PLAY THERAPY

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Dynamics of the Process of Counseling with Children

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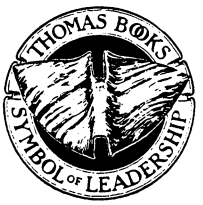

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To Kimberly, Karla, and Craig,
who continue to reaffirm my
belief in the process of
applying play therapy procedures
at home.

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PREFACE

IN the process of growing up, children's problems are often compounded by the inability of adults in their lives to understand or to respond effectively to what children are feeling and attempting to communicate. This "communication gap" is widened as a result of adults' insistance that children adopt that means of expression commonly used by adults. Efforts to communicate with children on an exclusive verbal level assume the presence of a well-developed facility for expression through speech and thus confine children to a medium that is often awkward and unnecessarily restrictive. Play is to the child what verbalization is to the adult. It is a medium for expressing feelings, exploring relationships, describing experiences, disclosing wishes, and self-fulfillment. The process of play is viewed as the child's effort to gain control in the environment in which he/she finds self and of the perceived world. The problems children experience do not exist apart from the persons they are. Therefore, play therapy matches the dynamic inner structure of the child with an equally dynamic approach.

My intent in this book is to help a special kind of adult in the lives of children, the child therapist, to become more deeply aware of and sensitive to children to the extent that the therapist can communicate accurately and in a facilitative manner with greater responsiveness. Although most children are quite adaptable and resilient, they are often in need of assistance in their attempts to understand self, to express feelings and reactions, and to adjust to the situation or experience in which they find themselves.

This book is an outgrowth of my experiences in teaching master's and doctoral level courses in play therapy. I felt it was important to provide students with training and experience in many issues typically not presented in most play therapist texts. Therefore, my objective in this book has been to bring together clear and definitive writings dealing with those issues as well as the basic information

needed to conduct effective play therapy sessions. To that end, unlike most play therapy texts, which either exclude or present only a cursory explanation, the unique features of this book are that it presents the following:

- in-depth exploration of the significance of play in children's development
- an exploration of the child's view and perception of his/her world
- original writings of a variety of authors noted for their contribution in establishing the major approaches to play therapy
- a thorough analysis of several techniques of limit setting
- a discussion of the stages of emotional adjustment in the play therapy process
- practical suggestions on explaining play therapy to parents
- guidelines for assessment of children's progress in play therapy and to help the play therapist focus on the difficult issues involved in termination
- an exploration of the issues of maintaining confidentiality when working with children
- a description of the process of transferring a child in play therapy to a new play therapist
- information on the utilization of play therapy with a variety of children including the learning disabled, child abuse victims, seriously ill children, and the mentally retarded in such diverse settings as schools, agencies, and hospitals
- information on the training of parents and teachers to be play therapists

This book is designed for the student and practitioner in elementary school counseling, clinical psychology, counseling psychology, child psychiatry, social work, and related disciplines such as special education, early childhood education, child welfare and Child Life Programs in hospital settings. From my experience as director of a children's diagnostic and therapy center which has developed an interdisciplinary team approach to working with children who have learning difficulties, I have found a basic understanding of the various approaches and therapeutic procedures in play therapy to be an extremely valuable asset also to the speech therapist and the person providing reading therapy. Utilizing some of the procedures em-

ployed in play therapy, these specialists have found that they are much more effective in helping children to profit from the learning experiences provided.

Therapy does not occur automatically as a result of placing a child or small group of children with an adult in a room containing a variety of toys, with which the child may already be acquainted. The therapeutic encounter results from the play therapist's understanding of self, children, the rationale for play therapy, basic theories of play therapy, the therapeutic process, and his/her own unique contribution to the relationship. Although the first and last of these prerequisites are outside the scope of this volume and lie within the individual, they are indirectly affected by the other areas. The child therapist must be deeply involved in and committed to a thorough understanding of what he/she believes, what he/she is doing, and why. The effectiveness of an individual whose behavior in a play therapy session is governed by an inadequate understanding of theory is questionable. There is no one best theoretical model. The play therapist must select that approach which seems to be most congruent with his/her total personality. While the basic approaches to play therapy differ in their theoretical rationale and procedure, they have a common goal — optimal social development and personal growth by the child.

I want to express my appreciation to the journal editors and authors of the thirty-six selections for their permission to reprint their writings. I am also indebted to the graduate students in my play therapy courses for their eagerness to learn how to be helpful to children and for their willingness to question and share their ideas.

GARRY L. LANDRETH

CONTENTS

PLAY THERAPY

PART I

UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN'S PLAY

Chapter 1

THE ROLE OF PLAY IN CHILDHOOD

DAN I. SLOBIN

FOR purposes of exposition, explanations of play will be discussed under four headings, on the basis of the *focus of attention* of the explanation: (1) biologically oriented, (2) person-oriented, (3) lifespace-oriented, and (4) socioculturally oriented explanations. This scheme claims to be neither an exhaustive nor a sharp classification of explanations of play, for explanations vary in their breadth of focus. The terminology for the second and third headings is borrowed, of course, from Lewin (1935). By person-oriented explanations I mean those whose primary interest is in the tensional systems within the individual and the means by which these tensions are dealt with in play. This is thus an "intrapersonal" orientation. By lifespace-oriented explanations I mean those which are concerned primarily with the person's interaction with objects and people in his world, and the role of play in structuring and determining these "extrapersonal" aspects of behavior. The meanings of the first and fourth headings seem to be fairly unambiguous and will be developed in the discussion below.

It will be useful to make one more point of definition before moving into discussion. Following Piaget (1951), I would like to distinguish between three main categories of games:

1. *Practice games*. This is generally what we call "play" in English, as opposed to "games." The term will be used to refer to pleasureful exercise of physical skills.
2. *Symbolic games*. These are games made up by individual children and played alone, usually involving a good deal of make-believe and imitation.
3. *Games with rules*. These are social games, involving regulations

From D. I. Slobin, The fruits of the first season: A discussion of the role of play in childhood, abridged from *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 4*:59-79, 1964. Reprinted by permission.

imposed by the group and sanctions for the violation of the rules.

Explanations of Play

1. Biologically Oriented Explanations

A number of theorists have been interested in setting play in the framework of biological evolution (Beach, 1945; Colozza, 1895; Groos, 1901; Nissen, 1951; Spencer, 1901; Spuhler, 1959).

The earliest of such attempts was that of Herbert Spencer, who argued that animals higher on the evolutionary continuum do not spend all of their time and energy in getting food, and thus must use up "surplus energy" in other activities. This aspect of Spencer's theory was earlier proposed by the poet Schiller, who said,

> An animal works when the mainspring of his activity is a deficiency, and it plays when this mainspring is a wealth of energy, when superfluous life itself presses for activity. (1862, p. 105)

For this reason, the theory is often called "Schiller-Spencer Theory of Surplus Energy," although Spencer carried it farther than Schiller's hint. He theorized that faculties which have been quiescent for some time of necessity push for expression, and concluded that

> play is . . . an artificial exercise of powers which, in default of their natural exercise, become so ready to discharge that they relieve themselves by simulated actions in place of real actions. (1901, p. 630)

There are a number of difficulties in accepting this approach as explanatory of all play. At best, it tells us why the child plays as opposed to doing nothing or doing other things, and attempts to explain the energy source of this activity. The use of the word "surplus" is somewhat puzzling — surplus from what? There is usually apparent circularity in this usage: energy is considered surplus if expended in play, and non-surplus if expended in work.

This "theory" does not help us to understand the choice of play activities, and it limits the range of activity to the exercise of a vaguely defined and outdated concept of a biologically fixed and localizable set of "faculties." It deals only with practice games, which are common to higher animals and man, and is helpful only in saying that children are very energetic, and having nothing else to do, spend their time playing. This is barely more than common sense

and does not carry us very far. Going back to our game of *Fuchs ins Loch*, we know nothing more about symbolism or the rules of the game; we do not even know why the children continue to play for hours, even to the point of exhaustion.

For the last reason, the surplus-energy view has often been opposed by the so-called *Erholungstheorie*, or "recreation theory," attributed to Lazarus (Colozza, 1895; Groos, 1901). This view regards play as an opportunity for the relaxation and restoration of exhausted powers. Actually, these two interpretations are not contradictory; both could operate under different conditions. But neither explains the choice of game or play activity. It is merely stated that "there is playing."

Groos, the great 19th century authority on play, added another dimension to this sort of theorizing (1901). He noted the increasing dependency period and decreasing importance of rigidly patterned instinctual behavior up the phylogenetic scale, and explained play in higher animals as a period of *Vorübung* ("pre-exercised") of skills which the organism needs later in life:

> Play is the agency employed to develop crude powers and prepare them for life's uses, and from our biological standpoint we can say: From the moment, when the intellectual development of a species becomes more useful in the "struggle for life" than the most perfect instinct, will natural selection favour those individuals in whom the less elaborated faculties have more chance of being worked out by practice under the protection of parents — that is to say, those individuals that play. (p. 375) . . . In general I hold to the view that play makes it possible to dispense to a certain degree with specialized hereditary mechanisms by fixing and increasing acquired adaptations. (p. 395)

This theory deserves more attention than the other two 19th century theories discussed above, since it was also endorsed by Freud (1958, pp. 101-104) and seems to have support from contemporary comparative psychology (Nissen, 1951) and anthropology (Spuhler, 1959). Spuhler points out an evolutionary trend "from built-in nervous pathways to neural connections over association areas (where learning and symboling can be involved) in the physiological control of activities like sleep, play and sex" (1959, p. 7). Nissen develops the point that

> In biological-teleological terms, play serves the purpose of developing an equipment of perceptual and motor patterns in the higher mammals, whereas animals with an inherited repertory of perceptions and motor co-