave it to Dibs.

Axline asks if Dibs spends much time with Jake, and Dibs says that he used to go out into the yard where Jake would tell him stories. Once Jake told a story of the last leaf on the **tree**. The leaf was sad because it thought it had been forgotten. But the **wind** blew down the lonely leaf and it was blown all around the world before coming back to the yard. Jake then gave the leaf to Dibs, saying that the leaf liked Dibs better than anyone else. Dibs mounted and framed the leaf.

After Dibs finishes his story, he then walks over to the dollhouse and **locks** it up. When Axline asks why Dibs did that, Dibs says he doesn't know. He then whimpers and asks Axline for her help with his shoelace before going over to the **nursing bottle** and sucking on it. Axline asks if Dibs is sad, and he nods: he explains that Jake had a heart attack so he doesn't often come around the house anymore. Dibs misses Jake. He says, "I guess, maybe, he is a friend?" Axline says he seems like a very good friend.

Dibs again reveals how much information he has absorbed from school and kept to himself. However, it took play sessions with Axline, and building mutual trust, for Dibs to be comfortable sharing some of the things he has learned without feeling that he is being tested on them. It's noteworthy that all the adults he knows seem to be paid staff—he lists his teachers and people who work at his home, but it doesn't seem that he's been exposed to adults in a purely social context. This again shows how emotionally deprived Dibs has been.



Dibs's story illustrates how much he valued kindness and empathy even before he started play therapy with Axline. Jake understood Dibs's love for the tree in a way that his father didn't, and he gave Dibs the branch to show that he cared and that Dibs wasn't alone. Just as Dibs's family seems to frequently lock him inside rooms, here Dibs shows another form of imposed isolation: placing a metal screen on his window so that he cannot reach for the outside world. This makes Dibs feel even more isolated and less free.



Jake again displays his deep empathy for Dibs in telling the story of the lonely leaf. The leaf represents Dibs in that Dibs, too, feels lonely and left behind by his peers. Jake also tries to add to Dibs's self-esteem by describing how the leaf could be free by traveling around the world with the wind. Because Dibs has already established the wind as a symbol of freedom in his mind, this gives him hope that he, too, might find a greater sense of freedom.



Dibs again illustrates how he retreats from the world when he feels emotional distress, which is clear in his sudden inability to tie his shoe and his desire to suck on the nursing bottle. As he still isn't fully able to express and overcome his sadness about Jake on his own, he reverts to a more infantile state to try to find comfort and avoid these emotions.



Dibs walks over to the window and looks at the **church**, explaining that Jake and his grandmother go to church, but his father and mother don't, so he and Dorothy don't go. Dibs then asks how many minutes are left, and Axline says eight. He decides to play with the dollhouse the rest of the time. As he pretends that he is getting the grown-ups ready for bed, he says that the laundress can't go to bed. The mother suggests that the laundress get a rocking chair, but the laundress is worried about bothering the man.

As Dibs plays, Axline accidentally kicks the puzzle Dibs made, and she straightens it. Dibs realizes what happened and comes over to see if Axline fixed it correctly. Dibs then locks the playroom **door**. After a moment, Axline tells him to unlock it because it's time to go home. Dibs unlocks the door, puts his hat and coat on with resignation, and walks down to the reception room as he waves goodbye to Axline. After Dibs is gone, Axline reflects on how strong he is and wonders whether Jake knew how much of an impact his understanding and kindness had.

CHAPTER 12

The next week, Dibs has the measles, but the following Thursday Dibs recovers enough to have his eighth session. When he arrives, he tells Axline that he liked the get-well card and the flowers she sent him. He says that his father told him the flowers could grow into bushes. Axline is interested in his father showing more engagement with Dibs, and she asks what Dibs said when his father talked to him. Dibs says that he just listened.

Dibs then asks himself what he wants to do. He replies that he's not in a hurry, and that he'll just "be." He lies down in the sand and pulls out a soldier that another child buried there, then he starts singing the muffin man song, but he replaces the words so that he sings, "Did you know the nothing man? He lives in a dreary grave." Dibs says that he doesn't talk to his father much, but he doesn't know why.

The church becomes a recurring symbol of Dibs's self-determination, in addition to being a stand-in for new experiences. The loving adults in Dibs's life (Jake and his grandmother) go to church, while the more critical adults in his life do not. Thus, over time, Dibs becomes more enamored of the church not only because it is something he is interested in, but also because it counters the expectations of his parents, even if this rebellion is subconscious.



Dibs's decision to lock the playroom door shines a different light on his constant preoccupation with locks. It indicates that there is perhaps a part of him that recognizes that he wants to be protected from those outside of his walls, like the cruelty of his father. But at the same time, he doesn't want to be isolated from friends like Jake, adding to his inner conflict.



This passage suggests that there might be growing trust between Dibs and his father. However, while Dibs is more open to communication as his father engages with him, Dibs still doesn't fully respond. This is his way of continuing to subvert his father's expectations and maintain self-determination in their relationship.



Dibs relishes the ability to just "be," indicating that he enjoys the escape from parental pressures. Because he is able to go at his own pace during his therapy sessions, he is more expressive of his emotions. He also finds more peace within himself, whereas before he was roiled with constant conflict about facing their expectations. Additionally, Dibs's new version of the muffin man song indicates his ability to be more expressive about his relationship with his father, because his father is often a negative (or absent) presence in his life.



Axline wonders if Dibs's behavior has changed at all in school—his teachers have not reached out to her at all. Meanwhile, Dibs continues to play in the sandbox until he suddenly opens the playroom door and takes the sign from the door. He points to the sign and asks what therapy is, a question that surprises Axline. Axline says that it means a chance to come play and talk in any way Dibs wants to—a time when he can be himself. Dibs worries about hearing someone coming down the hall, and he asks if the room is just for him, and Axline says it's just for him at this time every week if he wants it that way. Dibs says it's for him and for Axline as well, and he replaces the sign.

Dibs then tells Axline that he was sad when he had measles because he couldn't read books. Axline asks what he likes to read, and Dibs says that he has books about everything but that he likes science books best. He repeats that he really liked Axline's card, which his mother let him keep next to his bed. Axline wonders how Dibs learned to read, write, and draw—according to existing learning theories, he should not have been able to obtain these skills without getting instruction and mastering verbal language first.

Dibs hears the **church** bells ring and Axline says he has fifteen minutes left in his session. Dibs is very happy, and he exclaims about the beautiful day. He then rearranges the paints and sings about making a farm and building a fence. He puts the animal figures behind the fence and tells the cow to “straighten up” and not to “act like such a stupid idiot.”

Dibs hears the bells ring again, and Axline says it's time for Dibs to go. Dibs tries to pretend that it's one o'clock and that he doesn't have to go, but he gradually relents and agrees that he has to leave. He smiles at Axline and says goodbye, putting on his hat and coat. Axline observes that Dibs seems more at ease with his mother and even his father now. She wonders if they're changing their behavior towards Dibs, or if Dibs is simply relating to them more.

Axline's definition of therapy emphasizes her non-judgmental approach: that therapy should allow Dibs to maintain autonomy. In addition, Dibs's reaction to the person coming down the hall illustrates how much trust Dibs has built with Axline in the playroom. However, Dibs is clearly still wary of new situations and people, which means that even though Axline has helped him feel secure within the narrow confines of therapy, he still doesn't know how to carry that security within himself in other contexts.



Dibs's reading skills (and other indications of his intelligence) suggest that his parents did have a hand in helping to foster these skills, especially because they provided him with such advanced material. It also hints at how much they have been emphasizing his intellectual capabilities at the expense of his emotional and social skills.



Here Dibs starts to hint at some of the ways in which his parents' expectations have become deeply ingrained in his psyche. His language about the cow is almost certainly parroted from his father, and it becomes clear that his father is often harsh and judgmental towards him and others.



Axline illustrates here that non-judgmental therapy not only benefits Dibs, but also his parents. Because Dibs is able to gain emotional and social skills through therapy, his parents are in turn able to relate to him more openly and lovingly.



CHAPTER 13

Dibs arrives for his ninth session the following week in a very happy mood. He explains to Axline that his mother may be late because she's running an errand. Dibs then walks over to the easel and starts to sing about the paints. He stirs the turquoise paint with a brush and rinses the brush in the sink. When the brush slips down into the pipe, he isn't able to retrieve it and laughs. He then gets the **nursing bottle** and chews on the top. As he does this, he dumps a set of plastic dishes in the sink and washes them, jumping up and down with laughter. He explains that his grandmother sent him some dishes like these. His grandmother is coming home soon and he loves her very much.

After washing the dishes, Dibs decides to have a tea party for himself and six other children. He sets out the seven cups and fills a pitcher with water, pouring some into each cup. Then his tone of voice changes, imitating his mother. He says if they're going to have tea, they have to do it properly. Dibs instructs himself on how much tea and milk to pour in. He also chides himself, saying, "If you want to have a tea party you will sit down quietly at this table and you will wait until everyone is served." Dibs pours the tea precisely, even pouring some out when he thinks there is too much in one cup. Dibs says that children shouldn't have too much sugar and that if there's any more fussing he will "**lock** [them]—in [their] room."

Dibs sits at the table, and when he reaches for toast, he spills water out of one of the cups. He becomes frightened and quickly empties the cups. When Axline assures him that it was an accident, Dibs says, "Stupid people make accidents!" Then he starts to cry and says the party is over. Axline comments that spilling the tea made him frightened and unhappy and she asks if the boy who upset the tea got sent to his room. Dibs says yes, that it was stupid of him to be so clumsy. Dibs then cries out that he didn't want a party or any other children around.

Still upset about the spilled tea, Dibs asks to go to Axline's office and says that he's not stupid. Axline affirms that Dibs is not stupid. In the office, Dibs apologizes for being careless. Axline says he was careless, perhaps, but not stupid, and Dibs agrees. Axline observes that Dibs weathered this emotional storm: he discovered a strength in himself to cope with his hurt feelings. He then writes a letter to himself, saying that he washed the tea set and had a party with children. He signs off, "With love. Me."

Dibs's interaction with his surroundings illustrates how this safe, non-judgmental environment has given him freedom and ease over time. Whereas before, Dibs would barely have spoken and likely would have been very upset about a brush being stuck in the drain, now he is far less worried about things he cannot control, and he seems completely secure that he won't be punished for accidents. He is also allowed to act like an infant (sucking on the nursing bottle) even as he is showing a more mature sense of responsibility (in washing brushes or cleaning up dishes).



The tea party is a clear indication of how much Dibs's parents' expectations—particularly his mother's, in this instance—have affected him. Rather than simply being able to enjoy a make-believe tea party, he parrots her bizarrely strict rules and indicates that he's afraid of punishment, like the threat of being locked in his room. He is not just imitating his mother—the language is almost certainly hers, rather than his—but he is also taking her words as the rule of law and constantly trying to adhere to them, rather than determining his own way to have a tea party.



Again, Dibs parrots words that likely come from his parents. It shows how their expectations (and their harsh judgments of him when he fails to meet those expectations) give him great anxiety and even deprive him of joy. He has become so used to being punished and withdrawing from others that here he even states that he didn't want a party or to be with other children in the first place. In this way, his fear of mistakes actually spurs his isolation.



Axline's empathy and non-judgment once again help Dibs to work through his feelings. In affirming that he is not stupid but recognizing his distress at being careless, Dibs is able to separate these two sentiments and work through them. His and Axline's mutual trust enables Dibs to feel better about himself and foster the security that Axline hopes he can carry with him outside the playroom.



After writing the letter, Dibs looks at Axline’s calendar, circling his birthday and his family’s birthdays. Dibs then starts to erase the circle he drew around his father’s birthday, but when Axline asks him why he’s doing this, he stops. Dibs says that the circle will have to stay because it is his father’s birthday, whether Dibs wants it to be that way or not.

This is another example of Dibs separating his feelings from his actions. He is finding more security in his feelings, as he knows that he’s not happy about his father’s birthday. But he still accepts the parameters of the world—that it will be his father’s birthday regardless of how he feels about it. Dibs is accepting the fact that he cannot control everything about his world.



Dibs then looks at Axline’s card file, searching for his name. When he doesn’t find it, he writes a card with his name, address, and phone number, and he files it correctly. He also writes a card for Axline. When the church bells chime, he observes that all the people are going home from work. He asks where his mother is, and Axline says she hasn’t come yet—someone will ring the buzzer when she is there. Dibs replies that sometimes people don’t do what they say, and Axline points out when that happens, he feels disappointed. Dibs agrees.

Dibs’s sentiments here reinforce children’s need for security in their environments. As Axline pointed out in an earlier chapter, children feel most secure when given clear and consistent parameters. This is a good example: when those promises are broken, Dibs gets upset. Once again, Axline expresses empathy for his experiences, making Dibs feel more understood and allowing him to open up about his feelings.



Dibs then turns to the current day on Axline’s calendar and puts an X on it, saying it is his most important day. The buzzer rings shortly after, and Dibs comments, “like you said.” Dibs says goodbye, touches Axline’s hand shyly, and then walks out into the waiting room, where Axline notes that Dibs’s mother seems more relaxed. Dibs’s mother tells Dibs to say goodbye to Axline, and he flatly says goodbye. But when Axline points out that Dibs said goodbye to her in her office, Dibs brightens and says goodbye again.

Dibs’s comment of “like you said,” coupled with this unusual and tender physical contact, illustrates how aware he is of the promises that the adults in his life make, and how important it is to him to be able to trust those promises. Additionally, Dibs’s reaction to his mother telling him to say goodbye to Axline is important. It shows that his mother doesn’t have faith in Dibs to do what she expects, when in reality Dibs is a very capable and responsible child and had already done what she wanted him to do. When Axline explains that he already said goodbye, Dibs is pleased because Axline is confirming his capabilities.



CHAPTER 14

The next week, when Dibs arrives for his ninth session, he comments on Axline’s colorful dress—a departure from his normal, quiet entrance. Dibs’s mother tells Axline that he wanted to bring one of his birthday presents in for his session. She says that Dibs can explain the gift, and she notes with pride that she’s beginning to think Dibs has “all the answers.”

Dibs continues to show progress in each session. He is more openly interactive with others, and he is also taking the initiative to do what he wants to do by bringing in his gift. As a result, his mother, too, is forging an emotional connection with her son and putting her faith in his intelligence by noting he has “all the answers.” This underscores the benefits of this non-judgmental therapy for the family as a whole.



Back in the playroom, Dibs pulls out his present: a Morse code set. He shows Axline how he can type out messages with it. As he types, a truck passes by the window, and he says, “You look at truck, Dibs.” Axline posits that this reversion to baby talk is a relief from the pressure of his birthday gift.

As the truck passes, Dibs leans out the window to look at it. Two college girls walk by and say hello to Dibs, but he doesn’t respond. One of them tries a few more times, but he continues to be silent. She asks if Dibs can talk, and he still doesn’t say anything. Angrily, he returns to the room and says, “Don’t want to say hello! [...] Will not talk!” Axline comments that the girls hurt his feelings and he doesn’t want to talk to them. He says people are mean, but the truck is nice.

Next, Dibs goes over to the sandbox and buries a soldier in it. Then he says that he wants to bake cookies to take his mind off his worries. He acts out baking cookies, precisely working through the directions from memory. As Dibs waits for the cookies to bake, he sits in the sandbox and sings about the cookies baking. When he starts to count in the song, he reenacts his parents trying to teach him to count: whenever he is unable to remember the numbers, they call him a “stupid child,” but when he gets it right, he gets a cookie.

Dibs lays down in the sand and sucks on the **bottle** for a while, but then he gets up and says that he’s not a baby and he never was one. He puts on his shoes, commenting that if he needs or wants Axline’s help, she will help him. Then Dibs refills the nursing bottle and asks for help replacing the top. He says that Axline never calls him stupid—that she just helps him. She asks how that makes him feel, and he simply says, “I feel.”

Dibs returns to the sink, splashing around and happily making a mess. He then notices a can of scouring powder, places some in his hand, and puts it in his mouth. Axline exclaims that the powder isn’t good to taste, and he looks at her coldly. He asks how he can know what the powder tastes like without tasting it. Axline replies that she doesn’t know, but that the powder isn’t good to swallow. Dibs then spits the powder in the sink and rinses his mouth, as she instructs. Axline can tell her reaction upset him, so she apologizes, saying that she just didn’t like to see Dibs take a mouthful of the powder.

Even as Dibs makes progress in the therapy sessions, there are still times in which his emotional immaturity outweighs his intellectual capacity, and he reverts to less grammatical speaking patterns. Giving a Morse code set to a six year-old suggests that his parents have high aspirations for his intelligence, and even as Dibs enjoys his gift, he senses that the gift is putting pressure on him, which stresses him out.



Dibs’s exchange with the college girl is another example of the weight of expectations, even if they don’t come from his parents. Because Dibs chooses not to respond to the girl, she judges him harshly—a contrast to Dibs’s experience with Axline, who never pressures him to speak or berates him if he doesn’t. And again, this inability to live up to other people’s social expectations makes Dibs revert to less sophisticated speaking patterns.



Dibs continues to work through his feelings about his parents’ expectations. It is clear that he has incredible intelligence, since he is a six-year-old who can remember the precise directions for baking cookies. Yet at the same time, Dibs’s song suggests that whenever he isn’t able to convey his intelligence exactly how his parents expect, they criticize him harshly for it and he shuts down.



Dibs continues to experience the struggle of finding himself. He doesn’t want to seem like a baby, yet he also enjoys being cared for at times. Much of the trust that he and Axline share is based on this idea: she doesn’t judge him and simply allows him to be and feel what he wants, as he confirms here.



The incident with the scouring powder provides a contrast to Axline and Dibs’s usual dynamic. Because Axline judges Dibs in this moment and tells him that he can’t do something, he feels that she doesn’t trust him and gets upset. In contrast to the way her non-judgment usually makes him more open, her judgment shuts him down.



Dibs then fills the sink with dishes and glass bottles. He drops one of the bottles and it hits the faucet. He says it might break and cut him, and he asks if Axline is afraid for him. Axline replies that Dibs knows how to take care of himself, having learned her lesson.

After washing the dishes, Dibs sucks on the **nursing bottle** and says that he's not very old—he's only six. He then says that he wants to go down to Axline's office, and he takes his message set with him. Once there, Dibs types out a message and decodes it: "I am Dibs." His next message is "I like Dibs. You like Dibs. We both like Dibs." He puts the messages in Axline's index card file and asks her to keep only his card and her card in the box.

Dibs then says he liked his birthday presents this year, including the birthday card Axline sent him. It's almost time to go, and he decides to sit for his final three minutes. As he sits peacefully, he says, "I'm being happy." When the time is up, he picks up his code set, says goodbye, and leaves.

Here Axline tries to reverse course from the incident with the scouring powder, once again emphasizing Dibs's self-determination and allowing him to take the lead in his actions without judgment.



Dibs continues to shift between capable and infantile behavior. Whereas before he said that he was never a baby, now he emphasizes that he's still quite young and permits himself to suck on the bottle. Still, Dibs is learning to accept himself in all forms, which shows when he writes a message about liking himself.



This is a major development for Dibs. Rather than constantly being on alert and anxious, or wishing to stay with Axline for longer than he needs, Dibs is calm, relaxed, and happy. This is another reinforcement of the benefits therapy has provided and the new security Dibs has found in himself.



CHAPTER 15

The following week, for Dibs's 10th session, he says that he has planned what he wants to do. He sets up the dollhouse and places the mother, father, sister, and brother dolls in the house. Dibs then walks over to the window and says he can see so many wonderful things. Dibs explains that sometimes he is afraid of people, but sometimes he isn't—like when he's with Axline.

Returning to the sandbox, Dibs digs a hole there and says that someone may or may not be buried there. Dibs then says that while his grandmother has always loved him, his father has not always loved him. But his father likes him better now and talks to him more. Dibs then starts to talk about a microscope he got for his birthday before reiterating that he feels safe with Axline.

Dibs continues to battle with mistrust of others. However, only through building trust with Axline and the environment of the playroom is Dibs then able to extend some of that security to the outside world; his new confidence demonstrates the positive effects of that trust.



Dibs's assessment of his father and grandmother reveal the importance of unconditional love in his life. It is why he is open and loving towards his grandmother, who does not judge him, versus cold and distant with his father, who criticizes him. Additionally, Dibs's retreat to the microscope is another instance of using intellectual concepts to avoid engaging with his emotional struggles.



Dibs goes to the dollhouse and acts out a story. He says that the mother is out for a walk and the sister doll is away at school. The father doll is in the house alone. The father unlocks the boy's room and the boy runs out of the house because the boy doesn't like locked **doors**. Dibs says that the father then goes out for a walk because he doesn't know what to do, and he buys a microscope from a toy store down the street. When the father calls for the boy, the boy comes running in, bumps into the table, and almost knocks over the lamp. The father says the boy is a "stupid, silly child and he [is] ashamed of him." The boy then runs out of the house again.

Dibs imagines that when the mother returns to the house, a giant boy comes along—so big that nobody can hurt him. The giant boy locks the windows and **doors**. Then the father starts smoking his pipe and the house catches on fire, but the family can't get out. They scream and scream, and the little boy sees them and can't save them; Dibs starts to cry as he says this. Axline asks if Dibs is upset because the father and mother are locked in the burning house, and Dibs says he's crying because he feels "the hurt of doors closed and locked against [him]." Axline puts her arm around Dibs.

After a moment, Dibs brushes away his tears and uses the boy doll to save the mother and father doll. He unlocks the doors and puts the fire out. Dibs returns to Axline, smiling faintly, and says that he didn't let the family get hurt. He then says his parents used to **lock** him in his room, but they don't do it anymore. He also returns to the sandbox and fills up the hole he dug earlier.

Axline thinks that the locked **doors** in Dibs's life have brought him intense suffering, as they have deprived him of love, respect, and understanding. Dibs drinks briefly from the **nursing bottle**, but then he says he doesn't need it anymore—that he's a big boy now. Then Dibs backtracks, saying sometimes he may want to be a baby again. When Dibs leaves the playroom, Axline notes that Dibs seems to leave behind some of the sorrowful feelings he uprooted there.

This story demonstrates the toxic dynamic between Dibs and his father. While Dibs doesn't say so, it becomes relatively clear that much of this story is true—particularly given the detail about the microscope, which his father did in fact give him. His father seems to feel conflict between trying to love his son and making sure that Dibs can live up to his expectations. In addition, Dibs's father also struggles with his own ability to connect emotionally. When he doesn't know what to do about Dibs running away, he bizarrely buys him a present meant to improve his intellect (the microscope) rather than trying to engage with Dibs and express love.



This episode underscores the importance of Axline's non-judgmental approach to Dibs's therapy. Rather than punishing or judging Dibs for acting out the deaths of his parents, she instead provides a comforting arm around him and simply tries to understand his feelings. This allows Dibs to understand that he doesn't actually hate his family; instead, he dislikes the way in which they punish him and simply wants them to understand the hurt that they have caused him.



Dibs's reaction to his violent reoleplaying demonstrates the benefits of Axline's empathetic response: filling up the hole indicates that he no longer wants to "bury" his family, as he considered doing earlier. Dibs is able to express these difficult emotions toward his family, but he is also able to move past them.



Axline recognizes that the locked doors were a punishment that inadvertently prevented Dibs from feeling acceptance and love. Dibs's final comments during his session indicate that he is learning to accept all of the parts of himself, and the safe environment of the playroom is allowing him to begin to heal from his painful childhood experiences.



CHAPTER 16

Dibs arrives happily for his 11th session. He notices a fence that another child built in the sandbox, and he quickly removes it. He also takes a gun from the sandbox and puts it in a drawer. When Dibs opens the window, he talks to the air, telling it to come inside. He then tells Axline that his father doesn't like it when he talks to the air instead of to his father; often Dibs doesn't answer his father, which makes his father angry. Axline notes that Dibs withholds speech as a way to get back at his father. Dibs then takes out the gun and points it at the father doll, saying that if he speaks, Dibs will shoot him. After this threat, Dibs hides the gun in the basement of the dollhouse so that nobody gets hurt.

Dibs then says that there are children in his room at school who are very interesting. Axline asks if Dibs wants another child to come and play with him in the playroom, but Dibs grows very angry, saying "Don't want anybody else in here!" He says that no one likes him and they wouldn't come. Axline asks if another child wanted to come, whether he would let them. Dibs says no, shouting that the room is just for him and Axline; he is close to tears. Axline says she understands and confirms the room can be just for the two of them if he wants it that way.

After a few moments, Dibs says tentatively that he likes the other children, but he doesn't want them in the room with him. Then he goes over to the sink and adjusts the faucet. He says, "I can stop it. I can go it," and, "I am Dibs. I can do things. I like Dibs." Dibs then starts filling water bottles and pouring them into each other. He is excited at his ability to manipulate the water.

Dibs starts to talk to the water bottle, but then he chides himself and instructs himself to talk to people instead. He says that if he wants to say hello to the bottle, he can in this room. Dibs asks Axline to put the top on his **nursing bottle**, and then Dibs drinks from it. Dibs says if he wants to be a baby, he can be, and if he wants to be a grown-up, he can be that, too.

Dibs goes over to the easel and mixes up the paints and the brushes, then he puts the brushes back in their proper jars, saying there is a correct way to do everything. But, he says, in the room, he can mix them up, too. He concludes, "In here, it's all right just to be." He says that Axline understands what he means, and he pats her hand and smiles at her.

Dibs's arrival at this session shows a great deal of progress. Unlike Dibs's disappointment at the duck and the mountain being moved in Chapter 7, here Dibs is much more secure. If he doesn't like something about his surroundings, he knows he has the power to change it. However, Dibs's story about his father hints at burdens he still carries. Dibs intentionally uses his father's expectations—like the fact that his father thinks Dibs should speak to him—against him. But Dibs diminishes his own capabilities in the process. This leads to a harmful cycle of emotional disconnection from and anger toward his father.



Dibs's reaction here speaks to the trust that he and Axline have built together, but it also shows that Dibs still mistrusts everyone who isn't her. This indicates that while he's learning confidence in therapy, he still isn't fully able to carry confidence and security through to the outside world. He is still hesitant about change, particularly when it comes to trusting other children, and his infantile language reflects his inability to fully cope with change or unpredictability.



Dibs's emotional distress at the prospect of having another child in the room leads him to revert to more juvenile language and behavior, reinforcing the continued conflict between his intelligence and his emotions. At the same time, Dibs is finding joy in autonomy and is growing more confident in his abilities.



Dibs continues to find freedom in determining his own activities. Instead of living up to his father's expectations of talking to people rather than objects and being a grown-up rather than a baby, Dibs is comforted by an environment in which he can do whatever he wants without judgment.



Dibs's tender declaration here emphasizes the freedom he feels in doing what he wants. While his parents have a "correct way to do everything," in the play therapy room Dibs doesn't have to fear his own childishness or mistakes.



Dibs then asks to go to Axline's office. Once there, he looks at her books and her dictionary before saying that soon it will be time for him to go. Then, he repeats that he doesn't want anyone else in the playroom "yet." Axline wonders if this means a seed had been sowed in his mind to bring a friend someday, or to make a friend at school. When the session ends and Dibs goes into the reception room, he flings his arms around his mother and cries out that he loves her. Dibs's mother starts to cry as she leaves with Dibs.

CHAPTER 17

The next day, Dibs's mother calls Axline for an appointment, and Axline meets with her later that day. Dibs's mother looks happy, and she tells Axline how grateful they are for her work. She was touched by Dibs's affection the previous day, and he seems generally calmer and happier. He doesn't have temper tantrums or suck his thumb anymore, he looks at them and speaks to them directly, and he even plays with Dorothy sometimes. Dibs's mother says that Dibs is beginning to feel that he belongs to the family, and she feels that he is one of them as well.

Dibs's mother wonders where she went wrong with him. She says that she knew that he wasn't mentally disabled (even though she told Axline that she thought he was), and she reveals that she was teaching and testing him from a young age; she knows he can read and write. Dibs's mother read Dibs hundreds of books growing up, never knowing whether he truly understood what she was saying, but she wanted to prove something to herself: that she could teach Dibs and that he could learn.

Dibs's mother laments that she was always testing Dibs and doubting his capacity, because she recognizes now that this tormented him and built an emotional wall between them. She says that Dibs's grandmother accepted him the way he was and believed in him, and they have a good relationship as a result. Dibs's grandmother used to tell his mother that if she relaxed and let Dibs be, he would be okay. Dibs's mother says she feels very guilty about what she has done to him, acknowledging that she wasn't able to admit previously that she was a source of his problems.

Dibs's subconscious openness to making a friend (as suggested by the word "yet") coupled with his reaction to his mother marks a huge change for Dibs. Even though he is still expressing some hostility towards others (and particularly his parents) in therapy, being able to express those emotions enables him to move past them and express his deep love for them as well.



Dibs's mother's report emphasizes how the play therapy has been broadly improving his life. These many tangible improvements illustrate the benefits of Axline's empathy and lack of judgment. Because Axline tries to understand him and doesn't judge his negative thoughts, he is able to express his negative feelings and move past them, simultaneously maturing and growing more confident even outside of the playroom.



Dibs's mother reveals that many of her interactions with her son were motivated by her desire to cultivate his intellect, which helps explain why he's so emotionally stunted. She also used his progress to determine whether she lived up to her own expectations as a mother and a teacher, which shows how she was using Dibs to evaluate herself and she wasn't always putting his needs and interests first. Dibs's behavior illustrates how damaging this was, as he continues to feel pressure to act as his parents want and he worries a lot about not living up to their expectations of his intelligence.



Dibs's mother finally acknowledges how much her expectations have affected Dibs and how she promoted his intellectual capacities at the expense of building an emotional foundation between them. By contrast, his grandmother, who held no expectations, was therefore able to build that emotional connection because she did not put the same kind of pressure on him or make him feel judged.



Axline points out to Dibs's mother that her relationship with Dibs seems to have changed; now she's proud of her son. Dibs's mother nods and shows Axline a picture that Dibs drew, which is very detailed and has amazing perspective for the work of a six-year-old. She explains that the drawing is too good; she worried that he might be schizophrenic. Now, however, she is happy that Dibs is acting more normally. Axline thinks that when a child is forced to prove himself as capable, results can be disastrous. A child needs love, acceptance, and understanding.

Dibs's mother explains that if Dibs has superior ability, it shouldn't be wasted. Axline notes that his accomplishments mean a lot to her, and Dibs's mother says yes. She recalls teaching Dibs to read at two years old, spelling out words with letter blocks and making him copy her until he could read. Then she would ask him to bring her records with certain words on them, and he would always get the correct record. But, she says, there was never any emotional contact between them.

Dibs's mother says she sent Dorothy away to school so she could focus on Dibs, but she wishes she had let him be a child. Now she sees that she blamed Dibs for the strained relationship between herself and Dibs's father, and she has come to love Dibs and feel proud of him. She knows that Dibs had to change—he had to be a better person than she was—in order for her feelings and her husband's feelings to change. Axline observes that because Dibs's mother felt accepted, she was able to dig into her own feelings and understand her behaviors and motivations. Axline thinks that not only is Dibs finding himself, but so are his parents.

CHAPTER 18

The following Monday, Miss Jane calls Axline, excited to report that the teachers have seen a big change in Dibs. She says that Dibs will answer them now and even initiate conversation. He refers to himself as "I" most of the time. Axline asks to have lunch, and she, Miss Jane, and Hedda meet the next day. The teachers no longer doubt that Dibs has been aware of and listening to everything going on around him. And he has even started to do what other children do in the room, like returning greetings and hanging up his hat and coat. Additionally, he no longer has temper tantrums and he smiles.

Dibs's mother illustrates how much she prioritized her son's intellectual ability even when she knew that it likely meant he was struggling with his emotional and social skills. Axline puts this tactic in starkest terms, emphasizing the harm that these kinds of expectations can have on a developing child. Again Axline emphasizes empathy in place of prioritizing ability. It's also noteworthy that, even in this moment when Dibs's mother is trying to walk back her impulse to judge Dibs, she now does so in a different way: suggesting that his drawing is so accomplished that it actually might indicate mental problems. Just because a six-year-old made a good drawing does not mean he's schizophrenic, so this shows that Dibs's mother has some work to do in accepting Dibs on his own terms.



Dibs's mother provides further examples of how she tested Dibs, putting her expectations for his development above their emotional connection. Yet even though Axline is internally critical of this approach, she continues to empathize with Dibs's mother. She makes an effort to understand that Dibs's mother, too, has internal motivations for her behavior towards Dibs, just as Dibs has internal motivations for his behavior.



Axline stresses how important it is for her to be empathetic not only towards Dibs, but also toward his parents. Because Dibs's mother is able to express some of her fears and admit the guilt she has about their relationship, she is able to move on from those feelings. This is crucial because it allows her to recognize her own fault in Dibs's developmental challenges and she no longer maintains that Dibs is mentally disabled—an attitude that surely hurt his confidence in himself.



Affirming the report from Dibs's mother, Dibs's teachers reveal the benefits of his play therapy with Axline. They make concrete comparisons to his earlier behavior like not using "I" or throwing temper tantrums. Because Axline provided him with a safe and secure space, he was able to grow confidence in himself and then take that security with him outside of the playroom, just as she hoped. He is now a happier and more relaxed child, which benefits him and everyone around him.



Hedda also presents Dibs's paintings (which are much simpler than the drawing that Dibs's mother showed Axline the day before) and a few simple sentences he wrote like "I see a cat." Hedda is excited by Dibs's progress, but Axline wonders internally why Dibs is undercutting his abilities at school. She thinks these may be signs of Dibs adjusting to a group his own age. Hedda enthusiastically says that he can also read aloud, though very haltingly. Axline decides not to reveal Dibs's true ability, worried that it would discourage the teachers. She hopes that Dibs will gradually be more comfortable being himself, but she believes at this point that his social adjustment is more important than displaying his intellectual abilities.

Hedda also says that Dibs has started to dance during the rhythm band, and that his mother seems much happier with him. On Dibs's birthday, he sang along with the other children excitedly and passed out a piece of cake to each child. Axline is pleased with Dibs's progress, but she hopes that in the future he'll be able to use his abilities, not deny them. She knows his intellectual abilities were used to test him and that he became isolated as a result.

Hedda also relays that Dibs acted in a school assembly, performing the part of the **wind** in a story and making up a song as he danced. The teachers and the children were thrilled that Dibs was part of the group, and Hedda thought that Dibs had found himself. Axline thinks that while this is great progress, there are many feelings Dibs has not dug out of his past yet. Axline wants to help Dibs further understand his emotions so that any hatred and fear he still has can be brought out into the open and diminished.

CHAPTER 19

At Dibs's 12th session, he asks to record on the tape recorder in Axline's office. As the tape rolls, Dibs starts talking about his family and his school. Then he asks why his father slammed the door, saying that his father is "stupid and careless." He says he doesn't want his father around if his father is going to act like that, and he threatens to **lock** his father in his room.

Axline understands that there is still a degree of conflict between Dibs's emotional capabilities and his intelligence. Even as he starts to interact with others more, he is still holding his intellect back, showing that he's not yet comfortable being himself. Yet just as Axline didn't assure Dibs's mother that he had superior intelligence in Chapter 8, Axline does not do so here. She knows that focusing on Dibs's intelligence will only exacerbate some of his problems. Instead, Dibs needs to learn more social and emotional skills to let his intelligence flourish.



The story of Dibs's birthday demonstrates that he has taken great strides in the social skills that Axline is trying to build. Still, she aims to eradicate the tension between the different areas of Dibs's mental life. Rather than having his intelligence stifle his social skills, as happened with his mother, or his socialization stifle his intelligence, as is happening in the classroom, the goal is to make sure that Dibs can use both effectively.



Dibs's dance as the wind illustrates his newfound freedom of expression and his increasing social skills. This relates back to the story of the wind that he told in Chapter 9. In contrast to the tree, which was lonely and sad, the wind was able to travel anywhere it wanted. Dibs now identifies with that sense of freedom, and he uses that freedom to relate more to the other children. Axline hopes to continue to foster Dibs's freedom by helping bring out more of his negative emotions and mitigating them.



While Dibs is still exhibiting some hostile feelings towards his father, he has a slightly different perspective now. Whereas in Dibs's earlier sessions he criticized himself, now he is criticizing his father using his father's own words. Like with the story of the fire, he expresses a desire for his father to understand the pain of the punishments to which Dibs has been subjected.



Dibs rewinds the tape and listens to it several times. He turns on the recorder again and tells a story about a boy going into his father's study and saying that he hates his father. The father begins to cry and apologize for what he did, and the boy says that he's going to punish him and get rid of him. Dibs clicks off the recorder and assures Axline that this is just a story—in fact, he made gifts for his father at school. Then Dibs adds to the recording, saying he hates his father because his father is mean to him. When Dibs clicks off the recorder, he says that his father isn't mean anymore. Dibs turns on the recorder once more, threatening his father by saying that if he **locks** Dibs up again, he'll kill him. When he is finished, he asks Axline to save the tape.

Dibs then declares that he wants to go back to the playroom. He goes over to the dollhouse and gets the father doll, then builds a prison in the sandbox for him. Once the doll is in jail, he tells Axline that he used to be afraid of his father because he was mean, but now he isn't mean anymore. Dibs then informs Axline that his father takes care of him, but he's still punishing his father for all the things that made him sad. Dibs takes the boy doll and rescues the father doll from the prison, after which the father doll says he loves Dibs.

Dibs explains that he talked to his father today: Dibs said good morning and told his father to have a nice time today, and his father returned his greeting. Dibs also says that on Sunday, his father took the family to the beach on Long Island. His father told him about the oceans and the tides and they built a sandcastle together. The family was very happy together.

Dibs returns to the sandbox and says that he didn't want to keep his father locked up and buried: he just wanted to teach him a lesson. Axline says she understands, and Dibs smiles. Axline notes that Dibs has been more open with his expressions of vengeance and hate only *after* he started to feel more secure in his relationship with his father.

Here Dibs grapples with the conflict between the anger he has often felt between him and his father and the growing emotional connection between them. Dibs is recognizing that he can both love his father and still bear negative feelings towards him for the pain that he has caused. The goal is not for Dibs's life to be completely perfect. Instead, Axline hopes to give Dibs the tools to work through his negative emotions and be able to express the positive ones more openly as well—which he also does here.



This episode demonstrates the clear benefits of the play therapy: it allows Dibs to express his emotions and feelings without fear of judgment for violent behaviors. And, in doing so, Dibs is able to then move beyond those feelings. He puts his father in "prison" but then also acknowledges that his father takes care of him, and so Dibs rescues him. The fact that Dibs wants his father to understand his sad feelings only highlights the benefit of Axline's empathetic approach.



Dibs then shows that his feelings about his father are not only shifting internally, but that these shifts are also translating to how he interacts with his father. The more he is able to express his negative feelings with Axline, the less he focuses on them when he actually spends time with his family.



Axline sums up the benefits of her non-judgmental therapy, as it helps Dibs to work past his feelings of vengeance and hate and develop a better relationship with his father. He had to be able to do this at his own pace, becoming more confident in himself before he could overcome and combat the criticisms from his father.



CHAPTER 20

The next week, at Dibs's 13th session, he notes that he and Axline only have three more sessions before they both go away for summer vacation. He also says that his grandmother is going to spend the summer with them this year. Dibs then picks up the girl doll and calls her a brat, saying that he's going to get rid of her by poisoning her. Sometimes he's afraid of Dorothy when she screams and hurts him, he says, and sometimes he scratches and hits her back. Dorothy was home this past weekend, and when Axline asks how that went, he says that he played with her and that they don't fight much anymore.

Dibs comments that Dorothy is going to attend his school next year. He's glad that she's coming home because she was probably very lonely at school. Dorothy doesn't bother him like she used to; this weekend, Dibs read Dorothy a story that his father gave him. Dibs then pours some paint together and says that this is poison for his sister. Axline asks if the poison will mean the end of her if she eats it. Dibs nods, but then he says that he won't give it to her just yet.

Then Dibs moves the mother doll to the sandbox and instructs her to build a mountain, saying "don't tell me you can't do it." He'll show her how to build the mountain again and again, but she must do it. Then Dibs picks up the **nursing bottle** and says he's just a baby who can't do anything, instructing grandmother to "take care of baby." When Dibs returns to the mother doll, he asks angrily why she doesn't do what he says. He threatens that if she screams and cries, he'll **lock** her in her room. According to Dibs, the mother is afraid to be locked in her room, so she tries to build the mountain.

Dibs then returns to the doll representing Dorothy and holds her. He says that he'll take care of her, holding the **nursing bottle** to her lips. Dibs explains that he's going to make a gift for each of his family members at school and he wants to give his grandmother a piece of the **branch** from his favorite tree. He then picks up the mother doll from the sandbox and tells her that he'll help her, that she doesn't have to build a mountain. He puts her back in the dollhouse and sets everyone around the dining room table. Dibs starts to paint in bright colors, saying that the colors indicate happiness.

Dibs's interactions with the doll representing his sister are comparable to his interactions with the doll that represented his father. Now that his relationship with Dorothy is improving, Dibs is more open about his negative feelings about her. Just as he is doing with his father, Dibs is trying to build more trust and security in his relationship with Dorothy.



Just like Dibs's play helps him work through feelings about his father, Dibs also works through feelings about his sister. Axline doesn't judge Dibs for pretending to poison Dorothy. Instead, she understands that expressing this desire paradoxically indicates that Dibs is developing more trust and affection for his sister. In understanding and relaying his thoughts back to him, she helps him realize that he doesn't in fact want his sister to disappear from his life; he recognizes the positive feelings that he has towards her.



In this passage, Dibs plays with the mother doll in a similar way to how he played with the father and sister dolls: he is trying to reverse their dynamic by holding her to impossible expectations, showing her how her expectations for him have made him feel sad, judged, and powerless. He expresses his love for his grandmother once more because she releases him from those expectations and allows him to act like a baby, which is symbolized by the nursing bottle and reflected in his childish language.



The more Dibs is able to express negative feelings toward his family members, the more his anger dissipates, leaving him able to express love and joy. Dibs is now even being empathetic towards Dorothy, whom he feels has no one to take care of her. He's also empathetic towards his mother, seeming to sense that she, too, suffers from the burden of her own expectations. Using the nursing bottle with Dorothy illustrates that Dibs is setting aside his childish tendencies and displaying greater maturity and responsibility. He also shows his security by giving his grandmother the tree branch: whereas before, he used the branch to feel secure, now he has security in himself and he feels comfortable giving the branch away.



As the session concludes, Dibs says that he only has two more Thursdays after this one. He'll miss Axline, and he remarks that it was a wonderful playroom. Axline notes that it had at times been a happy room, but that it had also held sorrow. Still, now Dibs has a sense of security. He can confront his feelings of hate and revenge and find mercy instead. Through his self-knowledge, he is now able to use his capacities and emotions more constructively.

Axline sums up the progress that Dibs has made in this passage. His trust in Axline and his feeling of freedom from judgment in the playroom allowed Dibs to build confidence and security in himself. Subsequently, Dibs's sense of freedom in the playroom enabled him to express sorrowful feelings, but then allowed him to diminish those feelings and become a freer, happier child.



CHAPTER 21

For the following week's session, Axline borrows a city figurine set and leaves it in the room for Dibs to use if he wants. When Dibs arrives, he immediately notices the set and decides to build a toy town for himself. He sets up a **church**, a house, and a truck, describing his city as he builds it. Dibs also flies an airplane and sets up some stores, a hospital, and a garage. Next, he moves the mailman all over the city delivering letters, and he imagines a friendly farmer and his family in a house with their animals.

Dibs's engagement with the figurine set not only illustrates his intelligence and creativity, but some of his newfound social skills, as well. This is clear from fact that he includes not only different objects, but friendly people as well. It's apparent that his intelligence and social skills are now more balanced and that he has more trust in the outside world.



Dibs imagines a boy going into the river filled with alligators and snakes, but another child goes in after the boy and warns him to get into a boat. He says the two boys get into the boat together and become friends. Dibs also sets up a policeman directing traffic and a school. Dibs points out a little girl who will stay at home so she won't be lonely. Dibs is excited about the city he has built.

Dibs's imaginings here continue to illustrate higher emotional intelligence and improved social skills. He has sympathy for the little girl—who represents Dorothy—and indicates that he wants her to have a friend. With the alligator scenario, he acknowledges that friendship affords safety, whereas before connecting with others was anxiety-inducing for Dibs.



Suddenly, Dibs picks up the fire truck; he explains that one of the houses is on fire. The family is caught upstairs, he says, but the fire truck comes and rescues them. When he leaves his therapy session, he has to get his hair cut, and while he used to be afraid of the barber, he isn't anymore. Dibs concludes, "I guess maybe I am growing up."

Again, the comparison of these incidents to earlier sessions show how much Dibs has improved in a short period of time. He isn't nearly as distressed by the imagined fire as he was a few sessions earlier, and he moves quickly to rescue the family, showing how his family relationships are healing. In addition, his description of the barber shows his improvement, as he grows more secure in himself and trusting of others.



Dibs sets up a few more figures in his city, and he designates one man as his father who is trying to get home. But, Dibs notes, the traffic sign always says stop and his father cannot get home. As Dibs leaves, he is excited about the world he built: "a world full of friendly people." After Dibs is gone, Axline remarks that Dibs's world was well-organized and his plan showed high intelligence. Dibs liked the people, though he still expressed resentment toward his parents. He is responsible and aware of his surroundings—he is certainly growing up, Axline thinks.

Here Axline affirms that Dibs's emotional intelligence, social skills, and intellect are now more balanced. Because he views the city as having "friendly people," he is able to use his intellectual capabilities and build a highly developed world. While he still expresses some discomfort with his father, he is able to express it in a much less aggressive way and work through those emotions.



CHAPTER 22

When Dibs comes in for his last session before summer, he asks to spend part of it in Axline's office. He wants to add to the tape that he previously made, saying that this is his last visit to the playroom before summer. Then he and Axline go back to the playroom and Dibs once again builds his town. He sets up two houses, which he designates as his house and Axline's house; he also sets up his grandmother's house. Dibs sets up a **church**, a jail, and a big chestnut **tree**, and he says his father's office is on the first floor of the jail. He also places his mother and sister in jail.

Dibs picks out a male figurine in the toy set and explains that the man is Dibs. He then takes a child figurine out of the city that he's built and exchanges it for the grown man figure. When he asks if he can come back to the playroom one more time after summer, Axline says yes. Dibs then picks up the two figures—the man and the boy—and says that both of the figures are himself.

Dibs says that the mother, father, brother and sister figures are a family and they'll go to the beach together with the grandmother. The jail is next to Axline's house, and Axline doesn't like jails so he buries the jail. Dibs's house and Axline's house are moving further apart. He then explains that the big Dibs figure goes to school, and the little Dibs figure gets sick and shrinks until he's gone; Dibs buries the little figure in the sand. The big Dibs figure is strong and brave. Then he says goodbye to Axline.

Axline explains that Dibs came to terms with himself—Dibs poured out his hurt feelings and emerged with strength and security. While his upset feelings with his family still flare up sometimes, they're now much less intense. Dibs is building a concept of himself that is in harmony with his abilities; he learned to understand his feelings and cope with them. He is no longer angry or guilty—he has confidence and security. He's not afraid to be himself anymore.

CHAPTER 23

Axline returns from vacation and receives a message from Dibs's mother, who reports that Dibs wants one more session. Dibs's mother says that Dibs was wonderful this summer—he was happy, relaxed, and talked all the time. Dibs comes in the following Thursday, and Axline also observes that he is much more relaxed, outgoing, and happy. Even Dibs's movements are more graceful. When Axline meets Dibs in the waiting room, he shakes her hand and greets her warmly.

Dibs placing his family in jail relates back to his desire for them to understand how he feels when they lock him in his room. However, he makes an important distinction: his father's office is in the jail, meaning that his family isn't exactly locked up this time. Even this illustrates how Dibs is moving past some of the harshest feelings that he has had toward his family.



This anecdote encapsulates Dibs's acceptance of himself. Even as he acknowledges that he is growing up, he also recognizes that there are many different versions of himself. He has resolved his struggle between being an infant and acting capable by admitting that he can be both at the same time. What's most important is that he can determine what he wants to be.



Dibs's play not only shows his acknowledgement of growing up, but also that he is becoming more secure in himself as he does so. The reference to his and Axline's houses moving further apart indicates that he knows their sessions are coming to an end, and he has gained enough independence and security that this does not upset him. As he notes, he recognizes his newfound strength and bravery.



In this passage, Axline sums up Dibs's development over the course of the sessions. By providing a secure environment, Axline helped Dibs express himself through play, determine what he himself wanted to do (regardless of his parents' expectations), and use his newfound emotional intelligence and social skills to let his intellect shine through.



Dibs and Axline go to the office, which Dibs says is a wonderful place. He takes out Axline's card file, which still has just his card and her card. She says she put everyone else's cards in another box, but she kept this one as he said he wanted it. Dibs is amazed, and he repeats, "As I said I wanted it."

Soon after, Dibs and Axline return to the playroom. He whirls around it, laughing and commenting on how wonderful the room is. He turns on the water in the sink and splashes it. Then he picks up a jar of yellow paint and says that he's going to deliberately pour it on the floor. He does so, saying it makes him feel good to do it. Then he gets out cleaning rags and wipes up the puddle of paint.

Dibs then says that he can't quite figure out the playroom, explaining that he doesn't know what kind of person Axline is, because she's not a teacher or a mother or his mother's friend. But it doesn't matter. Dibs then runs over to the **nursing bottle** and says that the bottle brings him comfort when he needs it; he sucks on it for a few minutes. Dibs realizes, however, that he doesn't need the bottle anymore, and he hurls the bottle against the radiator so hard that it breaks.

Dibs walks over to the dollhouse, saying goodbye to the figures. Then he goes to the window and asks if he can go over to the **church** across the street. Axline says yes, even though it's an unusual request. Inside the church, Dibs is impressed by its magnificence, saying that he feels very small. Dibs comments that God must be very big to need such a big house.

The organ starts to play, and Dibs becomes afraid. But he stops before he and Axline leave. Dibs explains that he is afraid of the bigness and the noise but that the **church** also fills him with brightness and beauty. Dibs waves goodbye to God and he and Axline return to the playroom. He found their trip very nice, and he asks Axline why some people believe in God and some don't. She says she's not sure, but everyone decides for themselves.

Dibs's refrain of "as I said I wanted it" reinforces how much he values the ability to be himself in the room and determine what he wants, despite his parents' expectations.



Dibs's actions with the paint call back to Axline's statement that part of growing up is in developing "responsible freedom." He has the freedom to pour out the paint if he wants to, but he also takes responsibility for his actions by cleaning it up. Dibs's laughter and ease also show how having this responsible freedom allows him to be happy and thrive.



Dibs recognizes that the nursing bottle has brought him comfort. But just as Axline stated that the best security is found in oneself, Dibs acknowledges that he doesn't need the nursing bottle to find that comfort or security. Breaking the bottle is a symbolic gesture that Dibs has grown up and doesn't need objects to affirm his occasional desire to be childish.



Just like breaking the nursing bottle, going to the church is another symbolic change for Dibs. It contrasts with Dibs's first session, in which he only felt safe enough to touch and name the objects in the room. Now he is much more willing to be adventurous and take risks, leaving the comfort of the playroom and exploring a completely unknown environment.



Even though Dibs is afraid, he is able to overcome this fear, indicating a greater sense of inner security. He's clearly becoming able to soothe himself and regulate his own reactions to situations. The trip proves that Dibs is open to new experiences and willing to take initiative in his life when he is curious about something.



Dibs wonders what God is like. His grandmother says that God is like a Father in heaven, but he hopes that God isn't like his own father, because he doesn't always know if his father loves him. Dibs knows that his grandmother loves him because he feels it deep inside him. He wants to talk to God, but his parents don't believe in God. Soon after, the buzzer rings and Dibs says goodbye to Axline. He skips over to his mother, greets her, and takes her hand to leave.

Dibs's discussion of God also illustrates that he is taking more responsibility for his own thoughts and feelings, allowing himself to think beyond the confines of his parents. While his parents don't believe in God, Dibs contemplates the idea that he can make his own determination on religion. This mature, introspective assessment shows just how much Dibs has grown throughout his therapy sessions.



CHAPTER 24

Two and a half years later, Axline is sitting in her living room when she hears Dibs's familiar voice. He is telling a friend about the 27 different plants in his yard; Dibs has just moved into a house down the street from her. A few days later, Axline meets Dibs on the street and he immediately recognizes her. Dibs says that he's grown up now, but he remembers how they played together. Dibs recalls that at first he was afraid, but Axline told him to have fun and that no one would hurt him in the room. Dibs also remembers that Axline told him to fight his enemies, and he did so. Dibs says that now he is big and strong and not afraid.

The irony of Dibs's recollection is that Axline never explicitly told Dibs to have fun or that no one would hurt him. However, the fact that Dibs remembers it this way illustrates the trust that she built between her and Dibs, and how impactful this feeling was for him. By instilling a sense of trust, Axline gave Dibs security that he could carry with him for the rest of his life, as he describes here.



A few days later, Axline meets Dibs's mother and father on the street and they thank Axline again for the help that she gave Dibs. They tell her that Dibs is now enrolled in a school for gifted children. Dibs then rides up on his bike and his mother asks if he remembers Axline. When his father prompts him to answer, Dibs reveals mischievously that he saw Axline five days earlier. He also calls her his first friend. As they leave, Axline observes that Dibs has learned how to believe in himself and free himself.

Dibs's mischief indicates that he has found comfort and confidence in himself as a result of the play therapy sessions. He doesn't always have to act according to his parents' expectations; instead, his self-determination has allowed him to flourish and reach his potential.



EPILOGUE

Axline writes that Dibs was able to move out of the darkness of his life and let sunshine in. Life is more meaningful when it has darkness *and* sunshine, because out of disappointment and sadness, people can discover confidence, faith, and hope. Axline often presents part of this book to students and in professional meetings; one day, she received a letter from a former student in the army who heard another man talking about Dibs. The two men both agreed that Dibs taught them how to be a complete person, because Dibs only wanted what everyone wants: a chance to be loved, respected, and accepted for all of their qualities.

Here Axline expands on the lessons that Dibs learned and applies it to people in general. While children like Dibs may need extra help in discovering how to be themselves and developing their own security, all people find value in empathy, self-determination, confidence, love, and a balance between one's social skills and intelligence.



Years later, a friend of Axline's who teaches at a school for gifted boys shows her a letter in the school newspaper. Axline's friend doesn't know about Dibs, but he knows that Axline works with children and enjoys seeing evidence of their courage and capability. The letter is one of protest against the school's decision to dismiss a student for cheating. The writer explains that the expelled student was simply verifying a date, and that it's better to be curious and have honest doubt than to be ignorant. According to the writer, exams should not be used to bring "suffering and humiliation" to someone who is trying to succeed. The letter concludes that the educators must "unlock the **door**" of ignorance and prejudice. He says if his friend is not reinstated, he shall not return to school. It is signed "With sincerity and intent to act [...] Dibs." Axline asks what the boy is like. Her friend says Dibs is 15 years old, brilliant, full of ideas, and a leader who acts on the things he believes in.

Dibs's letter shows how even fifteen-year-old Dibs maintains many of the values that Axline fostered in him. Dibs questions the idea of always having to live up to others' expectations, suggesting that often rules only bring "suffering and humiliation." This statement, coupled with Dibs's comment about "unlock[ing] the door" of ignorance, recalls Dibs's parents' treatment of him. His response demonstrates his maturity in advocating for self-determination, acceptance, and empathy rather than harsh expectations. And the fact that Dibs writes the letter on behalf of a friend illustrates how his intelligence is truly able to shine when he uses his intellect alongside his social skills and emotional intelligence. His moral leadership and true brilliance could only come from this well-roundedness.



AUTHOR'S NOTE

A week after the play therapy sessions end, Dibs takes the Stanford-Binet Intelligence test. He establishes a good relationship with the examiner and the results indicate that he has an I.Q. of 168. His reading score is also years beyond his age and grade level. Axline writes that he is an exceptionally gifted child. She concludes that a child, given the opportunity, can have honest, forthright communication. In addition, a mother who is respected can also be sincerely expressive when she knows she will not be criticized or blamed.

In contrast with Dibs's introduction, where his emotional incapacity obscured his intelligence, here the opposite is true. Only through his newly developed social skills is he able to demonstrate his aptitude—a genius I.Q.—because before the sessions, he wouldn't let anyone test him. And in Axline's concluding remarks, she reinforces how empathy and non-judgment enable all people—children and adults alike—to be freer with their emotions and work through them.





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