

Chapter 6

Adlerian Play Therapy: Practice and Research

Kristin K. Meany-Walen
University of Northern Iowa, USA

Terry Kottman
Encouragement Zone, USA

ABSTRACT

Many play therapists routinely use Adlerian theory as their primary mode of conducting therapy with children (Lambert et al., 2007). In an age of evidenced-informed practices, research that supports or describes a treatment's effectiveness is important (Chambless & Ollendick, 2001). Because of Adlerian play therapy's popularity and the emphasis for evidence of treatment effectiveness, researchers began investigating Adlerian play therapy. A brief description of Adlerian play therapy and a description of research is provided.

INTRODUCTION

Adlerian play therapy is a popular method of working with children, adolescents, and families and been identified as one of the top three most widely used play therapy approaches by people who work therapeutically with children (Lambert et al., 2007). It was developed by one of the authors (TK) in the late 1980s, merging the concepts and strategies of Individual Psychology and the skills of play therapy to a developmentally responsive intervention for children (Kottman & Meany-Walen, 2016). Its philosophical tenants follow those of Alfred Adler and his theory, Individual Psychology, emphasizing that people are socially embedded, goal directed, and striving for belonging (Adler, 1927/1998). Although Adler stressed the importance and influence of childhood on human development and personality, he did not provide specific strategies in which to work with children. We believe he would endorse Adlerian play therapy as he wrote,

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Adlerian Play Therapy

[Play] should be seen as educational aids and as stimuli for the child's psyche, imagination and life skills. Every game is a preparation for the future....In observing children at play, we can see their whole attitude towards life; play is the utmost importance to every child. (Adler, 1927/1998, p. 83)

The Adlerian play therapist and client move through four phases of counseling: building a collaborative and egalitarian relationship, investigating the child's lifestyle, helping the child gain insight, and reorienting/reeducating the child to more productive and socially responsible ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving in various situations (Kottman & Meany-Walen, 2016). In the process of Adlerian play therapy, the therapist uses directive and nondirective interventions and toys, play, metaphor, storytelling, art, sand tray experiences, and movement to learn about, communicate with, and educate the child client. Because Adlerian theory holds that people are socially embedded and cannot be understood in isolation, parents or other important adults such as teachers are involved throughout the process. They provide information about their relationship with the child, the child's history, current functioning, and changes.

In the first phase, the therapist and client begin to develop a relationship in which the child is and feels valued and encouraged. The goal of this phase is for the child to feel cared for, safe, and hopeful about the potential for positive change. As these feelings become activated in the child, the child becomes more free and open to express him or herself, available to gain insight, and less resistant to making changes. The therapist shares power with the child as both parties exchange information, make decisions, and interact with one another. The play therapist uses basic play therapy skills of tracking, restating content, and reflecting feelings as a way to build a relationship with the child. Using some directive techniques (i.e., art, movement, sand trays, puppet shows), the Adlerian play therapist also actively engages the child in games and activities designed to build trust, foster the emerging relationship, and set the stage for the therapeutic process. One examples of a directed technique is to play a relatively simple and common game such as Jenga®, tic tac toe, or checkers. This can be helpful to assess the child's ability to take turns, follow pre-set rules, win or lose gracefully, and stay focused. During the game, and based on what the counselor knows about the child, the counselor may or may not insist that the child follow the traditional rules of the game, or might brainstorm with the child new ways of playing the game. Essentially, the goal is to build trust and practice sharing power. Metacommunicating about themes and underlying issues throughout this process, the Adlerian play therapist deepens the relationship. Although the primary focus of the first phase is building an egalitarian alliance with the child, the Adlerian play therapist continues to strengthen the therapeutic relationship throughout all phases of the play therapy process.

In the next phase, investigating the child's lifestyle, the play therapist works to understand the child's lifestyle--his or her unique way of being and beliefs about self, others, and the world and the behaviors that accompany those beliefs (Kottman & Meany-Walen, 2016). The lifestyle is at the center of Adlerian theory and the following constructs are frequently used by Adlerian play therapists: family constellation (Kottman & Meany-Walen, 2016), personality priorities (Kfir, 1981, 2011), goals of misbehavior (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964), Crucial Cs (Lew & Bettner, 1998, 2000), life tasks (Adler 1927/1998; Maniacci, Sackett-Maniacci, & Mosak, 2014), mistaken beliefs (Sweeney, 2009), and assets (Kottman 2009; Kottman & Meany-Walen, 2016). The therapist uses this information to conceptualize the client and his or her assets, issues, and patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving and develops a treatment plan. Treatment plans are designed to encourage and strengthen the child's assets, and shift the child's feelings of inferiority, mistaken beliefs, and socially deconstructive behaviors into socially useful and constructive self-perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors (Kottman & Meany-Walen, 2016).

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