



# RHYTHMS OF RELATING IN CHILDREN'S THERAPIES

**CONNECTING CREATIVELY  
WITH VULNERABLE CHILDREN**

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# 6

## FROM COCOON TO BUTTERFLY

*Music Therapy with an Adopted Girl*

COHAVIT ELEFANT

Noa was two and a half years old when I first met her: a beautiful, lively girl with long dark hair and wide open brown eyes. She was brought to music therapy by her adopted mother with the complaint that Noa was hitting, biting and pushing children at her nursery school. Noa had lived in several foster homes from the time she was two weeks old until she was nine months, when she was finally adopted. Her biological mother and Noa stayed together in a foster family but, after a few weeks, her mother ran away with Noa. Soon after, they were assigned to a new foster family to assist the mother in raising Noa. However, when it was evident that she couldn't care for her baby, it was decided to take Noa away from her biological mother and Noa continued to stay in foster care. At age six months the father in the foster family became ill and Noa was moved to yet another foster family that adopted her at age nine months. The hardship in her short life could have ended at that point. However, two months after the adoption, her adopted parents divorced and the father left the home.

From this brief history we can assume that attachment and detachment were themes in young Noa's life. Noa's security in her basic attachment bond to her mother will have been severely shaken and compromised. Her impulse and ability to attach to new carers (the various foster carers along the way) will have been worn down over time and through challenging experience. Her innate impulse to reach out to connect through healthy interpersonal rhythms – to feel connected, to fulfil her need for emotional learning – may have faded. She may have learnt to defend herself from emotional uncertainty, probably becoming more guarded and less open to others. She will have become less naturally

social, interacting with others as objects of suspicion *just* as she was treated as an object, being moved from one place to the next.

This chapter will describe two and a half years of music therapy process with Noa. It will be illuminated by examples from our 45-minute-long weekly sessions. These examples illustrate stages along the way, as our relationship was slowly woven through musical and verbal interplay and communication. We will explore intricate movements in physical, emotional and musical space and regulation; from total distance (both physical and musical), to closeness; from chaos and turmoil, to self-control and responsibility. I will attempt to connect psychological process and musical nurturing, by carefully utilizing various musical elements and nuances (tempo, rhythm, dynamic, melody, harmony, timbre and form) within vocalization and playing. We will see how these changes took form in the therapeutic process.

## Beginning

Noa, two and a half years old, enters the music therapy room with confidence. She says goodbye to her mother and begins to explore the room.

The first session was mostly chaotic and disorganized. Noa went from one instrument to the other, throwing everything that came to hand. She went to a bowl full of mandarins and began throwing them at me while laughing. I began picking up the fruits, putting them in the bowl while singing:

*In the bowl, in the bowl,  
in the bowl we put the mandarins.  
All the mandarins are now in the bowl and  
the bowl goes on the shelf.*

Noa was surprised by my reaction and began singing:

*Yes, all the mandarins are back in the bowl  
and we put them on the shelf,  
and we put them on the shelf!*

This little scene of throwing mandarins came as quite a surprise to me. However, instead of reacting with, 'No, we don't throw mandarins' (thus emphasizing the 'bad behaviour'), I began organizing the event, provided a frame, which in turn gave internal and external borders. The singing provided a natural structure and organization, with clear repetitive phrases that contained binary words (in the *bowl*; on the *shelf*). For each rhythmic phrase, Noa seemed to make a small body movement on each accent. Noa, who was surprised by my response, went along with me, imitating the song. For the next session I made sure there were no objects around that Noa could destroy or break.

Drake (2011) describes her experiences in the early sessions with adopted children and discusses how their behaviour 'can appear unregulated and erratic and they may present with heightened anxiety. This may be evident through avoidant, controlling or withdrawn behaviours' (p.22).

This was quite true in Noa's case. During the first sessions she was busy exploring the instruments, moving from one to the other while asking me, 'What is this? What is this? How do you use it?' She wanted me to name each instrument and show her what it does and how to play it. She did not, however, want me to play the piano or the guitar. She only 'allowed' me to improvise singing when I was describing what she was doing. Reflecting each of her movements every time she picked up an instrument, I described her actions and facial expressions through my song. If I stopped, she asked me to continue my descriptions.

### Physical and musical space

Noa ordered me to sit as far away as possible from her (the farthest end of the room), while she was exploring the instruments. There was no eye contact between us. I began reflecting, through my singing, a simple description of what she was doing.

Reflecting the person's words or feeling state [*or actions*] allows the client to stay in the moment and explore it more fully. In many respects this is a unique aspect of therapy – we allow clients the time to uncover feelings at a pace that is comfortable for them. (Grocke and Wigram 2007, p.31)

However, whilst reflecting, my singing during this period was quite emotionally detached, without much expression or emotionality. My physical and emotional distance felt appropriate. It felt as though this was the level of interaction Noa could currently handle. And so, I attempted to meet Noa's needs and abilities in her self-exploration process as *she* expressed them to me, telling me exactly what she could contain at that period in our relationship.

In a later session Noa found a box full of pictures representing children's songs. She tossed all the cards on the floor. My singing reaction was to the tune of 'London bridge':

*Oh, oh, all the cards are on the floor  
on the floor, on the floor  
All the cards are on the floor,  
out of the box.*

She asked me to pick up the cards and put them in the box as she began singing to the same tune:

*We are putting all the cards in the box, in the box  
 We are putting all the cards in the box.  
 They are no longer on the floor, on the floor  
 Now they're in the box.*

She then asked me to sit far away, as she once more tossed all the cards, and I sang:

*Oh, oh, all the cards are on the floor, on the floor, on the floor  
 All the cards are on the floor, out of the box.*

The tossing and picking the cards was repeated about five times. Then Noa began picking one card at a time, putting them back into the box. I began singing the song represented by each card, as she picked it up, but as soon as she put the card in the box, I stopped singing. She looked surprised and smiled when she realized what had occurred. Noa felt the potential for control. She continued picking up one card at a time, now with control over how short or how long I was supposed to sing the song. She waited with anticipation for my singing to stop as each card entered the box. We were totally synchronized, our cycles of shared rhythm coming to a natural crescendo as Noa put the card in the box.

Noa was at the beginning of her self-exploration. She was experiencing the sense of her emergent self, 'experiencing being alive while encountering the world' (Stern 2000, p.22). As I synchronized myself to her movement and mirrored her actions in my singing, she was able to see herself in my performance. This synchronous mirroring, over time and many iterations, will help Noa to learn about herself and others (Bruscia 1987; Wigram 2004).

She then lifted the card representing the 'Bee song'<sup>1</sup> and I began singing it. She held the card with the picture of the bee while I sang the whole song. At the end of the song, Noa said, 'Again'. I sang the whole song one more time and she said, 'Again'.

I would like to explain what happened during this song. The first time I sang Noa the song, I sang it in a steady, quite fast tempo with moderate dynamic. I did not employ any emotional or musical attunement. It was sung with restrained musicality and emotional distance, just like our physical distance. Then Noa began to reduce that emotional distance. Her intrigued energy – communicated in her body positioning, tone and expression – led me to respond by singing the song again, but this time singing it a bit slower and extending

1 The 'Bee song' is a famous children's song: 'I'm bringing home a baby bumble bee, won't my mummy be so proud of me. I'm bringing home a baby bumble bee, oops the bee stung me.' The song can be extended by adding 'bzzzz, oops, the bee stung me, bzzzz, bzzzz, oops the bee stung you'.

the ending by adding the 'bzzz' part to the song. Now I was using 'attunement' to simultaneously communicate and connect with Noa's emotional state. Stern (2010b, p.42) defined 'attunement' as, 'matching and sharing dynamic forms of vitality, but across different modalities'. Then Noa asked for the song again, and I extended the song even further by adding two 'bzzzz' parts. I sang the song with attunement and greater emotionality and she began to anticipate the 'bzzz' and the 'oops' in the song, asking me to sing it again and again.

Our synchronized interaction took another step forward as Noa allowed me to 'play' with the song by expanding the ending sequence. She was able to contain the fine changes and the associated emotional tension, as she now had safety and enough predictability in her experience of the song's basic structure. Daniel Stern used the term vitality affects (Stern 2000) to describe the temporal contour of energetic experience as it arises. Vitality affects comprise narrative structured patterns that involve heightening excitement with an ending in resolution. The experience of sharing vitality in a synchronous temporal structure, over a moment of time, gives mothers and infants a sense of meeting. Stern (2000, 2010a) describes an example in which a mother is playing with her infant, suspending each time the end moment in which she will 'get him' and tickle him. They interact through a play of temporal variations that regulates the infant's state, and as the mom tickles him the game resolves and the dyad shares a unique moment. Similarly, we can see vitality affect in our improvisation which occurred within the clear structure of musical phrases – Noa allowed and enjoyed the anticipation of climax, acquiring meaningful and safe experiences of, and for, constructing her self-with-others (Stern 2000). This made for a potential growth of intimacy as a result of these encounters.

At one stage I tried singing a new song, but Noa shouted, 'NO, the Bee song'. I responded accordingly and continued with the Bee. However, after about ten times of singing the Bee song, she showed me a new song card. Slowly, Noa began requesting different songs and I sang them now, with greater degrees of emotional and musical attunement. Noa could tolerate this (and enjoy the connection) if, at the same time, I continued to maintain my physical distance. Her self-regulatory capacity progressed as she was able to receive and react more and more to my actions (Trevarthen 1980). It was evident in the change of the dynamic forms of our music that an intersubjective relationship was forming (Pavlicevic 1997).

In one of the sessions Noa held all the mallets she could find in the room (about ten of them). She held them tightly and began walking around the room. I picked up the tempo and quality of her walking, which sounded to me like a march, and began playing and singing it on the piano, accentuating each word:

*Noa is marching with the mallets, with the mallets with the mallets  
Look at her while she's marching with the mallets, with the mallets.*

Noa began shouting, 'No, no!' I continued to play and sing, 'No, no! No, no! You don't want me to sing while you are marching!'

All of a sudden, Noa approached the piano and bit me. I asked her, 'Did you bite me?' Noa: 'Yes, it's your fault!' She then continued marching around the room with the mallets telling me to continue to play.

Young children are music listeners, and can be sensitive to musical changes even between octaves, harmony or simple frequency ratio (Trehub, Schellenberg and Hill 1997). Accordingly, in mother–infant interactions, each change in the form and/or pattern of the temporal shifts of sound intensity can have its own emotional reaction (Stern 1996). In our interaction, my music elucidated with intensity Noa's acts, words and movements. Noa was faced with a multisensory mirror – one that could illicit strong self-regulatory reactions.

The biting was the first close physical contact that occurred between us. Although I was quite surprised and puzzled, I did not react with a strong emotional reaction. I contemplated whether my playing was too dominant and was too much for her to handle, although after she had bit me she *did* want me to continue to play.

It could be that Noa wanted something else from me, something unknown to me when she said 'NO, no!' – something she was not able to explain in words. And possibly when I in return imitated the 'No, no!' I triggered her frustration. The reason I continued playing throughout was that I believed our communication could continue and be supported through the playing and singing. I amplified Noa by singing: 'No, no! No, no! You don't want me to sing while you are marching!' This amplification would help her in her self-awareness and show Noa that I was always alongside her. I did not set a specific boundary around hurting/biting, etc. at this stage in Noa's therapy. I felt quite safe and felt that our delicate and intricate work of building borders should grow from within rather than from external limit setting. I did, however, ask Noa if she had bitten me, as I thought it was important to acknowledge that the biting came from her.

When Noa was done marching, she came to the piano and began playing on it with a rubber-head mallet. Previously, Noa had needed to keep a physical and musical distance between us. In the marching section she seemed to be exploring that distance, testing out my reactions and feeling for where her trust lay. As she approached the piano with her rubber-head mallet she seemed to be expressing a new level of trust in my ability to keep her safe. She stayed beside me at the piano.

I held the mallet (together with her), leading her on the piano while forming a melody. It seemed that the mallet represented an extension of her fingers, or a kind of an 'intentional object' (Stern 2000). The mallet was more than an extension; it enabled a safe distance from any potentially overwhelming direct experience on her skin. Through it, Noa safely continued to experience her emerging self – receiving body inputs, symbolizing, touching and creating.

I began improvising on the piano, a quiet melody, and she asked me to stop playing. It seemed that any move to generate my own input was still unwelcome. It had to be exactly as she wished. As long as I was synchronized with her, moving the mallet with her, she felt comfortable. But as soon as I initiated my own melody, this level of separation was felt by Noa as uncomfortable.

### **Towards separation (and so into relationship)**

With her family history, Noa may have experienced disrupted, confusing interactions with the adults in her life. The usual consistent experiences which lead to strong, safe attachment bonds with caregivers may not have been available for Noa. She may never have felt consistently in sync with a caring adult. She may not have felt connected or 'held' rhythmically, emotionally – not enough anyway. Within the music therapy room Noa was beginning to experience that connectedness. And once Noa was safe enough to open to elements of the attachment experience, to allow herself to feel in sync and connected to me, she needed to experience this over and over again.

Next, I will move on to describe the beginnings of Noa's explorations into psychological separation (the development of her sense of autonomous self). It is important to note two things about this progress. First, Noa's separation needed to be preceded and underpinned by many experiences of connectedness. An infant has to feel contained in the rhythm of her caregiver before developing the confidence to reach out to explore the world as a separate being. Second, this progress towards separation is never linear. Noa's forays into separation developed alongside a deepening of her connectedness. She would always need the base of attachment experience from which to explore.

In a later session Noa was again playing with the rubber-head mallets. Noa picked up all the mallets and one fell down. I reacted by saying, 'Oh, oh!' Noa laughed and threw another mallet on the floor and waited for my 'Oh, oh' reaction. This was repeated several times. Each time, when I added the 'Oh, oh', I would make it more dramatic with a wider melodic and dynamic range. The more I accentuated the second note, the more Noa laughed. I asked her if the mallets were falling by themselves or if she was throwing them? She replied, 'I am throwing them.' This was the first time Noa took real responsibility for her action. She was beginning to view herself separately from me.

This first incident in which Noa took responsibility for her action (identifying her role and control over it) can be seen to have occurred within a universal game structure, the game of 'Fort-Da'.<sup>2</sup> The term Fort-Da describes any game

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2 Freud (1955) coined this word 'Fort-Da', meaning 'Here-There', when he noticed the joy his baby grandson showed watching the movement of a yoyo in front of his face.

in which the baby throws an object back and forth, noting when it is gone and is returned. Freud (1955) used this game to explain the notion of pleasure, suggesting that pleasure was derived from a sense of empowerment related to the mastery of task, other people and reality. In our game Noa explored the mastery of her 'gone' act, and received a musical reaction 'back' as she saw the mallets on the floor. This interaction was a progression from our base of synchronization as she took responsibility and identified herself.

For Noa, her emerging sense of psychological separation was occurring within a safe environment. When this is the case, a child's flourishing sense of autonomy will naturally lead her to play more confidently with psychological distance, to test and develop trust, to explore and take risks in relationship. In other words, we need to be individual before we can truly be in relationship.

A little later on in our sessions, Noa began to hide in the room, asking me to find her. The first time she hid, I sang, 'Where is Noa, where is Noa?' She came out from hiding and laughed. This game was repeated several times and became longer as I expanded on the singing, 'Where is Noa, where is Noa? Maybe she is in the piano? Maybe in the closet? Maybe she left the room? Oh, what will I do, I can't find her.' Not only did it become more tolerable for Noa to disappear for a longer time, it also became evident that she was becoming able to give me more control through a musical structure. When I found Noa, I sang out loud, 'Here you are. I finally found you.' She asked me to sit far away while she was hiding and was especially happy when I called out her name in a worried intonation, 'Noa, Noa.' She replied immediately, 'But I am here, don't worry, I didn't go away.' In a safe, exciting context (defined by the shared musicality of our relationship) Noa was testing my consistency and reliability – would I always find her, would I always care enough to try? She was internalizing a sense of safety and consistency in relationship through experiencing the care in my musical, emotional and practical response.

### **Noa's story unfolding**

In a development of the Fort-Da game with the rubber-head mallets, Noa spontaneously began to organize the mallets in a row saying, 'One for Noa, one for Cookie, one for Ron [her brother] and one for my mother.' Noa did not mention her older brother, who had special needs, nor her father. When I asked about them, she said that they are 'gone far away'. At this point, I decided not to ask any leading questions to explore this further. Noa's disclosure felt fragile, tentative and premature. Instead I marked this moment as a 'sign' and decided to see if this topic would reappear later. I trusted the slow process in therapy and believed that Noa would come back to her family later, and throughout her sessions – she did. This was the beginning. Noa went on to explore herself

in relation to me and the meaningful others in her life. Themes of safety and confidence would arise, together with acts of construction and destruction.

### **Developing subtleties of relationship: A balance of structure and spontaneity**

A year into our music therapy, together Noa and I had found a new level of shared musical structure which enabled Noa to develop her confidence in exploration and improvisation. This more sophisticated improvisational process became a vehicle for Noa to develop her social skills and engage in subtleties of relationship.

In one session I showed Noa how to play the kazoo. The kazoo can be an extension of our voice. It is a fun, emotive extension that can be likened to the babbling and playful sounds a baby will often explore in her pre-verbal developmental stage. Spontaneously, a dialogue began between us. At first the sounds were disorganized with no clear regulation, but slowly, as I began imitating her playing, her phrases became longer and more expressive. A basic musical structure – with an underlying beat, tempo and pulse of turn-taking – can hold a vulnerable child as she explores relationship and emotion in improvisation. Here, a balance between structure and measured unpredictability is so often essential. Together, Noa and I explored the subtleties of joint attention, turn-taking, collaborative intentionality and shared meaning making. We felt connected, in sync and happy. There was a lot of eye contact between us, and laughter and more freedom than ever. And all with a kazoo!

### **Intimacy**

Noa had found safety and spontaneity in the structure of our musical play. The temporal framing, and the predictable emotional narrative (the vitality affect) of each iteration of play enabled Noa to improvise and explore with confidence. Noa now brought this sophisticated balance between structure and spontaneity into her physical play, enabling exploration of intimacy for the first time.

Noa took out all the kazoos from the instrument box (ten in all) and put them on her fingers. She began singing a well-known children's song about ten fingers. She asked me to put the kazoo on my fingers and I sang the song about the fingers. At the end of the song I walked my fingers towards her and tickled her. She seemed to like it. The following time, as I got close to her, she patted my glasses. I asked if she wanted me to take off my glasses and she replied, 'Yes'. I continued walking my fingers toward her slowly, while singing the finger song, and towards the end of each phrase of the song, I tickled her. We played through this pattern many times. Noa was able to tolerate the closeness

when she could anticipate the tickling at the end of the phrase. Here Noa had the repetitious structure of each phrase of the game – the temporal patterning along with an energetic and emotional narrative – to hold her anxiety and help her anticipate what was to come.

Noa then asked me to tickle her even more. I now used my hands, instead of the kazoo, to very gently tickle her. I tickled her legs, her stomach, her back and her arms. Out loud, I named the body parts while doing so. She came very close to me and lay on my lap, took my glasses off my face and looked straight into my eyes. She began playing with my face, trying to put her small hands in my mouth and nostrils. She played with my hair. I sang softly as she played in this way, singing about the things she was doing. Then I tried a playful development of this interaction. I began pointing at different parts of Noa, while singing, ‘Here is Noa’s nose, your beautiful little nose. Here is Noa’s mouth, your beautiful little mouth. Here are Noa’s eyes, your beautiful brown big eyes, etc.’ Noa asked me to repeat the song over and over again. She was engaged, connected and secure enough to hand over control of the game. Her body became totally relaxed as her breathing became deeper and slower. The reflexive, embodied nature of the joint attention integral to this experience helped Noa build her boundaries between self and other; helped her to begin to shape her body scheme and structure.

In the following session, Noa told me that her leg was hurting and asked me to take care of her. I said that of course I would take care of her. She lay on my lap and asked me to tell her that I would take care of ‘all of her’. I began singing that I would take care of her legs, of her arms, of her tummy, of her nose, etc. But then she began to pinch me. I explained that she was hurting me, which led onto the following interaction.

*Me:* Would you like me to watch over you so you don’t hurt me?

*Noa:* Yes, I want you to take care of me. You, Cookie bite me and hit me.

*Me:* Did I bite you?

*Noa:* Yes!

*Me:* And I hurt you?

*Noa:* Yes!

*Me:* And I hit you and scratched you? All this I did to you? So what do you need to tell me?

*Noa:* That it hurts me.

For the first time (possibly ever) Noa felt safe enough to make a clear statement about the pain that had marked her young life. This was hugely significant.

Noa then lay on the floor and covered her face with her arms and asked, 'Where am I? Where am I?' She laughed and hid her face again. Then she covered my face with a scarf and I asked, 'Where am I? Where am I?' Noa suggested that we hide together and gave me a big hug. Her invitation to hide together was an important step in our relationship.

## Midway

During our second year of music therapy Noa began playing the instruments, rather than only exploring them. She began putting the bells around her arms and legs, dancing freely around the room with the music while singing the songs. She also let me play the piano whilst she moved back and forth from watching herself in a mirror, to coming close up to me with a big smile, to back to the mirror again.

The sessions were rich with music making. Noa now had a clear sense of her self in relationship with other – there was Noa and there was me. We had separate voices that at times could merge, and in that merge, Noa no longer worried that she would disappear. There was a lot of freedom, vitality, and it seemed that Noa had emerged into an independent person.

Noa's growing capacity as an independent, confident child was evident in her wider life. Noa was much calmer in the nursery school and had stopped hitting and biting. She was playing with the other children and had become quite popular. She was now able to accept and live positively with the separation of her parents within her adopted family. During her first year of therapy, Noa lived with her adopted mother – never staying overnight with her adopted father. Noa's adopted parents separated only a few months after she was adopted. The divorce was a mutual agreement and the father moved within a walking distance from the family. The adopted parents had shared responsibility for the children although the older brother stayed more often with the father.<sup>3</sup> In that first year, Noa liked being with her father as long as they stayed in her mother's home. This may have been due to her difficulty in accepting changes, difficulty leaving her secure surrounding. Now, into her second year of therapy, Noa was happy to stay overnight with her adopted father – in fact, she couldn't wait to spend more time with him.

Increasingly, Noa included all these meaningful characters from her life in her therapeutic process, a process in which she now took the lead.

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3 Here, we get a little more insight into Noa's earlier statement about her brother and father having 'gone far away' (see 'Noa's story unfolding' above).

## Symbolism and ending

Noa began to play with some of the dolls and other toys in the room. She organized all the dolls in rows and said that she was making a show and everyone needed to watch her while she was singing and dancing. For several sessions she performed her dancing and singing in front of me and the audience of dolls.

Noa's play with the dolls and toys then began to take on more of a symbolic quality. She began to tell stories. She dictated each story and asked me to put music to it.

In one example Noa used five dolls along with clear rhythmical patterns and melodic lines to create a story:

*Noa:* Here is a man, ah, ah, ah and here is a woman, ah, ah, ah. (*I repeated the exact line. I then continued*)

*Me:* Here is a man and a woman, ah, ah, ah. Here is their boy, ah, ah, ah.

*Noa:* Here is their girl, ah, ah, ah.

*Me:* Yes, the woman and the man have a very sweet girl and a boy, ah, ah, ah.

*Noa:* But they also have one more boy, la, la, la, la.

*Me:* The mother and the father, the girl and two boys.

*Noa:* They are one big family. They are all together. The mother plays with the girl and the boys and then the father plays with them.

After this session Noa's mother told me excitedly that Noa had said the following to her, 'My brother Ron came out of your tummy, my brother Ben came also out of your tummy. I came out from another mummy's tummy, but you are my *real* mother.' Needless to say how surprised and happy the mother was and no one could have worded it in a better way than Noa. The mother felt that from a cocoon Noa had become a beautiful butterfly.

## Epilogue

A few weeks after our sessions had ended, and I had left for another country, I received an email from Noa's mother suggesting that Noa would like to meet me in a café when I next came to visit. We met in a café two months after I had left. Noa was five and a half. She told me about her new kindergarten and about her friends. She asked if she could meet me in the clinic to play and sing next time I came. I agreed to that and we set a date for almost two months later. We met in the clinic, played and sang. At the end of the session Noa said, 'Next

time you come, I won't need to meet you, only talk to you on the phone.' And so it was. We had a long phone conversation almost two months later in which she said, 'I don't need to talk to you again, but I will send you pictures.'

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