



## Voice Dialogue with children

We regularly receive questions from our Voice Dialogue students about the application of Voice Dialogue when working with children. Since there was no information available on this subject, Marijke Leys from the Voice Dialogue Instituut (Belgium) and I from the Voice Dialogue Academie (Netherlands) decided to bring together a number of experts who use Voice Dialogue in their work with children and young people in a working group. This working group met online several times to exchange experiences. We also learned from the six-day Voice Dialogue training we gave in 2023 to the team at Kurios Bijzonder, a practice for child and youth therapy in the Netherlands. In this article, I report on our findings.

Working with Voice Dialogue is very possible with children, even from a young age (4+). Children understand the concept of inner voices at a very young age. This awareness alone can help them develop more freedom of choice in their behaviour. This is also possible without them actively experiencing the Aware Ego, as we do in a session with adults.

Children can easily put themselves in the shoes of a sub-personality in a playful way. Perhaps even more quickly than adults. They are used to playing and do so naturally. Through play, you can, for example, act out anger (a lion growling) and thus come into contact with a rejected part. In guiding children with Voice Dialogue, imagination is often used through dolls, drawing, clay, play and drama forms. It helps children when subpersonalities are made tangible and representable.

We are currently seeing applications and/or potential applications for children and young people

- \* in child therapy;
- \* in drama lessons with adolescents;
- \* in counselling children and families (bonding patterns in families);
- \* in coping with loss and grief;
- \* in schools (e.g. for fear of failure).

### Aware Ego in development

An important difference with Voice Dialogue for adults is that young children (under the age of 8) have little or no self-awareness. Their capacity for self-reflection is still developing. It is therefore not yet possible to ask children to take the place of the Aware Ego position and Awareness. From the age of 16/17, you can start using classic Voice Dialogue, complete with a middle chair, separate places for subpersonalities, the Awareness and the Aware Ego position.

This does not mean, however, that there is no separation between subpersonalities and the child itself. By discovering and acting out subpersonalities, a child's ability to choose one subpersonality over another does indeed grow. However, this is done more playfully. As we get older, the directing function (AEP) also develops more and more.

There are ways in which Awareness can be used through the relationship with the counsellor. For example, a girl asked the therapist to report to her mother about the play session while she was present, playing. She was allowed to add anything that was missing. This could be seen as a kind of

Awareness on the part of the therapist. In this way, it was not too vulnerable for the girl to let her mother know what she had experienced.

### **The primary system is still necessary**

Another important difference with adults concerns working with primary selves. Children live in the (family) situation where they are developing their primary selves. They actually still need their primary selves in the here and now as protection. A child cannot yet answer questions about the origins of a primary subpersonality, or at least not easily. Sometimes the origins emerge in the stories the child tells or through drawings. But often children quickly avoid acknowledging the underlying vulnerability of a primary part, for example by starting to talk about something else. That does not mean that the child cannot come into contact with an opposite and learn to use it. Children do recognize it when you talk to them about their lives. 'When they bully me at school, I don't want to be nice at all, but I do it anyway.' 'If there was an animal that could come and help you, which animal would it be?' 'A lion!' 'And how would that lion help you? Look, there's a lion among the cuddly toys. Shall we see how it would do that?' And so, through play, the child makes contact with a part of themselves that can bite back.

### **Parents and other caretakers**

When working with children, you automatically have to deal with the system in which the child lives. It can be a great source of help when the parents and caregivers themselves are also familiar with the Voice Dialogue language and learn to understand the intentions of subpersonalities. In this way, they can also honor what exists and thus create space for movement. Based on their own attachment history and past experiences, parents will tend to respond to the child in a certain way. When parents become familiar with the theory of attachment patterns, they can also discover which selves within themselves respond to the child and which selves they thereby evoke in the child. The same applies to teachers, who can look at their interaction with a child in this way. With children, it is very important that those around them become aware of their own inner world and give the child space.

### **Honouring primary parts**

As a counsellor, it is important to be mindful that you do not align yourself with the desire of parents or society to develop certain rejected parts too quickly. Suppose a child is naturally quiet and reserved, and the parents want them to be more outgoing and make friends. The introverted part of the child then gets the message that it is not okay to be so quiet and reserved and may start to feel rejected. If the facilitator honors that part, as we do in Voice Dialogue, that part can relax and feel welcome. It is not necessarily in the child's best interest to become more extroverted. Sometimes that is mainly a wish of the parents. And in any case, honoring the quiet part is important for developing healthy self-love.

### **Working methods**

There are countless working methods that can be devised to engage with the child's inner voices in a creative and playful way. For example, with puppets, cuddly toys, clay, drawing, collages and games. A few examples:



### The knights and the castle

A working method for talking to children about vulnerable feelings in a safe way. The counsellor places a castle in the room and various puppets, including knights. The counsellor explains that everyone has a castle and that its inhabitants are protected by knights. First, the child is allowed to choose a knight or a few knights and place them at the castle or on the battlements. Then they can tell who lives in the castle and place figures there too. There may also be secret rooms in the castle. The child can place figures there too. Not everyone is allowed to enter those secret rooms, so good guards are needed at the gate. That is why the counsellor chats with the knights, so that they can tell who lives in the secret rooms and why and how they need to be protected. The role of the knights is to carefully consider who can and cannot be allowed in.

### The friendship book

A working method to conclude a session or a number of sessions. Invite the child to use drawing materials, pictures, etc. to make a book in which all the subpersonalities have a place. On a pre-printed

sheet, the child can fill in the name of the subpersonality, what they do for the child, when they come, and so on. This book can be added to throughout the course of therapy.

### Expressing feelings

This is a method for very young children (between 4 and 7 years old). Take a concrete situation that occurred in the child's life. Take a sheet of flipchart paper. The child is allowed to tear pieces of the paper to indicate how big the part of him or her was that was angry, sad, happy, etc. If desired, the child can also color the pieces of paper to match that feeling or draw a picture on them. The child can also stand on top of them and show that feeling, while the therapist participates or asks questions to that part.

### **Conclusion**

Working with Voice Dialogue with children is still relatively unknown, but it has proven to be possible in practice. It can help children learn to allow their feelings and welcome what they are experiencing. They learn to recognize feelings through subpersons and to find language for them (an important aspect of attachment). Discovering the positive sides of subpersonalities also contributes to self-acceptance. They can get to know and use other sides of themselves without having to say goodbye to sides that they have already developed well and still need. There are numerous working methods you can use to do this.

### **Invitation**

Do you also use Voice Dialogue in your work with children and/or young people? We are very very interested in hearing about your experiences and how you apply it in practice. If you have any tips or working methods you would like to share, we would love to hear from you. Please email them to [j.budde@hetbalkon.nl](mailto:j.budde@hetbalkon.nl). Thank you in advance.

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