

## PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN PLAY THERAPY

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### Abstract

Psychologists and counsellors who work with children will readily agree that play is the essence and fortitude of a child's language, his most natural medium of self-expression. As it is important for the child to be able to "play out" his problems, one very necessary component all too often missing from the counsellor-child dyad is the parent. Therefore, not only does play therapy act as a medium of expression for children, but the therapist can and should utilize it as an effective technique whereby parents can better understand their children. When the counsellor decides that the therapy dyad is to include the parents, a well developed methodological approach on the part of the therapist is required. The purpose of this article is to outline a methodological approach as well as to emphasize the necessity of including the parent in the play therapy situation.

### Résumé

Les psychologues et les conseillers qui travaillent avec les enfants sont d'accord que le jeu est l'essence et le coeur du langage de l'enfant, son moyen le plus naturel et spontané pour s'exprimer. Il est certes important pour l'enfant de vivre et résoudre ses problèmes par le truchement du jeu. Cependant, un élément important manque trop souvent dans le rapport conseiller-enfant: le parent. Ainsi, le jeu devient non seulement thérapeutique pour l'enfant mais également devient un moyen permettant aux parents de mieux comprendre leur enfant. Quand le conseiller décide que les parents doivent participer à la thérapie de l'enfant, une approche méthodologique bien pensée est requise de la part du thérapeute. Cet article veut décrire une telle approche et faire ressortir la nécessité d'inclure les parents dans l'utilisation du jeu thérapeutique.

Psychologists and counsellors who work with children will readily agree that play is the essence and fortitude of a child's language, his most natural medium of self-expression. This particular form of self-expression does not know any barrier of mental or physical pathology. That is, play is not necessarily limited to the healthy nor is it limited to any one aged child. Although experimental research with play, as either the dependent or independent variable is difficult to conduct, many investigators such as Moustakas (1953), Axeline (1947, 1964), Miller (1968) and Ohlson (1974) have reported extremely positive results. The results of these studies emphasize that through the medium of play with self and other children, the therapist can assist the child in developing those social behavior skills necessary to function effectively within society. In fact, if the social modeling principles involved in the teaching of altruistic values were applied to

the play situation, it might possibly become an effective way of teaching those values (Cartledge, 1975). In the presence of a discerning therapist, the child may also gain a better understanding of himself and the way he relates to others. Play activities and situations may also be particularly meaningful for the child when he is emotionally upset, lacking self-confidence, or fantasizing. When such events as divorce, death, the arrival of a new sibling or parent surrogate, moving into a new neighborhood, school phobia, or peer conflict occur in the child's life, he frequently has difficulty understanding and adequately dealing with them (Barclay, 1967; Anderson, 1968; Ohlson, 1973; Despert, 1953; Scheffer, 1969). As the child's linguistic development is naturally and developmentally limited, the therapist can utilize the play therapy technique as a viable means whereby the child derives meaning from his experiences.

As it is important for the child to be able to "play out" his problems, thus enabling him to better express his feelings of frustration, anger, hostility, disassociative tendencies, plus a host of other affectual variables, one very necessary component all too often missing from the psychologist-child dyad is the parent. All too often the play therapy situation between therapist and child is too secretive with parents having only peripheral involvement or receiving little clinical information as to what is taking place between therapist and child. Therefore, not only does play therapy act as a medium of expression for children, but the therapist can and should utilize it as an effective technique whereby parents can better understand their children. In fact, the author of this article has found that in the majority of his own cases involving play therapy, if parents are excluded from the therapy situation, they generally have greater difficulty in comprehending the child's total developmental process. Under the guidance of a qualified psychologist, parents, by involving themselves in their child's world of play, can learn more effective means of communication with their children, establish closer bonds of trust and affection with their children, and better understand the world, real and make believe, in which the child lives, by truly experiencing the child's inner feelings and frustrations.

When the psychologist decides that the play therapy dyad is to include the parents, a well developed methodological approach on the part of the therapist is required. The play therapy situation can be disastrous if parents are merely requested to participate without first receiving direction and purpose from the psychologist. Without a strong methodological approach the parents might as well go home and let things remain as they were. First, when the psychologist includes the parent(s) in the play activity, he must be sure that the parent(s) involves himself as an active participator rather than a benign observer. However, once the parent has decided to become a participant in the play therapy, the psychologist must guard against the parent(s) becoming a director of the play session. If the parent(s) slips into the role of director, the session should be terminated immediately and a parent(s) - psychologist consultation session should be set up, informing the parents of what is happening. The author has found in a great many cases that when the parent(s) assumes an authoritarian role, the natural or extemporaneous play which fosters the child's self-expression, will generally be curtailed. The therapist must, therefore, insure the

parent of total involvement in the child's activity. This is best accomplished by first having as many parent consultations as required, explaining the procedures, processes and goals of the play therapy program. Second, the author has found it very useful and effective to have the parents observe other children participating in individual or group play therapy situations as well as observing video's of other parents involved in play therapy with their children. Third, the author has found that it is necessary to continually reinforce the parent(s) in terms of his involvement with the child. The reason being that immediate and spontaneous communication between parent(s) and child doesn't usually occur during the first couple of sessions and parents have a tendency to withdraw their input into the session if not continually reinforced.

Paramount to the therapy session itself, the psychologist must ensure that there exists an equality of roles wherein the child is not threatened by the presence of the parent(s). Again, the author has found that a parent who presents a threat to the child during a play session causes the child to become withdrawn, frightened, and often submissive and anxious. This can be avoided by exposing the child to the parent(s) involvement on a successive approximation basis until the parent(s) is completely involved in the sessions. Although it takes time for the parent(s) and child to adjust to the parent's newly acclaimed role, the results of the interaction are tremendous. Under the direction of a qualified therapist and with the parent(s) as participator, the child will more readily display his emotions, share his world of dreams, and establish a greater degree of communication with the parent(s).

Not only is it important to "set the stage" for play therapy, but of great importance is the selection of play materials. The materials that should be kept on hand by the therapist should be simple and easy to handle so that the child will not become frustrated by materials he cannot easily manipulate. In order to withstand strenuous handling, the toys/materials should be of durable construction. For extremely young children (2-4 years of age) who have a tendency to place objects in the mouth, toys should be non-toxic and absent of small parts that can easily be inserted in the mouth. In addition, the toys should be as sexually unbiased as possible in order to allow the child to designate his own sex object choice. As for the setting, a large sandbox is ideal. A puppet theatre, complete with several different hand puppets, serves as an excellent outlet for

children's activity. The puppet theatre is an excellent means to initially involve the parent(s) in the play therapy session. Other play materials generally appropriate are walki-talkies, nursing bottles, dolls and doll house, toy animals, soldiers, paint, paper, Skinnerian boxes, blocks and cubes and typewriters. Also, clean egg cartons, cardboard containers, and plastic bottles can be put to innumerable uses by children and parent(s). In fact, the more non-defined the material/toy, the more the child and parent(s) can explore ways to improve their communicative process (Ohlson, 1973).

The end result of play therapy between parent(s) and child is, of course, a better communicating family unit and thus, maximum behavioral growth for both the child and parent(s). Most psychologists are probably in agreement that play therapy is a technique wherein the psychologist can help the child manipulate his environment (Sears, 1951), assist in developing the child's creativity (Scheffer, 1969), and strengthen the child's socializing ability (Axeline, 1964). By including the parent(s), however, the play therapy situation becomes a very viable means whereby the parent(s) can learn to understand the child's world, and help develop his creativity and more effectively communicate with his children.

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