

Excerpt from the chapter
“Working with Parent Couples”

from the book

The First Year and the Rest of Your Life

Movement, Development and Psychotherapeutic Change

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Vignette 2: Working With the Couple

One Week Later

In an effort to help Debra and Rob investigate their relationship in greater detail, R.F. invites them to try a movement exploration at the beginning of the session. R.F. asks the couple to stand facing each other and a few feet apart and then gives them a soft, round, flexible ball (approximately 5 inches in diameter) to hold between them by resting the palms of their hands on either side. Because it is always easy to talk instead of experiencing any anxiety that might emerge during this exploration, she asks if Debra and Rob would remain silent. R.F. tells them simply to notice what they experience as they feel their palms on either side of the ball. In addition, she asks each partner to notice how much or how little “push” they need to successfully meet the other or feel met by them. Either person may look into the other’s eyes whenever they have the interest, or they can choose not to look.

Once the movement process begins, R.F. notices that Rob’s legs are placed much wider apart than his hips, while Debra’s legs are placed very close together. This makes Rob’s stance quite stable but less easy to adjust and Debra’s stance less stable but more flexible. In addition, Rob’s elbows are extended such that his arms reach well into Debra’s kinesphere—the space near her body. But, Debra keeps her elbows quite flexed so that her arms remain close to her torso.

Their positions give the appearance that Rob is shoving the ball toward Debra, who appears to comply with this arrangement.

As the exploration continues, Rob’s face appears wide and open during the exchange. He lengthens his spine, bulges his chest forward, and appears to grow. In contrast, Debra’s face narrows, and her eyebrows draw together as she abruptly shortens her length and narrows her chest, appearing to shrink. The ball moves closer and closer to her body.

As their postures reveal, Rob seems to enjoy this exploration as he expands in all dimensions, while Debra reduces herself in all dimensions and seems uncomfortable.

In time, R.F. asks Rob and Debra whether each feels well met by the other and suggests that if not, each tell the respective partner what he or she needs. But, each must signal through movement alone. Now, Debra begins to extend her arms, allowing them to move a bit farther away from her body. To do this, she clearly increases the intensity of her push. Almost immediately, Rob pushes back with an even more intense energy and succeeds in getting Debra’s arms to move closer to her torso once more. The jolt from the intensity of Rob’s movement pushes Debra back on her heels. All of a sudden and in response, Debra drops her hands to her sides, and Rob is left “holding the ball.”

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The exploration in pushing gives Rob, Debra, and R.F. much information to process. A visibly upset Debra shares how much this experience is like her daily life with Rob, how it illustrates what she often feels with him. If she increases her “push” and stands up for herself, Rob grows more intense. Debra then says she feels overwhelmed by his needs and his expressions most of the time and cannot find a place for herself. On hearing this, Rob is completely mystified. He says that he was so happy to feel the strength of Debra’s push, and that he wanted more—“I love to feel her with me,” he said, “so I pushed back to encourage her to be stronger with me.”

It becomes clear that Rob needs more stimulation to feel well met, and when he asks for it in his way, Debra feels overwhelmed and anxiously withdraws. Each partner can now see and feel how the mismatch in their fundamental movements and inclinations accompanies a mismatch in their styles of asking for and making connection. With an intense focus on what they are doing and how they are doing it, the existential issue underlying their methods of interacting emerges spontaneously and therefore cannot be avoided.

As our discussion continues, it becomes clear that Debra needs to find a more energetic expression with Rob—to discover and maintain the solidity of her push so that she does not lose herself to him and so that he can feel her presence more distinctly. But, Rob also needs to be more sensitive to Debra. If he is going to feel met, he also must discover how to yield with Debra and to include her in his experience.

Debra and Rob pick up the ball to try once more. As they continue their movement inquiry, Rob says he is aware of the high intensity and driving force with which he pushes against Debra. He remarks, “I want you to push me back so that I know you’re there.”

Rob’s desire and enthusiasm to connect with Debra fuel his push, which becomes more abrupt and intense.

Debra says, “When you shove me, I freeze.” Rob wants to do something different but is not sure what to do. R.F. suggests, “See if you can soften your heart, whatever that means to you, and let Debra come to you.” Taking in the instruction, Rob slowly shortens his spine, which allows the bulge in the front of his chest to lessen, while the area in the back of his chest widens. Rob’s elbows bend and move closer to his torso, and the ball comes into a more equidistant relationship between them. R.F. invites Rob to become aware of his breathing and to emphasize the exhaling phase.

Taking a longer and deeper exhalation will allow Rob to attend more easily to himself and Debra.

Once Rob makes this adjustment, Debra has the space and time to become aware of her own pushing movements. “It’s as if I don’t know where to push from,” she says. R.F. suggests that to find the necessary support to shift her pattern, Debra can widen her stance slightly so that her legs are directly under her hips. Next, R.F. asks her to bend both knees

and then to push the floor away with the soles of her feet to straighten her legs. Debra tries this several times and then says she can sense both feet pushing against the surface of the floor. Soon, Debra’s spine lengthens, and her head, which was pressed forward (sagittal), now reaches upward (vertical). R.F. suggests that Debra widen her elbows as they are still held close to her sides. Once she does this, her chest widens, and the intensity of the pushing of her hands against the ball increases. Debra says, “Now I feel some strength.”

After a few moments, and using their newly expanded movement repertoires, they begin to move the ball in all dimensions—forward/backward, side/side, up/down—and a playlike rhythm emerges between them. It is now hard to detect who is leading and who is following.

As Rob slows and softens his push, he is able to yield with Debra and so is better able to feel her as they move together. Discovering that he can include Debra as part of his pushing experience allows the familiar anxiety—that he will not be met—to recede. As Debra increases the strength of her push, she is more resilient and not as bowled over by Rob’s intensity.

Several Weeks Later

Under continued care by her pediatrician, Jenna’s digestive difficulties have yet to abate. Both parents are naturally anxious and distressed about this. At the same time, they have come to realize that their clashes regarding how best to handle their baby’s discomfort are the symptoms of more complex relational problems. And although their difficulties are not the cause of