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## Book Review

# Dibs: In Search of Self

**By Virginia M. Axline**

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**Reviewed by: Bruce B. Henderson**

Professor Emeritus, Western Carolina University,  
[henderson@wcu.edu](mailto:henderson@wcu.edu)

In response to James Anglin's challenge in this journal's previous issue, to take an old book off the shelf and reread it, I immediately thought of Virginia Axline's *Dibs: In Search of Self*. When I became an undergraduate psychology major over 50 years ago and wanted to begin to work under my mentor, Jerry Levin, it was prerequisite reading. Jerry knew Axline from Teachers College at Columbia University. As a practicing clinical psychologist and academic, Jerry was not particularly wedded to the specifics of Axline's 'play therapy' method, but he thought Axline's approach to interacting with children provided an ideal model for his students. I think he was right.

Although *Dibs* was not published until 1964, it was based on the case of a five-year-old Axline worked with at Carl Rogers' University of Chicago Counseling Center in the 1940s. Axline had been a student of Rogers at Ohio State and moved with him to Chicago, although they eventually had a serious falling out (documented in a thorough and fascinating study of Axline by Stich [2020]). Dibs was uncooperative, uncommunicative and sometimes aggressive with his teachers, parents, and sister. His behaviour changed dramatically over a series of weekly play sessions with Axline. Dibs' behaviour was transformed at home and at school.

Interpreting this nearly 80-year-old study shares all the problems of any research generalising from a single case study. To this day, you can find arguments on social media about what was wrong with Dibs (in the Rogerian tradition, Axline made no diagnosis), and you can also find testimonies as to the effect reading the book had on budding teachers, psychologists, youth workers, clergy, and counsellors. Perhaps it is important that there is significant evidence that versions of Axline's play therapy are effective (e.g., Lin & Bratton, 2015).

Yet, in some ways diagnosis and effectiveness are beside the point. Therapists from a variety of theoretical orientations, cognitive behavioural (Cochran et al.,



2024), psychoanalytic (Jackson, 2010), and family systems (Redfern 2022) have documented what they have learned from reading *Dibs*. That is the point. What we learn from Axline is how best to work with children. We build relationships by being physically and psychologically available, respecting the child's space and voice, and by being responsive to their needs rather than our own. We learn from children through careful objective observation, not via inferences coloured by our own biases and presuppositions.

Rereading *Dibs* was like meeting up with an old friend. Over a half-century of working with children in a wide variety of settings, the lessons from Axline have served me well. And in a note to James Anglin, *Dibs* absolutely loved books. In his last session with Axline, *Dibs* remarked: 'And isn't it funny that little black marks on paper can be so good?'

## References

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## About the reviewer

Bruce Henderson is professor emeritus of psychology at Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, NC, USA. He is an advocate of high-quality residential care for children and youth, and author of *Challenging the Conventional Wisdom about Residential Care for Children and Youth: A Good Place to Grow* (Routledge, 2024).

The review author was reviewing their own copy of this book.

