

Therapeutic role of play therapy: A Review



Psychology

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ABSTRACT

Play can be considered a medium through which children develop their social and cognitive skills, explore their social and physical environment and interact with others. Play therapy is a very effective modality for working with children, adolescents, adults, groups, and families. Play is educational, creative, and stress relieving and encourages positive social interactions and communication. Play gives children a chance to master their worlds as they create, develop, and maintain their own senses of self. Play therapy is not just as "talking" therapy with adults; it is a mode that encompasses multiple approaches and theoretical viewpoints. Although play therapy is over 90 years old; its use has increased in past 15-20 years in school and mental health settings. This has significantly helped in identifying the cases of abused children, and has provided better means in behavioral management of children with special health care needs.

Introduction

Play can be considered a medium through which children develop their social and cognitive skills, explore their social and physical environment and interact with others.¹ Children below the age of 10 years, generally have not developed the abstract reasoning and language skills to verbally express their thoughts (Bettelheim 1987; Piaget, 1962).^{2,3} Play can be useful in establishing communication with the child, making adults understand children and improve their interaction with them. It is also helps children to reveal their feelings, thoughts, reactions, and attitudes that they have not been able to verbalize and constructively act out their anxieties and tension. During play children are able to explore their desires and goals; can gain insight into their own behavior and motivation, explore alternatives, and learn about consequences. Play can also be used as a medium to teach children social skills. (Kottman, 1995, 1999b, 2001; Landreth, 1991; Thompson & Rudolph, 2000).⁴⁻⁸

The usage of play as therapeutic approach, can be traced back to the early phase of the psychotherapy. Initially play was used in counselling and psychotherapy as a way of increasing child's comfort in the counseling session (Freud, 1946)⁹. However, gradually it became the primary focal point of therapy (Klein, 1955)¹⁰. Play therapy is not just as "talking" therapy with adults; it is a mode that encompasses multiple approaches and theoretical viewpoints. Although play therapy is over 90 years old; its use has increased in past 15-20 years in school and mental health settings. This has significantly helped in identifying the cases of abused children, and has provided better means in behavioral management of children with special health care needs.¹¹

Types of play therapy

Play therapy allows children to communicate and express themselves through playing, constructing creatures out of clay, telling stories, making puppet shows, , drawing pictures, painting, singing.¹² Different categories of toys, as outlined by Kottman, which can be used for play therapy are family and nurturing toys, fantasy toys, expressive arts toys, aggressive toys and active playing toys like snakes and sharks.

Play therapy can categorized into two types: Non directive and directive play therapy. Directive therapy further includes Cognitive behavioural therapy, Gestalt therapy, Developmental therapy and SFBT. Non-Directive therapy includes Child-centered therapy, Jungian therapy, and Psychoanalytic therapy. Two other forms are also there: Adlerian and Filial.¹³

Therapeutic role of play therapy

'Play' whether directive or non directive, plays a therapeutic role in the life of a child. First and foremost it is a mode of self expression. Young children of the age group 2-10 years often have difficulty in expression because of their limited vocabulary and abstract thinking ability. Rather, they are much more comfortable in expressing through concrete play activities and materials (Landreth, 1993).¹⁴ Especially in dealing with sensitive issues like sexual abuse, play allows them to express themselves indirectly through anatomical dolls, puppets, and objects. This kind of indirect expression is beneficial as the child maintains some psychological distance from the hurtful feelings.

Another effect of play therapy is Catharsis. It is an activity that involves completing some or all of a previously restrained or interrupted sequence of self-expression, such as crying or hitting (Nichols & Efran, 1985).¹⁵ Physical and psychological tensions of the mind can be released in the play room by engaging the child in play activities such as punching an inflated plastic doll, pounding clay, or bursting balloons. Emotional release has been acknowledged by most psychotherapists as an essential ingredient in psychotherapy (Ginsberg, 1993).¹⁶ In play, children will re-enact and relive traumatic experiences as a means of gradually mentally gaining mastery over them (Waelder, 1932).¹⁷ Repetitive play can be considered a slow healing process (Oremland, 1993).¹⁸ Also by playing out upcoming stressful events, such as starting school or the birth of a sibling, children are able to make the strange event become more familiar and role play coping behaviors (Barnett, 1984; Kramer & Schaefer-Hernan, 1994).^{19,20}

Next important role is to Access the Unconscious. According to Elkind (1981)²¹, "Play work", is the mental process that transforms unacceptable, unconscious wishes into acceptable actions. Though, it is difficult to understand conscious play images and actions; a play therapist through interpretation can bring such unconscious material into conscious awareness. Play area and the toys and games provide a familiar, neutral area and stimulus onto which children can reveal unconscious conflicts through defense mechanisms as projection, displacement, and symbolization.

Play therapy also facilitates learning. Play is a very enjoyable activity for children. Hence, the attention to learning of emotional and social skills is enhanced during play. It also helps in gaining metaphorical insight. In interactive fantasy play, the therapist tells a story through the play to teach a child a lesson or give a solution to his problem (Gardner,

1971)²²; which is much more accepting for the child as compared to direct confrontation (Frey, 1993)²³.

Alliance Formation, attachment and relationship enhancement are other important outcomes of play therapy. (Horvath, 1991)²⁴ Children would rarely come voluntarily to therapy and most of the time feel very uncomfortable in one-to-one talk with an adult. Play, on the other hand, is feasible activity to overcome a child's initial reluctance to become involved in the therapy process (Bow, 1993).²⁵

Play therapy also helps in development of moral judgment. Children's spontaneous rule making and rule enforcing in informal and unsupervised play situations, help in development of mature moral judgment Piaget (1932).²⁶

Counter conditioning, development of internal locus of control are other roles of play therapy. For instance, playing hide-and-seek in a dark room can help a child conquer the fear of the dark. It has been found that hospitalized children who were given the opportunity to engage in dramatic play with hospital-related toys, showed a significant reduction in hospital specific fears (Rae et al, 1989).²⁷ It allowed the child to move from a passive to an active role, e.g., child can role play giving an injection to a doll patient. This is useful as the child feels powerful and in control.

Child also becomes more competent, develops self control and a sense of self. Play provides children with multiple opportunities to create things like tell stories, construct their own world in sand etc. By engaging in different activities like construction play and game play, children learn self-control skills, like thinking, planning ahead, and anticipating consequences of different moves etc. (Singer, 1961; Singer & Singer, 1990).^{28,29} Simultaneously, there is an increase in creativity and divergent thinking of the child.^{30,31}

Fantasy Compensation is another important aspect, which if fulfilled by play. In play, children can get immediate gratification of their wishes. A fearful child can be courageous, a weak child can be strong, and a child of poverty can be a rich king. Socially acceptable behaviours like assertiveness versus aggressiveness, can be practiced in the safe environment of play. These real life behaviours can be introduced by the play therapist through use on puppets. Children then have their puppets to practice this more adaptive behaviour. All these practices can be repeated several times in play to ensure that the skill is learned and remembered by the child.³²

Conclusion

Play therapy is a very effective modality for working with children, adolescents, adults, groups, and families. Play is educational, creative, and stress relieving and encourages positive social interactions and communication. Children can practice and develop new skills in a way that makes sense to them, without the structured confines of "the real world" or the need to use verbal language. When playing, children learn to tolerate frustration, regulate their emotions, and excel at a task that is innate. Play gives children a chance to master their worlds as they create, develop, and maintain their own senses of self, and in turn help the medical professional in effectively establishing communication with the child.

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