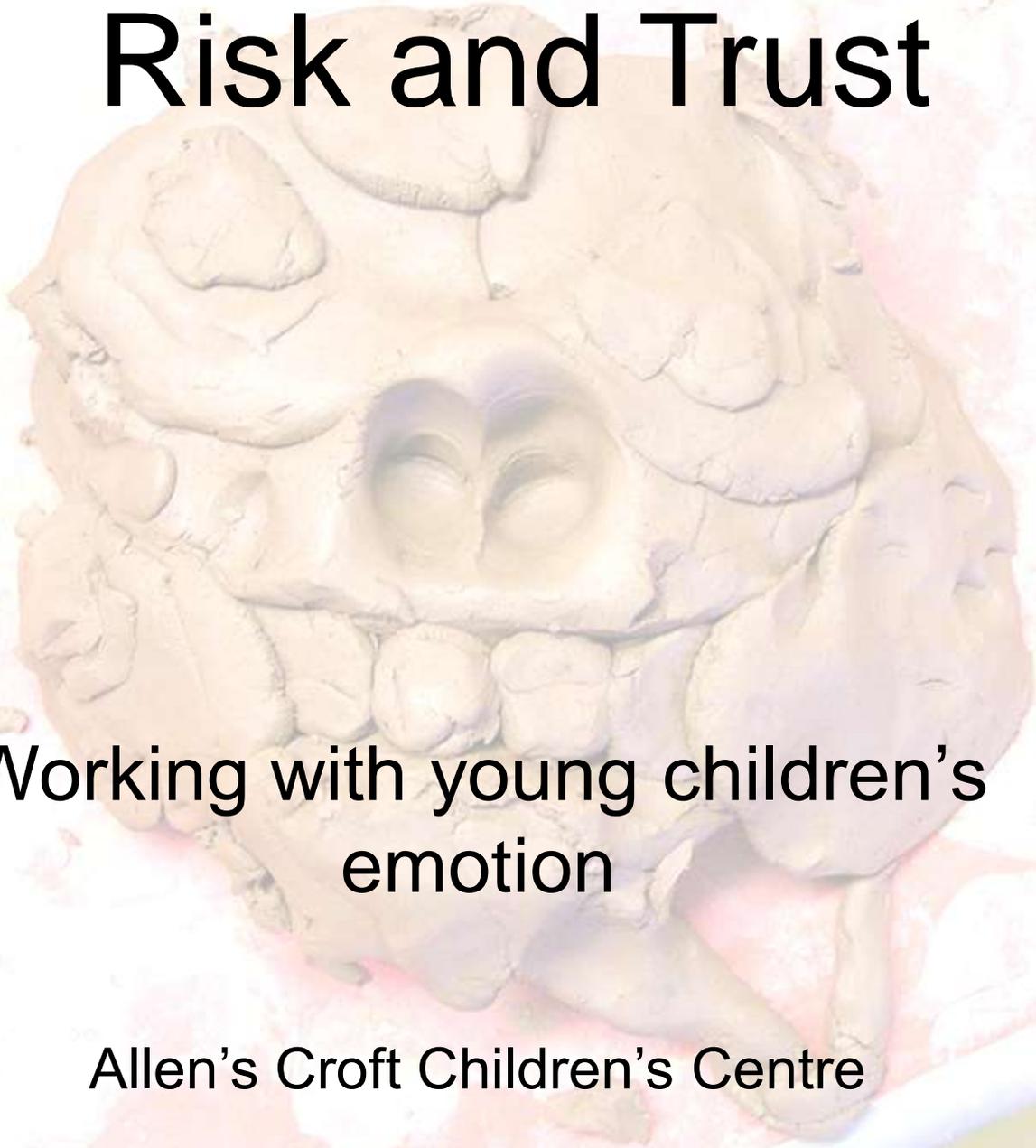


Risk and Trust



Working with young children's
emotion

Allen's Croft Children's Centre

The project began with interests in sharks, dragons and birds. The latter seemed to be linked by flight but another theme recurred in their play; themes about being safe and unsafe. All the children's scenarios provided a way of exploring threats to their sense of safety.

The Shark Tale October 2005

Expressing Fear and Concern in Play

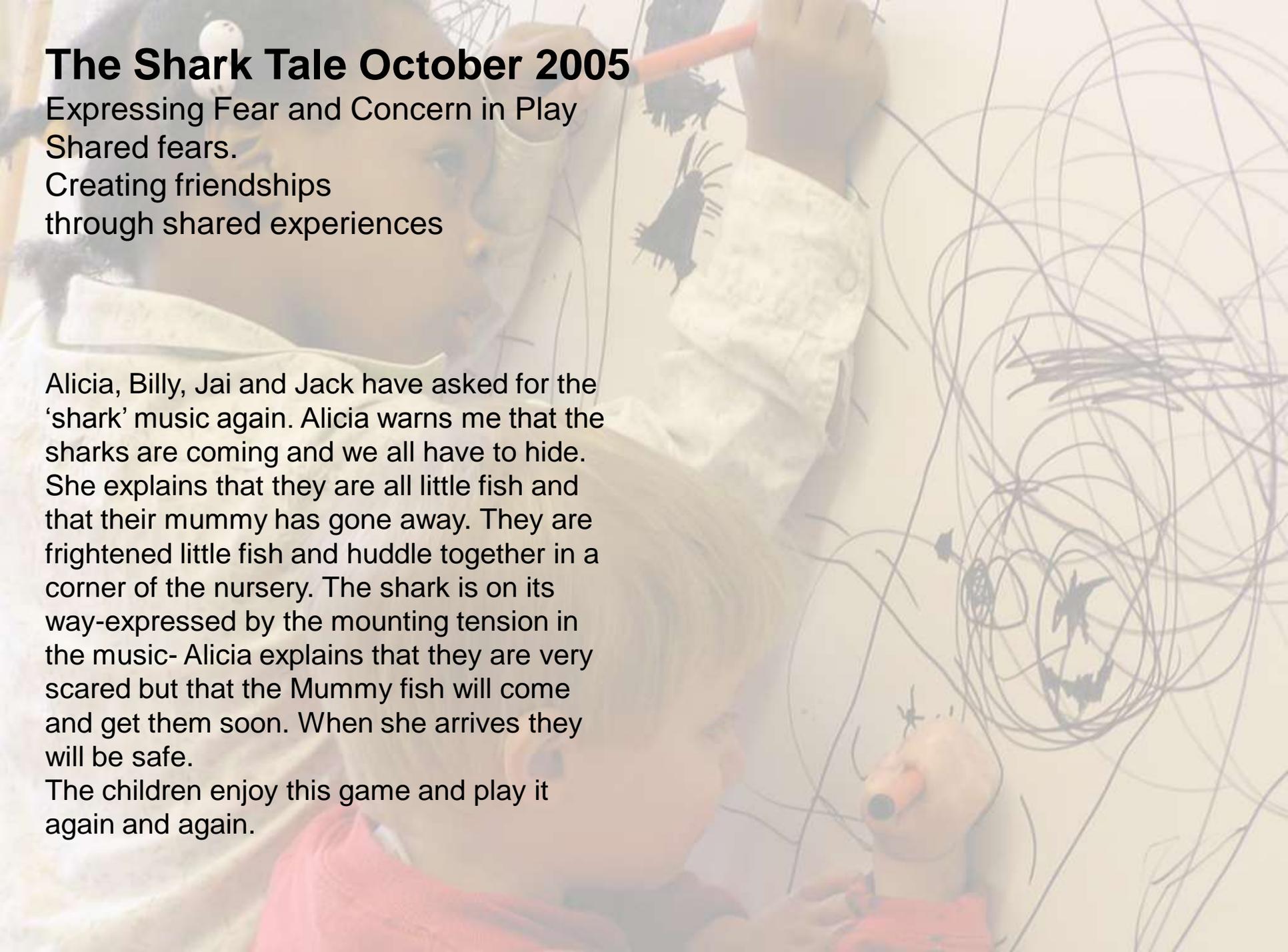
Shared fears.

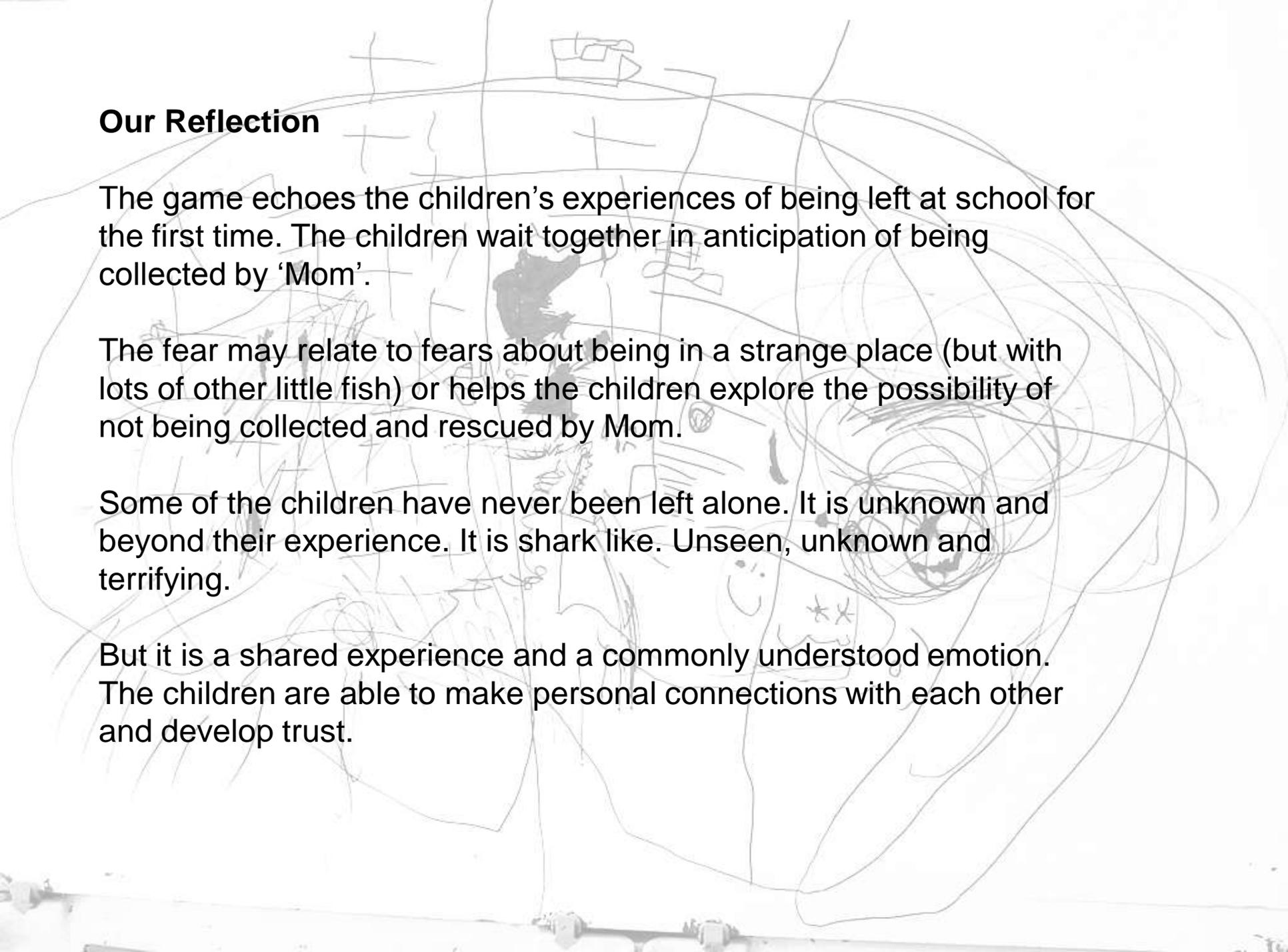
Creating friendships

through shared experiences

Alicia, Billy, Jai and Jack have asked for the 'shark' music again. Alicia warns me that the sharks are coming and we all have to hide. She explains that they are all little fish and that their mummy has gone away. They are frightened little fish and huddle together in a corner of the nursery. The shark is on its way-expressed by the mounting tension in the music- Alicia explains that they are very scared but that the Mummy fish will come and get them soon. When she arrives they will be safe.

The children enjoy this game and play it again and again.





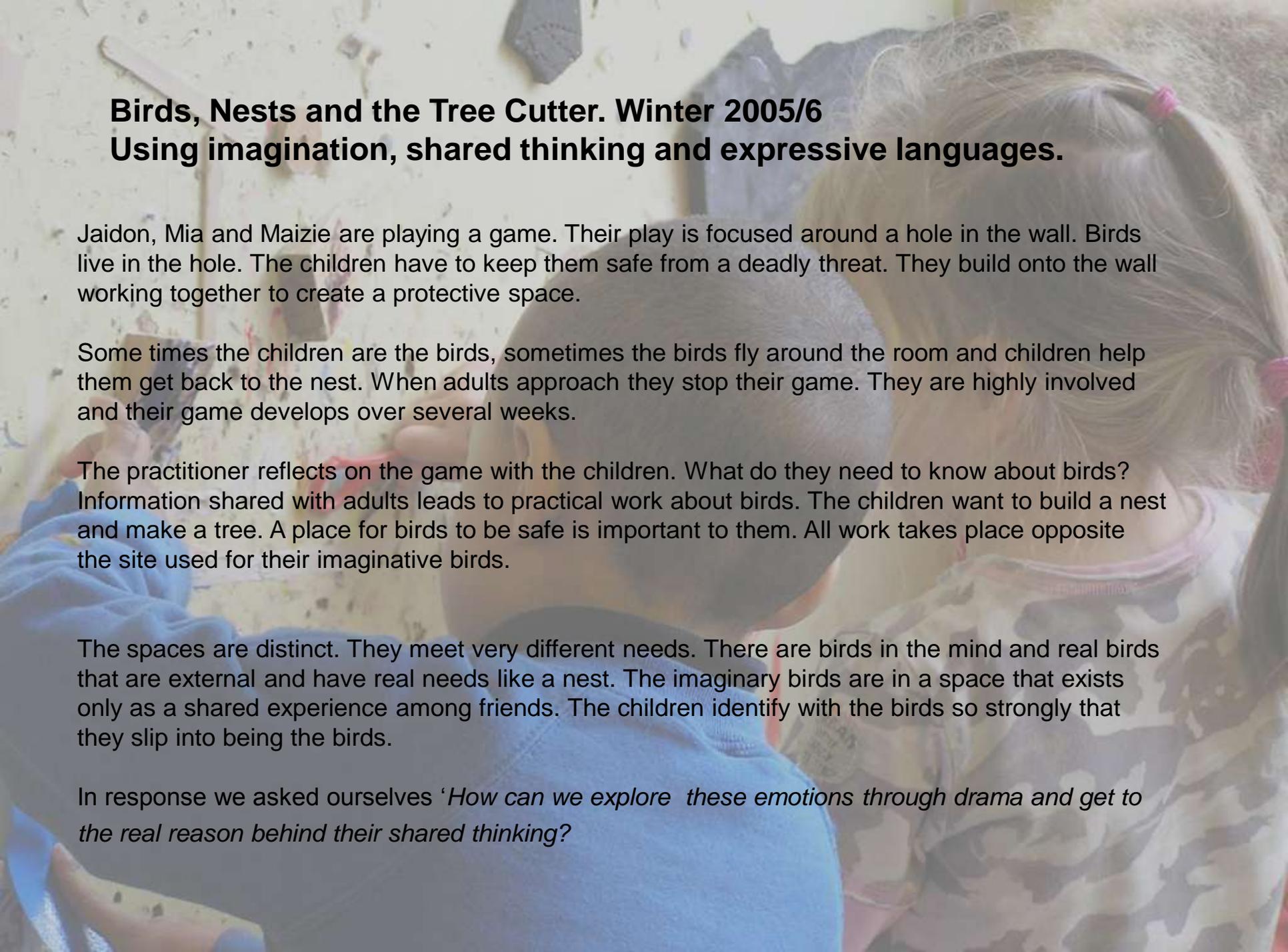
Our Reflection

The game echoes the children's experiences of being left at school for the first time. The children wait together in anticipation of being collected by 'Mom'.

The fear may relate to fears about being in a strange place (but with lots of other little fish) or helps the children explore the possibility of not being collected and rescued by Mom.

Some of the children have never been left alone. It is unknown and beyond their experience. It is shark like. Unseen, unknown and terrifying.

But it is a shared experience and a commonly understood emotion. The children are able to make personal connections with each other and develop trust.

A photograph of three children, Jaidon, Mia, and Maizie, playing a game around a hole in a wall. The children are seen from behind, looking towards the hole. The wall is light-colored and has some debris on it. The children are wearing casual clothing, including a blue hoodie and a camouflage patterned shirt. The text is overlaid on the image.

Birds, Nests and the Tree Cutter. Winter 2005/6

Using imagination, shared thinking and expressive languages.

Jaidon, Mia and Maizie are playing a game. Their play is focused around a hole in the wall. Birds live in the hole. The children have to keep them safe from a deadly threat. They build onto the wall working together to create a protective space.

Some times the children are the birds, sometimes the birds fly around the room and children help them get back to the nest. When adults approach they stop their game. They are highly involved and their game develops over several weeks.

The practitioner reflects on the game with the children. What do they need to know about birds? Information shared with adults leads to practical work about birds. The children want to build a nest and make a tree. A place for birds to be safe is important to them. All work takes place opposite the site used for their imaginative birds.

The spaces are distinct. They meet very different needs. There are birds in the mind and real birds that are external and have real needs like a nest. The imaginary birds are in a space that exists only as a shared experience among friends. The children identify with the birds so strongly that they slip into being the birds.

In response we asked ourselves *'How can we explore these emotions through drama and get to the real reason behind their shared thinking?'*

The children's interest coincided with an artist's residency with dramatist, Peter Wynne-Wilson. The children used their imaginations to create narratives about the bird. They demonstrated a wide repertoire of actions, developed preferences for certain forms of expression and play cooperatively alongside their chosen relationship groups. Facial expression, gesture, and body language was used as the predominant language to express thoughts and feelings.

Peter created his own boundaries for work with the children, allowing them to initiate him into their play by mirroring their banter and play. At times this involved name calling. For staff this was a risk and challenged our beliefs about acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

We asked

When do you know when to stop the play?

When do you encourage the children to listen?

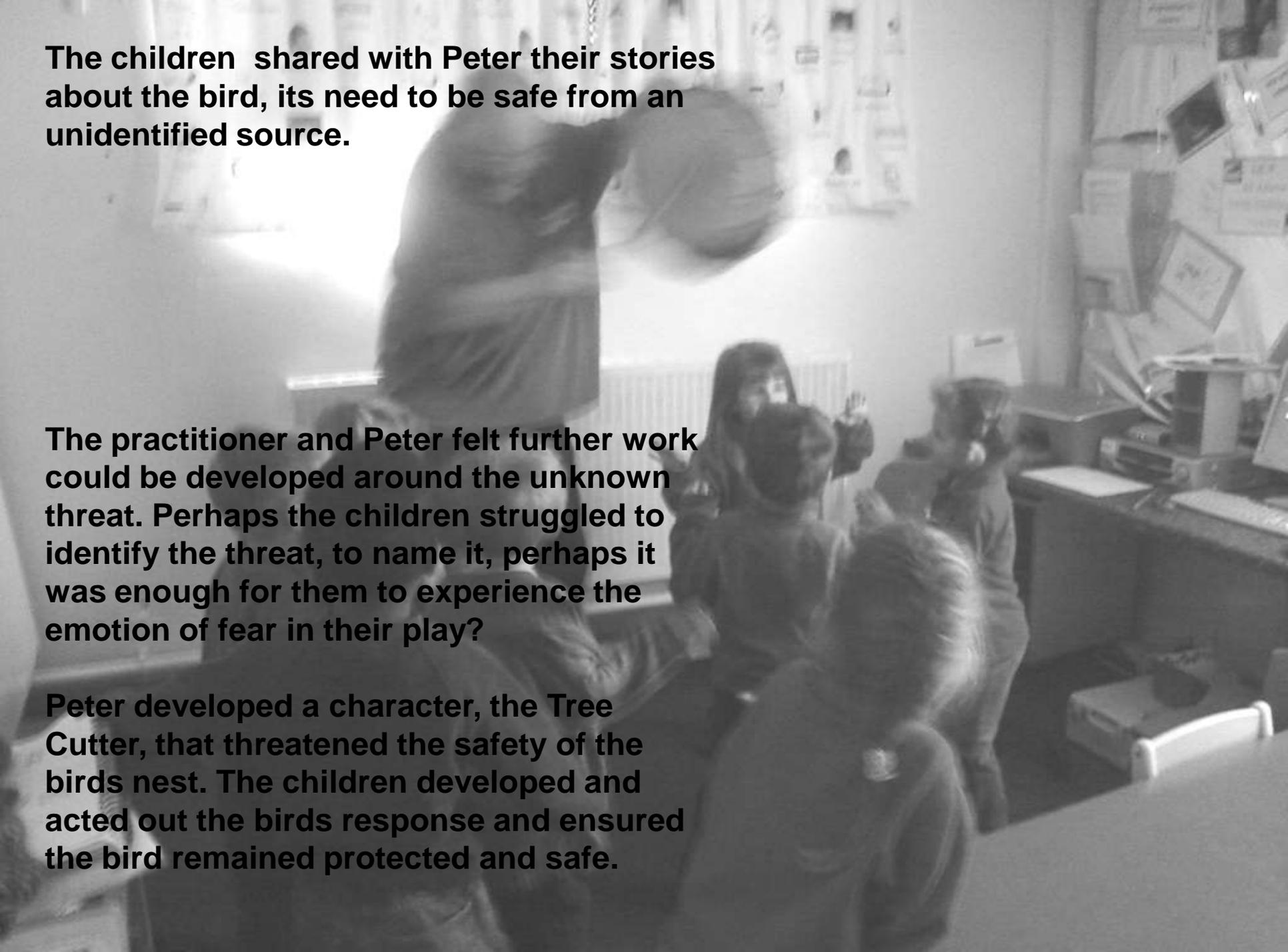
Will the dramatist understand, if as the practitioner you step in?

What is acceptable behaviour in the eyes of the dramatist?

How far will the dramatist go?

Our response as practitioners was to rely on instinct and trust; in the artist, the practitioner and the children.



A black and white photograph showing a practitioner in a dark hoodie holding a large, light-colored, textured object (possibly a bird or a nest) in a room. Several children are visible in the background, some looking towards the practitioner. The room appears to be a classroom or office, with a desk and various items on the wall.

The children shared with Peter their stories about the bird, its need to be safe from an unidentified source.

The practitioner and Peter felt further work could be developed around the unknown threat. Perhaps the children struggled to identify the threat, to name it, perhaps it was enough for them to experience the emotion of fear in their play?

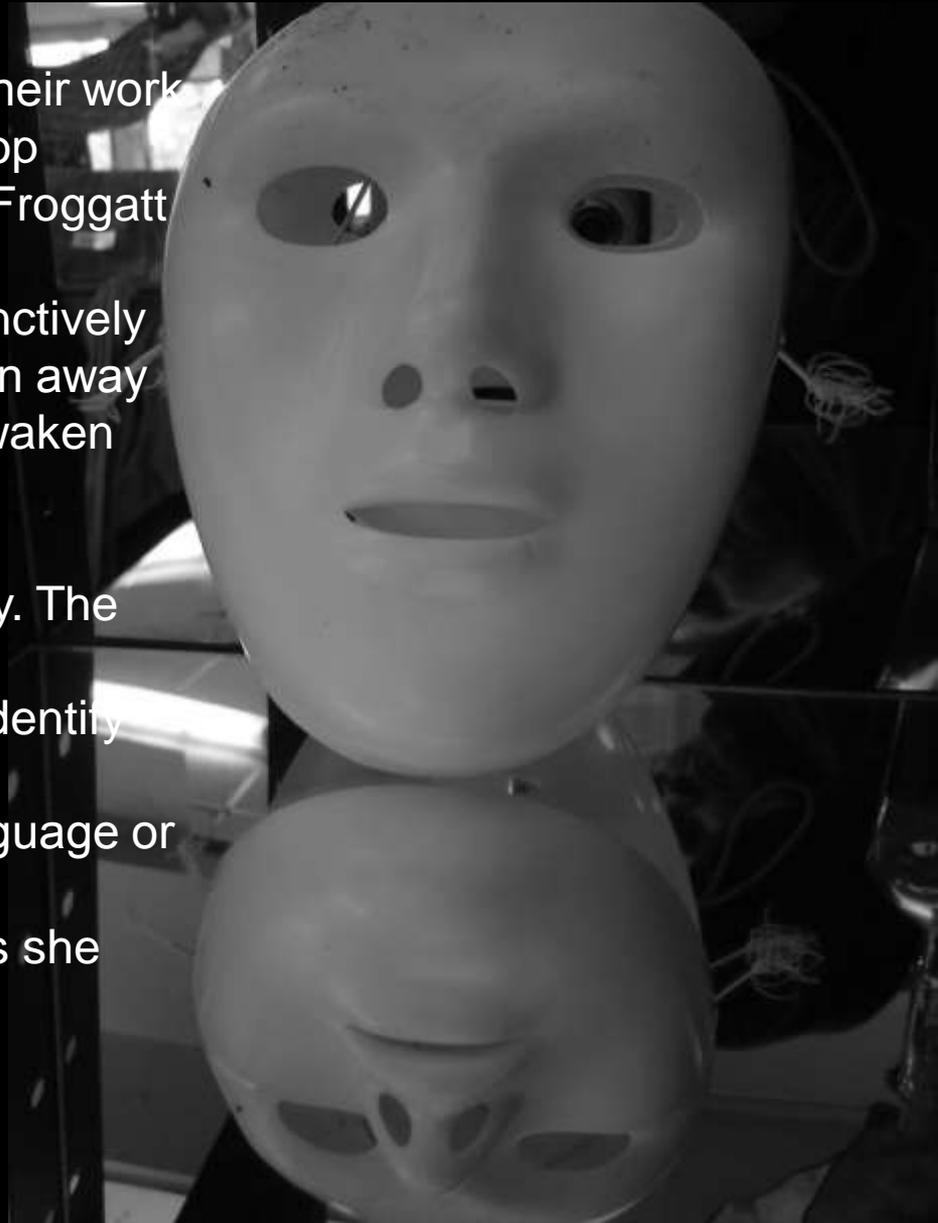
Peter developed a character, the Tree Cutter, that threatened the safety of the birds nest. The children developed and acted out the birds response and ensured the bird remained protected and safe.

The intensity of the children's response to their work with Peter inspired the practitioner to develop work around emotion in the setting. Sasha Froggatt writes 'As the practitioner co-ordinating this experience I took risks, understanding instinctively that the children wanted the 'safeness' taken away from their play. I used masks as a tool to awaken real emotion in the children.'

The masks challenged their feeling of safety. The person they knew was suddenly a blank expressionless face. They were unable to identify with the real or unreal Sasha.

'They could read nothing from my body language or my eyes.'

Was it Sasha or was it not? Is she smiling is she angry is she sad? If it isn't Sasha who is it? Will we be safe or unsafe with her?



Our Reflection

Drama is not a form of role play; its about instilling in the audience real emotion.

Themes involved the safe and the unsafe, nurture and threat, the visible and the invisible, taking real risks.

The predominant language was non-verbal.

Practitioners were unprepared for the depth of feeling children would express and this challenged our image of the child as one full of varied and intense emotion.

Our desire to nurture and protect children was also challenged. Should we dissuade and protect children from negative emotion? Or did the children feel safe enough to explore their fears with us? Could we hold their fears for them? The experience also had a huge impact on our staff team, opening discussion on how far do we really go if a child wants to explore aspects of negative and destructive emotion.

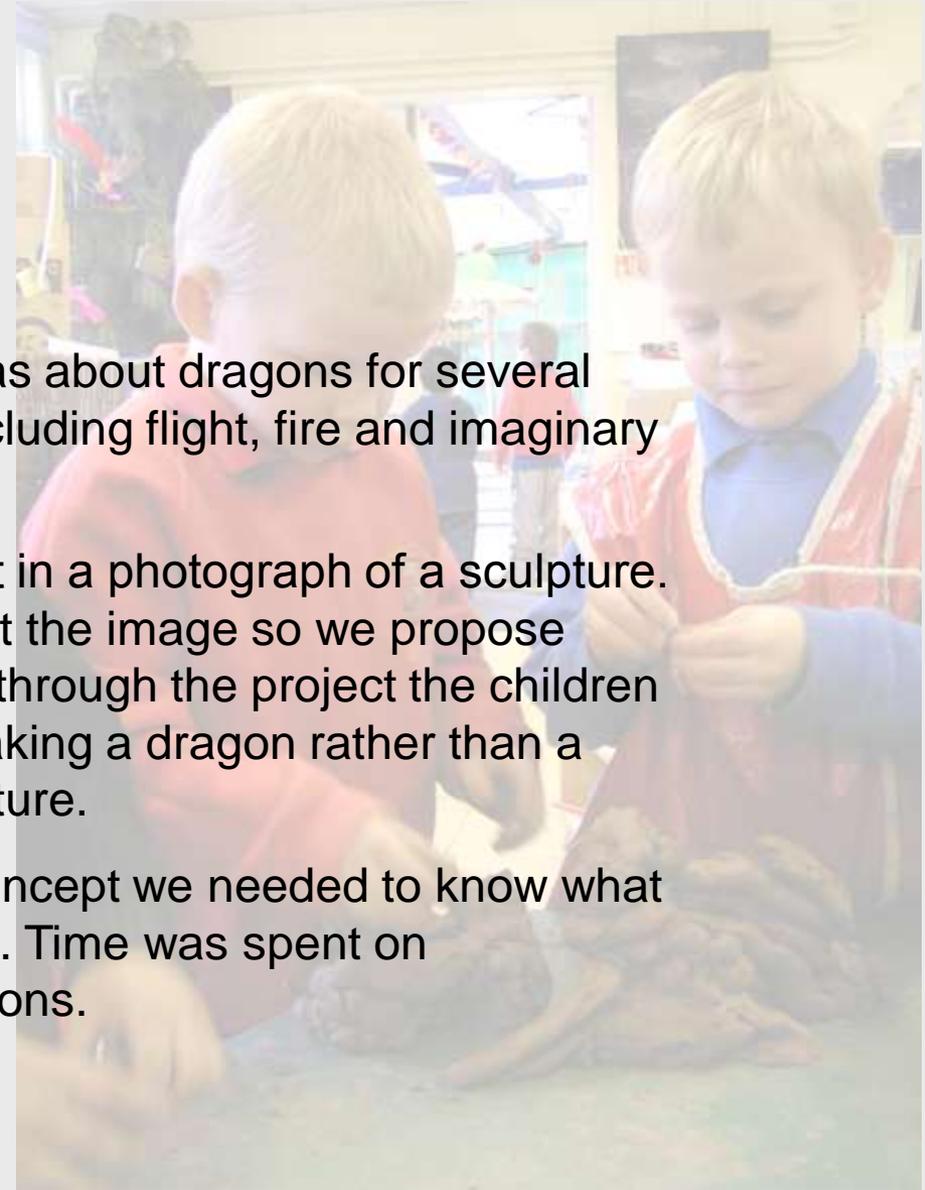
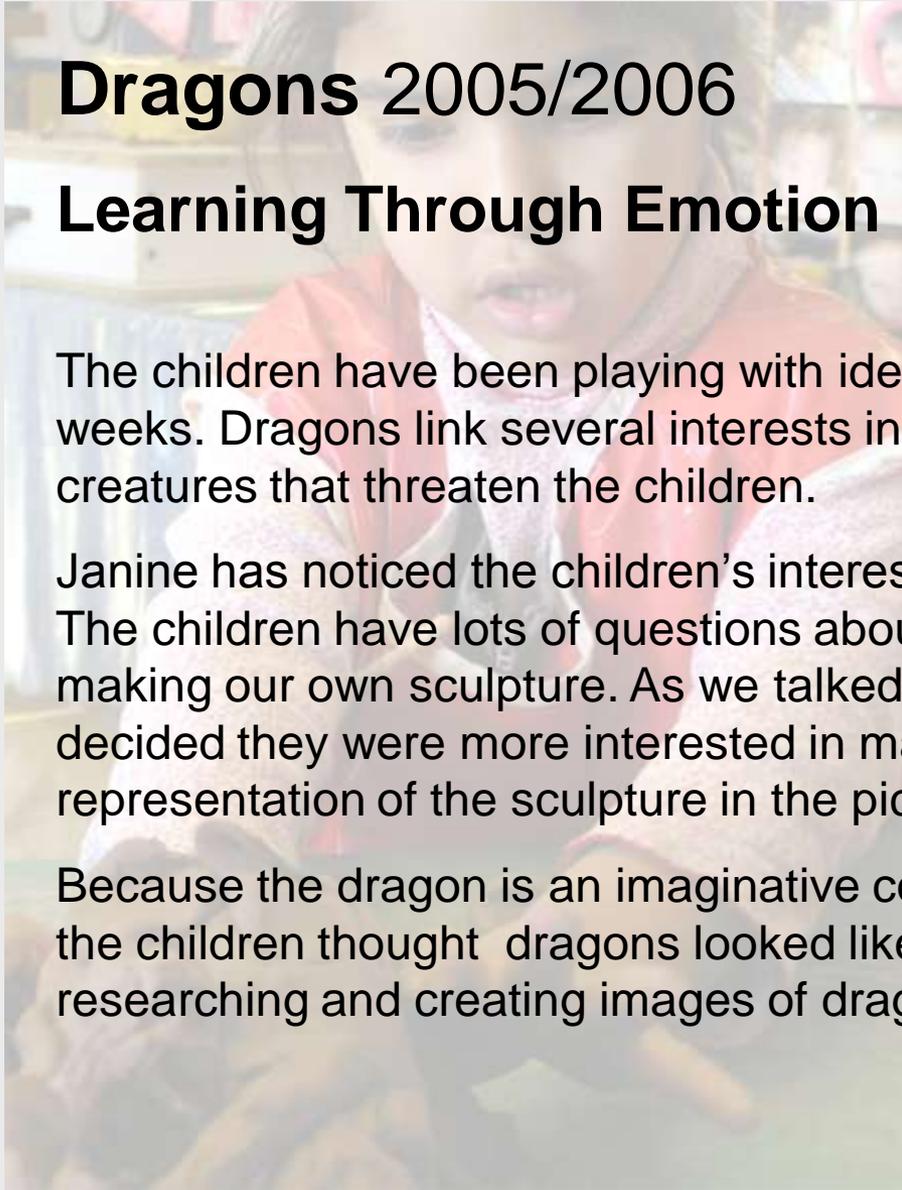
Dragons 2005/2006

Learning Through Emotion

The children have been playing with ideas about dragons for several weeks. Dragons link several interests including flight, fire and imaginary creatures that threaten the children.

Janine has noticed the children's interest in a photograph of a sculpture. The children have lots of questions about the image so we propose making our own sculpture. As we talked through the project the children decided they were more interested in making a dragon rather than a representation of the sculpture in the picture.

Because the dragon is an imaginative concept we needed to know what the children thought dragons looked like. Time was spent on researching and creating images of dragons.



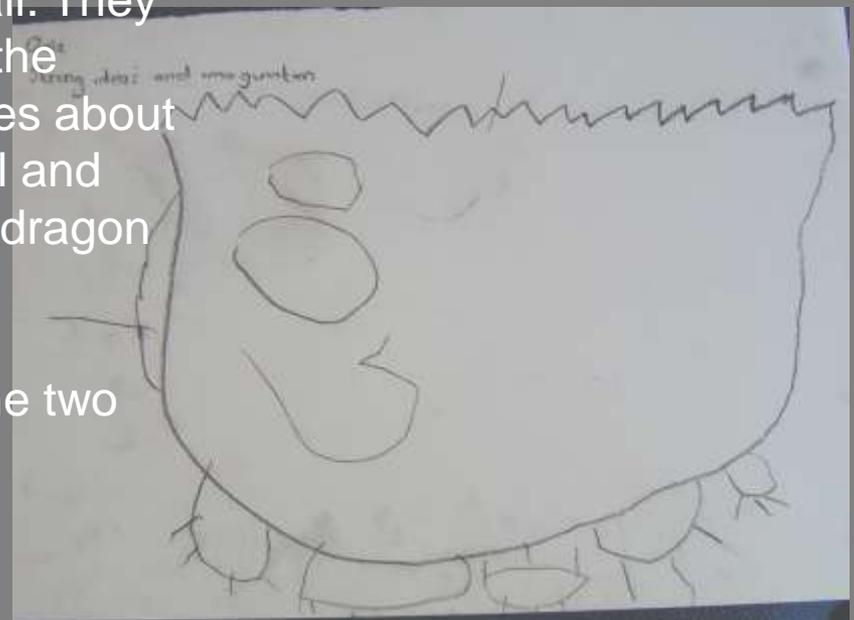
What Do Dragons Look Like?

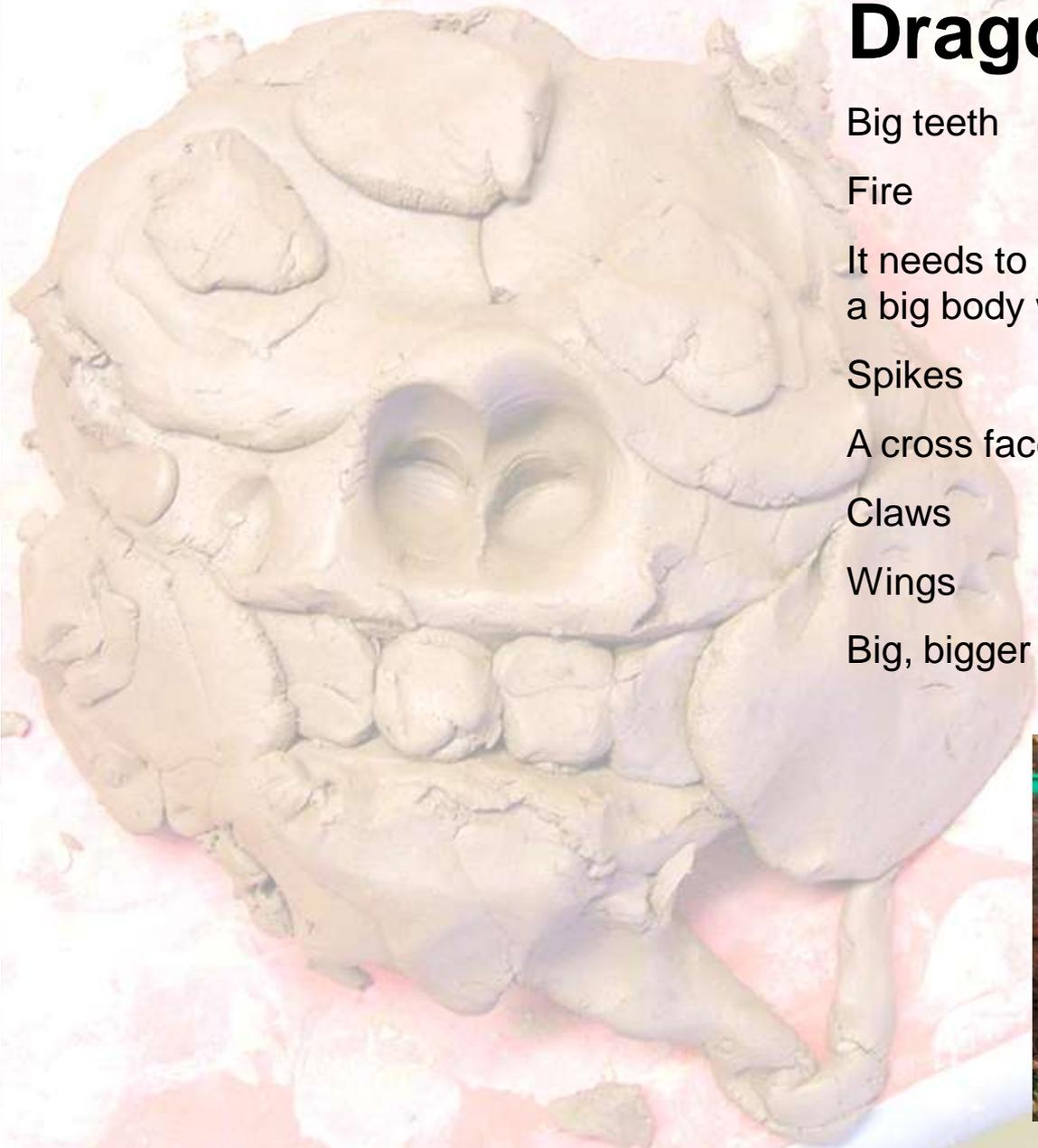
Drawing formed part of the children's reflection on their understanding of what dragons are. At the beginning of the year the drawings were accompanied by lots of verbal descriptions of what the dragon was like. Later in the year the drawings are more detailed and make clear attempts at representation.



Drawing helped the children think about detail. They described claws, spikes and teeth. Some of the dialogue developed into imaginative narratives about the dragon. The dragon was becoming a real and imaginary experience for the children. A real dragon outside and a dragon in the imaginations.

Drawing can be seen as a bridge between the two experiences.





Dragons

Big teeth

Fire

It needs to be big, it needs a big body with sharp teeth

Spikes

A cross face

Claws

Wings

Big, bigger



Making Connections

Is flight a real or imagined experience?

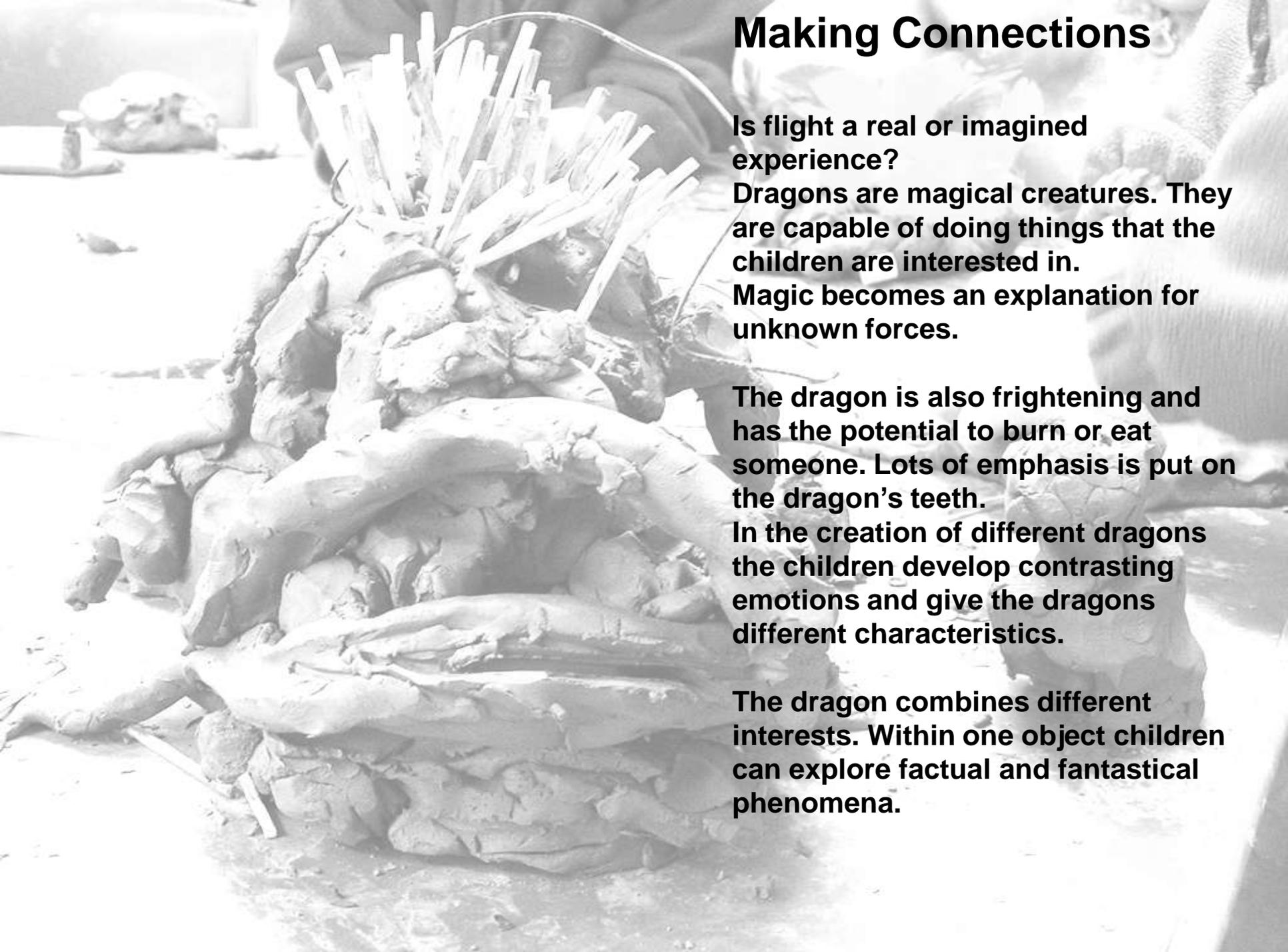
Dragons are magical creatures. They are capable of doing things that the children are interested in.

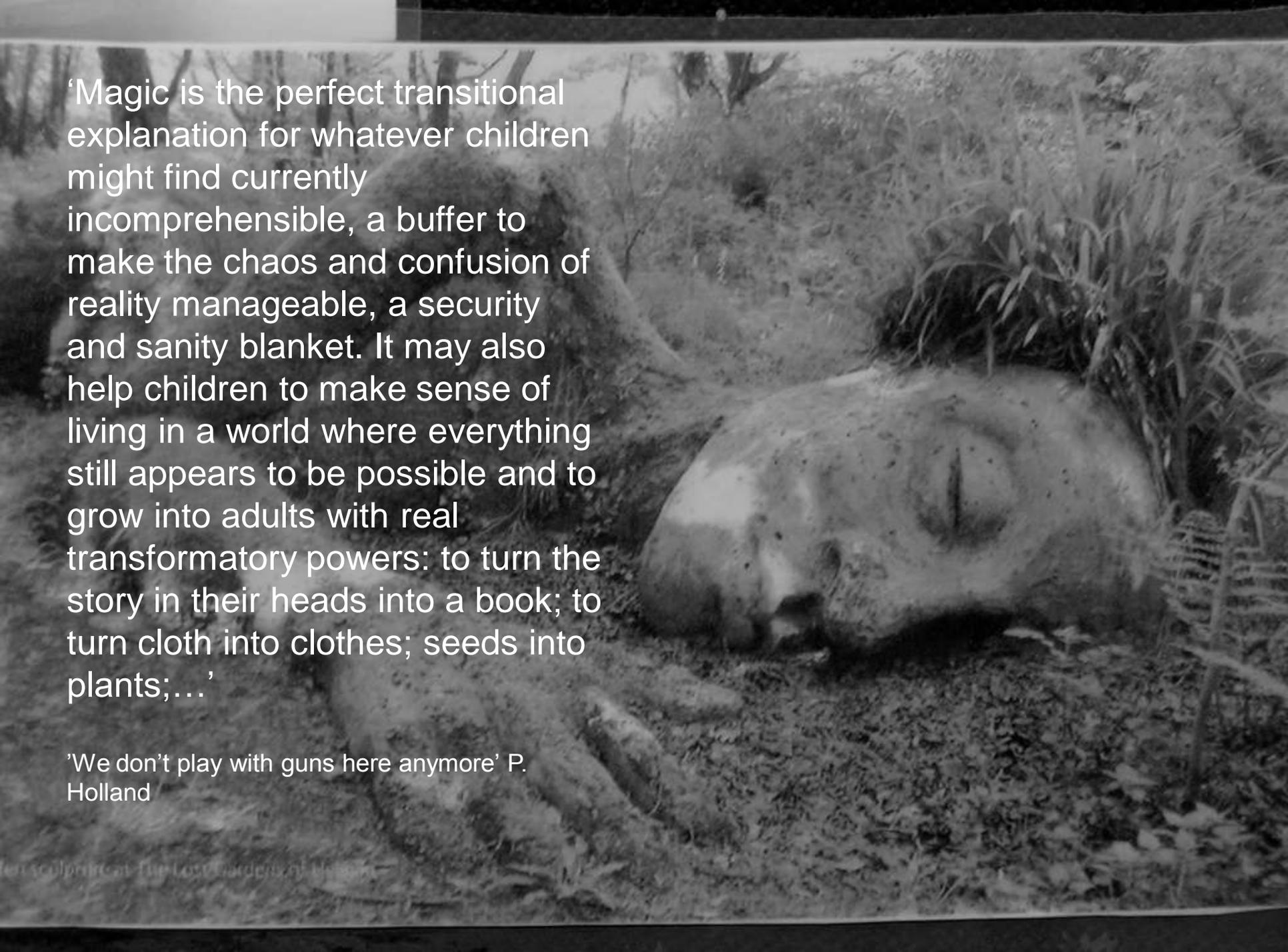
Magic becomes an explanation for unknown forces.

The dragon is also frightening and has the potential to burn or eat someone. Lots of emphasis is put on the dragon's teeth.

In the creation of different dragons the children develop contrasting emotions and give the dragons different characteristics.

The dragon combines different interests. Within one object children can explore factual and fantastical phenomena.





‘Magic is the perfect transitional explanation for whatever children might find currently incomprehensible, a buffer to make the chaos and confusion of reality manageable, a security and sanity blanket. It may also help children to make sense of living in a world where everything still appears to be possible and to grow into adults with real transformatory powers: to turn the story in their heads into a book; to turn cloth into clothes; seeds into plants;...’

‘We don’t play with guns here anymore’ P. Holland

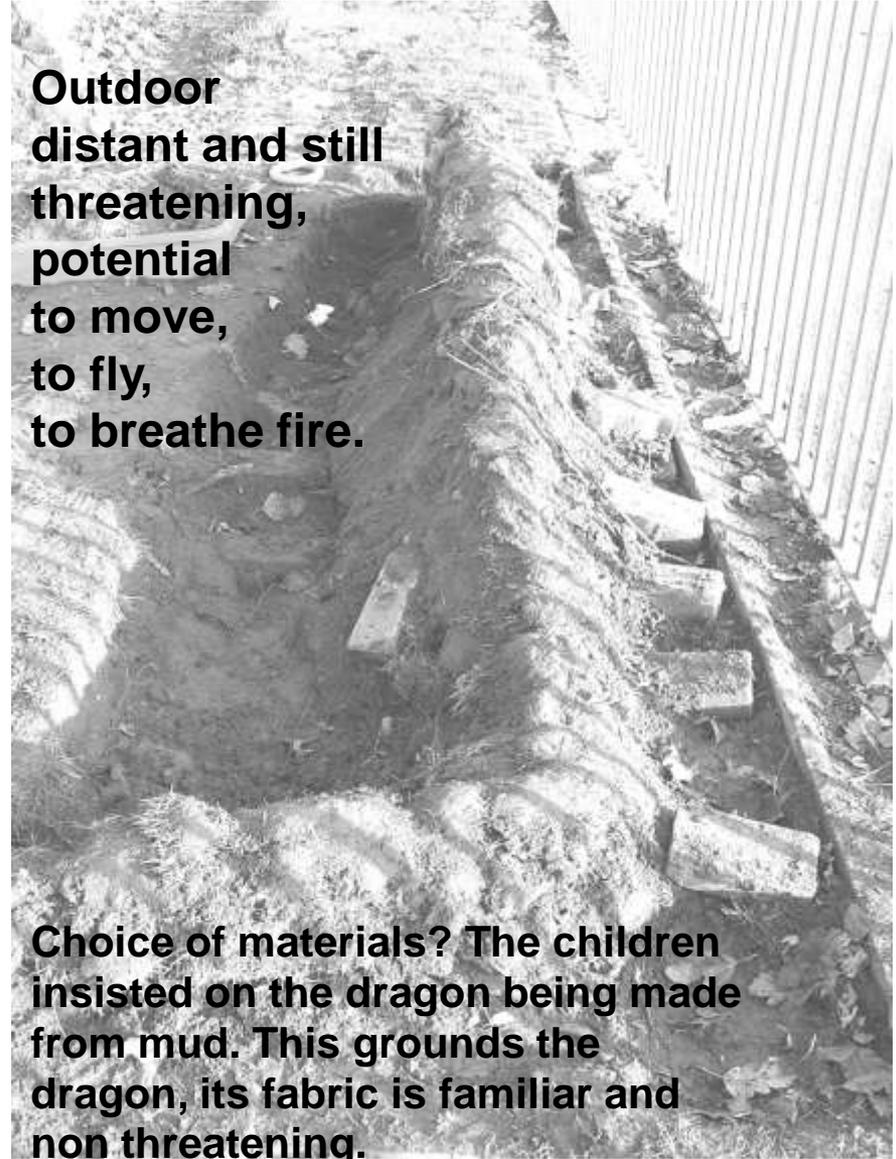
Location of threat

Indoor and tame?



This dragon needed to be nurtured, fed and kept company. But its external appearance was ferocious, with bared sharp teeth, open mouth, and flame red skin.

Outdoor distant and still threatening, potential to move, to fly, to breathe fire.



Choice of materials? The children insisted on the dragon being made from mud. This grounds the dragon, its fabric is familiar and non threatening.

Using visual art to explore feelings

Working indoors George is enthusiastic about working on dragons and becomes very involved in project work.

But he is scared of dragons. The idea of a dragon in the garden worries him. He watches it from a point of safety while asking if it can move. It takes George some time before he can approach the dragon.



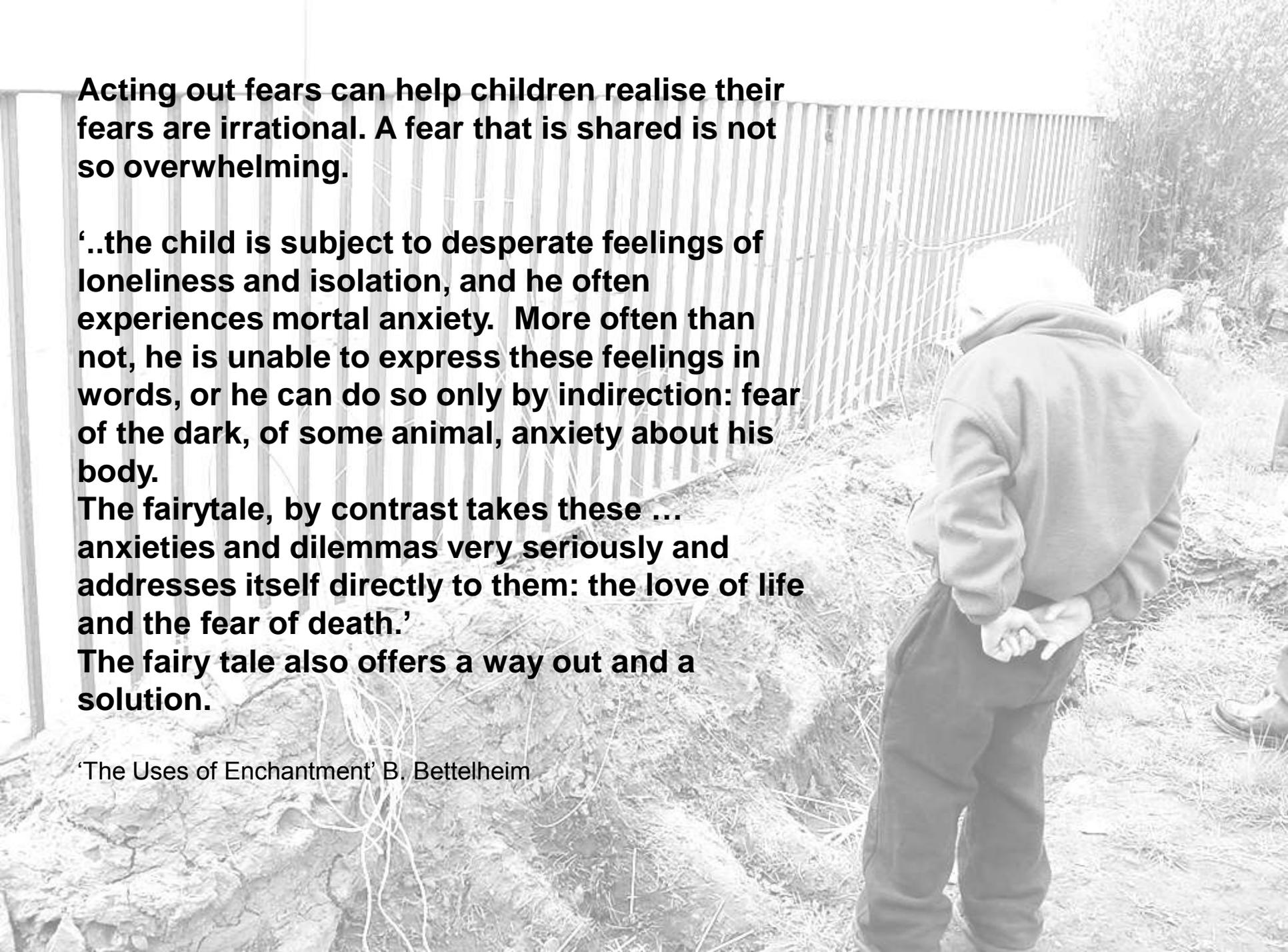
Acting out fears can help children realise their fears are irrational. A fear that is shared is not so overwhelming.

‘..the child is subject to desperate feelings of loneliness and isolation, and he often experiences mortal anxiety. More often than not, he is unable to express these feelings in words, or he can do so only by indirection: fear of the dark, of some animal, anxiety about his body.

The fairytale, by contrast takes these ... anxieties and dilemmas very seriously and addresses itself directly to them: the love of life and the fear of death.’

The fairy tale also offers a way out and a solution.

‘The Uses of Enchantment’ B. Bettelheim



Under Threes Unit

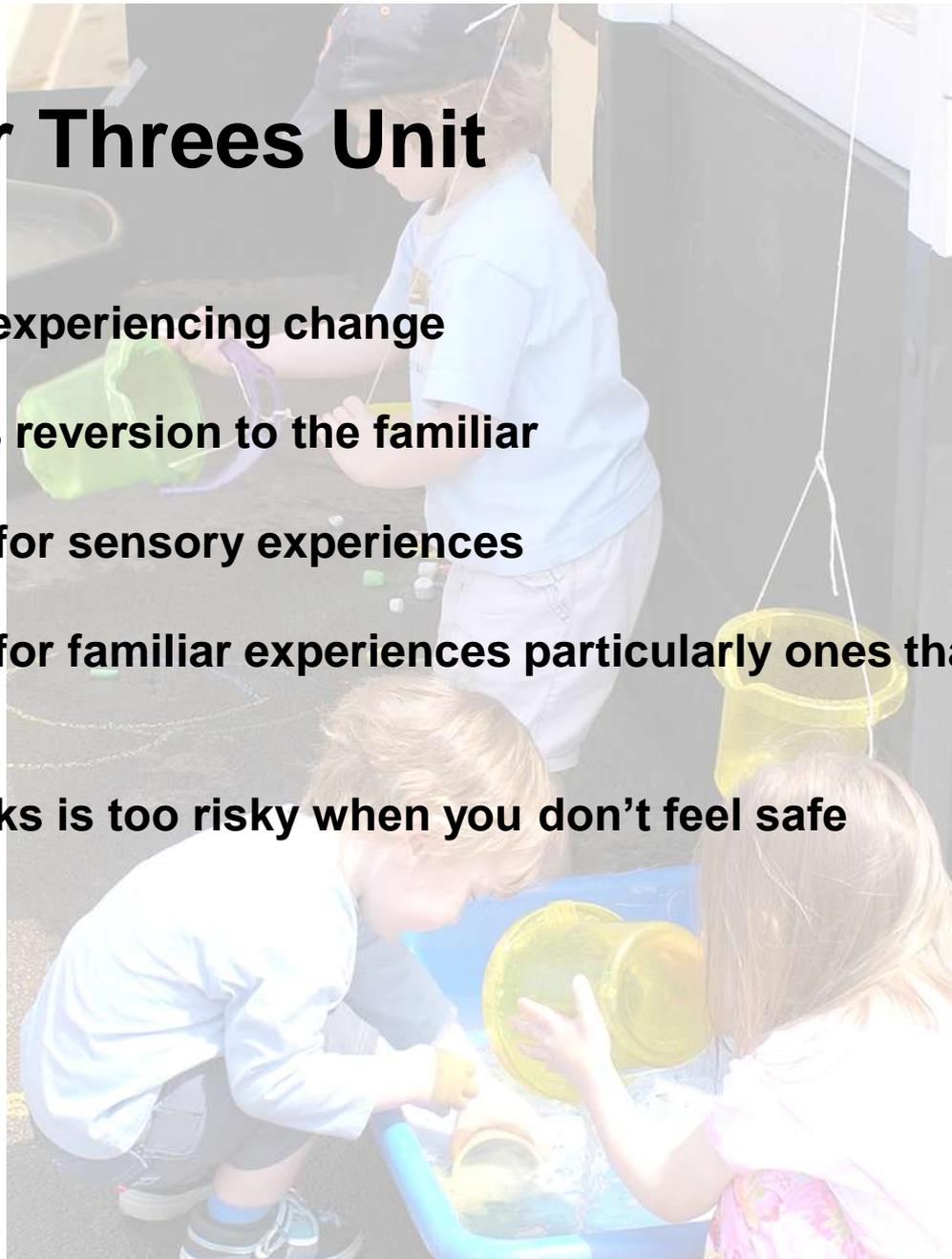
A setting experiencing change

Children's reversion to the familiar

The need for sensory experiences

The need for familiar experiences particularly ones that are shared

Taking risks is too risky when you don't feel safe



Birds

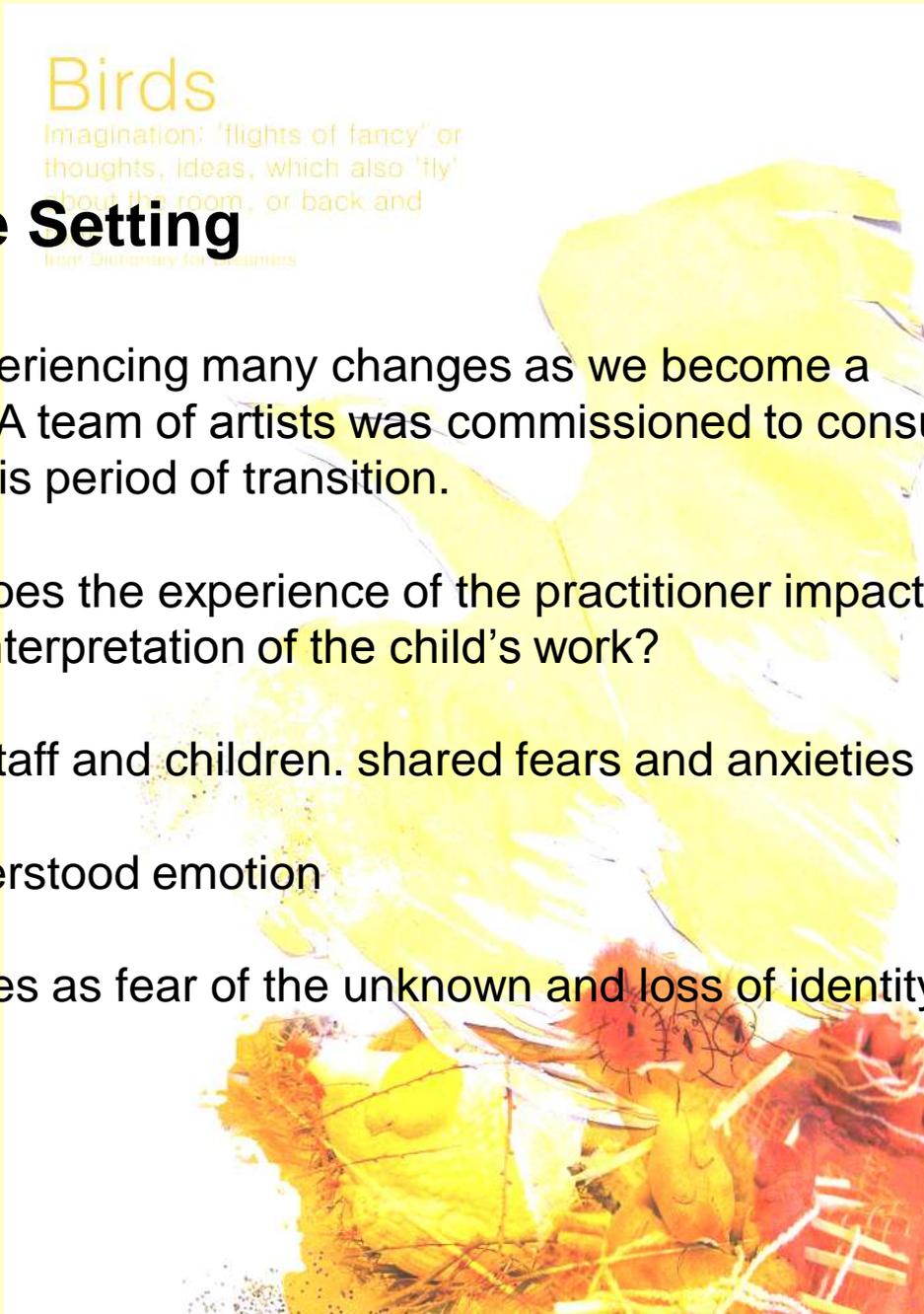
Imagination: 'flights of fancy' or thoughts, ideas, which also 'fly' about the room, or back and

from: Dictionary for Learners

Adults in the Setting

Our setting is experiencing many changes as we become a children's centre. A team of artists was commissioned to consult with staff about this period of transition.

- To what extent does the experience of the practitioner impact on the interest and interpretation of the child's work?
- Relationship of staff and children. shared fears and anxieties
- Shared and understood emotion
- Underlying themes as fear of the unknown and loss of identity.



Reflection on Emotions

Practitioners discomfort at young children's depth of feeling

Protecting children from 'bad' things. Questioning our role as practitioners

Supporting the expression of young children's emotions

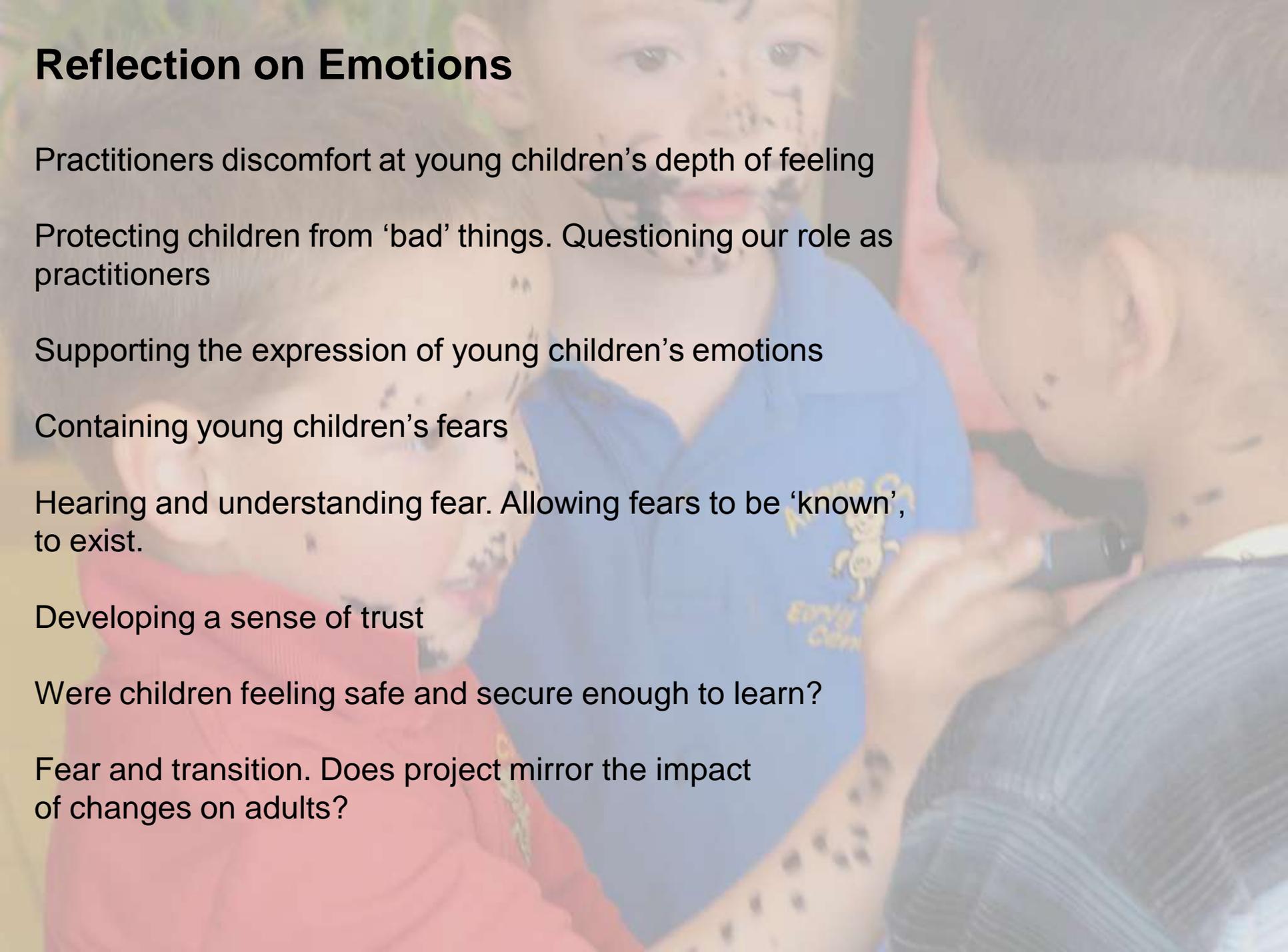
Containing young children's fears

Hearing and understanding fear. Allowing fears to be 'known', to exist.

Developing a sense of trust

Were children feeling safe and secure enough to learn?

Fear and transition. Does project mirror the impact of changes on adults?



Reflection on Practice. Risk and Trust

- Physical risk taking and emotional risk taking.
- Inviting artists into setting. To keep the 'contents' moving, to question, to stop ourselves settling, to create a tension...
- Cultural attitude to emotion. To be emotive, emotional, is a risk.
- Risk of feeling at work. Being afraid of thinking, of feeling too much...
- Working with tensions. Creating empathy? From fear and concern for others?
- We all need a sense of safety to be able to take risks. We need to take risks in order to learn, challenge our thinking, and develop trust in others

‘...as we learn about the world,
we learn about ourselves, and
the two are inseparable.’

J.J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*