

# Building a Relationship with Alice, an Autistic Child

by Ioanna Gagani

Ioanna Gagani was born in Athens and studied acting in Athens and theatre studies in Paris. In 1997 she moved to Melbourne where she studied psychology and Spanish and began her psychodrama training. She started her work with autistic children in 1999 and currently works as a departmental coordinator in a school for children with autism and intellectual disabilities. Her goal is to help children with autism to find pleasure in their relationships with others and through that develop their communication and social skills.

Ever since I was an adolescent, I have had a big interest in autism. The complete isolation of the children whom I saw in films and documentaries always left me speechless with amazement. Although I could grasp the concept of other disorders, autism was a huge question mark for me. How was it possible for someone to be so completely detached from the world?

I was very excited with my decision, years later, to work with autistic children. When a job came up, however, I was terrified. I had never met an autistic person before, much less worked with a three-year-old, non-verbal girl with autism. What was I thinking? How could I possibly do this?

I was hired as one of three therapists who would be working with Alice following the Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) treatment approach. We all had a two-day training session in ABA and then started working individually with Alice. Although I was doing ABA, I was always

thinking in psychodramatic terms. I knew that, no matter what intervention I used, it wouldn't work unless I first made a connection with Alice and established a strong relationship with her.

In this article, I present a few significant moments in my work with Alice that helped us make a connection and start building what is now a very strong positive relationship.

## THE FIRST CONNECTION

Alice plays with her picture cards. They are small square cards with pictures of animals and objects on them. She sits on the floor repetitively gathering her cards, holding them up as high as her hand can reach, watching them drop and gathering them again. As she does this (during most of our session) she looks happy and completely detached from her surroundings, including me. Often she talks while doing it, speaking words that

are incomprehensible. She has complete control of what she does (gathering and dropping the cards) and provides herself with the stimulation she enjoys (watching things fall). This self-stimulatory behaviour is a characteristic of autism.

My desire is to enter Alice's game and participate in it. I think that, if I succeed, the above roles that keep her safe but isolated will diminish and thus more progressive roles will emerge. I have tried on previous occasions to enter into her game, but Alice has ignored me and turned her back to me. It feels like she has the key and I am searching for the right keyhole. I once again plunge into the search, so that the door to her game will open and Alice will welcome me in.

At last I do something that gets Alice's attention and triggers her curiosity. I get on my knees, sit on my heels and lay my upper body on my thighs. I wait, immobile, and as the cards fall on the floor I start laughing as if I am being tickled. Alice is interested.

Alice's roles shown in Figure 1 are part of what I perceive as a very big isolating role cluster. Her desire to control her environment

leads her to shut off from the world and engage in self-stimulatory play which is a safe, controllable and risk-free activity. I come in as *The Mass* and relate to the *Happy Mesmerised Self-Stimulator*, as I don't want Alice to give up any control. I am just trying to get her to receive some stimulation from me, rather than herself. She does get interested. She picks up her cards and drops them again, this time looking at me and enjoying my reaction.

As Alice becomes curious about what I am and what I am doing as *The Mass*, her isolating roles give way to a progressive one, the *Surprised Curious Delighted Player*. She becomes involved in what I am doing, instead of being detached and isolated. As I observe this shift, a symmetrical role emerges in me; I also am delighted and surprised, since, after so many unsuccessful attempts to play with her, I have finally found a way to do it. The two symmetrical roles that emerge in both of us are very important, as without the delight of both players no game can continue.

And the game goes on. The third time Alice picks up her cards, instead of letting them

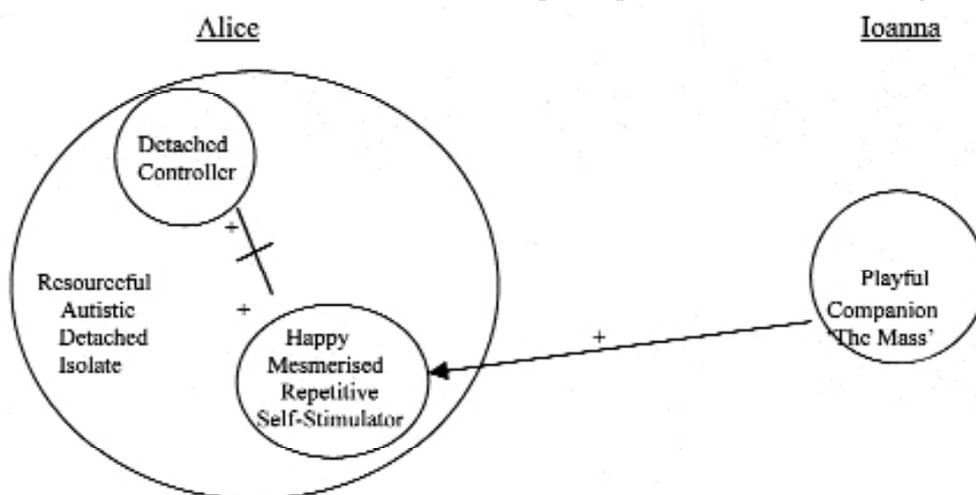


Figure 1: Alice's roles during the picture card game

drop on the floor, she drops them on me. I laugh and subtly move my upper body as if the cards are tickling me. As the game continues, I slowly make my responses bigger and louder. I try variations of my initial response, always careful to stay lower than her, because the moment I move out of her visual field, Alice doesn't follow me with her eyes. She is very amused and surprised with all my responses and although she mostly looks at my moving body, when she drops her picture cards on me, she looks into my eyes with a look that says 'what will you do now?!'.

Figures 2a and 2b show the shifts in Alice's roles after my intervention. Alice's coping roles diminish and three new progressive roles emerge.

Although some aspects of her coping roles are still present (Alice is still doing the same repetitive motion and has control of the cards), the progressive roles that emerge allow her to connect with me rather than to isolate herself.

As a *Playful Resourceful Companion*, I try different ways of playing with Alice, the majority of which had no effect on her. I send a message of acceptance, that it is all right for her to be however she wants to be. I never push her to do anything she doesn't want to. I never persist when Alice shows no interest. Rather, I move away and try something different later in our session. This has two positive outcomes: firstly, it gives Alice permission to be who she wants to be and do what she wants. Secondly, it keeps Alice's warm-up to me at the same almost non-existent level. If I persist in my attempts to play the picture card game with her, I feel it will affect her warm-up in a negative way, pushing her further away from me and strengthening her desire for isolation. So the

message I give is 'I will try and play with you for a while and if you don't like it, I will stop. I won't be angry with you, I will just try again later.'

After a few attempts, I become aware that I am trying to connect with Alice as a person, as myself. This might be too confronting for her. I try something different; I stop being a person and become a mass, physically smaller than her, which moves as the cards fall. That mass apparently isn't too confronting for Alice and her curiosity is triggered. So I provide Alice with a situation where her motivating force (I want to find out more about this mass before me) is stronger than her reactive fear (I'm losing control, I don't know what will happen). In fact, Alice still has some control over me, because she is controlling the cards and if the cards don't drop, the mass won't move. I do control how the mass moves, so I am very careful not to become either too confronting, or too boring.

This is my first connection with Alice. I watch as she slowly moves away from her coping roles and into new, more progressive ones. She connects, not so much with me, but with *The Mass*, not fully aware it is me. She makes that connection some sessions later. For the time, she enjoys the game and for a few minutes connects with me as *The Mass*. That connection ends the moment the game finishes. As soon as I stop being a *Spontaneous Responsive Companion*, Alice goes back to her isolation. She has provided me with great insights about how to approach her in the future. We continue playing the picture card game in following sessions, but that doesn't change Alice's warm-up to me outside the game.

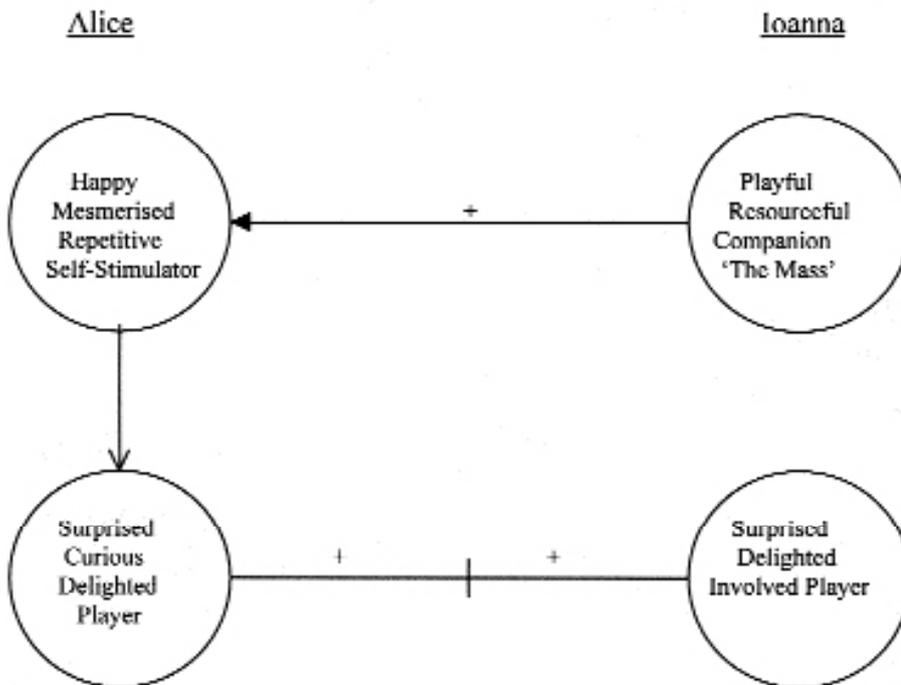


Figure 2a: Alice's role progression in the picture card game

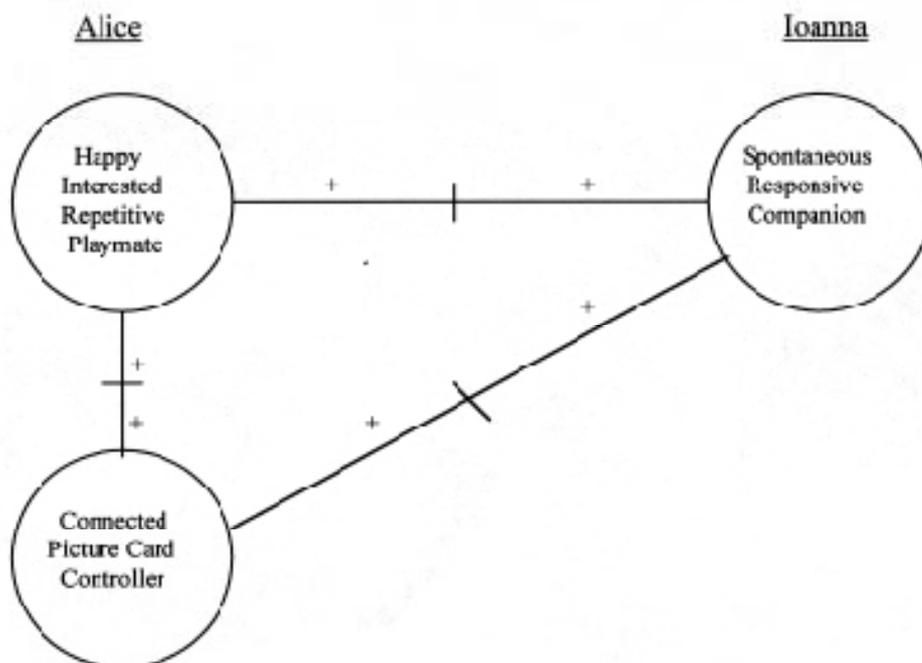


Figure 2b: Alice's transformed roles in the picture card game

## THE BEGINNING OF THE RELATIONSHIP

I will now describe a number of interventions that I made in one session with Alice, which changed our relationship completely and in particular Alice's warm-up to me. These interventions were so significant that from these moments onwards, a very strong mutually positive relationship began to develop between us.

I would arrive at Alice's home in the afternoon. If she had been awake from her nap for a while, her reaction when she saw me was to cry. If she were still feeling quite sleepy, she would ignore me as she did everyone and everything else around her.

The session that I describe here starts with Alice lying on the couch, still sleepy. She has her arms between her legs and is softly rocking herself. Her eyes look empty and she is completely shut off from the outside world. She is a *Detached, Self-Sufficient Rocking Nurturer*. This is a coping role in which she has control of what happens to her and provides herself with the stimulation she needs at that moment: to be rocked like a baby and to be nurtured. My initial response is to leave her alone; she doesn't want to be disturbed. I feel helpless. I perceive her as being so far away that there is nothing I can do to bring her back. I have two choices: I can just pick her up saying 'come sit' which signals the beginning of the ABA, or I can take some time to warm her up to it.

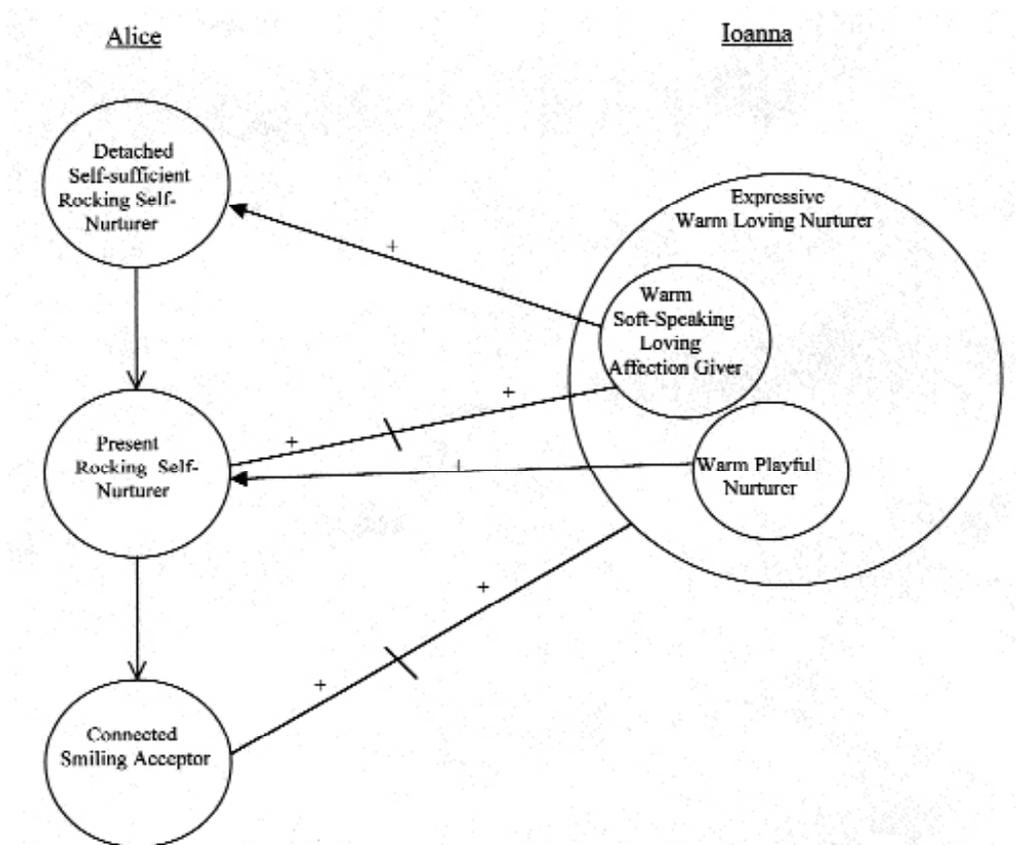


Figure 3: Alice's role progression as I warm her up to me

The first choice seems very cruel, abrupt and not respectful of where Alice is at. I know that it will upset her very much, and rightly so. When I decide to go for the second choice, my own warm-up immediately changes from helplessness to spontaneity and resourcefulness. I know that I am in unknown territory and that I have to be very crisp in my observations of Alice's shifts, and shift myself accordingly.

I sit on the floor next to the armchair where Alice is lying. I speak to her in a soft voice and stroke her legs and her hands (*Warm Soft-Speaking Loving Affection Giver*). Alice turns her head towards me, looks at me and then turns away. I continue stroking her and talking to her, the way I would speak to a baby. Alice once again looks at me. This time, however, she smiles and doesn't turn away. She keeps rocking herself (*Present Rocking Self-Nurturer*). Very smoothly, I shift from stroking her to gently playing and tickling her (*Warm Playful Nurturer*). This process goes on for about 15 minutes, with me in the role of *Expressive Warm Loving Nurturer*. Alice is enjoying my gentle way of connecting with her. She is smiling and accepts everything I do. Although she is not always looking at me, she doesn't turn away from me any more. She also stops rocking herself and accepts the nurturing that I give her (*Connected Smiling Acceptor*).

When I arrive for my session, Alice appears to be in a soft and gentle mood. I sit next to her and mirror that mood by also being soft and gentle. I take on, however, a complementary role to hers, by becoming a *Warm Soft-Speaking Loving Affection Giver*. I observe a change in Alice's role: she is still a self-nurturer rocking herself, but she is no longer detached. This is a major shift from her previous role. She has come back from wherever she was to the here and now. This

is a sign that I am on the right track and that Alice is aware of the affection I am giving her. Being very patient and giving her all the time she needs, I interact with her as an *Expressive Warm Loving Nurturer*. The one-way relationship between my *Warm Playful Nurturer* and her *Present Rocking Self-Nurturer* gives rise to a new role in Alice, the *Connected Smiling Acceptor*. It is the first time in our relationship that Alice takes on a complementary role to mine – I provide nurturing and she accepts it. This is a very significant moment. Alice is beginning to trust me! She gives up her self-nurturing and accepts my affection instead.

The fact that I have taken the time to warm her up to her relationship with me means that Alice doesn't cry when we start the two-hour ABA session. During the first hour she is present and happy, connecting with me very often, and at other times playing by herself. We play a number of games involving her picture cards. On the break, Alice wants to watch a video, so I put on Cinderella, one of her favourites. While she is watching TV, I watch her. I observe her laughing and smiling and going very close to the TV when there are animals on the screen. She moves back and does not react whenever Cinderella or another person appears. Just as she has connected with me as a mass in the picture card game, Alice is now connecting with the animals rather than the people on the TV. She moves around and smiles with all the songs in 'animal language' and disconnects from all the people songs in English.

When the break is over, we go back in the therapy room and Alice sits on the floor looking through her Cinderella book. I sit next to her and point at different animals in the book. I make the appropriate animal sound and interact with her as an animal. I become a mouse, a cat, a horse, a dog, and a

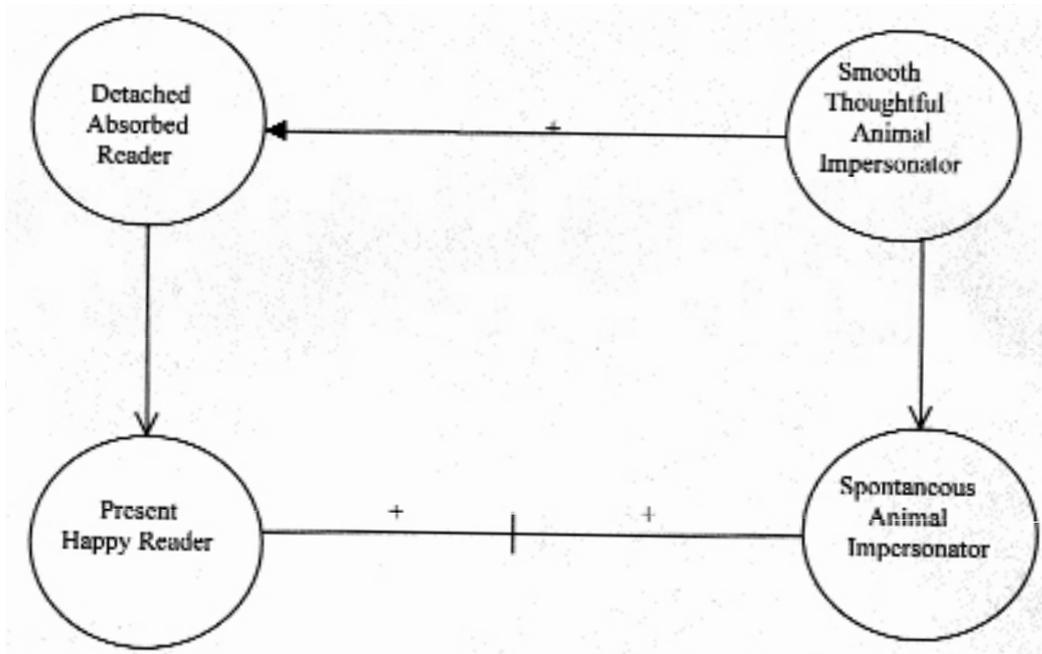


Figure 4a: Alice's role progression and role relationship with me during the animal game

chicken. I start very smoothly, ready to stop if Alice doesn't like it. But she does. For a while, we are connecting through the book, me pointing and acting as the animal I point at and Alice enjoying it and smiling.

Observing Alice as she watches Cinderella gives me a great insight into her sociometry. I already know that she loves Cinderella, both the book and the video. But by watching her, it becomes clear to me that she is mostly connecting with the animals. So when, after the break, Alice starts looking at the

Cinderella book, it is an opportunity for me to try and get on board with her by taking up the roles of the animals in the book. I make a smooth start in order to see if Alice will take notice. Immediately a new role emerges in her, the *Present Happy Reader*, which allows her to connect with me and enjoy what I am doing. I immediately expand my role. I am a horse pushing Alice around with my head, a mouse tickling her all over with my hands, a dog barking, licking, biting and sniffing her. We gradually get so involved in this game that we forget about the book and

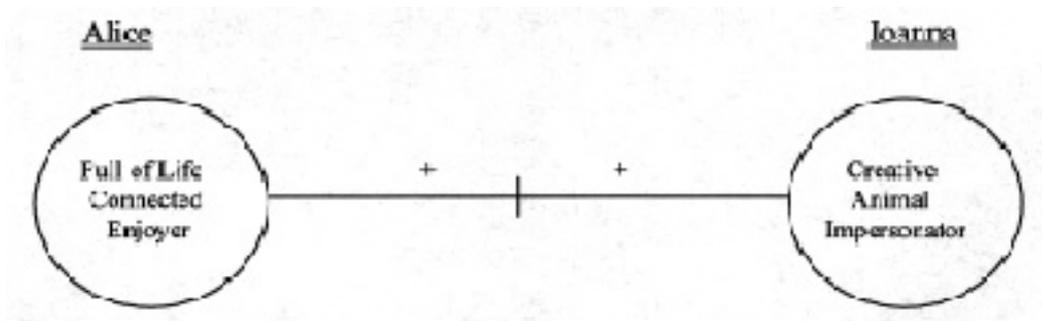


Figure 4b: Alice's role progression and role relationship with me as the animal game continues

end up rolling around on the floor with me becoming every animal I can think of.

As I keep expanding my role, Alice changes as well and a completely new progressive role emerges, the *Full of Life Connected Enjoyer*. At this point of the game we are in complementary roles – if someone were watching us they would see an adult playing with a child. Alice’s functioning is progressive and no aspect of her isolating role cluster is in the foreground. Actually, I have never seen Alice having so much fun before. She is really accepting of what I am doing and enjoying the closeness of our bodies. She is laughing as loud as she can. She looks radiant. We end up lying side by side on the floor; her cheeks, and I am sure mine too, are bright red, and her eyes shining. It is at this moment that she looks at me and really sees me. Alice looks straight into my eyes. Her eyes are full of love and tell me that she realises all those animals she has just played with are me.

Having been in complementary roles, the end of the game finds us in symmetrical ones. Alice is in another new progressive role, the *Radiant Satisfied Player*. I doubt that she has ever enjoyed so fully playing with another person. And a further role emerges – the *Conscious Loving Seer*. This one forever changes our relationship. It was very clear just at the end of the game that Alice had made the connection between the animals and myself. She didn’t make that connection in the picture card game where *The Mass* was something separate from Ioanna, but now she can see that the animals are Ioanna. And by making that connection she realises that Ioanna can be and do all sorts of different things. That realisation changes everything.

From that day on, Alice stopped crying every time I arrived. She has warmed up to me and as a consequence has been warming up more to ABA. She has been a lot more open to playing with me, rather than with herself. And it is not as difficult for her to move out

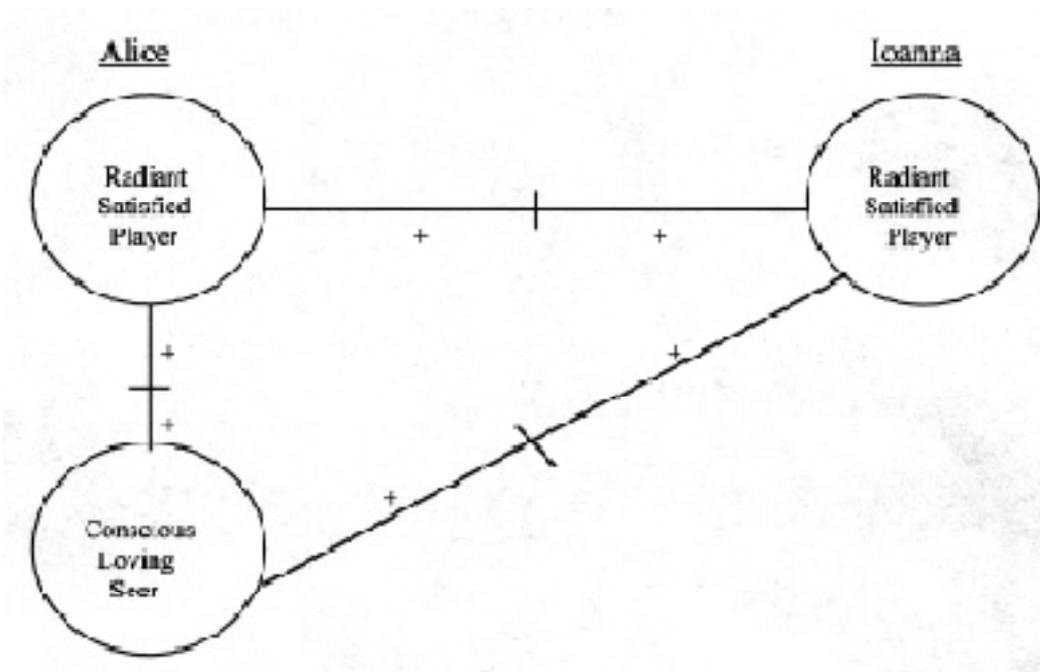


Figure 4c: Alice’s roles at the end of the animal game

of her isolation, or for me to move her out of it. She is now very interested in me, knowing that I'll come up with something out of the ordinary. Very often she wants me included in things that she used to enjoy doing alone. She gets very upset, for example, when I am not next to her at the computer enhancing all the games that she likes, bringing the characters to life right in front of her. And she is aware that I am there with her in the room. She will always turn and look at where I am and what I am doing when she is watching television.

So many things have happened in one year. So many changes, laughs and tears, all of which have shifted Alice's social atom in amazing ways. She is now almost four years old and talking! A lot of her speech is echolalia (compulsive and apparently senseless repetition of a word or phrase just spoken by another person), but she also asks for things and says what she wants.

Alice also has mutually positive relationships with others on the ABA team. At the team meetings she comes and hugs each one of us. She loves the attention and loves being the star of the meetings. Although she still doesn't always accept and like the ABA, she has developed a relationship with us, in which she sees more in us than just our role as ABA therapists.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

What a gift to see Alice's huge progress within one year and know that I have played a part in it. The same child who used to cry at my sight, who used to bite me, kick me and hit me at times when she wasn't ignoring me, is now hugging me and singing songs with me. And not only that, but she is also calling me by my name! 'Ioanna', she says in a tone of voice that is very hard to

describe in words but that will stay engraved in my mind and heart forever, 'Yes!' I reply, trying hard not to jump off my chair with joy because she is saying my name in a functional way and not just repeating it echolalically. 'I want help' she says to me. And I either help her or coach her to do it alone, if I know that she can.

Although Alice's progressive roles have generalised in other situations and with other people, it is a slow process, often depending on the response of others. For example, she doesn't call everyone by name, even though she knows their name. I believe it has to do with how the person reacts when Alice calls them. Some of us are thrilled every time she calls us and we show it. Alice can pick up the slightest emotion in people and when she does something that makes us excited she shares our joy, and is more likely to do it again than if we had acted as if it was nothing special.

A role that has generalised very quickly and with everyone is the *Participator in Laughter*. During our individual sessions I would start laughing on purpose and Alice would laugh with me. At the team meetings, whenever we laugh, Alice joins us. She even stops watching her favourite videos when she hears us laugh and walks into the living room laughing. This makes us laugh more, then she laughs more, and we end up not being able to stop.

A lot of her isolating roles have diminished, she is now very rarely a *Detached Controller* or a *Detached Rocking Self-Nurturer*. She stopped playing the picture card game a long time ago. Generally, her self-stimulatory behaviours have decreased, as more progressive roles have started developing. Most of the time Alice now prefers to be with others, rather than on her own.

## **GUIDELINES**

There is no recipe to follow when working with autistic children, or with anyone for that matter. Every child is different and must be approached in unique ways. However, I have found the following general guidelines useful in my work:

Accept, respect and allow the child to be however they want.

Don't pull the child into your world. Find a way to step into their world and walk together along the bridge that connects the two.

Observe and work with the child's sociometry. Get on board with them by getting on board with whatever it is that they are most connected with, be it a person, a toy or a piece of string.

Doubling and mirroring are two very useful techniques in order to get a sense of the child's world and also to be a companion to them.

Never assume that the child doesn't understand just because they lack communication skills. Talk to them. They do understand, if not the all words you speak, definitely the emotions you are expressing both verbally and non-verbally.

Be spontaneous. Find ways to make them curious about you.

If you are feeling any hesitation within you about doing something, don't do it, it won't work. Be comfortable and confident. The child can pick up on any hesitation or uncertainty that you are feeling.

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