Prescriptive Play Therapy for Treating Childhood Trauma

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What is Trauma?

"...as long as the mind is defending itself against invisible assaults, our closest bonds are threatened, along with our abilities to imagine, plan, learn and pay attention to other people's needs." Bessel van der Kolk

"The experience of violence and victimization including sexual abuse, physical abuse, severe neglect, loss, domestic violence and/or the witnessing of violence, terrorism or disasters." (NASMHPD, 2006)

- Type 1
  - Disasters (man-made and other)
  - Ex: Hurricanes, terrorism, earthquakes
- Type 2
  - Complex, chronic, interpersonal
  - Disturbing, unrelenting stress effects
  - Multiple types or abuse of perpetrators

Why Play Therapy? General

- Primary way of communicating
- Emotions can be visually & actively expressed & processed
- Emotions children experience may be too complex to describe within the developmental limits of their vocabulary
- An effective and concrete method for revealing many aspects of their inner worlds
- Play is healing
- Provides a corrective experience
- Empowering techniques of play therapy can relieve the emotional burden
- Through the use of play, children can address the trauma symbolically without having to verbalize frightening experiences and feelings

Alexithymia: No Words for Feelings

- Substitute language of action for that of emotion.
- Not able to describe what you are feeling because you cannot identify what your physical sensations mean. Mind-body disconnection.
- Traumatized people can either experience or talk about their experiences, but they cannot do both at the same time.
- They cannot figure out for themselves what they're really feeling about any given situation or what makes them feel better or worse, this results in numbing.
Trauma research supports the use of Play Therapy

- In Play Therapy trauma can be resolved when the traumatized once again have the ability to access their imagination and rework the scenes where the traumatized became frozen.
- Play Therapy is a modality that can allow the traumatized to access these experiences because it does not rely on language.

Why Play Therapy? Child-Centered

- Establishing rapport and trust is at the core of the relationship
- Child is in control, has the power
- The choices related to how and what to play are the child's
- Unconditional positive regard and acceptance are the building blocks of CCPT
- Noticing what you are feeling fosters emotional regulation (reflection)

In child-centered play therapy...

- By acting out through play a frightening or traumatic experience or situation symbolically, and perhaps changing or reversing the outcome of the play activity, children move toward an inner resolution, and then they are better able to cope with or adjust to problems.

Landreth & Bratton, 1999
Why Play Therapy?
Some arguments based on Van der Kolk:
The Body Keeps the Score

- The majority of people treated with CBT continue to have serious PTSD symptoms three months after the end of treatment.
- Finding words to describe what has happened to you can be transformative, but it does NOT always abolish flashbacks, improve concentration, stimulate vital involvement in life, or reduce hypersensitivity to disappointments or perceived injuries.
- In order to understand trauma, we have to overcome our natural reluctance to confront that reality & cultivate the courage to listen to our patient’s stories.

Using Child-Centered Approach: Altered Structuring

- You can say anything in here, even if someone told you...
- ... that they would hurt someone you love
- ... not to
- ... that you would get in trouble
- ... that they would hurt you
- ... that it’s a secret

What it looks like in Play Therapy?

- Precarious Hygiene
- The dark
- Use of masks, puppets
- Trickery
- Hide and seek
- Secrets
- Good vs. Evil
- Feeling creeped out
- Confusion hurt/love
- Dissociation
- Passivity
- Masturbation
- Inserting objects
- Cleansing/Washing
- Messes, Wet messes
- Eating vomit, dirt, poop, pee, vomit, people
- Intercourse of feelings
- Back alive
- Devouring
- Toilet breaks
- Hypervigilance
- Aggression, Regression, Expression
- Sexual simulation
- Nurturance
- Sexual Artwork
- Precarious boundaries
If it feels creepy, it is creepy!

What do they feel?
- Hurt
- Sad
- Shame
- Guilty
- Confused
- Rejected
- Anxious
- Responsible
- Self-loathing
- Disconnection
- Vulnerable
- Betrayed
- Unloved
- Mistreating
- Fear
- Brave

As Dumbledore said to Harry Potter, "A child's voice, however honest and true, is meaningless to those who've forgotten to listen."
It's not what you do, but who you are.

- Identifying feelings.
- Communication of accurate empathic understanding.
- What do you like about kids?
- What do you like about this kid?
- Limit setting.
- Your playfulness.
- Acceptance.
- Connection.
- Microview > Macroview

How do you know what you are doing in Play Therapy is working?

- Your words
- Additive play
- Deeper into the story
- Reflective adjectives
- Proximity
- Firsts
- Pro-social choices in session

Disclosure

- Children often do not tell us with words that they have been sexually traumatized. There are many reasons children might hesitate or be afraid to tell us about what has happened, including their relationship to the offender, fear of the consequences, retaliation or uncertainty about whether or not they will be believed.
- Should a disclosure of the sexual trauma result, either verbally or symbolically, there is often an accompanying regression in treatment as the client needs to once again overcome the fear associated with the disclosure of the trauma.
- "Initiation, intimidation, stigmatization, isolation, helplessness and self-blame depend on a terrifying reality of child sexual abuse...The average child never asks and never tells" Roland Summit
If they don't typically verbally disclose, what do they say...

➤ Get in our underwear and let's cook.
➤ You be the mom and do sex to me.
➤ I'll pull down my pants so you can play with my penis.
➤ I have sucked on bigger tits than yours.
➤ Let's movie kiss.
➤ I saw TJ push hug mom into heaven.
➤ Put a blanket over the doll so she doesn't see the rape.
Unsafe House

LIMITS

Safety of child
Physical
Emotional-Psychological
Safety of Play Therapist
Physical
Emotional-Psychological
Integrity of the Playroom
Integrity of the Larger Environment

Boundaries, Boundaries, Boundaries

➤ Time
➤ Personal Space
➤ Showing
➤ Touching defining private parts
➤ Repetition Compulsion
Consultation: Tips

- Empathy
- Hypothesis
- Listen
- Parent as expert
- Time
- Support