

## Empathetic Empowerment as Friendships through CoCreative Play in Child Development by Aliah Selah Clar Rheinstein



**“The language of friendship is not words but meanings.”**

**-Henry David Thoreau**

### Observation Phase

During my observation of young children engaged in creative play, I noticed how deeply immersed they became in their imaginary worlds. The environment was lively and filled with energy, as the children freely moved between different play scenarios. I observed them in a **playground setting**, where natural elements like trees, leaves, and open space provided them with materials and inspiration for their imaginative play. Some children played independently, while others engaged in **collaborative storytelling and role-playing games**.

One of the most striking dynamics I noticed was the presence of **dominant players**—those who naturally took on leadership roles, shaping the direction of the narrative. When a single dominant child was involved, the other children would often follow their lead, seamlessly adapting to the evolving story. However, when two dominant children played together, **conflicts arose** over the storyline or character roles. For example, one child might declare, “And then the pink elephant comes in!” while another insists, “No, there’s no pink elephants—the elephant is purple!” These small disagreements sometimes escalated into full-blown arguments, and in a moment, began disrupting the flow of play.

Interestingly, I often observed **distinct gender-based play patterns**. Girls in the group usually engaged in imaginative **nurturing and caregiving roles**, gathering leaves from plants to create "medicine from China." This likely reflected experiences in their own homes, where they may, have had a parent who was using Chinese Medicine to help them heal and was intrigued by it. I noticed how some children were leader, yet their play was **collaborative**, mimicking real-life caregiving and inclusive behaviors that they had observed in the adults and older siblings around them.



A lot of the time, boys gravitated toward **action-driven, high-energy play**, often centered around heroes doing battles like pretending to be part of the Star Wars cast with imaginary lightsabers. Their play often involved more **physical movement, sound effects, and dueling**. Each of them eagerly claiming roles as Jedi warriors. Unlike the girls' who mostly enjoyed more cooperative play, the boys' interactions had a more competitive edge, with occasional **arguments over who was "winning"** or who had the stronger powers.

In my own life, when we found a wonderful kindergarten school for our son, it was because it blended the educational aspects of Montessori that can be too strict in some schools, yet this school blended that with Bev Bos, ([PLAYvolutionHQ.com](http://PLAYvolutionHQ.com)) known for her "Centers" philosophy and book "Together We're Better" who emphasized "coactivity" and student having the choice of what learning center to go to during Centers Playtime. There were many possible subjects like: painting/drawing, clay, crafts, water-play, dress-up clothes and a playhouse, Legos/blocks and math games, and one with simple science experiments.

The two philosophies balanced the need to explore freely and have specific accomplishment with lessons to get starting with reading, writing, and math with their "hand on" activity approach, that had aspects of play. It was perfect for our son, having the centers all set-ups so he could wander around and explore, create, build.

In raising our son, who was sensitive, we finally found a kindergarten program that we loved. But he was overwhelmed by the dynamics of a few really rowdy, somewhat insensitive, boys in his class. And I wanted to do something about it. So I developed an after-school program to help foster friendships through a movement class - because I trusted the teachers wanted that as well. They were thrilled, and gave me the gym to use with lots of building cushions and other equipment that we could use.

**"Leadership Bully-Safe Training"** was a - 2 days a week after-school program that focused on fostering friendships through movement activities we did each class that had a "friendship word" as a theme. First, engaging students in a dynamic obstacle course I changed each class. Then, we sat in our friendship circle, and that was when I introduced the "friendship word" and we talked about the meaning and I asked them to share examples in their lives when they felt that way. Then, we did our regular movement routine that we worked on each class. It combined stretching and physical self-defense techniques with basic martial arts. My son had been doing a year of martial arts training (he started at 4) - so he was my assistant, and helped with giving demonstrations. And we talked about what to do when someone is not kind and learned verbal self-defense methods too. And then we would do these methods and focus on our "friendship word" (trust, respect, appreciation) while doing **"CoCreative Superhero Play"** with the goal of becoming a **"SuperHero Friend"**.

We talked about the roles of the superhero, villain and victim in stories. And how to "be the superhero of your own life". To take the sensitivity of the victim and the strength of the villain and rise up to become the "Superhero of your own life". As Superheroes, using our power for good, and allowing our wisdom that seeks to be friends with everyone and help those in need. You may think these topics are too complex for kindergarten students - yet they were so eager for real connection. I found that each student came from complex home life situations and for many, no one was really teaching a heart centered, fun approach to building friendships. They wanted a practical approach on how to be a good friend. And that is what we talked about. I told them in a way that improved the quality of their creative play outside too, not just in our class. I taught all kinds of improvisational acting concept like saying "yes" to each other's imaginary ideas, so you are continually building the story cocreatively. There is no one fighting over controlling the narrative. I see how all adult conflicts arise from understanding, controlling and/or shifting the narrative.

I broke down how to build interdependence, with a simple amendment: The Golden Rule + checkin'-in: simply asking the friends what they feel and need to be comfortable while focusing on keeping the connection. When I explained it with this example, the kindergarten students totally understood.

**Example:** You like giving hugs, you see an old friend, and you want to give them a big hug. Yet they don't remember you as well. Instead of an awkward hug. You remember to be checkin'-in and say. "Hug?" and are relieved you asked and say "fist bump" and you do a fist bump and then sit to catch up both enjoying the connection.

And most of all, I would emphasize that the friendship is more important than anything we are disagreeing about with their friends. And that we agree on a lot more things than we disagree about. That disagreements are not setbacks in the relationship, they are part of the relationship, and how our disagreements where they are resolved respectful (we talked about conflict-resolution methods) that makes us closer friends. That disagreements are the important way we teach each other things. It was remarkable how this mellowed out the rowdy students because they had a place to use that need for movement. And the principal commented on how the whole school was more friendly, because the ones where were disruptive now wanted to be **"Superhero Friends"**.

I also taught Comedy Traffic School as a sensitivity training... and said, "How we drive our cars, is how we drive our lives, and our relationships." So for Road Rage on the road or in our lives I taught, The Art Of Disarming Bully Behavior. And then I had lots of "hands on" ways to build interdependent relationships. I find that everyone wants improvement in the quality of their relationships at every age. And like for kids, for adults, much of the answer is **CoCreative Play**.

Throughout the observation of the video, my attention **shifted between different groups of children**, taking in their interactions, facial expressions, and body language. Most children displayed **intense focus and engagement**, fully absorbed in their invented worlds. Some laughed and cheered as their stories unfolded, while others grew frustrated when disagreements arose. As an observer, I was fascinated but also aware of how **easily play could shift from harmonious to conflict-driven**, depending on the social dynamics at play and that is why I am dedicated to helping students become, "**SuperHero Friends**."

## Reflection Phase

Reflecting on this observation, I gained **a deeper understanding of the role that play serves in childhood development**. Creative play is not just about entertainment—it allows children to **process their emotions, experiences, and cultural influences**, as seen in the girls' medicine-making game and the boys' reenactment of heroic battles. These moments of play serve as **a bridge between reality and imagination**, where children make sense of the world around them.



The observation also reinforced the **importance of teaching flexibility in play**, which I directly experienced in my own teaching practice. When I introduced **Improvitational Acting principles** to students struggling with rigid thinking in their imaginary games, I saw firsthand how learning to say **"yes" to others' ideas** transformed their

experience. Instead of arguing over details, they learned to collaborate and expand upon each other's creativity, making their play more enjoyable and inclusive.

I was also reminded of my **own childhood experiences with play**, especially how storytelling and imagination were powerful tools for connection. Watching the children engage in pretend



play transported me back to moments of my own childhood when **creating imaginary worlds with friends felt just as real as everyday life**. I recalled how, just like the children I observed, I had encountered moments of conflict when playing with others. Those moments were not just minor disagreements but **early lessons in negotiation, social dynamics, and creative problem-solving**—the very same skills I now encourage as an educator.

This observation reaffirmed **how vital creative play is in developing social, emotional, and cognitive skills**. It also underscored the value of guiding children toward **open-minded and collaborative play**, helping them develop the ability to **adapt, include others, and expand their creative thinking**. Understanding these dynamics not only deepens my appreciation for childhood play but also informs how I approach teaching—fostering an environment where creativity, inclusivity, and imagination can flourish.



Organized creative play, improvisational tools, as part of acting classes helps grow trust.



## Further Reflection After Discovering More Of The References

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## Theoretical Insights on Play

CoCreative Communications - where everything is said from the heart, and we say, no matter what we say, “we are all in this together, and we can work it out. And you do, and that build trust that trust build friendships. When we are given Positive Improvisational tools for our creative play, this supports creative play in a way that nourishes the friendship. As we focus on finding our similarities and uniting our common visions - interdependency becomes obvious as what we all seek. Misunderstandings happen because people have different words for the same images or different images for the same words. We are all unique and each needs to teach others one's meanings to know our language and our shared meaning is our friendship.

This observation reaffirmed the work of **major child development theorists** such as **Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and Donald Winnicott**, who all explored the importance of play in **cognitive and social growth**. **Piaget (1962)** believed that play is essential for helping children develop symbolic thinking and problem-solving skills, which I witnessed firsthand as children negotiated the rules of their imaginary games. **Vygotsky (1933)** emphasized that play allows children to experiment with social roles and practice real-world interactions, which aligns with the way children used creative play to process their daily lives. **Winnicott (1989)** introduced the idea of “**transitional objects**”, like a teddy bear or favorite toy, that help children navigate independence and emotional regulation. His ideas parallel how play itself serves as a transitional space between reality and imagination, allowing children to **explore, process, and grow**.

What is beyond Winnicott’s idea of “the Good Enough” Mother or Parent & Attachment Theory? This observation reaffirmed **how vital creative play is in developing social, emotional, and cognitive skills**. It also underscored the value of guiding children toward **open-minded and collaborative play**, helping them develop the ability to **adapt, include others, and expand their creative thinking**. It makes me so happy to feel that this will bring up a new generation who seek peace and know how to cocreate it in times of conflict and when in the flow.

Understanding these dynamics not only deepens my appreciation for childhood play but also informs how I approach teaching—fostering an environment where creativity, inclusivity, and imagination can flourish. Every child wants this, they don’t always know how to stay in flow because those around them are not there with him in play, in flow having fun. We all seek elders who walk their talk and their kindness multiples it is what we all seek.



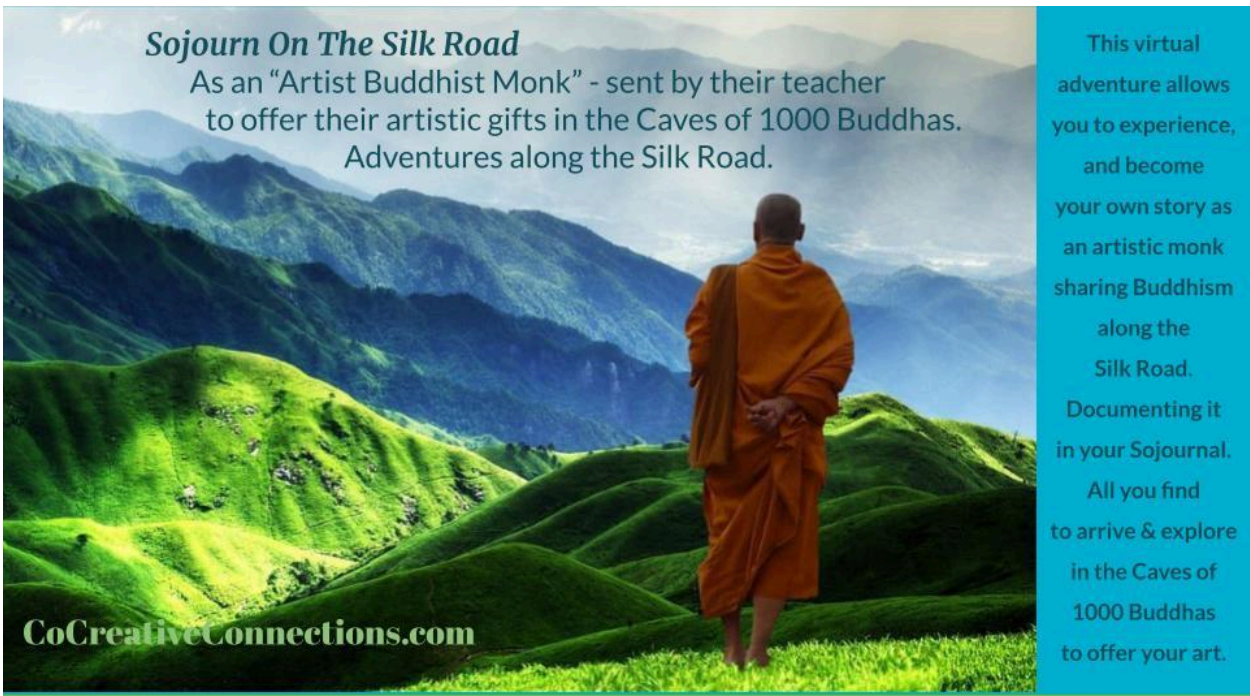
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Taking the creative play theme in middle school and high school students:

[Secret Sojourn On The Silk Road](#) is in pre-production as an interdisciplinary experience to get mindfulness into the schools through art, art history, geography, and our imagination:

<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1FeQWwRdVPBcSIFuVEI8EDmzI18ac9IRPuYMVCOOf1m0/edit?usp=sharing>



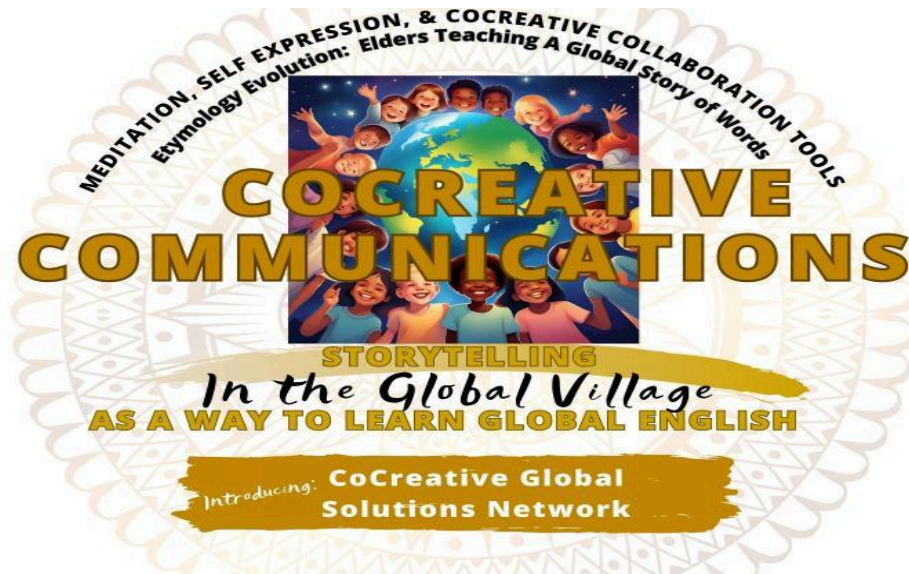
**Sojourn On The Silk Road**  
As an "Artist Buddhist Monk" - sent by their teacher  
to offer their artistic gifts in the Caves of 1000 Buddhas.  
Adventures along the Silk Road.

This virtual  
adventure allows  
you to experience,  
and become  
your own story as  
an artistic monk  
sharing Buddhism  
along the  
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Documenting it  
in your Sojourn.  
All you find  
to arrive & explore  
in the Caves of  
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And a project with a vision that will foster friendships and collaborations around the world.  
That started at Spelling & Typing in the Global village when our son love to hear the stories of  
how words came to be and the world language they came from.



**CoCreative Communications:**  
No matter what you say,  
you say from the heart,

"We are in this together,  
and we are going to  
work things out."

And you do,  
and you are fair,  
and this builds trust  
and that's what builds  
friendships. Introducing:  
The "Peace Bench &  
Friendship Circle  
Protocol"

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