

Shaping Boundaries...Creating Space

By Sonja H. Sutherland

“Here are the rules...and this is where I draw the line. Please don’t push it. I mean it.

Ok, ok... I’ll erase this line this once, but that’s it. And I’m drawing it over here... in permanent ink. Ok, ok, ok... we all know nothing’s really permanent in life...”

How many times have you found yourself in a predicament in which you’ve set boundaries, laid down the law, created what feels like reasonable rules, only to encounter relentless protesting... until finally you decide its not worth so much agonizing? So the rules get rewritten. And the protesting soon resumes. But now it’s over the new rule... or a different rule... or how so-and-so isn’t following the new rules. Once again, you find yourself in a power-struggle or policing the rules, wondering how you ended up in a stream of boundary disputes when you tried to be so flexible with your demands and limits.

So often when we think about boundaries, we focus on limits--on that line that must not be crossed. But what if we think of boundaries in terms of shapes, instead of just lines? Thus, we acknowledge and utilize not only the lines, but also the *open spaces* that those lines define. It is easy to only focus on what is in front of us instead of also noticing where there is nothing... where there is room for exploration, room for creativity, room for freedom.

Nothing is really where there is an opportunity for something to happen.

Can we explore the negative space--- the open spaces within shapes--- as fully as we recognize the lines themselves? Certain artists, like the sculpture Henry Moore, fully utilize negative space to shape and inform their artwork. Martial artists, as well as eastern philosophies, are also aware of, and play with, perception in ways that our western eyes and minds are not traditionally accustomed to. In Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind, Shunryu Suzuki writes: “Our body and mind are not two and not one. If you think your body and mind are two, that is wrong; if you think that they are one, that is also wrong. Our body and mind are both two and one. We usually think that if something is not one, it is more than one; if it is not singular, it is plural. But in actual experience, our life is not only plural, but also singular.” (1970: 25) This shift from dualistic thinking to a multidimensional singular sense of perception expands ones choices for action--for living.

In our movement classes, we play lots of games which require cooperation from the entire group. Thus, we continually deal with individual needs and desires

within the context of the whole group. So we have to establish rules for our play which have room for individuals, yet are consistent in serving the entire group. As all parents and teachers know, this is not always so easy. The children expend a lot of energy on reminding others what the rules are, telling on each other if someone is not following them to their satisfaction, and of course, testing those rules themselves and suggesting how we could revise them. In fact, We could spend so much time defining, defending and redefining rules that we would run out of time to actually play the games! As the movement specialist, I believe in moving! In exploring, experiencing and creating through the process of doing. So without ignoring the childrens' concerns or our need for clear boundaries, I shift the emphasis from these boundaries to the dynamic flow of the game that these rules support. Without ignoring or changing the rules, I expand our focus to include and emphasize our reason for rules in the first place: to provide us with a structure in which we may play freely.

Active utilization of open space in action and in interactions

By emphasizing open spaces within a shape's boundaries, we discover a whole universe of opportunities for exploration and expression, while still providing clear, consistent structure. As a teacher, I pay close attention to where the boundaries are and begin each game by establishing them with the class. This gives the game structure. Yet as we play, I attempt to help the children to stay within the boundaries such that they are not constantly running into them or being reminded of them. To facilitate this, I must be aware of the boundaries *and* the open spaces (choices). When a child is heading towards a boundary, I attempt to redirect his or her attention towards the open spaces (the possibilities). This keeps our focus on the dynamic nature of the game. Thus, within the boundaries, a quality of limitlessness may evolve. This is very important, for...

It is not boundaries that limit us, it is our perception of these boundaries that does.

Boundaries can be containers for exploring limitless possibilities within a given structure.

Shifts in perception, shifts in possibilities

When we focus our attention in any one direction or one plane of action without maintaining a sense of the multidimensional nature of space and time, we reduce our vision, lose sight of the totality of the situation, and thus, limit our responses. From our narrowed perspective, certain dimensions don't exist. Solutions that may rely upon the inclusion of these dimensions aren't even in our realm of possibilities. Often it is not the boundaries that we need to shift, but our perception of them. Hence, boundaries can be great resources for creative solutions. Here is a wonderful example from my class: "Who can make a shape where you are both inside and outside one of the floor shapes?" One child was standing with his whole body inside a floor shape, grinning. A little perplexed I

asked: “Are you both inside and outside a floor shape?” And he replied: “Yes, my feet are inside the floor shape and the rest of me is *above* it”. This is the kind of creative thinking that makes me grin all over. The boundaries are no longer limits, but structures for their abundantly creative natures to climb all over and to play with.

Multidimensional Awareness

How easily we can get trapped into one dimensional thinking: “Don’t think of pink elephants”. Try it: Don’t think of pink elephants. By including pink elephants in the directive for avoiding thoughts of them, pink elephants naturally must come to mind.

While playing running games in movement class, I noticed that no matter how much room we had, the children headed straight for each other and collided. Telling them not to do this was like the pink elephant kunundrum. But instead of telling them not to run into each other, I realized that I must teach them how to see and utilize the open spaces around the flurry of activity that is coming their way. We play many games around this theme. Here are some examples:

I have a long styrofoam roller. I move with the roller through the three basic planes of action: vertical, horizontal and sagittal. First, I move in an up and down manner in front of me (vertical plane). One by one, each child starts by standing directly in front of me and must figure out how to get out of the way of the moving styrofoam roller *with the least amount of movement*.. I repeat this task in the horizontal (swinging side to side) plane and the sagittal (lunging forward and back) plane. While in reality, all three planes of action exist simultaneously and actions typically come in interesting combinations thereof, I simplify the circumstances so that the planes of action are clear and easily defined for learning purposes. By simplifying and clearly defining what is, we can start to recognize what is not. We start to see not only where the actions is happening, but also where there are openings and how they can get out of the way of the action.

Next, I begin to move continuously and randomly through the space, while still emphasizing these three planes. In the next level, I begin to combine action planes so the children have to pay attention more three dimensionally to find the openings. Finally, we play Roller Tag. The children try to tag me while I try to tag them with the roller before they can get me. If I tag them, they are frozen and must rely on a teammate to unfreeze them. If they tag me without me tagging them first, they get two points (though we ultimately don’t keep track of all the points, they still enjoy the process of accumulating them). They can utilize all planes of action, as can I. In order for them to tag me without getting tagged by me first, they have to really pay attention to where I am active and where I am open.... where my attention is not. I try to get everyone frozen without allowing anyone to get points while they try to tag me as often as they can before I freeze everyone or give up. It is twelve against one, afterall.

It is a fascinating to explore dimensions of time and space... to play with our perceptions and the limits (or freedom) our own perceptions establish. How do we shape boundaries? How can we create space in our lives? It is an ongoing learning process in my life and I have found no better way to be inspired and interested in this process than through play. It is my pleasure to play and to learn with your children.