



THE ARCHETYPE APPROACH / CASE STUDY LIBRARY

AA-CS-005

Imagination as a Bridge to Belonging

How Symbolic Play Supported Connection



CASE TYPE	Imagination & Social Integration
AGE / CONTEXT	3 years - integrating
DATE RANGE	01/26-04/26
PRACTICE SITE	Children of Towan Kindergarten
PRACTITIONER	Oliver Riddett

EMERGING AA PRINCIPLE

Imagination can be both a place of safety and a bridge into shared relationship.

OBSERVE

What is happening?

RECOGNISE

What pattern is this?

BALANCE

What is missing?

INTEGRATE

What has emerged?

Observe -> Recognise -> Balance -> Integrate

What was happening?

The pattern as it first appeared



INITIAL PRESENTATION

A child presented as highly imaginative and verbally capable, spending long periods immersed in solitary imaginative character play. They often appeared deeply absorbed in fantasy narratives and found it difficult to integrate these worlds into reciprocal peer interaction.

RECURRING PATTERNS

- Extended solitary imaginative play
- Repetitive character-based narratives
- Parallel rather than reciprocal interaction
- Relational hesitation outside fantasy roles
- Stronger communication within imaginative worlds
- Difficulty expressing direct relational needs
- Preference for internal imaginative worlds over shared social space

OBSERVABLE BEHAVIOURS

The child regularly created rich fantasy narratives and sustained symbolic play for extended periods. While socially aware, they often remained within imaginative roles during interaction and found it difficult to bridge symbolic experiences into shared peer participation.

CONTEXTS AND TRIGGERS

- Unstructured group play
- Rapid social interactions
- Busy peer environments
- Situations requiring direct communication
- Social unpredictability

WHAT WAS THE CHILD SHOWING US?

The child appeared to use imagination as both a developmental strength and a regulatory strategy. Symbolic worlds offered safety, predictability and confidence that were harder to access in direct social interaction.

What pattern emerged?

Seeing beneath the behaviour



PRIMARY PATTERN	Imagineer / Watcher imbalance
SUPPORTING PATTERN	Friend under-accessed
BRIDGING FUNCTION	Builder grounding and Friend-based relational integration

SHADOW / IMBALANCE PRESENTATION

Imagineer qualities were richly available, but could become contracted into solitary fantasy. Social participation, direct communication and relational confidence were less consistently accessible outside the symbolic world.

POSSIBLE UNDERLYING NEEDS

- Relational safety
- Supported social bridging
- Shared imaginative experiences
- Confidence expressing needs directly
- Emotional containment
- Grounding within peer interaction
- Co-regulated social participation

DEVELOPMENTAL UNDERSTANDING

The child's imagination did not appear simply to be avoidance. It functioned as a safe regulatory system through which emotion, identity and meaning could be explored.

PERCEPTION SHIFT

The key perception shift was from 'The child is lost in fantasy' to 'The child's imaginative world may be the safest place from which relationship can begin.'

What was introduced?

Keeping the strength - widening access



ADULT APPROACH

- Enter the child's imaginative world respectfully rather than redirecting it.
- Use symbolic play as a bridge into relationship.
- Widen existing narratives to include peers.
- Support direct communication from within familiar play themes.

ENVIRONMENTAL AND PLAY ADJUSTMENTS

- Smaller collaborative imaginative groups
- Quieter symbolic-play opportunities
- Structured shared storytelling
- Collaborative role-play and character games
- Co-created narratives with peers

BALANCING RELATIONSHIP

Imagineer -> Builder, supported by Watcher -> Friend

Shared imagination allowed the child to remain inside a familiar symbolic language while gradually widening the social world around it.

BALANCING SEQUENCE

Imagine -> Share -> Connect -> Participate

The aim was not to remove fantasy. It was to help imagination become relational rather than isolated.

What became newly available?

Growth without losing the original strength



OBSERVABLE CHANGE

Over time the child increasingly demonstrated greater peer participation, shared imaginative play, improved direct communication and longer sustained peer interaction.

WHAT BECAME VISIBLE

- Imagination remained regulating while becoming less isolating
- Greater willingness to invite others into imaginative experiences
- More consistent collaborative play
- Safer expression of needs
- Greater movement between internal fantasy and shared social reality
- Relational confidence increased without reducing imaginative richness

WHAT EMERGED OVER TIME?

The child's imagination remained central, but became increasingly integrated with friendship, communication and participation rather than existing separately from them.

INTEGRATION

The strength itself became the bridge: imagination opened a route into belonging.



Imagination Can Become a Bridge

Imagination is not always a barrier to participation. When symbolic worlds are respected and entered relationally, they can become powerful pathways into communication, belonging and shared play.

AA SNAPSHOT

PRIMARY PATTERN

Imagineer / Watcher

BALANCING RELATIONSHIP

Imagineer -> Builder; Watcher -> Friend

BALANCING STRATEGY

Symbolic bridging through shared imagination

CASE CATEGORY

Imagination & Social Integration

SUPPORTING PATTERN

Friend

MAIN PRESENTATION

Solitary imaginative play with limited peer integration

OUTCOME THEME

Social participation through imaginative connection

AGE / CONTEXT

3 years - integrating

CLOSING REFLECTION

“Children do not unfold through correction alone. They unfold through relationship, balance, safety, rhythm and being deeply seen.”

AA TAGS

Imagineer

Watcher

Friend

Builder

Imagination

Symbolic Play

Communication

Belonging

Social Integration

Story Bridging

AA EVIDENCE THEMES

- Imagination as regulation
- Relationship before redirection
- Symbolic play supports development
- Social integration through shared meaning
- Widening safety rather than removing coping strategies
- Balance rather than correction

AA DEVELOPMENTAL REFLECTION | EVIDENCE STRENGTH: 5 / 5

This is a distinctive case because it treats imagination as both a strength and a regulatory strategy. The intervention did not pull the child out of fantasy; adults entered it and widened it. The emerging social gains make this a useful example of symbolic bridging. Similar cases would help establish whether this is a repeatable pathway for other Imagineer-heavy children.