Start with a Seed of Imagination

By Kristin Rytter, Ph.D.

Children’s imaginations have magical properties, transporting and transforming them. But does this have a purpose? Of course it does. Through imagination, little kids can discover many things about themselves, such as their interests, talents, and sometimes their future careers.

So what happens to little kids who are seemingly too physically disabled to engage in pretend play either with another person or on their own? Do they have imaginations? Do they mature as they become older? Answering these questions requires a look inside of these kiddos’ brains; an impossible task without expensive imaging. Or is it?

I can provide some insight, because I grew up with severe athetoid cerebral palsy (CP) and no intelligible speech. I still remember participating in make-believe play. Around the age of three years, for instance, I played dolls with my mom. Somehow, she knew I wanted to name my dolly Molly. This means that I imagined a name in my head without physically interacting with a Molly. Did my imagination stop there? Of course not.

When I was five or so, I held my Raggedy Ann doll in my arms in the best way I could and vocalized as if I was talking to her, pretending that she was my baby. Lying on the floor, I moved her around on a doll blanket, putting her to bed. At school, the staff must have noticed that I was pretending, because they asked me yes/no questions. Are you putting her down for a nap? Are you getting her ready to go home? Are you changing her? Asking me such questions made me feel that what I was doing was important. And it was. I was learning to represent objects and daily activities with different things such as a cloth for a blanket, a block for a school bus, and a paper towel for a diaper.

Supporting pretend play facilitates cognitive and language development for any child. Giving me toys, different props, and asking me questions to think about them enhanced my mental abilities, but it was much less obvious due to my quadriplegia and no intelligible speech.

When I become a little older, I had an imaginary friend who I talked to. This progressed to
pretending that I did different things, usually what I couldn’t have done with my severe CP. For example, I cut hair. I was also a nurse, but I didn’t like giving people shots. So I quickly become a doctor. Why not? When I learned more about CP, I became a neurosurgeon; fixing people’s brains. I loved to pretend, and I did a lot of it.

One of my fondest memories of going to special school consisted of my classmates and me making our own puppets with the necessary physical assistant for a play. I created a spaceperson with long hair. After making our diverse-looking sock puppets, we wrote a script. Yes, we performed in a play with our sock puppets on our hands. About two years later, my best friends co-starred in a play we had written about how we could communicate. From these and other imaginative activities, I gained more cognitive and language skills.

Besides developing my ability to use sophisticated communication devices in the future, I also worked my imagination much like a muscle. It built up so much over time. Funny images would pop up in my mind. For example, when someone said a white elephant was in the room, I would conjure up a white elephant sitting on a pink and green striped couch holding a little teacup. Sometimes, I had to watch myself, because adults could talk about a serious subject, and I wanted to laugh at what I had pictured. At that time, I couldn’t tell people about the funny pictures that I had in my head; people wouldn’t have known what in the world I was laughing about.

Luckily for me, my dad wasn’t all that serious; he was silly, in fact. He said one day unexpectedly, “There’s Ole Man Greevy, sittin’ in his ’57 Chevy,” mispronouncing Chevy to rhyme it with Greevy. As a little girl, I immediately laughed, because it sounded funny to me. I laughed also because of the picture that I conjured up in my head – a man with matted light brown hair and beard sitting in a rusted-out car. My chortling only reinforced my dad reciting his new saying over and over again.

As the years rolled by, my picture of Ole Man Greevy changed. For instance, when I was a young teenager, I envisioned him standing against the same old car with a golden retriever smiling by his side. About this time, my dad started asking me questions like, “How did he get there?” or “What was he doing there?” I worried about his life before he just sat in the car. Was he a millionaire who finally turned to alcohol when success got to him?

The older I became, the more my dad encouraged me to write a book about Greevy. I shook my
head and laughed, as I thought doing so would be foolish – writing a book about a man who my dad had made up in a silly old saying. But Greevy was alive in our heads. There was no denying it.

I grew up and enter the adult’s world where I went to college and the doctoral program at the University of Washington to get a Ph.D. in developmental psychology. I studied cognitive, language, and social-emotional development; and attachment, mostly in children developing typically. I minored in brain studies. In addition to all of this, I took classes in special education and rehabilitation.

Such diverse training prepared me for having my own business, Unique Perspective, helping mostly children with severe speech and physical impairments, their families, and professionals succeed. A large part of my work has consisted of consulting with families and educational teams on a wide variety of subjects. These included literacy development, communication, self-advocacy, discipline, and even pretend play. Often, I saw very well-intentioned people doing similar things that actually hindered the learning and maturation of children with severe speech and physical impairments (SSPI). In turn, I gave similar advice to the majority of my clientele. As you can well imagine, this became monotonous, especially writing dry reports. I designed these reports to help parents and professionals to improve children’s education by using key principles.

The more of these dry reports I wrote, the more I thought about writing books where I would explain the key principles and how to implement them in real life with children. For some reason, I could not make myself start any of those books. Perhaps it was because one of my other passions was creative writing, and I had a story expanding in my head. Yes, it was Greevy stirring around in the recesses of my mind, much like a bear waking up in the spring. I began to hear him. I actually felt all tingly when he first saw his baby boy. Was I becoming psychotic?

Of course not. I just needed to let him out of my own head and down onto paper. Spring 2011, I started writing his story. At some point fairly early on, I altered his son’s character to have severe athetoid cerebral palsy and no intelligible speech, allowing me to teach the reader about the key principles in vivid and concrete ways.

In some scenes, the little boy’s imagination leaks out enough for his dad, John Greevy, to expand
it into an activity. For example, the boy, Matthew, imagines planting dandelion seeds in flower pots to give to his friends. John takes this as an opportunity to teach him about planting, the value of reading information online, fairness, persistence with communicating, and other life skills. Through these interactions, John sees Matthew’s mind come alive as a mischievous and typical child. I wanted to show readers how to support the magical thinking of children with SSPI, because their physical limitations mask their abilities to pretend and conduct experiments. Supporting such capabilities facilitates their cognitive and language development, which they need so desperately to reach their own full potential, however it looks for them.

Writing vivid scenes involving John and Matthew required me to imagine what it was like being a child with SSPI. I often needed to think back about how I convey things without speech, using control over my body movements and an independent communication means that I could use. To make John’s and Matthew’s interactions as realistic as possible, I needed to remember the challenges, frustrations, and triumphs that people in my life and I had while doing a whole host of things together.

I would hate to think about what my life would have been like if people hadn’t supported my imagination to grow by giving me age-appropriate toys and by asking me questions about make-believe people. To a child with SSPI, this is huge gift, because they can earn money using their thinking powers when they reach adulthood.

In order to educate people about how to help kids with SSPI succeed in childhood and adulthood, I had to address some controversial topics, such as whether to mainstream or whether to give a child with eating difficulties a feeding tube. Trying to present both sides to the controversies, I have attempted to accomplish two goals.

The first objective consisted of validating people’s fears and doubts regarding their decisions, because they absolutely need to be discussed openly and honestly. Doing so can help create ways to prevent potential problems from occurring. An example of this is when John and Matthew teach his new classmates about his abilities, communication, and disability. John hopes this will keep most of the children from teasing Matthew about his disability.

My second goal is to show that even good decisions regarding children with SSPI have some drawbacks. Families and professionals sometimes need to give more weight to the positives than
the negatives. Although Matthew can become nauseated when people tube-feed him too quickly, tube feedings free so much of Matthew’s time, enabling him to do more things. These include enjoying books, playing in the mud, being mainstreamed, making up riddles, and other childhood activities.

When I think about what I have done with my imagination, cognition, and language abilities as well as well-developed imagination, I feel proud. I hope to inspire families and professionals to facilitate these qualities in children with SSPI so that they can take pride of their many abilities instead of dwelling on their limitations.

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