

Affinity Therapy : Some Techniques, Concepts and Guidelines

By Ron and Cornelia Suskind

Many parents have reached out to us since the publication of *Life, Animated* in April, 2014 to ask, "How does it work?" Many parents and therapists are already using the book, which has principle and practices woven into the narrative, tucked often among renditions of our family's ups and downs, tears and laughter. Some readers told us they began weaving techniques (such "Educating Zazu," p. 180) into their child's educational/therapeutic plan. Others express delight that, in the course of their own explorations of their child's passion, they stumbled upon some of the same approaches we used.

We began developing affinity therapy when Owen was six-and-a-half, and we realized he'd memorized dozens of Disney animated movies. The core question of what to do with these powerful passions/obsessions among the autistic dates back to the 1940s, when Leo Kanner first began to form the foundations of definition and diagnosis. For most the years since, the view has been that they are perseverative, non-productive repetitive engagement that should be curtailed. In the years since the rise of Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA), another position has been to control the obsessions, and try – if possible – to use them as rewards in behavioral therapies.

As I point out in the book, we tried many of these techniques – including a padlock on the television – until we began to see a new way of embracing the affinity. The book is something of an adventure story in how we slowly arrive at this discovery and an acquired clarity about how Owen's affinity, tapping intrinsic motivations, reveals his evolving identity and otherwise opaque or otherwise invisible capabilities. By the time he was 11 – when, in response to being ejected from a school, he developed his now well-known fascination with sidekicks – we began to see how he was using it to develop emotional depth.

For years, we felt our way, even over the skepticism of many therapists and clinicians. When Owen was 13, he began seeing Dr. Dan Griffin, a clinical psychologist in Silver Spring, Maryland, with long experience. After some hesitations, he joined us in exploring new pathways for the therapy. That was 2003. Together, we guided Owen through many uses of his affinity (more and more, Owen was taking the lead), including the development of

inner speech using his pantheon of animated characters; a capacity, in line with theories of Lev Vygotsky, that was long thought to be impossible for ASD.

Since the book was published in April, 2014 – and all this was widely revealed -- leading neurologists are organizing trials to explore the neural mechanisms that underlie autism's signature affinities; specifically, what fMRI's display when ASD-affected children lock onto their deep interests. It's anticipated that this will differentiate the neurological profiles of different children within ASD, as well as reveal underlying capabilities that are visible only when intrinsic motivations activate the reward circuitry and other related networks guiding motivation. This research will be directed toward building a broadened, manualized therapeutic model to use these affinities as pathways in the coming years. We plan to keep readers and the wider community posted about ongoing developments. When everything is shared, everyone can benefit from participation in trial and error. This, after all, is largely a family-driven therapeutic model, a case in which the intense engagements and innovations from families will likely lead and shape research. In April, the New York Times reported that researchers from MIT, Yale, and Cambridge University, inspired by *Life, Animated*, are teaming up to study the effectiveness of structuring therapy around a child's affinity. This was thrilling news, and research we will watch closely; updating our readers as it unfolds. On LifeAnimated.net, we've posted the first broadly offered survey/questionnaire, the Affinities Poll, to collect data about what types of affinities are embraced by folks with ASD and how families deal with those deep interests. We'll be analyzing and publishing that data. Also on the site, are testimonials and videos by and about those with ASD, where they show ways they use their affinities – relying on them, speaking through them – as an expression of a powerful individuality. We've also started a technology company that joins leading technologists, neuroscientists and clinicians to create a next generation of truly-augmentative apps to lift differently-abled communities, starting with ASD.

But parents are clamoring for guidelines now. So we've mapped a few of the therapeutic techniques that we developed across 20 years to get families started. In many ways, this is a family therapy. It doesn't necessarily replace other therapies or efforts, but what we found over years was that it was the most effective engagement we had with our son. Now, that he can talk, he agrees. Having an autistic member of the family is expensive – Autism Speaks estimates that the traditional menu of services and supports costs families

about \$60,000 per years. The cost of “affinity therapy” was mostly time and what investment bankers call “sweat equity.” It was crucial, looking back, that one parent (Cornelia) could be at home caring for Owen, and we are deeply sympathetic to couples or single parents for whom that is impossible. Nonetheless, the intense leveraging of an affinity is an avenue with advantages. Even beyond cost, there is the current and ever-growing resources of the internet cloud. A parent or caregiver with sufficient ardor can rather quickly become an aficionado of most affinities. The ASD child will often be a step ahead, with their expertise driven by powerful motivations. But the parent/caregiver always has advantages of symbolic thought and analysis of how the particulars of one affinity connect to other related affinities and to the wider world. Stick with it. Educate your clinicians and let them edify you about measuring progress, appropriate goals and standards of practice in related therapies. What many parents are finding is what we found years back: that beyond all the measurable benefits in cognition and speech/language, affinity therapy provides a shared place and shared language where the core, essential emotions of parent and child, sibling to sibling or friend to friend can be expressed, received and reciprocated. And, as we all know from whatever sort of life we live, the most effective and fulfilling human connections are forged through love. Love has a lot to do with all of this.

FOR FAMILIES: Here are ways to start turning affinities into pathways.

Originally, we called our technique “Disney Therapy,” because the classic animated films were Owen’s overwhelming interest. When we discovered in the past few years that many types of passions can be used in similar ways, we developed the term “affinity therapy,” which now encompasses a growing array of techniques designed harness the deep passions that are a universal feature of autism.

What follows is a tool-kit drawn from Disney and most naturally suited to children with video-related affinities. But it can be adapted for other contexts and affinities – anime, maps, minecraft, dinosaurs, astronomy and so forth – in similar ways. It can be exhausting, and a parent will wish from time to time that they never see another video or peruse another map. But, after trying to cut off the affinity, many parents realize what we found: that these affinities, properly handled, are a pathway to both cognitive and emotional growth. There is no doubt that their deft use can build basic capabilities in terms of language, reading and general knowledge. But there’s something more important at work: these affinities are often the strongest pathway for a parent to express love for a child with ASD in way that the child can receive and return.

[Here are few tips about how we used Disney, with references from the book:](#)

Listen and learn. “Jucervose,” or “Just her voice,” is our first example of Owen reciting a portion of script, though it’s just 3 words. It was a phrase from “The Little Mermaid,” Disney’s 1989 animated film, uttered by the movie’s villain (the Sea Witch) about what Ariel the Mermaid would have to hand over to become human. Did Owen understand the words? Did he repeat them in an echolalic verbalization to simply correspond to a dramatic set of images? We couldn’t know. But we repeated them, as did he, to correspond with something we could all see on the screen and reference, with motions and expressions, when the TV was off. All those actions comport with basic principles and function of language.

If your child does something similar, we recommend you start by repeating the language back to him/her word for word, as he says it, while trying to make and hold eye contact.

This is a way to use echolalia to forge social connection. It may take time to decipher the phrases your child is using, as it did for us a year later to realize that “Bootylyzwitten” meant “Beauty lies within.” Once you do, say the line, with intonation as similar to how the movie characters say it as possible. See if your child turns and looks at you or holds your gaze. This is a way to use what is often called *scripting* – the repeating of movie/TV scripts – to form social/emotional bonds.

Side-by-side engagement. When watching videos, stay focused on the screen, which is the shared context. For animated movies, the child is probably responding to the exaggerated facial expressions and maybe the emotions they display. They won't turn away to look at you, but you can remain close to them. Begin adding appropriate verbalizations. Repeat key lines, in the silences following what's being said on the screen. You have to ease in slowly. A child initially won't want you to talk over what the characters are saying, which creates auditory dissonance. But in the silences, you can also add appropriate verbalizations. When Dumbo wants to see his mother, and Timothy, the mouse sidekick, sees that, you can say, “He's sad.” When Mrs. Jumbo puts her trunk around him and rocks him, you can say, “That is love,” or “He's happy.” Bring emotive expression to the language, so they can pick up your tonality. They likely won't look at you—their eyes will be fixed on the screen – but that doesn't mean you're not being heard (as Owen explained to us in his teen years). Try to add commentary. If you can play out what's happening on the screen (wrapping arm around child at the same time Mrs. Jumbo wraps her trunk around Dumbo, for example) that is also very helpful. The key here is to build the early stages of interactive play and emotional valence that will mirror what's on the screen.

Dancing. Many children will get up and dance in front of the screen. If they're up dancing, see if you can dance with them. Dancing to these songs is both a celebratory act and offers vestibular satisfaction. Respecting and enjoying the affinity it is respecting and enjoying the child. Figure out which character they're doing, which is usually feasible. Pick, if possible, the other character in the scene, and attempt a mirror of the screen's interactions. If not, pick the same character they're mirroring and do it, too. Once you've finished one of these emotional songs, it's a very good time for affection. For hugging, high-fiving, laughing.

A Brief Digression: Remember that what is on the screen is a context as welcoming, familiar and manageable to the child as the context a neurotypical person feels in a stroll from the kitchen to the living room. Home for some of our kids may instead represent a sensory barrage, and the manageable and hyper-systemized rendering on the screen is a replacement for the familiarity of the well-trodden parts of your own home. Viewing the onscreen world as your child's alternate home is helpful. When you engage with that onscreen world, you are entering, with the child at your side, the place they feel most at ease. They're living in this place. Think of it like visiting their home.

Use of dialogue away from the screen. Soundtracks in cars are golden. Why? As the soundtracks play, the images matching the notes are usually running through your child's head (again, Owen explained this to us later). But because you're not both staring at the screen together, this provides for easier entry into the context of each scene that is referenced by the music. The car is usually a closed, airtight environment – with the silent, outside world passing by – making it an ideal place for speech and interaction.

An example: Let “Be Our Guest,” the hit song from *Beauty and the Beast*, play. Some children are fine with a parent singing along, many not. The moment that song is over, say, “Who's that?” See if they say, “Lumiere,” Ask, “What's he feeling?” The response, often, will be, “Happy.” That's a common default word, so try for another option. Ask questions as a long as possible, like, “Who is the guest?” (Belle). It's helpful that this interaction doesn't demand eye contact, which is often over-stimulating for kids on the spectrum.

Sometimes, more verbal children will request that the songs be played in certain order – play track 2, now track eight, back to six. That's because they run in a different order on the CD than in the actual movie. It is a common memory feat: a kid will remember which songs correspond to which number and want them run in the same order as in the film. This is a very nice verbalization opportunity. After a song ends, ask, “Which track next?” Then don't say anything and let them instruct you. Ask them the name of the song, or what the song is about, or why they like it. With a song about to come on – out of order with the movie – those few seconds of urgency (change it quick!), will often elicit speech. For instance, if they want you to switch to Belle's song about wanting “adventure in the great wide, somewhere,” ask, “What's it really about?” It's not like you're withholding the song, but rather expressing curiosity and letting them guide you. “Be Our Guest!” “What's that about?” “Dinner! Friendship!”

Use of fast-forward and rewind. Ask if you can watch a certain scene or song with them. Say, they're in the basement, as Owen often was. Cornelia might say, "I'll be upstairs making dinner. When it gets to 'Be Our Guest,' pause it and come get me." This is a way to tap pragmatic speech and executive function, which are often challenging for kids on the spectrum.

Roleplaying. The selection of particular songs and scenes is part of a process whereby you are deploying parts of the movie for communication or emotional contact. Often when you want to play a scene, you'll have to watch the whole movie until the scene comes along. When you get to a scene, pause it. Warn your child ahead of time ("We're going to play Baloo, Mowgli, and the rock"). Have the child always handle the remote—they are the remote control king. It's one of the key areas where they will accept and offer pragmatic speech. When you get to the scene, have them pause it. The most important element is to have everyone get up and assume roles. Hit "play," to get your lines set (they'll invariably outrun you in recitation) and then play out the just finished scene. Stick to the script, if possible. Intonation is as important as mimicry. Try to play out the body motions of the characters and the child will, too. On screen, those motions are often fluid gestures of movement and interaction. After the scene is over, you should return to the movie. You want the roleplaying to blend seamlessly with the movie—the child's desired activity. You don't want them to feel like the desired activity is being unduly disrupted. Everyone laughs, you play the scene, and back down to the couch you go.

For nonverbal kids, or kids with very little speech, you may want to produce an easel or a cue card with "What's Mowgli feeling?" followed by a choice of expressive words to choose from. Start with two. Work your way up. Several parents have reported doing this with great success.

Context matters. All of these exercises are progressive, and generally used in a step-staged process. But, throughout, context is a key. One way you can progress is to find scenes that are matches for situations playing out in your home. When it was time to walk our dog, one of Owen's few chores, we'd use *101 Dalmations* and a scene where Roger and Anita take the dogs to the park. When it's time to sleep, you could do *Dumbo* in the tree. The idea here is to reference the scene and the idea of the scene, and see if your child responds

(either to a simple mention of the scene or to acting it out). The Seven Dwarves are also very valuable, because each dwarf represents an personality trait, so they can serve as emotional benchmarks. In conversation, when your child seems to be experiencing something they can't express, you can ask, for example, which of the dwarves he or she feels the most like. You, of course, can also use a dwarf to reflect your feelings.

Language Arts. A good way to think of these exercises is as language. These affinities all have a sub-structure, an architecture that reveals corollaries in symbolic thought. That's the biggest difference between affinity therapy and other therapies, like Floor-time. This is more focused and analytical in the ongoing use of the affinity, rather than a parent/therapist expressing an interest to connect with the child and pull them into more traditional interaction. The goal, here, is to move more deeply into the affinity, to know it and know the child through it.

Parents across the country have contacted us since the book's publication. Some are speaking map. Some, speaking Disney. Some speaking Anime. One parent has become an expert on black and white movies from the 1940s because that's where her son has invested his identity. The impulse, in each case, is the same: to find a shared language of love and support.

For Therapists: Approaching Affinity – A seriously fun way to play

A short offering by Dr. Dan Griffin, who worked with the Suskind family.

Parents have the most intimate and familiar connection with their children and have the potential to focus that intimacy like a spotlight on them. A therapist, by comparison, can only hold a candle. Parents are the most important people in their children's lives, and it is generally safe to assume that children are the most important people in the life of a parent. Entering the realm of affinities can provide a bridge between parent and child like no other. Affinities offer the opportunity to narrow the focus and dive deeply with a child. Affinity strategies deepen understanding between parent and child. The energy source propelling them is "intrinsic motivation" – the child is engaging in the activity because the task is naturally interesting and enjoyable. In the often-frustrating world of human motivation, it doesn't get any better than intrinsic motivation. There is no problem with how to get a child to "do" this – there is often nothing else he or she would rather do.

Exploring the ideas and activities via Affinity Strategies

1. Do the math: God gave us two eyes, two ears, one mouth. Watch and listen at least three times more than you speak in the land of affinities. The key word is curiosity. The key to curiosity is attention. And attention is the key to kingdom. Everything becomes more interesting when we pay attention to it.
2. Suspend what you believe about the "evil that screens do." The digital universe is the closest humans have come to date in discovering a "universal sweet spot" for all of us – but particularly for kids along the spectrum and with a variety of other atypical paths of neuro-development.
3. Attention is a two-way street. That I am paying attention to you is absolutely necessary to the process. What is as important is do you "feel" my attention? And does that attention feel positive? Is it an experience of interest, not concern? Of delight, not consternation? Of "just right" rather than "maybe a little faster, slower, nicer, softer, etc.?"

4. This quality of attention is crucial. Many parents don't realize that so many of their interactions with special needs children are corrective in nature . . . though borne of a parent's hope to help make the child better "for their own good." Engagement in a child's affinities reverses that. Cornelia Suskind often says, "respect their affinity, you respect them. Their chosen affinity is often at the core of their identity." Children shine in that warmth.

From Here to Affinity

Ron says: "How to craft that first conversation with the parents so they understand what they've been seeing (a loose recognition of how the child locks onto several, or a single, interest) and how it can/will be usable going forward.

Essentially, a point by point distillation of what you tell parent/pilgrims when they can come see you for a single day...

Many of the folks that have consulted with me come from a distance, so I have devised a Two Session Consultation Model. The first visit occurs after the parents have filled out a few questionnaires and taken some video samples of their child- in daily situations and while engaging possible affinity areas. **The goal is to tempt parents to move from observers to cultural journalists to co-conspirators.**

I. **Stages of Two Session Consultation**

1. **Engagement and Witnessing**

Careful listening, particularly to the ways in which caregivers act as explorers first, then learners, healers and teachers, and finally, as co-conspirators,

Attend to content that connects members – the affinity items the child finds most compelling and the areas that are naturally appealing to parents are explored

2. **Focusing, punctuating-** what are the areas that hold the most interest, positive emotional charge and suggest a possible link to areas of need. Punctuating areas in which a child's identification with an affinity has actually influenced her behavior
3. **Enacting:** Getting parents to "show me" not tell me how this looks,- expanding their range as actors / playmates, using the existing scripts for phrases to gain enough interest to make this interactive
4. **Discussing limits / Targeting areas of need-** asking "What is most important to you as parents to accomplish?" and "Do you see connections between the desired changes and goals and the affinity?"
5. **Expansion** – expanding metaphors, introducing new frames
6. **Using affinities to increase novelty,** titrating anxiety, experiments in failure- changing caregiver responses,
7. **Sibling Novelty:** Sibs routinely see what we as parents will never glimpse- they can be extremely important co-conspirators

Consultation Concrete Steps

1. Find out what they have been doing - where is it successful? Where has it worked and pooped out? What have the parents learned that they can recreate, generalize?
2. Where have the parents been stuck at the table - the ABA stuff that does not generalize?
3. Where is the itch? What are the classes of behavior that have the highest valence for the parents - story about teachers and refusal of aba - they had to experience themselves as successful
4. What is most meaningful to parents is going to a)increase their motivation b)attune them to incremental meaningful change. This is important because there are two possibilities - one is that parents exaggerate change - see it where it is not occurring, the other is that they fail to recognize how small change is taking place. Being able to spot it in small increments is key

Harnessing Affinities Consultation

Parents typically have the most intimate and familiar connection with their children and have the potential to bring focus to that connection is like a stage spot light on their kids. A therapist can only hold a candle with regard to the available emotional intensity.

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I have had numerous consultations with parents that read Life Animated and wanted to process their own experience. There is a similar theme- parents observe the intense attraction to a particular affinity – whether it is characters from Disney movies, or shows such as Thomas the Tank Engine and Yo Gabba Gabba, or mythic figures such as ninjas, knights, even child in an Jewish Orthodox family whose passion was NASCAR.

Concrete Steps (continued)

5. Assess for affinities - possible points of entry. Things that have interest and emotional charge. Things that have a possibility of identification with the characters
 - how we all get instruction from larger sources - the bible, myths, Hollywood.
 - how some of our affinities pick us - "by any means necessary", "an offer he can't refuse"
 - How to tell what these are? where possibilities might lie
6. How are the affinities manifesting themselves in kids life at present? Maybe just as bits of repetitive script or songs or actions.

The more or less conventional targets of interventions for individuals on the spectrum focus on:

- **Reduction** in problematic behaviors that can isolate an individual and restrict the settings he or she is capable of functioning in- e.g., self-stimulatory behaviors, narrow interests, uncooperative behavior, social isolating behavior, poor language skills.
- **Developing and increasing** socially attuned behaviors and experiences that are associated with a higher quality of life- for example, more autonomy and independence, improved quality of social functioning, improved coping and problem solving skills, personal satisfaction with occupational life, improved mood and self-regulation skills and interest and curiosity about the world

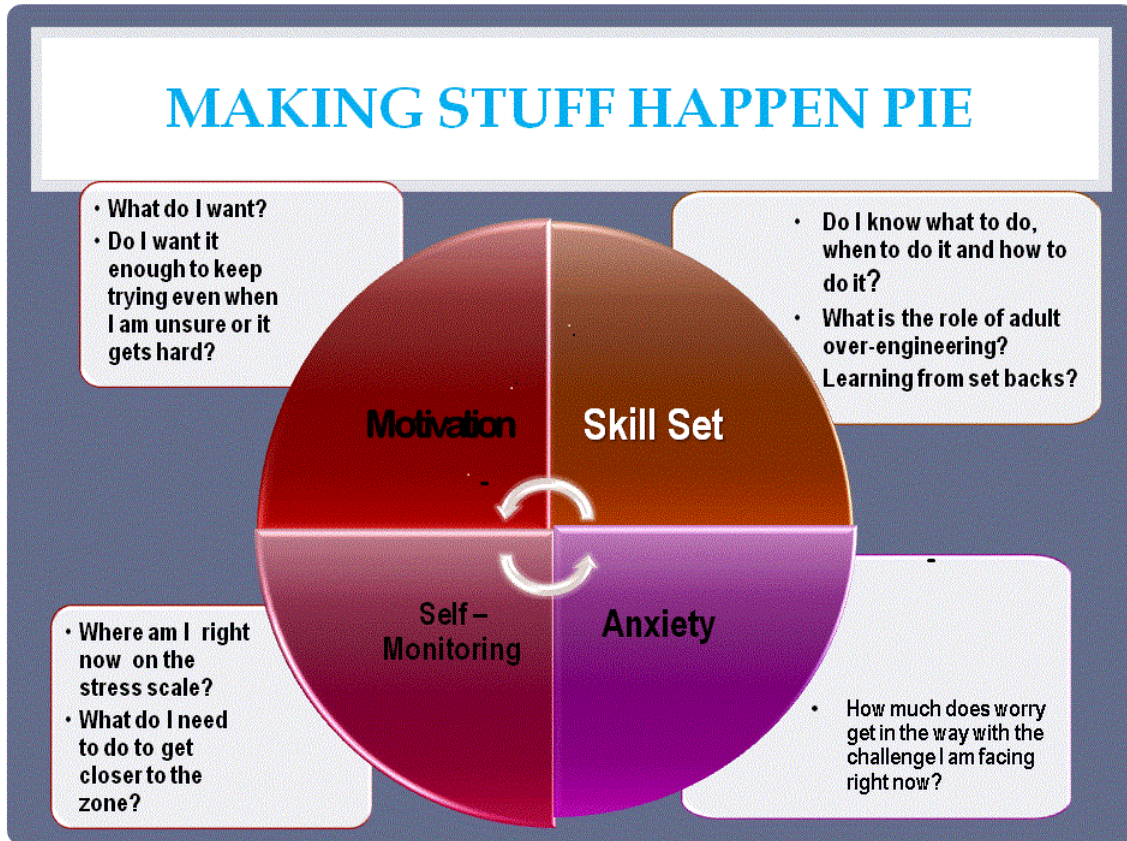
Concrete Steps (continued)

We must remember this:

7. The idea that the first step to anything positive begins with attention- we become more what we pay attention to, what we think about.
8. **It has to feel powerful, effective. Like learning another language - that in learning - we first have to see that it gives us some agency- it brings about a desired change in the social environment**
9. **It has to feel worth the effort- that there is some real reward in working a muscle as opposed to accomplishing what i want without having to work so hard**
10. **A parent is to be willing to make life more difficult in small doses, to insert moments of dynamic tension, the tipping point between having to try harder and giving up or just passing or waiting for someone to figure it out and allow me to avoid the aggravation**

III. Possible areas to target in Affinity Approach

With regard to four components I believe essential to behavioral expansion- Motivation, Skill Set, Self-Monitoring, Self-Regulation (Griffin, 2014), Disney was completely intrinsically motivating, Owen practices incessantly to improve his skill set and paid close attention to his accuracy – doing a lot of self monitoring. This whole endeavor was accompanied by a reduction of anxiety as it controlled the amount of visual and auditory input to manageable level, and frequent repetition was always possible.



With regard to the Pie above –Disney was completely intrinsically motivated; Owen practices incessantly to improve his skill set and paid close attention to his accuracy – doing a lot of self-monitoring. This whole endeavor was accompanied by a reduction of anxiety as it controlled the amount of visual and auditory input to manageable level, and frequent repetition was always possible

- **Does the use of the model activate “hope” for all the players, i.e., optimism about the near and distant future; is there a current sense that all are engaged in a worthwhile pursuit?**
- **Does use of the model increase the frequency, intensity, duration and perceived quality of interactions between family members?**

- **Is there an increase in the affective intensity between family members 1- engaged in affinity scenarios, and 2- in situations beyond the affinity sessions?**
- **Does use of the model increase openness to experiences that were previously avoided. For example, asking for help in public place, independent travel, and initiating contact with other**

Why it worked

The affective charge in the room immediately went significantly up, whether it was Ron, Cornelia and Owen, in the room with me or Ron and Owen, Cornelia and Owen or just me and Owen. The elevated affect was marked by joy, intensity, greater focus, spontaneity, laughter, heightened relatedness, and spontaneity

Ron, Owen and I often used scenes from movies to engage with each other. It struck me that this was a reliable point of connection between Owen and Ron and anyone who was familiar with Disney movies. Owen was using themes and segments from the movies to connect the way many people may use sports standings, politics, and the weather.

What I believe Owen was doing: he would watch specific sections of each movie in his pantheon repeatedly. Often short segments were pored over, memorized, analyzed and deconstructed. In doing so, it soon became apparent that Owen was constructing a pantheon of characters that would become the empirical data for his theories of personality and the basis of his social psychology. He attended to plot, themes, language and most particularly Character – including human motivation, (love, anger, power, greed, insecurity, loyalty, moral ideals, and conflict). It also clued Owen into the less obvious motivations behind flattery, subterfuge, and ambivalence

IV. Does Affinity Therapy result in changes that might reflect improvements in characteristically truncated areas?

For example:

- Theory of Mind- (TOM) is a specific cognitive ability to understand others as intentional agents, that is, to interpret their minds in terms of theoretical concepts of intentional states such as beliefs and desires.

Worked a lot on private speech - using the scripts as a starting place for borrowed ideas to negotiate common social events. We worked on PATTERN RECOGNITION – what is the recognizable pattern of someone who is feeling needy, disappointed or alienated.

- Robert Gordon's (1986), mental simulation, the idea that our capacity of psychological understanding depends on our ability to run cognitive simulations. According to this view,

it is possible to infer other people's intentions and future actions by using our own mind as a model for theirs. All we need is to be able to run a decision process "off-line": to pretend to be in other people's shoes and see how our mind would resonate as if we were in the pretended context. Simulation doesn't involve a complex theory of mind: it involves a capacity of pretense and of putting oneself in the other's place.

Owen would study over and over short segments of Disney movies – we reviewed these and used them to help Owen discern:

- **motivation**
- **emotional state of characters**
- **complex social behaviors such as subterfuge, deceit, double dealing guilt, ambition, altruism.**
- **also the issues of privacy vs secrets**
- **responsibility**
- **the impact of certain behaviors on others- being a know it all, rigidity, selfishness, self-centeredness, parental love, greed, etc**
- **how people differently cope with loss, disappointment, hostility, death**

Concrete Steps

11. For affinities to work they require two components:

- agency / expansion / frustrationsuccess - the video game template
- fun - that attention is evoked by creating contexts that set up anticipation for fun - something interesting is going to happen - "Once upon a time"
- fun is created by novelty, slapstick, kabuki, opera, in a word, being cartoonish

12. Reciprocity element - ping pong - the simplest ways of instilling we are sharing, this is interactive; that your response is actively bringing about a change in what i do

- model for kid
- attempt with kid
- minimal prompt

13. Use of script from affinity that pertains to real life recurrent behavior that is largely achieved and consistent - use of it as a narration - "Clean up song"

14. The Use of script to give tail wind to a new desired behavior - like friends don't bite friends

15. The use of script to support more abstract principle - like "Dont give up. '

V. Does Affinity therapy improve the degree to which person can self monitor his or her social behavior and make desirable adjustments if needed? With Owen we used a simple frame:

What is my social direction?



Moving toward others

Behaviors that feel friendly, welcoming, inviting to other people.



Moving away from others

Behaviors that feel indifferent, standoffish, aloof.



Moving against others

Behaviors that feel hostile, aggressive, provocative

Concrete Steps

16. One challenge is how to see the back of your head? The ways in which we might overestimate how a strategy works – parents who are eager to see positive change, or who are so demoralized they fail to register real change.