

Play Therapy for Children

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INTRODUCTION

History of Play, Introduction to Therapy

The use of therapy to heal traumas, aid diseases, and overall better the quality of people's lives is becoming more and more accepted and normalized in today's society. In comparison to the stigma around therapy and mental health decades ago, the world has come a long way.

Another area of mental health that has been vastly improved on is the mental health and wellbeing of children. The common misconception that all children are happy-go-lucky because of their lack of life exposure, doesn't always hold up. So many children go through experiences that leave them with trauma just as adults do; however, children don't have the mental capacity to confront these traumas and cope with them. Traditional therapy that is used for adults, is not as effective for children, as it is aimed towards people who are able to process things at a higher level than most children. There are various types of therapy that are more suitable for children, including play therapy.

As a biological and natural function, play has been recognized to be vital to the development of both humans and animals. The innate need and desire to play comes from the need to be social and explore the world surrounding these humans and animals. A book that discusses the nature of play in all of its forms for humans and apes suggests, "playful behavior often resembles "real" behavior but lacks its normal biological consequences" (Pellegrini et al., 2005). Play is an integral part of a child's development because it is using a tactic that is comfortable to them, to explore a world that is uncomfortable to them, while also allowing them to fulfill their natural need to be social with one another. A child engages in different types of

play at various stages of their life that include dramatic, fantasy, exploratory, manipulative, and physical play. Each form of play consists of something different, and aids a child's development in various ways. The style of play that a child participates in depends on their social skills, the stage of development they are in, the environment around them, and so much more. As a whole, play is the activity that gives children a sense of responsibility and allows them to feel in control. By giving children the space to play freely, they are able to figure out who they are, what the world is like, and how to communicate with one another. For example, as a parent or adult watching children play make believe is often a funny sight to see, and seems as if it is simply for fun. However, the importance of this imaginative play is imperative to a child's growing up, "Pretend play serves the child well for self-entertainment and for assimilating the complexities of the world. But it is also the foundation of a long-term incorporation and consolidation of a major human characteristic; our human imagination, our capacity through consciousness to form experiences into stories, to manipulate memory representations of our physical and social worlds into new scenarios" (Goldstein, 1994). Seeing that play is an integral part of a child's development, it makes logical sense that when trauma or hardships come up in a child's life, play would be a helpful and familiar tool to use to assist the child in overcoming said trauma. After research done on the impacts of play on children and animals, and the thought it could carry on to be much more powerful, play therapy was created in 1946 taking ideas from Freud, Virginia Axline, and Carl Rogers.

At its core, play therapy is based on the meaning of play itself, "the central experience for the child in helping her make sense of the world around her" (Cattanach, 2008). By using a concept such as play, that is much more familiar to the child, they are able to tap into feelings, emotions, and memories that they may not have been able to express using words alone; Melanie

Klein refers to play therapy as “furnished direct access to the child’s unconscious”. For many children who have gone through traumas whether it be their home life, a medical diagnosis, or anything in between, play therapy is an extremely useful tool that can be helpful to both the healthcare providers and the children in their healing process. When researching the effects of play therapy in abused children the Freudian concept is discussed, “children repeat in their play everything that has made a great impression on them in actual life” (Cattanach, 2008). In the lives of children, play therapy can be an extremely helpful tool in order for them to make sense of their own life experiences, as well as being a telling communication tool for the adults around them to understand how the children are feeling. Through a process of relationship building, play, and many other components of therapy, children are able to get similar benefits that adults do from therapy, that are tailored to their needs and cognitive function. Play therapy can be used in conjunction with other therapy methods to provide help and healing to children with trauma, and, when given the attention it deserves, can also be used to help children of marginalized communities.

THE WORLD OF PLAY THERAPY

Used with Other Forms of Therapy

Play therapy is not an all-encompassing form of therapy. The concept of play therapy is translated into several different styles of execution and is used alongside other more “traditional” techniques in order to create the best possible outcome for the child. The overarching theme of play therapy is to use toys, scenarios, and actions that are easy and familiar for children to help them better explain and understand the more complicated things in their lives. Seeing that every child is different, it only makes sense that there are different types of play therapy to cater to the

interests and personalities of various children. For children who thrive off of social interaction and connection, group therapy can be a wonderful tool that allows for flourishing and growth. Using group therapy has long been a way to let people who suffer from trauma connect with one another and feel supported throughout their healing, which often makes it easier for people to open up about their personal lives, “Within the group setting, youth have the opportunity to learn social skills. Further, social behaviors practiced within the group can afford youth the opportunity to focus on generalizing behaviors practiced in the group and apply these to real-life situations” (Stutey et al., 2020). In the case of children and adolescents, group play therapy has been proven to be successful in strengthening both children’s intrapersonal and interpersonal processing (Stutey et al., 2020). By using group therapy, children are able to improve their social skills, reduce anxiety, and have a type of practice on how to approach decisions in their lives to come. In a study done by the *International Journal of Play*, group play therapy is used in combination with reality therapy on a group of children who have experienced some level or trauma or mental illness in their lives. Reality Therapy is explained as, “aims to help clients identify their desires or wants and evaluate the choices they are making” (Stutey, et al., 2020). Throughout the study, these children were placed into groups and presented with scenarios similar to ones that were likely to happen at some point in their lives. The scenarios that were simulated, and walked through within the groups, ended up helping the children increase their social skills amongst each other, increase their self-esteem levels, and help their decision-making skills. The simulations gave them a space to explore decision making with the support of other people around them, “In this small group, youth can experience creative means to gain insight into their basic needs and quality world in order to choose behaviors that are more congruent with what they want” (Stutey et al., 2020). Often times traumatic experiences can deeply alter the

way a child looks at the world, causing them to not trust certain people or be afraid of taking certain routes in their lives. By presenting these children with scenarios that allow them to navigate decision making, going forward they can begin to move on from their traumas in the ways that they desire, while maintaining healthy coping mechanisms.

In addition to group play therapy, specific interests are targeted and utilized in both music therapy and nature-based play therapy. Music therapy is commonly used in more residential programs such as hospitals with children being treated for long term diseases such as cancers. Music therapy specifically uses instruments and various forms of music to promote a sense of personal development and growth as well as a sense of comfort to patients who have outside stressors in the form of their illness. The many benefits of this therapy are discussed in a journal article published by *The Journal of Pediatric Oncology Nursing*, “Music Therapy is particularly effective in promoting social objectives such as increased interaction, verbalization, independence, and cooperation; enhanced relationships with health care personnel and family members; and increased stimulation during long-term hospitalization or isolation” (Standley, et al., 1995). For a child who is struggling with something that is almost completely out of their control, having a tool like music to either create or listen to in any way they please, can be something that allows them to feel like they are in control. In a study done in Australia, oncology patients who went through a series of music based play therapy programs showed increased levels of emotional support and reported that the music provided them with a healthy outlet during their treatment (Stadley et al., 1995). Being creative is another important component of a child’s development, as it brings about a level of confidence. Children who may have lack confidence due to illness or isolation are in need of an outlet that might be able to raise their confidence up to a healthier level. By incorporating musical freedom and creativity into a child’s

therapy program, that child is able to grow in ways that simply talking to a therapist may not allow them to, “Counseling techniques are often paired with music to achieve emotional objectives such as expression, adjustment, stability or focus of control” (Stadley et al., 1995).

Another popular outlet for people who find themselves in high stress or mentally unstable scenarios is nature. Nature is a perfect way for people to “reset” themselves amongst dealing with their trauma seeing as, “humans have an innate need to connect with nature” (Swank et al., 2020). Humans, especially innocent children, have a natural affinity towards nature that allows them to relax, feel grounded, and explore their truest selves. Another study done by the *International Journal of Play* looks at how children, when given the opportunity to explore freely in nature can be extremely therapeutic for children who have underlying trauma. In nature-based play therapy, children are often the ones in the driver seat, meaning the healthcare provider gives them the freedom to dictate what happens throughout the session. The presence of nature within therapy is beneficial and important, “Nature has a powerful influence on the physical and mental health of children; and therefore, it is crucial to provide opportunities for children to connect with nature” (Swank et al., 2020). Giving such power and responsibility to children while allowing them to calm themselves and connect with nature is an incredible tool that allows the child to forget about their traumas, alleviating some of the crippling symptoms that they can cause.

Using the various stimulating activities that coincide with the personality of children such as socialization, music, or nature, mental health professionals are able to maximize the benefits of play therapy for children. A child is much more likely to open up, want to grow, and overall get help, if they are actively participating in something that feels both comfortable and enjoyable to them at that time. There are countless other forms of play therapy that could be used

depending on the type of child being focused on, but overall, making that child feel comfortable and confident is the top priority.

Types of Traumas Play Therapy is Useful For

With all its benefits listed about, play therapy would more than likely prove to be helpful for almost any child that it was used on, regardless of if that child had trauma or not. However, most research studies conducted that have provided evidence surrounding play therapy show its benefits among kids with various types of traumas such as medical trauma and abuse trauma/PTSD. Children who have severe medical diagnoses are forced to grow up much more than they should at their age. For a child who has a serious illness, it is more than likely that they are exposed to a world of pain, loss, and burdens that most children don't typically see on the school playground. In most scenarios as well, those particular children are surrounded by adults who process things much differently than they do. This disconnect of maturity levels can be very confusing to young children, and put them in a place of uncertainty and confusion. This also holds true for the siblings of the sick child, as they are placed in an equally difficult position. The journal, *Issues in Comprehensive Pediatric Nursing* discusses the effects of illness of the children and their siblings and how they respond to play therapy afterwards. This study showed that the children who had undergone a medical trauma, were much more likely to gravitate towards a play that involved different medical objects such as toy hospital beds or needles. By getting to tactically play with these items in a comfortable setting, the children are able to begin to understand what is happening around them in ways that are more familiar to them as opposed to meetings with doctors that use words far too big for children to grasp, "Medical play was a

mechanism for imaginal coping and working through stress related to medical experiences” (Nabors et al., 2013). It is also noted in this study that this play can be helpful in providers knowing how to talk to their children and how to best help them and their needs, “Play also is a means for eliciting children’s memories in a safe environment. It allows others to learn about their fears and concerns as well as their misconceptions about medical procedures.” (Nabors et al., 2013). A medical illness such as cancer or sickle cell disease that puts children in the hospital for extended periods of time, can be detrimental to a child’s mental health and make the world around them seem incredibly complicated. By presenting these children with the opportunity to play with medical themed toys and scenarios, the scary things happening to them every day begin to seem less scary, and more familiar. The tactile play especially with toys is a wonderful tool to help these children get used to the tools that may otherwise be foreign to them. By using this play therapy, children are able to feel like children and work through their emotions in a way that feels right for them, while making sense of the things that seem unfamiliar all around them, therefore lowering their stress and fear levels.

In addition to medical trauma, play therapy has also been known to be useful helping children cope with trauma of abuse. “The play therapy process for abused children is an exploration through play which helps the child make sense of her experiences in a way which is appropriate... and is determined by the child” (Cattanach, 2008). For children who are abused at a young age, they often don’t even know what has happened to them, which makes it extremely difficult for them to confront the emotions that follow the instance of abuse. Some children benefit from openly working through their trauma in all areas of their lives, while others prefer to have a sort of “safe space” that is specifically dedicated to talking about their trauma. Play therapy when used for children who have been abused, can serve both purposes for a child

(Cattanach, 2008). When a child is abused and they don't know how or why, they often try to block out the experience and force themselves to regress mentally into a place of misunderstanding to save them from confronting the abuse itself. By using age appropriate play for these children, they are able to slowly regain inside back to their respective cognitive stages in a way that is familiar to them, and then they are able to go forward with the healing process post-trauma. To highlight the importance of play post-trauma, a study was done in California using a group of school children who had been kidnapped and held hostage in a van. After the incident, it was difficult for the children to discuss what had happened to them and piece together how they were supposed to move on. However, when the children were placed in a setting with toys that were familiar to them, and allowed to play freely without being pressured with questions, they were able to use the toys to describe what had happened to them in simple terms. By using these toys, not only were the children able to describe the incident, but they were able to conceptualize their experiences and understand them at their own level which helps to kick start the coping process. This explanation of the traumatic event is also extremely helpful to the therapist as they try and help the child. Unlike an adult therapist, a child therapist in situations like this must act a certain way, "The role of the therapist is to help the child to use play materials to express herself effectively... to be audience and empathetic listener when required... to give it (the play) meaning and importance so that the child feels valued" (Cattanach, 2008). Taking the back-seat role and giving the attention and power to the child in play therapy, will make that child feel unjudged and safe, ultimately allowing them to explore their trauma in an effective and helpful way.

Play Therapy in Marginalized Populations

Play Therapy has been shown to provide great assistance to marginalized populations, however due to certain biases, these populations of children are not always given the space to “play” like other children are. Unfortunately, due to the biases that remain in our society, the benefits of therapy and play therapy are not always given to those who need it. For example, several studies show that play therapy would be extremely helpful within all children who have undergone trauma for many reasons whether that be medical, home life, etc. There is also plenty of evidence showing that Latino children are at especially high risk for diverse challenges of many kids. However, the lack of attention paid to this issue causes an absence of resources around for these children, “Latinos are frequently underrepresented in mental health services, and the effectiveness of socioemotional interventions for Latino children are under researched” (Caballos et al., 2020). In general, there is a lack of attention paid to Latino children and their mental health in school’s systems. As a marginalized community in the United States, it is very likely that these children have traumas just like the rest of the children in the country, however what serve as “warning signs” of trauma to white children aren’t always viewed as such with non-white children. The stereotypes and biases about children of color suggest that if a child is acting out or seems as though they may have something going on in their life, it is simply part of who ‘they’ are and is not seen as something that can be changed by extra help given to that child. Some people may think that going the extra mile with children of color is a lost cause, because they are going to start trouble anyway. However, not only is that assumption rooted in white supremacy and bigotry, but it is also proven to be false. The *International Journal of Play Theory* showcases a study done on young boys in elementary school from low income

households who are labeled as troublemakers that have a history of disruptive behavior in class. When exposed to sessions of play therapy, the boys were able to have attention drawn to them one on one, and have the space to simply play. While this play may have helped them piece together anything that may be happening outside of the classroom, above all it gave them the time to be kids and simply do what felt comfortable to them for a few minutes. The boys who used play therapy in school, showed vast improvements quickly in the classroom, also sending a ripple effect to their peers (Phipps & Post, 2020). The research that supports the effectiveness of play therapy is solid and provides a strong backing of how helpful and effective the power of play really is. However, there has been little to no research on play therapy that involved children of color, who arguably are at the highest risk for trauma in this country. If the same attention was given to children's mental health and behavioral patterns across the board, play therapy would be able to help exponentially more children than it already does.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, sometimes in this world kids are exposed to things that they shouldn't be. Bad things happen all the time, and there is no way to stop them. However, given the fact that children are unable to process things the way adults are, it is imperative that attention is paid to how to tailor coping processes towards the brains of young children. Not many children would be able to sit on a couch and articulate exactly how they are feeling about things in their life, that can be a difficult task even for grown adults. By allowing kids to take the reins a bit and play in ways they are comfortable, they are able to piece together the world around them, helping professionals know how to assist them effectively. Trauma can make a child's world turn upside down, making it seem impossible for them to be 'normal' and severely decreasing their

confidence levels. Play is something that makes a child feel like a child, makes them feel normal, and allows them to gain the confidence back that they may have lost. The research supporting play therapy shows that children benefit greatly from people meeting them where they are at, rather than trying to catch up to the world around them with no sense of how to do so. While this both evidence is helpful and exciting because it allows us to effectively help children even more, it is terribly disappointing to see these findings go to waste by not allowing all children to benefit from them. The lack of research and attention paid to the mental health and coping patterns of black and brown children is staggering, and is a reflection of the society that we live in. A society that holds on so tightly to the fact that white is the default, and that all research done on white children and implicated in white populations, is simply all that needs to happen. The biases that behavioral outbursts are normal for children of color but indicative of a problem for white children is harmful and perpetuates stereotypes throughout our society. The only way that our world is going to grow and heal from the traumas of the past, is to pay close attention to all members of the world, and help each one in the ways that best benefit them. A one size fits all model simply does not provide effective help to all people. Each child in the world needs to be given space to play, to be the captain of their own ship, and to heal in ways that suit them.

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