

# The Grandmother in the Development of Psychodramatic Roles in Grandchildren

by Annette Fisher

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Psychodramatic roles are the roles in life we enact that express our life force, our aspirations and our uniqueness. The role does not emerge from the self but the self emerges from the roles.

Psychodramatic roles increase the ability of an adult to enact social roles that are relevant and adequate in a variety of life situations.

Through play, imagination and enactment a child can develop psychodramatic roles that will give a basis for the development of a broad range of social roles. Psychodramatic roles allow the child to increase the sense of the self and is followed by the development of role clusters that will relate to social roles that are enacted in adult life.

Applying some of the psychodramatic principles to my life and work has been of major importance to me for the last twenty five years. These have included role theory, social atom repair and the theory of spontaneity and creativity. My involvement in psychodrama has assisted me to develop my abilities

in many areas. This has included increasing my role repertoire that has enhanced the parenting of three girls. As a single mother this has not been an easy task, especially during their teenage years. As a parent I was consistently faced with my own

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difficulties, as children have the wonderful knack of mirroring the parents failings. I often wondered who was put on the planet to teach life's lessons, the children or the parents. My conclusion is that the children are the principle teachers.

During this process of 'bringing up' children I had to face every issue I had attempted to avoid. These included commitment, responsibility,

authority issues, my own 'unfinished businesses', rage, unconditional loving and self nurturing. This led to the enactment of many dramas as a protagonist to repair my original social atom and role training to develop roles such as an assertive confronter, a loving nurturer and an open, vulnerable expressor of life. This process has included doubling, mirroring and role reversal. From these experiences I have increased my abilities to form relationships that are satisfying and rewarding, and have left me with a clarity that has made way for the roles that assist a child to develop psychodramatic roles.

The roles that I enact in my relationship with my grandson Jake that assist in the enactment of psychodramatic roles are: wise traveller, lover of life, friendly companion, loving guide, funny comedian, spontaneous scene setter, wise teacher, gentle coach, protective friend, creative genius, imaginative artist and firm limit setter.

However, developing the identity of grandmother did not come easily to me. The first time news of the impending birth moved me to tears. I was working with a group of women and children in a playground in the grounds of a block of government flats. The children were a wild, unruly lot and the mothers sat in the caravan and smoked as the children ran riot. When the phone rang for me in the caravan and it was my daughter, Jodie, telling me the news of the baby, I was stunned. I knew her relationship with her partner was not very stable and she was completing her degree at university, my last child had just left home and I could see a new path, child free.

Hence the 'warm up' to being a

grandmother commenced. Jodie and her partner were delighted and my shock and horror soon changed to excitement as the time for the birth approached. We had discussed what we called in the hippie days, a tribal birth. This meant a number of people who were close to the mother would be at the birth. The two midwives and friends were involved in the birthing process and into the world came Jake.

My worst fears came to be, and my daughter and her partner separated. Now I began to take a more involved and active role in the parenting of Jake, so my 'warm up' to my relationship to Jake increased. Jodie and I have similar values and are able to maintain a positive relationship. If we have different ideas or become conflicted we are able to discuss our concerns related to Jake.

It has not been fashionable in our culture for the grandparents to be involved in the day to day activities with grandchildren. After all, in the traditional marriage ceremony the father delivers his daughter to the groom and then the bride and groom disappear into the sunset. The mother-in-law has been stereotyped and has become the brunt of many jokes and is depicted as interfering and a trouble maker. This may lead to the grandmother also being type-cast and the grandmother's wisdom, knowledge of her own life, children, healing abilities, and home skills are lost as she is alienated from meaningful interactions with her grandchildren.

As I am not a person who would fit into a stereotyped grandmother sitting at home knitting and politely observing my children and their family at a Sunday afternoon tea, I am fortunate to have a full and ongoing relationship with my grandson

Jake. With my life experience, which has included the psychodramatic method, I have been enjoying the development of our relationship and value the opportunity to be involved with this little boy at such a personal level.

The following descriptions are ideas I have come to at this point in my experience as a grandmother and how I have made an effort to apply these ideas of the psychodramatic roles and how this has given me confidence in the roles I enact as a grandmother.

As the grandmother, I am an auxiliary to Jake. During this collaborative experience my aim is to assist him to develop independent action and self confidence. With encouragement for him to use his imagination and spontaneity, my hope is that he will be able to learn to be positive in his response to life, and on the spur of the moment to respond more or less adequately, as the situation arises. He will also be learning skills in relating to others with interactive activities.

The psychodramatic roles that he enacts emerge from his own imagination and dreams. These emerging psychodramatic roles are influenced by his relationships at home and school, books and television. What has been surprising to me has been the archetypal nature of the roles. Many of the roles are related to good versus evil and have a timeless quality. Hence, as an auxiliary the grandmother is a guide and I have attempted not to be prescriptive or an overpowering influence.

Through my own experience of being a protagonist, I am aware that playing a multitude of roles leads to a greater flexibility in responding to the world and the people we meet. By playing the roles of the darker

forces, I noticed that I developed a greater sense of my own strength and the fear of impending doom from outside attack became less. With encouragement and enactment, healthy roles have been strengthened and can be expressed with vitality. The impact of enactment also brings out the truth of the matter and assists in the distinguishing between fact and fantasy. I have applied these principles in my relationship with Jake.

As an auxiliary to Jake, I also provided guidance in the areas of safety. He needed assistance with understanding that a superman cape does not mean you can fly and swords and weapons are not to hurt people, animals or property.

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I will now describe three dramas that demonstrate the relationship I have with Jake and the development of his psychodramatic roles. Through experiencing the psychodramatic method myself as a protagonist and having directed many dramas, I felt confident that entering Jake's world and allowing enactment, concretisation and maximisation of situation, through play and interaction, would lead to role development.



## The Pirate

**The Scene:** Grandmother is in bed asleep. Jake, two years old, appears in the bedroom door.

**Jake:** Nana, Nana a shark is after me.

**Nana:** Quick come over here and jump on the boat.

(Jake runs over and jumps on the bed.)

**Nana:** Hang on Jake the sea is pretty rough.

**Jake:** Will he get me?

**Nana:** Grab your sword Jake, this is a pirate ship. (Jake is very fond of pirates and has a toy sword.) (Jake swirls the sword above his head.)

**Nana:** Wave your sword harder Jake. Here comes the shark. Now wave your sword. There, I think you have frightened the shark. Now Jake you and I can be the shark.

Nana and Jake then swim in the sea making large mouths with their arms and making snapping noises as the jaws open and close.

**Nana:** (as the Shark) Look at the pirate, we haven't got a chance.

**Jake:** Snap, snap. (looking really vicious).

Both get back onto the bed.

**Jake:** (back in the role of the pirate and waving his sword) Get out of here shark.

**Jake:** Now we can go to sleep.

Nana and Jake curl up together and fall asleep.



## St. George and the Dragon

A very dejected little boy stood before me and began to tell the story of his dream.

**Jake:** When I was asleep a dragon breathing fire burnt my face. All the skin on my face was peeling off. I was so frightened.

**Nana:** Was the dragon like this? (taking on a dragon role and pretending to breath out fire).

**Jake:** Yes.

**Nana:** Now you be a dragon with me. (Both walk on all fours and snort out fire.)

**Nana:** Now come over here Jake and stand on this hill (a chair).

**Jake:** I think I will hold my sword. Go away dragon you can't hurt me. (He draws himself to his full height and lunges at the dragon.)

In front of me I saw the birth of the psychodramatic role *St. George*. This emergence of a role had an almost magical quality and one explanation could be that Jake was able to enact spontaneously in the moment to the situation that we had created.



## Batman

On the morning of Jake's birthday he came to his last present, a batman cape and mask. He put them on and announced:

**Jake:** Now I am three I am not going to say that yucky f..... word again. I will never say that yucky f..... word again. Now I am three I don't say that yucky f.....word.

As a two year old Jake had the usual tantrums and would express his rage unexpectedly at any venue screaming obscenities. Any attempt to change this behaviour had failed.

Jake wore his batman cape and mask all day, to the Pancake Parlour for breakfast and for his party in the afternoon. He stood tall and confident all day and he has not said the f..... word since.

I do not understand why the shift took place. However, I observed that as he put on the batman clothes his body posture changed and he seemed to take on his own authority and had a strong sense of himself and his own views of the world and again he was able to respond spontaneously to the situation of the moment.

## Conclusion

This paper is written to demonstrate that the roles of the grandmother can be active and creative. By following the principles of role theory and spontaneity the old rigid conserves of family structure and function can be freed to encourage creative and joyful relationships. With imagination, commitment and love, a valuable contribution can be made to child development.

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