

The Adaptive Benefits of Play Through Life: A Meaning-Centered Approach

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Introduction

As a brand new mathematics and science high school teacher in Ontario, I was assigned as the guidance teacher for a class. I enjoyed working and guiding students so much that I became a Guidance Specialist. Then I realized that I was not equipped to help students who had problems focusing, difficulties relating to peers, and symptoms of distress. An announcement of a Play Therapy workshop caught my attention. I eagerly attended it without knowing what play therapy was.

After many years of training in play therapy, and having used it all through my professional career as Psycho-Educational Consultant, School Psychologist, Professor of Counselling Psychology and psychotherapist, I have learned to appreciate Play Therapy as one of the most powerful therapeutic tools for healing and positive change. Unfortunately, I have met so many people who have the misconception that Play Therapy is only good for children. I hope that this article helps readers have a better understanding of PT as a therapeutic modality for all people.

What is play therapy?

PT has a long history in the field of psychotherapy. Sigmund Freud first recognized the importance of children's play, and Anna Freud (1926) incorporated play activities into therapy. Carl Jung also recognized the therapeutic importance of play because of its rich symbolic meaning. Melanie Klein (1932) often interpreted the meaning of play in therapy, and Dora Kalff () integrated her Jungian training with sandplay.

For little children, playing is all they do. The world is their playground. As pointed out by Gary Landreth, Play is the singular central activity of childhood, occurring at all times and in all places. Play is spontaneous, enjoyable, voluntary, and non-goal directed (Landreth, 1991, p.7). Others also value Play in the healing process, for examples, Axline stated that "Play is the child's natural medium of self-expression" (Axline, 1947, p. 9), and Ginott (1994) recognized that, "A child's play is his talk and toys are his words" (Ginott, P.33).

Gary Landreth, an international known leader in PT, considers play as children's symbolic language that provides a way for them to express their experiences and emotions in a natural, self-healing process. Play is therapeutic when it is an integral part of counselling

Landreth (1999) defines Play Therapy as “a dynamic interpersonal relationship between a child and a therapist trained in play therapy procedures who provides selected play materials and facilitates the development of a safe relationship for the child to fully express and explore self (feelings, thoughts and behaviors) through the child’s natural medium of communication - play.” (p.14)

For adolescents and young adults, play is still a major part of their lives, perhaps, second only to schoolwork. Their form of play is more likely to involve peers, such as socializing, playing sports, and joining clubs.

What happens to adults? With increasing responsibilities and demands on the adults, there is less time for play. However, they still need leisure activities to provide some relief from everyday stress. It seems that adults prefer passive play in the form of participating in spectator sports, watching TV, etc.

For retired seniors, they again have more free time on their hand, and they can enjoy their second childhood. In nursing homes, there are recreational activities organized by the staff for their residents.

In one form or another, Play is always a part of our lives and a major contributor to our happiness and well-being. People play simply for the enjoyment of it. Play is a powerful intrinsic motivation.

Why is Play so important?

Play is a spontaneous process that allows an individual to engage in an activity either physical or mental. There are all kinds of play: active, passive, group or solo. It may involve thinking, feeling, moving, creating, focusing or team work. Play is relaxing, pleasurable, happening in the here-and-now, and involving the self in various degrees. It may even entail the “flow” experience, in which one loses oneself in an engaging and challenging game. As a leisure activity, play offers individuals the freedom to explore, to enjoy, and to be oneself.

Like all other mammals, children learn through playing. They learn how to balance their bodies and coordinate their hands and feet. They learn about their likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses. They learn how to cooperate with children and may even learn something about the world in which they live.

According to Piaget (), “Play is children’s means of making sense of their experience in order to make it part of themselves.” Another educational psychologist stated, “Play under the control of the player gives the child’s first and most crucial opportunity to have the courage to think, to talk, and perhaps even to BE.”

Similarly, Eric Erickson () said, "Making sense of the world is an enormous task for young children, ... Play remains an indispensable harbor for the overhauling of shattered emotions after periods of rough going in the social sea."

For adults, Play is an important source of positive emotions, which we all need to stay mentally healthy and productive. For games that include the whole family or group of friends, playing together improves relationships and bonding.

Dr. Stuart Brown (), psychiatrist and founder of the National Institute for Play discovered that playing together helped couples rekindle their relationship, and explore other forms of emotional intimacy. This finding also confirms in my own practice that leads me to conclude: "The family that plays together, stays together." Research by Chris Peterson (2013) has also shown that play is an important domain for living a meaningful life.

Play Therapy is not only effective modality of Psychotherapy with children and family, it is also inherently cross-cultural. Down through history in all continents, Play is an important part of cultures. They might have different tools, games, and rules, but for all participants, Play is a "state of being," as Stuard Brown called it, "purposeless, fun and pleasurable" ().

The role of play therapy in mental health

In my practice, Play Therapy is effective in working with children, adolescents, adults, and families. In this paper, I want to make a case that Play is essential for a healthy life through all stages of human development.

PT employs a variety of toys, from puppets, dolls, play house, miniature furniture, actual games, or sand tray. Typically, in a play therapy room, children have free choice what they want to play. Their selection of tools and the way they play provide important information about their emotional turmoil and family conflicts. Here is a photo of my play therapy room.

For children, it is particularly important because of their lack of the cognitive skills and vocabulary to articulate their problems or needs. Play also circumvents their defensive mechanisms. Sessions of play therapy are also times to learn self-control and boundary. For example, they learn that they cannot destroy toys or damage the play room.

Play Therapy is often used in schools, hospitals and even hospice. There are games that are adapted for individuals with disabilities. Because of the demand for qualified play therapists, many counsellors, social workers and psychologists are taking courses

offered by Canadian Play therapy Association and American Play Therapy Association.

Meaning-centered approach to play therapy

Meaning-centered counselling and therapy, as developed by Paul & Lilian Wong, emphasizes the following:

Basic assumptions about children:

- Children, like adults, are meaning seeking and meaning making creatures
- Children wants to makes sense of events that happen to them
- Children make attributions and often blame themselves for bad things happening in the family
- Children are hopeful and want to believe that tomorrow things will be better
- Children are intuitive spiritually and their spiritual and make-belief world are just as real as the physical reality
- Children feel better about life if they can have a sense of meaning and purpose
- Children feel better about life if they can feel securely attached to some significant adults
- Children feel better about life if their faith in God is encouraged or validated

Basic assumptions about children's play:

- Play is instinctual for children
- Play is a creative process of self-explorations
- Play is a communicative process of self-expressions
- Play is the social process of relating to others
- Play is the therapeutic process of self-healing
- Play is the developmental process of personal growth
- Play is often irrational but reflective of children's consciousness and unconscious needs
- Play can be both a source of healing and a fountain of happiness and growth

Basis assumptions about the sand tray

- Touching the sand creates a sense of grounded

- Working with the sand represents a natural way to express one's natural feelings, desires and needs
- Playing with the sand and toys gives the child a sense of control and responsibility
- Acting out a story gives the child a sense of re-creating his or her life
- Creating a pattern of beauty and harmony reflects healing and wholeness
- Playing with someone fulfills the child's basic need for relationship, intimacy and community

Basic assumptions about MCC:

(1) Meaning is all we need – The main task is to understand the client's world of meaning through:

- Verbal communications – what is being said
- Non-verbal communications – what is expressed non-verbally
- Habitual behavior – how the child typically behaves and interacts
- Play behavior – how the child plays (solo or with other people)
- Symbolic act – how verbal and visual metaphors reflect the child's needs
- Play components – how the structure and components of the play reveal the child's world

(2) Basic definition of meaning – meaning is cognitive, motivational and existential

The PURE model

P – Purpose and goal of

U – Understand self and situation

R – Right response or responsible action

E – Evaluation of the above three steps to see whether life is getting better

This definition provides a framework for understanding and guiding the child.

(2) Relationship is all we have -- The main counselling tool is to bring about positive change through the here-and-now of relationships:

- Building rapport in the first couple of sessions
- Creating a safe, supportive and trusting environment
- Establishing clear boundary and rules
- Facilitating playfulness and creative expressions
- Modeling a new pattern of relating

- Being non-directive when the child prefers to play solo
- Being interactive when the child wants to share
- Being directive when the child needs direct intervention
- Playing the roles of a friend and a counselor

(3) Basic therapeutic strategy – the ABCD model can be implemented throughout the interactions during play therapy sessions

Acceptance – Accept what cannot be changed

Belief – Believe that things can get better

Commitment – Commit to making the necessary changes

Discovery – Discover the joy of positive change

What is Play Therapy?

◆ in helping children overcome negative emotions and relational difficulties, and develop self-control and bonding.

Play draws children into a working relationship with the counsellor or helper.

Play provides a natural medium for children to express their feelings.

Play satisfies the children's need to explore and master, thereby building self-esteem.

Play allows adults to enter the world of children and make them feel recognized and accepted.

Play provides opportunities to acquire problem-solving skills and self-control.

Play helps children release emotions they have had difficulty confronting

Approaches to play therapy

There are different approaches:

Generally: Directive vs. non-directive

The process begins with an invitation to play.

The therapist creates a climate of warmth & unconditional positive regard.

Children may deal with emotional distress and trauma in a safe environment.

Recent Trend in Play Therapy

Filial Therapy (e.g., Guerney)

Child Parent Relationship Therapy (CPRT) (Landreth)

Dr. Landreth's child-centred play therapy approach is an encompassing philosophy for living one's life in relationships with children. This is based on a deep commitment to certain beliefs about children and their innate capacity for growth. Through play therapy, children are able to gain help in developing self-control and self-responsibility in a safe environment

Intergrating play therapy and family therapy (Mary Ann Pare)

These rules help the child to exercise self-control and respect.

The therapeutic effects of sand play:

- Children enjoy the experience of sand play
- It is a self-healing process (Bradley & Gould, 1993)
- It has a soothing and nurturing effect
- Children develop a sense of mastery and control
- **Children enjoy the experience of sand play**
- **It is a self-healing process (Bradley & Gould, 1993)**
- **It has a soothing and nurturing effect**
- **Children develop a sense of mastery and control**
- **Children use sand play to resolve conflicts and traumas**
 - Develops experiential, intuitive learning about self.
 - Encourages risk taking, self-exploration and self discovery in a climate of safety.
 - Encourages self control, responsible freedom of expression and decision making.
 - Encourages creativity and resourcefulness.
 - Enhances cognitive, social, linguistic, physical, motor development & emotional health (Axline, 1947; Chance, 1979; Feitelson & Ross, 1973; Frost & Klein, 1979; Garvey, 1977; Vygotsky, 1967).
- Children use sand play to resolve conflicts and traumas

Evidence of the effectiveness of play therapy sessions:

- Visible improvement in their emotional expressions
- Healthier outlook in life
- More motivated to attempt new tasks
- Better relationships with peers, siblings and adults
- More open in sharing their feelings and difficulties

- More comfortable in group participation
- Measurable progress in academic tasks
- Positive reactions from parents and teachers

Tenets for relating to Children

Dr. Garry Landreth

1. Children are not miniature adults.
2. Children are people capable of experiencing deep emotions.
3. Children are unique and worthy of respect.
4. Children are resilient, capable of overcoming obstacles.
5. Children have an inherent tendency toward growth and maturity.
6. Children are capable of positive self-direction.
7. Children's natural language is play
8. Children have a right to remain silent.
9. Children will take the therapeutic experience to where they need to be.
10. Children's growth cannot be speeded up.