



Introduction to Play Therapy
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Learning Objectives

- Awareness of the use of play therapy with children and adolescents
- Ability to design and conduct play sessions
- Understand the role of the therapist

Definition & Background

- The Association for Play Therapy (2014) defines play therapy as “the systematic use of a theoretical model to establish an interpersonal process wherein trained play therapists use the therapeutic powers of play to help clients prevent or resolve psychosocial difficulties and achieve optimal growth and development.”
- Play therapy has an extensive history dating back to the early 1900s and is rooted in psychodynamic theory. It has been refined throughout the years.

Background

- Typically, a trained mental health professional works with a child in a group or individually. Competence requires extensive training and supervision.
- Play therapists employ a variety of tools to engage children in treatment – e.g. a sand tray filled with various objects and miniature figures, puppets, reading and telling stories, story-making and role-playing.
- Most children are under the age of 12, however, play therapy is also used with adolescents.

Psychoanalytic Play Therapy (PPT)

PPT aims to change behaviour as well as the deeper aspects of the child - ways of coping and dealing with life via:-

- Helping to integrate various aspects of their personality
- Mastery of developmental tasks – e.g. separating and growing up, adapting to changes brought on by puberty.
- Promoting resiliency and adaptability and reducing a child's susceptibility to psychotic and borderline functioning, especially under stress.
- Assisting the child to develop an understanding of themselves, become more self accepting.

Psychoanalytic Play Therapy (cont'd)

- Providing a safe place for the child to explore thoughts, feelings and life.
- The therapist works at “therapeutically holding” the child i.e. absorbing any excitement and distress that the child is unable to handle.
- By momentarily confirming the child’s experiences the therapist helps the child to own his/her feelings and perceptions hence evolve in a more genuine self.
- Parents play a crucial role in supporting therapeutic function.

Developmental Play Groups

- Developmental Play Groups (DPG) were designed in the late 1960's.
- DPG is closely linked to models of psychosocial and cognitive development.
- DPG describe strategies for conducting groups with children from preschool ages through to late adolescence and emphasises the therapeutic uses of play.

Early Childhood

- Uses playrooms that include toys that bring children into contact with each other and require a degree of cooperative behaviour.
- Tells stories in which good role models are rewarded for preferred behaviour.
- Assists child to understand the cause-effect relationship of both cooperative and uncooperative behaviour. Positive effects of good behaviour is emphasised.

Preadolescence

- Play takes the form of games and activities such as board and outdoor games
- Sports, film or filmstrips can be used to provide modelling.
- Activity and game-oriented play, capitalises on the natural tendency of the preadolescent for small interactive groups of the same sex.

Adolescence

- The use of role-plays, drama, and films coupled with talk-interview counselling, provide good behavioural change tools for this grouping.
- Activities for adolescents are focused on helping them to address developmental challenges.
- Problems relating to identity issues, risk taking behaviours and conflicts are primary activity goals.

Important Considerations

The use of toys in play sessions should:

- allow relationship development with the child
- enable release of a wide range of feelings
- assist in developing self-esteem
- assist in developing insight
- help the child learn new behaviours to replace undesired ones

Important Considerations

- The therapist's behaviour during play sessions sets the tone/climate for behaviour change via modelling.
- The need to foster a warm and caring environment in play therapy is crucial to therapeutic success.
- It is the responsibility of the therapist to provide a non-threatening environment i.e. a 'safe space' for minors to express themselves.

RESOURCES

- Bromfield, R. N. (2003). *Psychoanalytic play therapy*.
<http://www.psychceu.com/Schaefer/0471264725.pdf>
- Gazda, G. (1969) *Group Counselling a Developmental Approach*. <https://cjc-rcc.ucalgary.ca/cjc/index.php/rcc/article/view/2357>