



Magical Thinking: How Children Make Sense of a Complex World – Ep. 21

[00:00:00]

Dr. Kimberly Bell: Have you ever had that feeling in your gut that something's wrong, but you can't quite figure out what it is? For young children that happens all the time. They feel the same big emotions as grownups, anger, fear, frustration, but they don't have the tools or experience to manage them, so they tell us how they feel through the way they behave.

In other words, children are always communicating. We just need to figure out what they're trying to say. Welcome to the Hidden Language of Children, a podcast devoted to helping grownups decode the meaning behind children's behavior. I'm your host, Dr. Kimberly Bell, chief of Clinical Practice Training and Innovation at the Hanna Perkins Center for Child Development in Shaker Heights, Ohio.

At Hanna Perkins, we understand a child's behavior as communication, and we work with the adults to understand it too, so they can enjoy parenting more while helping their children grow into resilient, caring, confident people. I'm here again with our producer, Bob Rosenbaum. Hi [00:01:00] Bob.

Bob Rosenbaum: Hi, Kim. Hey, you know how we all have little flashes of disconnected memory from when we're really young.

Kimberly: I, yes, I do.

Bob: I have one of riding in the backseat of the family car. My dad's driving, and I'm watching a driverless car back out of a driveway and head off in the other direction. I'm guessing I was four or five at the time, which puts this in the late 1960s.

The whole memory's just a few seconds, but it's as vivid to me now as if it happened yesterday. In fact, I still travel that street periodically, and every time I do, I look at the driveway where I remember seeing the whole thing. The car itself



was a big boat, like a Cadillac El Dorado, pale yellow, convertible top down, red interior, and no driver.

I remember telling my father about it in the very next moment, and he simply said he wondered what I could have seen. It could not have been a driverless car. Today maybe, but not back then.

As a [00:02:00] grownup. I know some piece of information is missing from my understanding of that moment.

Uh, I can't tell you what I didn't see or what I didn't understand. but I know what I thought I observed. My brain took that information, cross-checked it with all the other life experiences of a preschooler and came up with an impossible answer. I don't know why my brain also decided this was so important that it needed to be filed as one of my permanent memories, but that's what happened.

And right now it's got a little value because it's a perfect example of what the psychological community would call magical thinking; and magically enough that's our topic for today.

Kimberly: First of all, that's a fantastic story. It's a perfect description of what magical thinking is, which is this idea that when we do not have concrete facts or knowledge, to understand an experience that we have, our brain comes [00:03:00] equipped to put pieces together to come up with a hypothesis, right? A scientific guess what's happening. And so we see magical thinking in children more because they have less facts available to understand the world.

And so you will see grander experiences of magical thinking. So for example, with you, Bob, you didn't have a piece of information and so you went then there's, if I don't see it, there's nobody there. As an adult, your more critical mind would say things like "I've seen short people before driving, and sometimes you can't see them over the steering wheel" or you can come up with reasons why it's not this thing called an automatic car. But small children don't have that. And so they will – big word: confabulate – they will bring things together that don't go together and come up with this idea of magical thinking.

Bob: [00:04:00] We could see in our adult life that magical thinking doesn't necessarily disappear completely at a certain age. I, I know grownups who



regularly engage in what we would call magical thinking. But it's a phase for children.

Kimberly: Some researchers would theorize that it starts in infancy. So that mommy coming into the room to pick you up when you cry feels like a magical moment; that mommy appears and disappears. And that your cry brings the mother to you or the father or the caregiver is the magic. The reason we cry and call forth someone to make us feel better is because we start to have this association between, "I do a cry and the parenting person appears and makes things better."

Bob: We've talked about that in another conversation. Uh, you used the term object permanence. Object permanence is when you realize [00:05:00] that just because something is not within your sight it still exists.

Kimberly: Yes. And the test for it, like we talked about before, is if you take, if a child is playing with a toy and you take the toy and you put it under a towel or blanket, the child will lift the blanket to get to the toy. That tells us that the child understands the toy still exists and that's the first step in the letting go of magical thinking.

Bob: OK. So that object permanence is a developmental milestone that helps to move past magical thinking.

Kimberly: Yes.

But also think about it this way, as soon as they have a motor capacity, right? If your child can scoot or crawl, then you leave the room and they come after you. That's also a sign of object permanence.

Bob: Once your brain has developed to the point where it understands object permanence, it's still Swiss cheese. It's still filled with a bunch of things [00:06:00] that you may hear or see that you don't understand, and it's still trying to fill in those blank spots with whatever it can come up with.

Kimberly: Yes. So it's about the type of thinking that is primary versus like residual, right? It takes a long time to move from the primary way of thinking being magical to the primary way of thinking being reality based.



But the magical thinking aside from object permanence, which is like the beginning phases of that idea of there is a reality, there's an inside, there's an outside, there's an other, there's an me, there is a world I can act on. That's all sort of first year stuff. Second year stuff is more about "I have a feeling and I can say no," and "I can walk away from you and I continue to exist." It's more about self and your [00:07:00] relationship to the world. Still lots of magical thinking. We see magical thinking in words when the child begins to have words. OK, so I have some stories. So one of my godchildren used to put his hands on his mother and say, "stay happy," right? Because she's mad. He did something. "Stay happy." And that's magical thinking, right? That's what we call it, egocentrism in some circles. But that's all part of this idea of magical thinking, that I am in control of you.

And if I lay hands on you and I say stay happy, I am the center of the universe and I can control how you feel and if I feel angry, you are angry. And if I'm happy, you're happy and I can be in control of that. That's the hallmark of the second to two-and-a-half years of life. And then we have to give that up.

These are all little giving ups that we have to do with regard to magical thinking as we have [00:08:00] more experiences in the world and we learn more facts about the world and the more we have a mastery of language. And so you really start to lose it between 3 and 4. When you go off to preschool or whatever childcare you have, and you're presented with naming your colors and you're presented with, any kind of counting, right? Anything that is cognitive in that way, your brain is starting to become really ready to learn. OK? Keeping in mind that we're working on mastering things like keeping our body clean and dry; that's giving up magical thinking. I had a friend years ago whose son did not really want to go through toilet mastery and she got frustrated one day and said to him, " You will not be 34 years old and having your mother clean up after you."

And he looked at her and went, "Wanna bet?" That's magical thinking in its own format, right? There's this sense of I can stop time, [00:09:00] everything will remain the same. I'm going to ma grow up and marry my mother. Everybody stays the same age. These are all confabulation based on developing cognitive feelings and wishes without fully understanding the limitations of reality. And so as you grow up, reality comes into you, into your experiences and puts limits on you, and it's both exciting and scary. And so we talk about kids having really strong two-way feelings about growing up, that there is this push to grow up and there's a hunger to learn more. But there's also, with every new step forward a loss, and not only do the children feel it, but the grownups feel it as well.



Bob: Yeah. Grownups miss the magical thinking of their children. We all love the videos of children saying ...

Kimberly: ... the Darnest things.

Bob: the darnedest things. It's cute because it's age appropriate. It's not, it sounds so cute when a 50-year-old says the darnest [00:10:00] things.

Kimberly: Exactly.

I think most of the time when people say that they wish we could all maintain the innocence, it's really just a sadness about some of the sadder things that you have to come to accept about life.

Bob: So magical thinking takes it, it comes out in various forms. Um, you've already used the term egocentrism: believing you are the center of the world.

Kimberly: What's happening there is it's the same as when the child was saying "Stay happy." There is this sense that if I feel it, everybody and everything feels it. So Mom is angry. Dad is angry. My, my toy action figure is angry. It's, it actually can be very helpful in child therapy because children then channel their emotions into their creative play.

Bob: Another example that I can think of would be divorce. You hear over and over, the child somehow thinks it's their fault that the parents are splitting up because of something the [00:11:00] child did, or because the child is there. How do you deal with that?

Kimberly: That's kind of later in life too, right? When you start to primarily think from a reality point of view, like when the balance of power shifts between fantasy and reality, you're talking 3, 4 years old. When there is this sense of "there is a reality out there and I am limited because of it," right? So a child thinking at 3 or 4 that they're the cause of the divorce is usually, to be honest with you, it has to do with that child's mastery of their own aggression. They have so many things that they're dealing with in terms of their anger and their aggression against this idea that reality is settling on them, that they actually believe that their angry thoughts about their parents made somebody go away. So it's not just they got a divorce. It must be my presence that caused stress.



It's not like that. Oh, I've been angry before and I have thought really angry things like, I hate you, and now you have gone [00:12:00] away; or I have been jealous of your relationship with my mother and I have wished for you to disappear so I could have her all to myself on Sundays, and then you disappear. I did that.

That's really what the younger child is dealing with is this genuine internal sense of my anger caused you to disappear. That's the real magical thinking there. It's very different.

A 6-year-old will take responsibility, but theirs is going to sound like I was too difficult of a child. I'm hard to love.

Bob: Yeah, it's still magical thinking. But it's more informed, if not fully informed.

Kimberly: Yes. It's on a spectrum.

Bob: OK. Another type of magical thinking would be sympathetic magic.

Example: believing that drawing a picture of something can make it happen. Or believing that if you put on the shoes of a basketball star, you're suddenly [00:13:00] going to be able to play basketball really well.

Kimberly: Yes. If you think about... let's think about Halloween time. So the same child that I knew years ago who did not want to go into potty mastery, the way that the mother leveraged magical thinking in that moment was to say that if you urinated on your Buzz Lightyear underwear, you wouldn't be able to be a member of Star Command. And the child really wanted to be a member of Star Command. And so that mother leveraged magical thinking at that point. However, I think more directly the kind of thing you're talking about is when you see children starting to identify— and this can also happen at 3, 4 or 5 – children starting to identify with the grownups in their life, right?

Dad is really powerful, and so you see your child walking around the house in dad's shoes. They become almost by trying on the costume; or they pretend to play on a fake cell [00:14:00] phone. And they talk in the same tone and timber of their parent. It's a way that they embody their identifications with the powerful people around them.



It goes from magical thinking of, I put on the sweater, it makes me that person; if I put on the sweater, it makes me like that person. And then it is the magical nature of a transitional object, which is what you're talking about, which is that this blanket is imbued with all of the sensory comfort of my mother, and it's my first possession and it is magical in the way that it comforts me. And some people will hang onto that item into their 20s. Little less magical, but still similar.

Bob: Yeah. And then there there's another category of, of wish fulfillment that, um, a young child wants a pony and thinks that if they wish for it enough, it may happen. Or family pet [00:15:00] dies and the child isn't really able to accept that the pet's gone for good.

They don't understand the finality of death and have to accept some kind of a substitute understanding of what that means.

Kimberly: Yes. Into teenage years we can see this kind of wish fulfillment thing going on, and that usually means that you have run up against a limitation in reality, and so you start to believe in a different kind of magic. Another story, different child. This child was 5, maybe? We were leaving the movie theater and we had seen Harry Potter. And what I got was, this question, this is one of my godchildren: He said, "Auntie Kim, is the magic in Harry Potter real." And I was like, aha, what a great moment to talk about magic. And so I started talking about science and all these wonderful things about, what can seem like magic, blah, blah, blah.

And he said, at the end of my great dissertation, he said yeah, but can I make people disappear that are being [00:16:00] mean to me at school? And I said, oh, I'm sorry. No. And where has all the magic gone? It was this wistful sad forlorned moment of losing that idea that if I could wish these people away, that they would go. Was he smarter than that? Of course he was smarter than that, but he was communicating a trouble he was having at school. And so defensively there was this desire that if I just say that it's true, it will become true. And children do this when they lie about things. Like you'll get a call from the school and they're like, your child said that you're moving To Alabama, wherever. And you're like, where did that come from? And if you dig deep enough, you'll find out why that child had that fantasy. But the idea was if I just go to school and tell kids this, then it will be true. They will believe it's true. I will believe it's true, and then it will be true. And that is always a defense against [00:17:00] some sort of reality that is making the child anxious or sad.



Bob: Is it possible that it is, it's a built in part of our defense?

Kimberly: It's in everything. It's in our ability to escape into a book. And be in a story. And I think it is part of our creative process. We wouldn't have inventions if people weren't looking beyond what they already know. I think it's a vital part. That's why I say it's on a spectrum and it's what type of thinking is primary in your life, right?

If you escape into fantasy for too much of your life, then you aren't living in, in the world, you're not living in the world the way, we like the ability to love and the ability to work, but our capacity to be creative, our capacity to temper the world so that it comes at us in bearable bits instead of in things that will overwhelm us. We escape into fantasy of all kinds of things and....

Bob: Some magical [00:18:00] thinking sticks with us forever at some level. And the, the real, the adult skill is to be able to separate fantasy from reality.

Kimberly: Even when you are using it, like you get really into a TV show, especially with binge watching, interesting experience. When you binge watch 14 episodes of a television show, you get pulled into that world. And you can feel all kinds of emotions about it.

And you can not think about your world for a very long time. Many hours at a time. And then when you come out of it, people have reported feeling like depressed, right? There's a loss.

But you can shake it off in a day or two, or you find something else or you whatever, go outside. And it's the ability to come back from that and not get lost in it that is the vital part of it, but that thread runs through our human experience.

Bob: So for the fully developed mind, that's the, that's what matters. For the developing mind. What matters is the child is [00:19:00] constantly filling up those memory banks with new experiences and new things that they can use to create a more realistic reality and for the parents to support that process.

Kimberly: It is vital. Yes, because it's not just supporting that reality, it's feeling confident in your capacity to handle that reality. One of the things that we talk about, I use the phrase bearable bits. We believe that children need to face frustration. Which is really reality impinging, right?



These are what we call conflicts between let's say egocentrism, this child being the center of the universe thing, and the impingement of limitations from the outside world. Children need those. If you very rarely say no to a child and you gratify every wish, the child is not prepared to deal with how reality is going to land on them when it's not you saying yes. And what you're [00:20:00] communicating to your child in those moments of constantly gratifying and saying yes is that you don't believe they can handle anything else. It's a powerful thing to say to a child, I know you're angry. I know you're upset. I know you're frustrated. I'm with you. We've got this. It's not OK right now. But it will be eventually, and you can handle this. This builds up what we call emotional muscle. And if you try to go out into the world without that emotional muscle, without these bearable bits of frustration, then you aren't well equipped be a functioning person in the world. Does that make sense?

Bob: Yeah, it does. How about we take a little break for commercial here?

If you have questions about your child's behavior or development or concerns about your role as a parent our mental health clinic is here to help. The Hadden Clinic for Families and Children at Hanna Perkins has therapists who specialize in working with [00:21:00] parents to be more confident and comfortable raising children. The clinic can provide treatment for postpartum depression, parent coaching and consultation.

Uh, we help children through problems that they may be experiencing sleep issues, eating issues, making friends, just about anything you can imagine. Our goal is to be available to help your family through ordinary and extraordinary circumstances that are sure to come up. Our therapists are licensed in Ohio and many other states and can help make a referral if you happen to live in an area that we aren't able to serve.

If you want help, you can call the Hadden Clinic at (216) 991-4472, or just visit the Hanna Perkins website for contact information and help getting started.

Kim, we haven't done a "Let's Rephrase That" for a while.

So this is going to tie into our conversation: A child is out with mom out in public, making faces with their hands, doing all this, stretching their mouth and [00:22:00] contorting themselves and embarrassing the mom perhaps a little bit while doing it.



And mom says, if you keep doing that, your face is going to stick that way.

What's maybe not so helpful about that and how would you rephrase it?

Kimberly: Yeah. Oh, OK. There are so many things that are wrong with that. There's a part of me that wants to go "parents don't still do that, Bob," but probably they do because their parents did it and their parents did it, and their parents did it. So what the child is doing when they do that, like making different faces, one, they're playing with body mastery. And that happens over and over again. That's why you see 6, 7, 8 year olds doing that is because they have a new level of body mastery. At that age, they're running, jumping, skipping, playing sports and they just have a new control over their body. And so they play with that in lots of different ways. And one of the ways is making faces, and there's a part of them that likes to get the reaction out of people. They're being silly, they want people to be silly back.

These are the ages where – I don't know if kids still do it [00:23:00] but – you're driving down the road and like truckers driving by and you make the little hand signal, And then maybe the truck driver honks at you and you're very excited about that. It's about having agency in the world and playing with that. And so what the parent is responding to is not some form of misbehavior in this case, right? There's nothing misbehavior about it except that the parent in some way is feeling their own feeling. Whether like you said, they're embarrassing their parent. I really try very hard to get parents to not be so easily embarrassed of their children in public because first of all, 90% of the people who see it have either been that kid or have that kid and go through the same thing. But what you're doing when you feed something like this with magical thinking and try to scare a child, what you're doing is scaring them, right? You're scaring them through the leveraging of magical thinking, and that is a very temporary [00:24:00] situation. And when the child figures out you're lying, they're just going to be really mad at you about it.

Like don't lie to children. And so the better way to say it is: I am not sure why you're playing with your face right now, but this is not the place for it. And I'm going to ask you to stop. Now of course that sounds oh my God, easier said than done, and it absolutely is. But you have to choose your battles, right?

If you're having a tantrum about it, like it's small, medium or big. We always have to ask ourselves is this small, medium or big? And if the child is doing a rude face, like most people don't like somebody sticking their tongue out. Right? That's a



social norm. Then you educate the child on what you're doing is not kind and that's not how we behave towards other people. You can smile at other people, you can make a silly face, but we don't stick our tongue out at people. Like that kind of a correction where you don't just tell them to stop, but you give them the other thing to [00:25:00] do.

And so make it more of a teachable moment rather than something you're just trying to stop with fear.

Bob: Direct approach. If the child's 7 or 8, can you look 'em in the eye and say, when you're doing that, you're embarrassing me out in public and I wish you would stop.

Kimberly: I don't love it because it's this idea that your feelings are more important than theirs. In that moment, I am embarrassed. Therefore, you have to contain your behavior. It puts the child in charge of your experience.

Let me just say for those parents who are like yeah, but I do get embarrassed. You rue the day because there will be a time where you are embarrassing to your children. If you're going to see them as a reflection of you, then eventually they're going to see you as a reflection of them, and then you embarrass them.

And I don't really like it when I see videos of parents intentionally embarrassing their children in public. it's mean, fun. It's very toddler level fun. Mean fun. And oftentimes when your children [00:26:00] go and repeat that behavior in school or with you, then you get angry about it.

Love does not have to be filled with so much aggression and that's the lesson you're, believe it or not, that is the lesson you're trying to teach them they're making faces at people and they're not getting the kind of attention you want them to be getting. They're getting negative attention, if you will, instead of positive attention.

It's all about how much aggression is in your fun and there are lots of ways to have fun, but also be kind.

Bob: As always, Kim. Very insightful.



Kimberly: It's been great talking about this, Bob. I think we don't necessarily talk about this particular topic maybe enough, so we'll probably come around to it again, but if anybody out there has questions again about parenting or child development, we are happy to answer them. You can send questions to us by email to Hidden Language of children@gmail.com. Thank you for joining us. We hope you enjoyed this conversation and [00:27:00] found something to take away from it. The Hidden Language of Children Podcast is a production of the nonprofit Hanna Perkins Center for Child Development in beautiful Shaker Heights, Ohio. Our producer is Bob Rosenbaum. And Dan Ratner is our consulting producer. If you like this podcast, please subscribe to hear future episodes and share it with friends and family. We welcome your comments and any of your questions. Again, you can contact us by email at Hidden Language of children@gmail.com. For more links and information about our approach to healthy child development, you can visit us at [hidden language of children.org](http://hiddenlanguageofchildren.org). And I'm Dr. Kimberly Bell, and we will see you next time.