

Chapter 49

Play and Play Therapy

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ABSTRACT

Play is the most powerful, the purest, and the most effective form of communication language and self-expression available (walls, 1982). The concept of therapy through play was derived from Melanie Klein (1921) and Anna Freud (1952). Unfortunately, play is a rapidly declining art due in large part to our ever-changing, fast paced and technologically driven society where recesses are being cut and children often turn to video games instead of the outdoors. With this in mind, incorporating play into the daily academic life of children is critical and vital for their total well being – physically, socially and intellectually. The focus of this chapter is to explain the importance of play, provide a review of the literature, and discuss the theoretical framework, techniques and current trends. Special attention will be focused on how educators can utilize play therapy to enhance self-esteem, social, interpersonal and problem solving skills and reduce the everyday stress that surrounds our children today.

“At first, any playground seems a confusion of noise and movement, but patient observation can reveal a rich and dynamic oral culture.” Elizabeth Grugeon, 2005

INTRODUCTION

What does play have to do with play therapy? Play is an essential part of childhood. It is a fun-

damental event in growth and development from infancy (Harvey, 1980). Play refers to a spontaneous, voluntary, enjoyable activity; an attitude or spirit; a vital element in the total learning process; something not associated with work; a response to life and one in which the child can be involved actively or passively (Arnaud, 1975; Baker, 1975; Hartley & Goldenson, 1957). As previously stated, I argue that play is the purest, most effective form of communication language and self-expression available (walls, 1982). Through play, a child

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reaches out into his/her world of intellect, emotion, and physical space in effort to gain control in the surrounding environment (Baker, 1975; Landreth, 1991; Petrillo & Sanger, 1980). Play is a major part of a child's life; and it is the most complete of all the educational processes in terms of influencing the development of emotions, intellect, and physical growth (Elkind, 2007). In a 2007 statement issued by the American Academy of Pediatrics, Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg of the University of Pennsylvania refers to play as essential for healthy brain growth and development leading to imagination and creativity, as well as prompting resilience in children (Miller, 2009). Recently, there has been a tremendous decline in outdoor and creative/imaginative play among children. Hofferth, (2010) states there is little, if any, time spent playing outside compared to growing amounts of time that children are playing on computers and video games. The American Academy of Pediatrics states that active and creative play help children achieve success more effectively than sitting in front of the computer or television (Elkind, 2007; Miller, 2009). Play is the language of childhood. It is a critical element of healthy child development. Well known play researcher, Dr. Joe Frost (2008), states that "spontaneous play is the delicate dance of childhood that strengthens the mind and body, and nourishes the soul." The results of a 2009 study on school recess and its effects on group classroom behavior conducted by Romina Barros and her colleagues, Ellen Silver and Ruth Stein, suggests children who were provided with daily recess of at least fifteen minutes in length had better classroom behavior reported by their teachers than children not given a daily recess.

With this noted, why in 2010 have many schools taken away recess? Why have most schools eliminated physical education from their curriculum? Why has the preschool curriculum taken the "joy of play" out of the day where they spend more time on "academic work"? Why is our world today stripping from our children the love of life, the world of wonder, and the inability

to get along? The impact of eliminating play is taking a toll on the overall development of our children today. The use of play as a therapy is increasing in the practice of professionals who work with children. Children are being seen by play therapists for a variety of academic and social issues. I am consulted frequently to provide support and recommendations for teachers who have students who are displaying difficulty with their social skills and have an inability to get along with their classmates. This not only impacts the child's social and academic growth, but it affects the other students in the class. During an observation as the play therapist for a preschool program for 3 and 4 years, I noticed that a number of children were unable to play cooperatively with each other. One child in particular, let's call him Bailey, constantly was grabbing toys from other children, but not actually playing with them. The teacher's response to this action was "instead of taking a toy from your friend you need to 'use your words'." By the look on Bailey's face and the continued action of taking toys from his classmate, it was obvious to me that he did not understand what "use your words" meant. I asked Bailey if I could play with him and he nodded yes. I sat down beside him and began building blocks. Bailey began taking the blocks off the tower that I was building. I asked him if he would like one of my blocks and he nodded "yes". I said "Bailey, if you would like one of my blocks, I need for you to ask me." He looked at me and took another block. I said "Bailey, I need for you to say 'may I please have one of your blocks?'" At this point it was clear to me that Bailey did not have the language to actually play with someone else. He did not know that he needed to use words like "may I please have one of your blocks?" or "can I build a tower with you?" I had to teach Bailey the "rules" of sharing and playing cooperatively with others. This is just one example that acknowledges that we can no longer assume that children know how to play.

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