

# Dibs in Search of Self



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF VIRGINIA AXLINE

Axline was born in Indiana in 1913 and raised in Columbus, Ohio. After teaching elementary school for several years, she enrolled as a graduate student at Ohio State University, where she collaborated with Carl Rogers on person-centered therapy. In 1945, Axline became Rogers's research associate at the University of Chicago Counseling Center, where she developed her approach to child counseling. She gradually developed non-directive play therapy, and later, child-centered play therapy. In 1947, Axline published *Play Therapy*, which enumerated her theory of child psychotherapy. In 1950, Axline completed her Doctor of Education at Columbia University. She taught for six years at NYU's School of Medicine and School of Education, and for seven years at Columbia University. She then returned to Ohio. In 1964, Axline published *Dibs in Search of Self*, which is still hailed as one of the most influential books in the field of play therapy. Axline died in 1992 in Columbus, Ohio.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Axline's development of non-directive play therapy was adapted from the work of Carl Rogers's, who created person-centered therapy in the 1940s. Person-centered therapy's goal is to create an environment in which patients can learn to accept themselves and achieve personal fulfillment. It is now recognized as one of the major schools of psychotherapy. Axline worked under Rogers in graduate school, applying basic principles from person-centered therapy to children in play environments. She believed that not only should the therapist be empathetic and non-judgmental, but that they should also allow children to self-direct their play and set the therapy's pace. Person-centered therapy builds on humanistic psychology, which grew in opposition to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory established in the early 1900s and B. F. Skinner's behaviorism established in 1908. In *Dibs in Search of Self*, however, Axline repudiates both of these therapeutic methods.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In 1947, Axline wrote *Play Therapy*, which outlined her philosophy on non-directive childlike therapy—the method she uses with Dibs in *Dibs in Search of Self*. Eighteenth-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau also wrote about some of the foundational principles of play therapy in his book *Emile*, and Friedrich Froebel emphasized the importance of symbolism of child's play in *The Education of Man*. Gary Landreth's *Play*

Therapy (1991) details various developments in the field of play therapy since 1947. For case studies in child psychology, *The Boy Who Was Hounded a Dog*, written by child psychiatrist Dr. Bruce D. Perry, focuses on several stories of children dealing with trauma and immense stress as they develop, including how their brains have the capacity to heal. Other popular child psychology books that detail how to deal with children's emotional struggles include *The Whole Brain Child* and *No-Drama Discipline*, both written by Daniel J. Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Dibs in Search of Self*
- **When Written:** 1954–1964
- **Where Written:** New York, New York
- **When Published:** 1964
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Nonfiction (Psychology)
- **Setting:** New York City
- **Climax:** Dibs and Axline visit a church during his final play therapy session.
- **Point of View:** First Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Required Reading:** *Dibs in Search of Self* is often used as a foundational text in counselor training programs, especially in urban education working with children and families.

**The Best of Times:** Although there have been developments in the field of play therapy since the mid-20th century, the practice is still largely based on Axline's work.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Author and child psychologist Dr. Virginia Axline visits a private school in New York's Upper East Side to observe a five-year-old boy named Dibs. Dibs rarely interacts with others, and he often bullies out at his teachers and throws temper tantrums. The teachers have attempted categorizing him; they think he might be mentally disabled, though at times he seems highly intelligent. He may even know how to read. After observing Dibs at a school, Axline also meets with Dibs's mother and father. His mother is cold and resigned to the situation—the doctor thinks that Dibs can be helped, however. Dibs's parents agree to bring him to weekly play therapy sessions with Axline.

# Dibs In Search Of Self

**Sabine Zange**



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