

Play Therapy: Not Just for Children?

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Introduction

Play therapy promotes mental health care and wellness among children and is effective in helping children cope with a variety of issues, including anxiety, depression, abuse and behavioural difficulties (Landreth, 2002; Topham & VanFleet, 2011). Play therapy can be loosely defined as a relationship between a child and therapist who, through the use of various play materials, develop a trusting bond and safe space in which a child can explore their feelings, thoughts, experiences and behaviours through the use of play (Landreth, 2002). Inherent to play therapy is the education of parents and caregivers which is crucial to achieving therapeutic success. In order for play therapy to be effective, it is important that caregivers are educated about what play therapy is, the benefits it can offer and the importance of their involvement (Post, Ceballos, & Penn, 2012). This article outlines the reasons why parents, caregivers and the general public must be informed about play therapy and, more specifically, what this education should look like for parents and caregivers in particular.

The Role of Education in Play Therapy

Children and adults communicate through different mediums. Whereas adults communicate through verbal expression, many children lack the ability to verbally communicate and instead express themselves through play. It is for this reason that therapists will engage children in play as a

method of achieving communication and expression to help them overcome distress (Landreth, 2002). Through the use of play adults may better understand a child's thoughts, feelings, needs, desires and experiences (Topham & VanFleet, 2011.).

Although play therapy was developed to help children cope with distress, an important aspect of play therapy is the continued education and involvement of caregivers (Cates, Paone, Packman, & Margolis, 2006; Post et al., 2012). In addition to working with the child, therapists can teach caregivers how to meet and respond to the needs of their child, teach new parenting skills, discuss new approaches to discipline and provide additional resources specific to their child's needs (Post et al., 2012). Therapists can also educate caregivers about the importance of change within the home, which is an important component to successful play therapy. While children may make positive changes in therapy, it can be difficult to transfer those skills to other areas of their lives (Kottman & Ashby, 1999; Kottman, 2003). For example, a child who is learning how to comply with rules may succeed in doing so in therapy, but may fail to comply with the rules at home where they are not consistently enforced. In this circumstance, caregivers would need to enforce house rules by setting clear and concise boundaries for the child. Therefore, the process of play therapy is not solely about changing the child's behaviour, but usually also requires change within the family unit (Kottman, 2003).

One way to educate caregivers is through a specific type of play therapy called filial therapy (Landreth, 2002; Topham & VanFleet, 2011). Filial therapy was designed to strengthen the parent-child relationship and requires the therapist to guide and instruct the parent in their play and interactions with the child. In this setting, the parent or caregiver takes the lead in therapy and is

encouraged to try out new skills and techniques they have learned with the child (Topham & VanFleet, 2011). Filial therapy teaches parents how to use play to create a safe environment where they can learn to understand their children's thoughts and feelings (Topham & VanFleet, 2011). Furthermore, caregiver involvement in play therapy has been shown to increase the positive outcomes of play therapy (Ray, Bratton, Rhine, & Jones, 2001). The more educated caregivers are about play therapy, the more likely they are to become involved and adhere to the advice and suggestions of the therapist (Cates et al., 2006).

Unfortunately, just as adult mental health can be a misunderstood topic, so too can child mental health. It is vital for parents and child caregivers to have an in depth understanding of play therapy, but it is also important that the general public have an accurate understanding of what play therapy is and the benefits it can offer. This knowledge will allow for a more global understanding of the resources that exist for children, the benefits of play therapy, the deeper meaning of play and, most importantly, it will raise awareness around the existence and importance of child mental health care.

Conclusion

Education around play therapy can benefit both the general public and child caregivers by enhancing knowledge around how this therapy works, why it can be effective and the necessity for the direct involvement of significant adult figures in the child's life. This information will allow individuals to be more knowledgeable about the resources that exist for both parents and their children in distress, and promotes the normalization of mental illness specific to the child population.

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