

## **High Stakes Hide & Seek: Reflections from Therapists Practicing EFT and Play Therapy**

Have you ever played a game of hide-and-seek with a client? Undoubtedly you have. Withdrawers and pursuers alike have their own ways of playing the game. EFT clinicians must be like astute play therapists as we help clients develop safe havens and secure bases, first with us and then with their partners. Let's take a look at how beautifully this childhood game illustrates the makings of secure attachment and the lessons we can draw for our work with couples.

First we will illustrate several important processes leading to secure attachment that are embedded in the game of hide-and-seek. Next we will show how insecurely attached individuals are naturally drawn to hide-and-seek to satisfy their need for connection. Then we will examine how the metaphor of hide-and-seek can help with forming alliances and attuning to the experiences of both hiders and seekers. Underlying this article is the premise that the game of hide-and-seek is a useful metaphor for EFT couple therapy's tasks of aligning with hiders and seekers to ultimately help them to restructure negative hide-and-seek cycles into safe and secure bonds.

### **Hide-and-Seek – Natural Development of Safe Haven and Secure Base**

The game of hide-and-seek, played by children for generations, involves important attachment processes, such as object permanence (objects continue to exist even when they cannot be seen, heard or touched), secure attachment, ("I can find you if I need you and you will come for me if I hide"), object constancy (a relationship continues in the face of separations and reunions) and trust (in worthiness of self and in the reliability of the other). Being separate from the seeker, the child with object permanence realizes that the seeker still exists even when he or she is unseen and unheard. Securely attached individuals seek proximity to an attachment figure. When their attachment figure responds, they experience a safe haven to go to for comfort and a secure base from which to explore their world. Babies enjoying closeness with their attachment figures feel safe and secure to explore their environment.

Children who go through the motions over and over again of separating physically and finding their way back to their attachment figures achieve object permanence, as well as secure attachment. The separation and reunion

games of hide-and- seek and peek-a-boo are natural ways children develop object constancy. They come to see others as trustworthy and to gain a positive sense of self. Children who are securely attached initiate and play hide-and-seek with ease, trusting that they will not be forgotten when they initiate distance and that they are worthy of being found.

### **Hide-and-Seek as a Search for Secure Connection**

Children who are insecurely attached – who have faced trauma, adoption, anxiety or loss – are often drawn to playing hide-and-seek in the play therapy room. For them the stakes are much higher! They doubt their worthiness to be found, yet long to be pursued. They also doubt that someone will care enough to look for them. Playing hide-and-seek is a *very important game* to these children. They initiate this game so they will be found and thereby begin to heal wounds of feeling ‘left’, ‘abandoned’, ‘bad’ or ‘unimportant’.

Similar fears and unmet needs for love and acceptance compel partners in distressed couple relationships into escalating hide-and-seek cycles. Recognizing how insecurely attached children are drawn to hide-and-seek in the play therapy room for its therapeutic benefits, reminds us to depathologize couples’ hide-and-see cycles of distress. Doesn’t the critical pursuer really want reassurance that she hasn’t been forgotten or at least that her partner will show up when she’s looking for him? And doesn’t a withdrawing partner look a little bit like a wary hider unsure of how to go about revealing himself or wondering if he really wants to be found at all? He might believe that being found will ruin it all, that he needs to hide to keep the relationship and the game going. He may be thinking of ingenious ways to hide somewhere far away from the clamoring seeker.

Insecurely attached partners cannot ask clearly for what they need and want. Criticisms mask longings to matter and attempts “to find you so you will respond to me.” Withdrawal and defense are disguised messages of “I am afraid to let you find me because you may be disappointed in me and I long so much for your acceptance.” Like children initiating hide-and-seek in the play therapy room, adult partners go round and round in their attachment dance in search of security and safety.

### **Forming Alliances and Attuning to Hiders and Seekers**

When an adult plays this game therapeutically with the child, secure attachment can be facilitated. The astute therapist pays attention to whether the child wants to be found quickly or after some agonizing process of looking behind every chair and shelf. How does the child react to waiting, to being found and to transitioning out of the game to something else? A child's attachment needs and strategies (of anxiety or avoidance) will shape his or her responses in the game.

The therapeutic processes of this childhood game can help couple therapists form alliances and better attune to partners in distressed relationships. Children in play therapy take great pleasure in being found or in having the therapist look and look and look for them and not find them. We can imagine the attachment fear that gets activated when a brave child hides and questions whether he will be pursued or abandoned, but takes the risk to play anyway. Similarly, in forming our alliance with partners in couple therapy, it will help when we understand their attachment fears and the positions they take with these fears – whether, like the seeker, they hyperactivate their fears of abandonment and need to find their partner or, like the hider, they downplay and deactivate any attachment needs. We attune to the anxiety of the pursuer and to the avoidance of the withdrawer, to gauge the kind of responses that will be most helpful to form our safe haven alliance with each partner.

A male withdrawer, diagnosed with a disability at a young age, had spent years trying to keep this diagnosis a secret. Uncovering this secret in couple's therapy, he felt both relief and terror at the same time. He shared that he was "overwhelmed" and wanted the therapist to "lay off" ...but that there was also a part of him that wanted the therapist to keep looking for him. The therapist thought to herself, "So you *want* to be found, but you are *terrified* of what might happen when you are." She decided that it was important to consistently look for him and that he also needed her to seek him slowly. This meant that she needed to engage with the part of him that feared being found, as well as the part of him that wanted to be found. She was aware of needing to slice his experience very thinly and to very slowly process these conflicting emotions moment to moment.

We do well to pay attention to the couples in our office and how they prefer to play out this game of come-and-find-me. Jim Coan, EFT-er's favorite neuroscientist, studies the neurobiological processes of emotion. While presenting at the 2010 EFT Summit, he discussed the varying effects of

social support on those with different attachment styles. The *dismissive, avoidantly attached* person is stressed by the presence of another during times of impending pain, while *securely* or *anxiously attached* persons find a great deal of support and reduced brain activity in the frontal cortex when their attachment figure offers support at a critical moment. This information gives us clues as to how to “find” those with varying attachment styles. For example, it helps us catch the subtle difference between a pursuer hiding in wait for a sign of mattering to his or her partner and the hiding of a withdrawer, fearing she or he will be found as coming up short in the partner’s eyes.

### **High Stakes Hide-and-Seek— Restructuring the Bond**

Perhaps we are now being invited to become good “play therapists” and to engage our clients in their own high-stakes disclosure games of hide-and-seek. First, we build the safe haven of our alliance and then we expand the secure base that permits the partners to explore. We help them explore the distorted, negative hide-and-seek cycle and then take them through the increased disclosing and responding risks of restructuring the bond. Thus we help them to rebuild their sense of permanence and safe and secure connection with their partner, their inner selves and with others.

Kathryn de Bruin, MA, LMFT Certified EFT Supervisor San Diego, CA

Jennifer McMains, LMFT San Diego, CA

Lorrie Brubacher, M.Ed., LMFT Certified EFT Supervisor & Trainer  
Greensboro Charlotte Center for EFT