



Reclaiming imagination from fear

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Playful narrative therapy has been used with people of all ages but especially with children, often in relation to serious problems. This article examines ways of using imagination to plot against fear, as well as co-researching with children about what works to shrink fear.

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When fear gets a grip on a child's life, it's no fun at all. It can make sleep difficult and the parent's bed very crowded. It can make waking up slow and the mornings grumpy. Fear doesn't like kids having a go at the things they enjoy. Sometimes it keeps them home when they'd rather be at school, at parties or sleepovers. It can also make friendship difficult. Fear can talk parents into thinking the worst about themselves and can make frustration a daily experience. It uses lots of energy and takes children and their carers away from the things in life they usually enjoy.

There is a long tradition of playfulness in narrative therapy (Freeman, Epston & Lobowitz, 1997; White & Morgan, 2006; Castelino & Wilson, 1999; Carey, 2002; Hutton & Knapp, 2005). This article explores playful, imaginative and skillful ways to join with children and their carers to conspire against fear.

THE BROADER CONTEXT

Fear in the lives of children often exists in the context of significant trauma, abuse or exploitation. It is therefore important that this possibility is always considered by the therapist. This paper addresses fear that appears to exist *outside* of the context of abuse, or once safety has been re-established. Fear in the lives of children can also reflect the dominant stories of our culture at any particular time. For instance, in the area where I practice, a much publicised disappearance of a fourteen-year-old boy waiting for a bus has played a significant role in the development of fear stories in many children I meet with. Childhood fear may also be understood in relation to wider societal anxieties including the 'profound insecurity that children may experience in relation to the threat of nuclear war and ecological catastrophe' (White, 1989, p.107). Making visible the contextual background to childhood fears is therefore significant. Externalising practices provide a framework for doing so. They can also spark imaginative processes.

All too often, problems capture children's imagination and use it against them. This is particularly true in relation to fears. The narrative therapy practice of externalising problems seeks to enable children to reclaim their imagination: 'When a child's imagination works against her by creating or perpetuating a problem, she can strive to reclaim it for her own preferred uses' (Freeman, Epston & Lobowitz, 1997, p. xvii).

In the following three stories, Tilly, Dean and MacKenzie demonstrate how they reclaimed their imagination from fear.

TILLY

Tilly is ten years old and was referred to see me by the family's doctor because of fears she had for her mother's safety, and also night terrors she was experiencing. Tilly enjoys her friendships, loves dancing and is a keen and skillful netballer. She has a beautiful smile at the ready and a love of fun. She lives with her Mum and Dad and her two older siblings, a brother and a sister. Fear moved in when Tilly was seven. This was around the same time the family moved house, and Great Grandma and an Uncle both died. Fear got Tilly wanting to sleep in Mum and Dad's bed and not wanting to sleep over at friends' houses any more. More recently, some new fears had started pushing Tilly around, fears that had Tilly convinced that her Mum would hurt herself or die. These fears arrived around the time that Mum had a knee operation. Together, we began to conduct co-research (Epston, 1999) to discover as much as we could about these fears: when they started, how they operated, what they had Tilly convinced of, and their effects.

In our initial conversation, Tilly told me about how the night fears were mostly about someone being in the house. They made her feel unsafe in her own bed, or on her own, and they wake her up in the middle of the night. These fears had her sleeping in Mum and Dad's bed every night for the past few years. The fears were stopping Tilly from enjoying sleepovers and made it tricky when friends slept over at her house because she felt badly when they slept in her room and she slept with Mum. They were also making the bed a bit crowded and making it hard for Mum and Dad to have time alone.

Tilly said that the fear about her Mum was the most upsetting. This fear had Tilly worrying that Mum would slip and hurt herself again, or that she would be killed in an accident. This fear would get Tilly checking up on Mum constantly, phoning her frequently if she had to go out, and sleeping beside her Mum to keep an eye on her in the night. Tilly became extremely distressed on the one occasion her parents went away for a couple of nights. The checking up and the distress could be annoying for Mum and Dad and it limited when and where the family could go. Mostly they were stopping Tilly from being happy, and stopping Mum being free to do the day-to-day things she needed to do.

Through our co-research, Tilly managed to identify some situations when fear wasn't around:

- When I can see Mum
- When I am busy at school
- When I am having a lot of fun

At the end of our first conversation I shared a story with Tilly that another child, Sally, had written about her experiences with fear. Tilly was interested in what Sally had learned about fear and wondered if her fear would work in similar ways. Tilly agreed that over the next week she would keep a close eye on fear, learn as much as possible about it, and try to notice if anything makes a difference to lessen fear's power.

The second time we met, I learned from Tilly that fear loves bad news and scary stories. Bad news helps the 'Mum getting hurt' fear and scary stories help the 'stranger in the house at night' fear. I also learned that Tilly had decided to experiment with staying home while Mum went out. While Mum was out, the fear got her worrying, so she told her Dad and they decided to go to the beach and do fun things. This was a pretty hard day and fear kept making Tilly want to ring and check on Mum or go round to check on her. Fear tried to convince Tilly that Mum had had a car crash or slipped and hurt herself. This progressed to Tilly then imagining both Mum and Dad dead and wondering how she would look after herself. Tilly tried telling fear to go away but it fought back. I also heard that two of Tilly's friend's, Molly and Paige, had come over one day and Tilly had told them about her worries about her Mum. One of them said to her, 'I must be a really bad daughter; I don't worry about my Mum at all'. Tilly told me she thought this was interesting.

I asked Tilly if she felt she could trust Dad to look after Mum in the night and she was sure she could trust him completely. She decided that the nighttime fears weren't so much about Mum, they were more about someone coming in the house.

Towards the end of our second meeting, Tilly made a big decision to tackle the night fears and move out of her parents' bed. I enquired about what this required of her and what plans Tilly had for this project. She explained moving to a spare bed in her older brother Nick's room might be a safe first step. Together we formulated a plan. My role involved asking Tilly what she needed, who could support her and how she would achieve this. We spoke in detail about the arrangement of the room, where it is in relation to the stairs, and what equipment might be required.

There were a variety of important elements to our plan. These included photos of Tilly with family and friends placed under her pillow, her iPod, and Laura Geitz, the goal defender for the Australian netball team. Tilly, a keen netballer herself, saw Laura Geitz as a heroine. I decided to express an idea to Tilly that was put to me by a narrative consultant, Marilyn O'Neil. The idea consists of having a guardian angel as a protector. Tilly presented a strong likening to this and chose Laura Geitz as her angel because of her notable reputation as being the guard to the goal for the Australian team. She was adamant that no intruder would make it past Laura as she had a poster of her stuck firmly beside the door.

At our next meeting, Tilly proudly told me that she had moved into Nick's room and that he had been keen to help her. Tilly had been sleeping through most of the night and placed her poster of Laura at the top of the stairs that led to her bedroom as opposed to in her room. Tilly reported that her fear was shrinking, and that she was no longer experiencing bad dreams and fearful thoughts of strangers in her house. Tilly had discovered she is braver than she thought she was and this was rewarding for her.

One night since the last time we met, Tilly had a friend over, and she considered sleeping in her own room for the sleepover, but instead they asked Nick to sleep in the lounge and the two girls shared his room! That day, the girls had organised to be in a TV advertisement and the 'something happening to Mum fear' started coming back. Tilly really watched it – it tried to tell her 'you can't go and do something because Mum might get hurt' Tilly almost didn't go, but was able to when Mum took her instead to her friend's Mum. Tilly said that this big fear was robbing her of fun with her friends. She said the fear used to be at about 8-9/10 and now was at about a 5 1/2 /10 and she needed to shrink it to a 1 or a 2.

Tilly explained to me that fear gets her thinking about how much she loves and appreciates Mum and then imagining not having her. We talked a bit about how much Tilly loves her Mum, and I wondered what would happen if Tilly could use this love against fear, instead of fear using the love against Tilly. She was very clear about this, Tilly told me she could imagine having her Mum with her, being happy, doing nice things and being quite content. This would be using the love to not listen to fear. Tilly insisted that she needed to convince her fear that she wanted it to go away and that she would not willingly let it steal her fun and happiness away.

Tilly outlined a detailed plan for how she could escape fear at her school fair and enjoy some time going on rides and looking around with her friends.

While these plans were developed in collaboration, and in response to questions asked and occasional ideas shared, the details were particular to Tilly and emerged from her life and experience. My role as the therapist was to bring these ideas forward and draw them into a cohesive story with as much detail as possible. What was emerging here, was a story of a girl who cared about her family and friends, loved having fun, being active, and has had it with fear getting in the way of her enjoyment of these things.

At our fourth and final session, Tilly reported that at the school fair her parents had gone home, leaving her and a friend alone for over an hour. There was no presence of fear and Tilly described the experience as enjoyable. The following week, Tilly's Mum dropped her at the same friend's house and, when it was time for Tilly's pick up, she wasn't ready to come home, she hadn't even asked for her Mum once! Tilly was continuing to go to bed happily in her brother's room, even when he was not there, worrying less generally, and even planning a sleepover. Tilly's Dad reported that things were more relaxed at home, everyone was happier, and that worry had not been around at all.

I was interested in what Tilly made of these changes and how they had happened. She told me that she had been listening to her brother and he had told her, 'It's the best waking up with friends'. Tilly had also been listening to herself saying, 'It's going to be okay, Mum and Dad will be at home, I can do it, nothing bad will happen, I'll have fun'. Tilly's Mum and Dad had been convincing her of these same things. Tilly's Dad said that he thought Tilly's determination was helping, and that she was using her determination on this problem because she was caring and wanted her Mum to be able to enjoy herself. Tilly agreed that she did not want fear wrecking anyone's fun. Her Dad thought that confidence and being busy could possibly be helping against fear as well.

Apparently fear crumbled after this last session and Tilly was now 'going great guns', enjoying sleepovers, dancing and netball with confidence.

By this stage of the process, the focus of the conversation was on developing the story about where these steps away from fear were taking Tilly, the effects of this, and what says about who Tilly is and what matters to her.

MACKENZIE

Mackenzie was referred to me because a teacher was concerned about her 'clinginess', and while this wasn't a real worry for Mackenzie's parents, they wanted to make sure everything was okay with her as they had separated eighteen months previously. Before getting to know the problem, I wanted to get to know Mackenzie. I learned that along with being sporty and very caring towards younger children, she also had a wonderful imagination, which at this stage the problem was using against her.

A young person's relationship with her imagination may be a wonderful resource that can bring her much delight. But it can also terrorize. Captured and driven by fear, a rich imagination can spin out of control. (Epston, Freeman & Lobowitz, p. 204).

Mackenzie identified bad dreams as a problem. Both her parents said that, while she is usually really co-operative, sometimes fear made it hard for Mackenzie to go to her room up the hallway or upstairs to get things done, and the bad dreams meant she ended up in their beds every night. At times, Mackenzie's Mum ended up with hardly any space to sleep – just across the bottom of the bed.

I asked Mackenzie to tell me about the bad dreams and she introduced me to the scary thing that chases her, a monster with four eyes, big and small. When I asked about Mackenzie's knowledge of monsters, she also introduced me to her favourite monster, Mike Lebowsky from Monsters Inc. Mike is not scary, and in fact is scared of little girls! I then asked about the dreams that Mackenzie would rather be having if she could choose her dreams. She described a dream where the monster would turn into Mike, they would climb up a big tree together and tell jokes. Down below the tree would be fat little fluffy dogs barking, and Mike and Mackenzie would throw dog bones down for them.

Re-storying dreams is something that I have been using with children for some time. Mackenzie was interested in trying to plan some dreams before bed each night to see if she could modify her dream scenarios. This included drawing the dream and telling it in detail to her Mum or Dad before she went to sleep, then writing down the dream as it happened in the morning.

Before long, Mackenzie was reporting enjoyable dreams with bluebirds and unicorns, fluffy dogs, a big tree and Mike Lebowsky. Her dreams became more enjoyable

and her bad dreams had decreased. Mackenzie then began to exercise her imagination to tackle her daytime fears and worries. She informed me that she thought her Mum should make up an anti-fear spray. Initially the chosen ingredients for this included mint, insect spray and deodorant. Time passed and Mackenzie returned with her Mum and Dad and reported that she, her mum and her mum's friend teamed up to make the spray. The recipe they created required rainwater, salt, oils, glad wrap, a full moon, a day of sunlight and some special rocks in the water. Mackenzie chose the crystals that appealed to her and then they followed this by researching the powers the crystals' held. The jet crystal was used for protection in ancient times and the blue one was for keeping calm and not feeling shy. The night after preparing the spray, Mackenzie went straight to bed and stayed there all night – she thought that was pretty cool and was surprised by how quickly the night passed. When I asked what chance she gave the spray of working, Mackenzie said one hundred percent. The explanation for this was that when Mackenzie applied the spray around her room, the 'bad guys would bounce off'. She had also started to incorporate the crystals into her dream planning, along with some favourite animals, which included a snake and a giraffe that she had researched with the 'anti-fear research team'. Mackenzie reported that the fear was shrinking and was about half the size it used to be, but she still wanted to reduce it further. She informed me that the things that were helping to shrink fear include magic, the potion, a power ring from Mum, the anti-fear research team, and dream planning.

Before stepping into conversations about imagination, I listen carefully for clues from the child that might indicate the child's skills in imagination. In this instance, the role of the therapist is to offer the idea that imagination can be used against the problem, instead of the problem using it against the person. Together, a plan is co-authored that begins with exploring the child's and their carers' ideas and imaginings. Adult carers sometimes remember their own childhood relationships with fear, and how these were overcome. This fear fighting experience can bring valuable ideas to the conversation. The therapist aims to position themselves as co-researcher by bringing forward details and inviting the child and their carers to describe how and what they might use to shrink fear, and recording new developments.

When a problem is seriously oppressive the therapist can be invited to abandon playfulness.

'Problems tend to be grim. If they had a credo it might well be: "Take us seriously!" ... Inviting worry, despair,

and hopelessness, weighty problems can immobilise families as well as the people who serve them. We wonder whether it is to the problem's advantage to be taken quite so seriously. By the same token, is their very existence threatened by humour and playfulness?' (Epston, Freeman & Lobowitz, 1997, p. 3).

These authors invite therapists to be playfully creative even in the face of grave problems. This principle inspired a somewhat silly conversation I had with Dean, an eleven-year-old boy who was referred to me after writing about his feelings of not thinking he had a future.

DEAN

Dean was introduced to me by his Mum, Kate, as a lovely, caring and sensitive boy who loved animals and had a dry sense of humour. I learnt from Kate that the concept of Dean having the 'mental disorder' Aspergers, which made him, in his words, 'not normal' and 'apart from others', was making him question whether he could have a worthwhile life or future. Alongside feelings of difference and worthlessness, Dean was also being terrified by certain fears. These fears included thoughts that his family would be harmed and that someone was outside the house with a gun or a knife.

In our initial session, I took time to understand the 'not normal' ideas, and we located some of them in cultural stories about difference. I shared the *Lost in Normality* (Hutton & Knapp, 2005) kit with Dean and his Mum, and they took this home with them. I also developed a better understanding of Dean's fears and began the process of externalising during which he named them Fred. When Dean drew a picture of himself and the fears, he was small and the fears large. He was keen to work on shrinking them.

In the second meeting, Dean named the thoughts of worthlessness and the idea that life is not worth living as the 'Cruelty Thoughts'. I learned that in response to hearing about the way these thoughts were pushing Dean around, his older brother, Jake, had made a document that focused on celebrating Dean's uniqueness – it was titled, 'Sometimes I pretend to be normal but it gets boring so I go back to being me'. It contained images and statements that followed this theme. Dean found this rather special and Kate expressed that it made her heart melt. We talked about the cards Dean had chosen from the kit and had a conversation about the effects of the pressure to be 'normal' as well as what Jake meant by Dean's uniqueness – he said 'he likes who I am'.

The Cruelty Thoughts were making trouble in a big way. That afternoon, Kate had said 'no' to something Dean wanted for afternoon tea. The cruelty thoughts had emerged, Dean became 'explosive', thinking this was the end of the world and threatening to jump from the moving car. After Dean took a position on these thoughts as being 'dangerous trouble', I asked him how he might respond to them. He told me that he would not listen to them, that he would listen to anything but them, and that he would imagine chaining them up and eating food in front of them. Dean imagined that if he could stop listening to them, he might feel better and slightly more hopeful about life.

During the next meeting, Dean reported that the Cruelty Thoughts had bitten off more than they could chew and had choked. He assured me that they were dead. While I was a little concerned about the violence implicit imagery, I wanted to understand what it meant for Dean to be free from the Cruelty Thoughts. I soon discovered, however, that this was an elastic problem – it bounced back in another form.

Jane: So what's it been like without the Cruelty Thoughts around?

Dean: Ahhh, Fred's been disturbing me again.

Jane: Ooh, disturbing you again?

Dean: Quite a lot.

I asked a series of questions to get to know Fred a bit better and learned that he is 'The Scream' from the movie of the same name. Fred sometimes convinced Dean into believing someone was outside his house window with a threatening weapon.

The problem story was pretty persistent and did not seem to like us talking about positive developments. This prompted me to keep in mind what narrative therapist and trainer, Marilyn O'Neil, describes as NAG, Negotiated Assertive Persistence, always finding another way to ask about the preferred development, perhaps with a smaller question, or by coming around to it another way after exploring the problem more fully.

Through enquiring about Fred and how he works, I learned that Fred had Dean thinking that when he feels drowsy and falls asleep, someone will come and take him. Dean used TV as distraction from the fear and, while it helped, it kept him up late and made it hard to get up for school. I checked out how many of Fred's threats had come true, and discovered that, like many other fears,

Fred was a consistent liar. Despite Dean seeing through the lies, the things Fred told Dean still scared him. Dean could not think of a time when this did not happen, but his Mum, Kate, could.

Kate: Can I just interject please, he wasn't there Saturday night when we went and stayed with a friend in Brisbane – I don't think Fred was there then.

Dean: He can't get there unless he walked.

Kate: Aahh. Ok.

Jane: Ok, so Fred lives at your house?

Dean: Pretty much.

Jane: Pretty much? So he didn't go to your friend's house with you?

Dean: No.

Jane: How did you give him the slip? How was it he didn't climb in the car with you – or get in your pocket?

Dean: Cause he is too big and he would've been seen.

Jane: What does Fred look like?

Dean: He kinda ...

Jane: You better draw me a picture – can you draw me a picture of him?

Dean: I'll try ... Do you know the scream? Yeah, that's what he looks like.

I gave Dean some paper and colour pencils; he chose black deliberately and began drawing. We were working in the realm of imagination. Dean was describing fear as if it were a creature – that had made its way into his imagination after watching a film called The Scream with his older brothers. Dean showed me the drawing in progress.

Jane: He does look a bit scary!

Dean: This is just a mask.

Jane: Oh, so he wears a mask, what is underneath the mask?

Dean: A face.

Jane: And do you reckon that Fred needs to wear a mask cause he's just ordinary underneath there?

Dean: No idea – you can Google Scream and there are images – you can see all about it.

Jane: And how do you know that Fred looks like the scream?

Dean: Cause I saw him once and he said 'I've got a knife'.

Jane: Uh huh, so he said I've got a knife – so Fred is pretty threatening?

Dean: Yep.

Jane: And he gets you believing that bad stuff is going to happen?

Dean: Oooh Yeah.

At this stage, Dean saw Fred as having lots of power and being exceptionally frightening. I wanted to explore what worked against Fred. Again, working in imagination, I was actively co-authoring this anti-Fred story.

Jane: Why do you think Fred went on holidays after you and Mum went 'Fred-busting' the other week?

Dean: Cause he knew he'd been spotted ...

Jane: He knew he'd been spotted, how come he came back?

Dean: We haven't gone looking for him for a while.

Jane: Oh – so do you have to stay on the alert for him? You can't back off? Its important that you ... kind of keep your eyes open for him and let him know you are onto him?

Dean: (Nodding)

Kate: So what if I do that at bedtime.. at night time – would that help?

Dean: (Nodding while still working on picture of Fred)

Jane: So Fred busting at night time would help? Tell me, what will Fred busting look like? What would need to happen?

Dean: We'd need to have a torch and search the property.

Jane: Ok, have a torch and search the property.

Dean: Yep, and the boat – (looking at Mum).

Kate: Ok.

Jane: So if you have a torch and you search the property and you search the boat, when Fred says: 'there's someone out there' what would you be able to say to Fred?

Dean: Probably say – 'yep, they are'.

Jane: (Laughing) Yep they are ... and what would that be for, to trick him because you know there is no-one out there ... or ... something else?

Dean: Yep, to trick him.

Each time we took a foray away from Fred's power and dominance in Dean's life, the problem story pushed its way back in. During this process, I was learning about the

seriousness of the problem and how big and intimidating Fred was. Dean shared the further embellished drawing of Fred, indicating that it does not do justice to Fred's 'scariness'. I wanted to get a sense of Dean's position on Fred's presence.

Jane: Is it important to have Fred around? Is he an important part of your life? Do you like having him around or do you want to get rid of him?

Dean: Get rid of him.

Jane: Why do you want to do that?

Dean: I'm sick of him scaring me and keeping me awake.

Jane: What is it like for you when Fred keeps you awake at night time?

Dean: I get up late in the morning and I'm always late for school and Mum goes, 'Hurry up, we're leaving now!'

Mum: You don't want to get out of bed; you don't feel like getting up in the morning.

Kate reminded us about the unique outcome of Saturday night. Exploring unique outcomes was tricky for Dean, but imagining Fred and ways of confronting Fred was more possible. Dean said he had forgotten about Fred on Saturday and speculated that Fred might have felt disappointed about this development, but maybe practiced scaring Oscar, the dog, in the family's absence. We started to explore what Fred liked and did not like, what made him stronger and what might make him weaker. Dean decided that scary movies made him stronger and that comedy weakens him.

Jane: Why does comedy make Shred frink? I mean make Fred shrink – that is like a tongue twister!

Dean: (Laughing) Cos its funny and then when I laugh he thinks (comma) 'Oh he doesn't know I'm here, I may as well just go away'.

Jane: Aah, so he doesn't like you laughing?

Dean: Not really.

Jane: Why not? I think you might be onto something here, other people have also told me fears hate being laughed at too.

Dean: When I watch TV and I'm laughing and I forget he is even there and he probably goes (comma) 'I'm not wanted here, I may as well go'.

Jane: So if you're not taking him seriously enough he goes?

Dean: Yep, disappears.

Jane: So he likes you to listen to him, take him seriously, and he likes scary movies that get you really scared – does he like Mum?

Dean: You've never seen him have you?

Jane: If Mum's around does Fred hide under the bed or slip into the cupboard or ...

Dean: He hides in the bathtub.

Jane: Why the bathtub?

Dean: Mum never checks in there, she just looks quickly and shuts the door.

Jane: So what would happen if Mum sprung Fred?

Dean: Sprung Fred?

Jane: Like if Mum came in and grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and said to him, 'RIGHT FRED, I'VE HAD IT WITH THIS!!'

(Dean and his Mum smiling and laughing to each other)

Jane: What do you reckon Fred would do?

Dean: Never come back – not wanted!

I started to hear about some of Dean's favourite comedies from TV. I also learned that Fred hated company and relied on Dean being alone. We began to talk about recruiting Dean's brothers onto the team and then Dean told me they had 'slacked off with their support'. Kate believed that this was because they had noticed Dean was much happier, more relaxed, and that he did not need them so much. Although Dean agreed with his Mum, while we were talking about a unique outcome, the problem story began to resurface. Dean then used a comedic voice that caught my attention. We explored this as a talent and Dean developed it further, getting increasingly silly by making a variety a variety of strange noises and voices.

We detoured away from this talent back to the unique outcome, and I discovered that Dean was using self-control, patience and tolerance to cope with a friend who was described as 'hard work'. Dean had also been getting some great results at school, and agreed that he had been feeling happier, more relaxed and that the conversations had been 'making everything different'. I heard that ignoring the thoughts and making a plan were helpful in doing away with the Cruelty Thoughts and we began to make a plan for Fred. Initially, I was quite influential and then Dean and his Mum took over and developed the idea and made it their own.

Jane: So what time do you think is a good time for you to go to sleep so you can get up fresh in the morning?

Dean: 8.30-9.00 (looking at Mum).

Kate: 8.30 is good.

Dean: 9.

Jane: If you were going to use these comedy skills ... I'm thinking about your funny voices ...

Dean: (demonstrates the voice)

Jane: I wonder how you might be able to use your funny voice to ...

Kate: Trick him into thinking you are someone else?!!

Jane: Maybe! Trick him...or to let Fred know you aren't taking him seriously ...

Dean: (In his special voice) I wonder who ... whoooo whooo ...

Jane: So what would be the first thing Fred would say, would try to get you thinking? That there is someone outside the window?

Dean: That there is someone coming inside the house now. And they are going to kill me.

Jane: Someone coming in and they are going to kill you - and how could you use your funny voice?

Dean: (In funny voice and smiling) dah – nobody is inside!

(All three of us erupt in giggles and laughter)

Dean: It's too funny!!

Kate: I laugh every time you use that! Goodbye Fred – he's gone!

Jane: What happened to Fred then?

Kate: Fred will be laughing!

(Dean laughing)

Jane: You think Fred will be laughing?

Dean: (Repeats) Nobody is inside ...

Jane: Do you think this could work?

Dean: Yep.

Jane: So Fred says someone is coming inside and you say ... (pause)

Dean: (Again in funny voice) Nobody is inside.

Jane: And then Fred goes (trying really hard not to laugh).

Dean: (Bursts into giggles)

Jane: (Trying to sound like someone trying to sound mean fighting the giggles) Yes there is, they're coming in, they're going to get you ...

Dean: (Even funnier voice) Nobody is inside.

(More laughter from all of us)

Jane: And could you do a variation on that?

Dean: (Bursts into song) Nobody inside, no, no, no, no, nobody inside ... go away, go away, go away.

Finally, the plan came together. In addition to using the comedic voice, it involved Kate and Dean both checking the house with a torch. Kate was to grab Fred by the scruff of his neck and carry him out to the wheelie bin, getting assistance from Dean's Dad or the other boys if needed, depending on the size and weight of Fred. The wheelie bin would be taped closed for good measure and they collectively decided not to worry about how to get rubbish into the bin.

When used in a context of co-research and co-authoring with children, imagination and playfulness can upturn even the most serious problem. This approach requires careful listening, valuing of children's knowledges, skills and weird abilities, and a willingness to occasionally be somewhat silly ourselves.

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