2012 Top Playroom: What Makes a Safe, Effective & Inviting Playroom?

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- Top 10 Things That Every Play Therapist Should Know About Play Therapy
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As play therapists, we may decide to consult with our client’s teacher as part of the treatment plan. Or perhaps we have been asked to train teachers to use Play Therapy skills in the classroom. Either way it makes sense for us to create a positive relationship to maximize the benefits for children. Having been trained as both a teacher and a play therapist, it is easy to see that these two roles are similar. As a former teacher, I have made it my mission to understand where these two fields of study intersect and how we can partner with each other for the benefit of children.

Defining the similarities in the roles/training of teachers and play therapists will help create common ground and language. In this article, I will also discuss the differences which can potentially get in the way of communication.

**Similarities**

Teachers are trained to build a safe community for students and create positive relationships with each child. In high quality programs, teachers spend hours planning their environments and how they will function; lesson planning, assessing children,
“Teachers are trained to build a safe community for students and create positive relationships with each child ... Play therapists perform these functions as well either with an individual or a small group of children.”
said “using Play Therapy skills in the classroom;” some thought that they would actually be doing “therapy” in the classroom. Some were worried about opening up too much and that children would divulge confidential information in the group, or that the child would melt down and they would not know how to handle it. In a classroom too much emotional expression can interrupt the flow and inhibit teaching and learning. Play therapists are looking to elicit that emotion to help the child process it. It can be really hard in a group setting to conceptualize how the children can lead with safety and flow and learning still occurring. Often a misconception develops here, letting a child lead does not mean that there are no rules or limits in the playroom. Limits are grounded in real world situations, and safety for all must be maintained in the playroom.

The major difference in the roles of teacher and play therapist is that the teacher has to be an authority figure in order to keep the group safe and maintain a learning environment. The play therapist creates a balanced accepting relationship with clients. Teachers are always with groups and there is rarely a time when there is one child in the room to focus on. They also have their days divided up in sections such as reading, math, circle/group time, etc. that they have to transition children through each day. Transitions are a tough time for children who have disabilities, communication, or social/emotional difficulties (Hemmeter, et.al. 2008). Play therapists are focused mainly on individuals or small group interactions and there are really only two possible adult chosen transitions; into the playroom and out of the playroom. Play therapists are interested in the whole child and their learning needs outside of their specialty however they focus on what the child brings out in session when they are with the children.

### Translating the Skills

How do we create a partnership with teachers that not only helps our clients, but allows them to see how using the eight basic principles adapted from Axline (1969) in the classroom only takes minor modifications in thought, word and practice? The similarities are shown in the chart below. Although the chart follows a Child-Centered Play Therapy approach, much can be adapted for other approaches to Play Therapy.

Therapists can show teachers how to reflect children’s feelings in “real time” and explain that it creates meaningful connections between the feeling words and their experience. For example:

**Scenario:** Sara is a shy child, and Megan has just taken her doll from her and is playing with it. Sara begins to cry and withdraw.

<table>
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<th>8 Basic Principles - PT</th>
<th>Teacher’s Training and Role</th>
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<td>1. Create good rapport with children</td>
<td>• Create positive warm relationships with all students to promote a safe environment for learning.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Accepts child where he/she is</td>
<td>• Assessments are used to create individuated instruction (Soc/Emotional is one of the domains in Early Ed.)</td>
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| 3. Permissiveness to allow for free expression | • Teachers encourage self expression of children.  
• Teacher can allow for permissiveness and needs to lead the group in the teacher role. There is a delicate balance needed. |
| 4. Reflecting feelings to help child gain insight | • Formal teaching is a great first step (ie.anti-violence programs )  
• Labeling feelings in the moment helps the child identify what it feels like in the moment to build a personal connection for them. |
| 5. Children can solve their own problems | • Teachers encourage self help skills.  
• Treating children as if they can do things motivates the child to do them. |
| 6. Let the child lead | • Can set up times for children to lead such as during center time.  
• Can offer choices about what they want to do.  
• Follow an interest by doing a theme on penguins if children are really interested. |
| 7. Work at the child’s pace | • Teachers are continuously assessing, to see where each child is.  
• Instruction and the environment are set up with student needs in mind. |
| 8. Limit setting that is grounded in reality | • Teachers set rules and limits for the classroom  
• Offer alternative choices. For example, “One thing you cannot do is rip our books, but you can rip paper in the art center.”  
• Children need limits to keep them safe, and sometimes children that crave that safety present behaviorally. |

**PT response:** Sara, you are really sad and even angry that Megan took your doll. You weren’t finished playing with it. You want that doll back…(then support her in the negotiating process)

**PT response:** Megan, you really wanted to play with the doll too, and it is so hard to wait for your turn. You feel like it was taking too long… (then support her in the negotiating process).
It may seem new to a teacher to think about acknowledging Megan’s feelings instead of lecturing about the “right” thing to do. Using reflections with both children without judging their behavior will teach them how their behavior affects themselves and others while allowing neutrality and caring to both. Situations like this happen often and when consulting with or training teachers, concrete examples will help them to conceptualize using individualized reflections in a group setting. Remind teachers that when they try a suggested technique that yields inconsistent results that behavior change takes time, consistency and practice. Social/emotional learning happens like all other learning in a safe non-judgmental place with opportunities to practice AND to make mistakes. Try relating this to teaching a child to write his/her name. Teachers have students write their names in shaving cream, with play dough, on wipe boards, with pencils, markers, with glitter glue, macaroni pieces, etc (Feldman, 1991). Sometimes trial and error are forgotten when the issue is behavior because it rubs us the wrong way, or it disrupts the flow or safety of the classroom.

It is unrealistic for one teacher to catch every feeling a child is conveying because they are also trying to get supplies and help children. There has to be a balance. Group work can be tricky depending on the mix of children and adults in the room. Children can sometimes feel lost in a group which can provoke maladaptive behaviors. A teacher can acknowledge that “lost in the crowd” feeling through the use of a reflection such as, “You’re worried that I forget you are here.” You can also suggest some nonverbal communication like winking at the child from across the room or thumbs up (G. Kinnell, personal communication, March, 7, 2005). These simple suggestions can help a teacher minimize the need for attention seeking behaviors by helping the child to feel seen, heard and valued without immediate proximity.

Concerns about confidentiality and inviting more emotion than teachers are trained to manage in the classroom are areas where play therapists can help. These things can happen with or without using reflections. The play therapist can talk with the teacher about ways to give children a safe soft space with sensory items to manipulate or hold such as play dough or sensory bottles, etc. This may not be appealing to a teacher because of the fear that all children will want those things during a lesson. Even preschoolers are capable of beginning to learn that fair is not everyone gets the same, it is everyone gets what they need. Having these items out and available all of the time can help with this concern.

**Case Study**

In my Pre-K classroom I was growing incredibly frustrated with a challenging student. I searched hard daily to find some way to create success. He was in everyone’s space all of the time, he sat next to me and talked over me during circle time, he would torment one child that was very reactive to his teasing, and he would jump in front of other children in line. This child was rejected by his peers and I needed help. I could not reach him. I typically have a high tolerance for and love children that think and behave outside the box. No child had ever tested me this much!

At the same time I was taking an introductory play therapy course, and needed to do a session tape with a child to bring to class. The lens of a play therapist was very different than my lens as a teacher. I really LIKED this child! He was fun to play with, and although he tested limits, he did acknowledge them. Through the support of my instructor, and although we still had behavioral concerns that eventually led to a play therapy referral, I could manage his behavior with more success. Being less reactive helped me have more patience and I made certain that I “caught” him making pro-social choices (Mullen, 2007) frequently among other adjustments. I learned an important lesson from him the first time I caught him making good choices and he asked, “You mean I am doing a good job right now?” I bet compliments were rare for him in any environment he was in!

If teachers can experience before their own eyes this type of lens change with the assistance of a play therapist, then more partnerships would exist. More teachers would rely on therapists for help in being creative and confident about how to incorporate play therapy responses and skills in their classrooms and children would benefit.

**References**


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