Play Therapy: Helping Children Cope with Trauma & Stress

REBECCA JACOBSON PH. D. LPC-S NCC
REGISTERED PLAY THERAPIST
DRRUTH2000@MSN.COM
History: How children were viewed

Miniature Adults
Seen and Not heard
Not allowed to express negative emotions
Common models include

Myer, Lewis. & James (2013)

- Assessment
- Establish Contact/Build Rapport
- Control / Understanding the Current situation
- Provide Support / Ensure Safety
- Express Emotions/ Assess Past Coping skills
- Restore Cognitive Function/ Make a Plan
- Commitment / Referral/ Follow-Up
Adult Crisis Model

- Understand the Significance of presenting issue
- Rationale (use notes to stay on track)
- Use Summaries & Questions in your personal notes.
- Identify A Realistic time frame and limited resources
- Crisis Intervention are draining; use resources for YOURSELF CARE
Understanding Stress Reactions in Children

• Children experience very different reactions to stressful situations and often take cues from the adults in their life.

• Allow children to express negative emotions and behaviors and replace with positive behaviors

• Use relaxation techniques

• Teach coping and communication skills (identify emotions)
Working with Children

- Intervention changes from moment to moment with the cycle of stability/instability
- Children can quickly move from calm to distraught
- Track behavior of children rather than use praise
Theories: Chronic Stress/Loss

- Pattison (1977) Contradiction & Integration of Feelings.
- Do these really apply to Children?
Theories: The Unexpected

- Kubler-Ross may apply to survivors.
- Denial—Anger—Questioning??—Depression—Acceptance.
- Pattison- may apply Contradiction & Integration of Feelings.
- Corr-may apply to survivors.
- Dimensions of Coping.
The Grieving Process

- Standard theory:
  - Acknowledge the reality of the loss.
  - Work through emotional turmoil.
  - Adjust to an environment w/o deceased.
  - Loosen ties to the deceased.
  - Recovery.
How Children process (Fogarty, 2000):

- Numb & Stunned (protect children from being overwhelmed & let them know something significant has happened).
- Children may not experience the emotions the way adults do sending a message that something is wrong with them.
- Children experience “magical thoughts” about the event.
- Children may “act out.”
How Children process:

- Re-Creation of Past Experiences: May attempt to “re-create” past experiences with that loved one. These attempts fail thus allowing children to process the loss over time and prevent long-term denial.

- Anguish: teaches children that great loss = great love.

- Anger: May “Act out” or be passive aggressive
Magical thoughts:

- Magical Thoughts + Cognitive Distortions > Defense mechanisms > Personality Disorders

- “Magical thought is a child’s inaccurate conclusion(s) regarding a loss experience resulting in the child believing that he/she is responsible for the loss and needs to fix it.

- “Cognitive Distortions are restricting patterns of thought that fuel magical thought to develop into potential defensive mechanisms that can lead to personality disorders. (Fogerty, 2000, p.53).”
Example:

- **Magical Thought:** "When I am perfect, my parents feel better and I feel better so all I have to do is be perfect."

- **Cognitive Distortion:** "The only way to feel better is by being compulsively perfectionistic."

- **Defense Mechanism:** "When I am stressed by others or life, I will choose to be compulsively perfectionistic."

- **Personality Disorder:** I cannot control my compulsive perfectionism.
Reframing a Problem.

- Distorted Thought: This will never get better. No one will care if I was here or not.

- Realistic Thought: The family made adjustments in the past to smaller crisis, we will all get through this together.

- Distorted Thought: Everything is lost, we will never rebuild.

- Realistic Thought: It will take time, rebuilding is a process and we can change what we did not like in the past.
The Counselor needs to Help the Child:

- Accept the reality of the loss.
- Work through the Pain of grief
- Adjust to the environment in which the deceased is missing.
- Withdraw the emotional energy invested in the deceased relationship and focus it towards another healthy relationship.
- Convert the relationship with the deceased from one of present to a relationship of memory.
Helping Children move Forward

- They can have symbolic items that will move with them to adulthood.
- Pet: Picture, ceramic or stuffed animal.

(When I get my own place...I will have a Pet like this)
Helping Families Bounce Back

• Teach Families what to expect during transition time after Crisis.

• Help them understand changes in world view as a result of Crisis.
Individual Changes/ Family Changes

- Discuss Family roles before Crisis and how those roles have changed after crisis.
- Discuss issues of “self-worth” and changes in world view as a result of the crisis.
- Family members may feel more dependent and may have trouble adapting to changes that occurred as a result of crisis.
- Help families deal with financial changes that may result from crisis.
Compassion Fatigue

Figley (1993, 1995) defined it “as the natural and consequent behaviors and emotions resulting from knowing about a traumatizing event experienced by a significant other the stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person.

Figley later coined the term compassion fatigue to describe the cognitive emotional behavioral changes that caregivers experience from indirect exposure to trauma survivors or suffering person” (p. 7).
Reported Symptoms

- Helping professionals have reported symptoms:
  - intrusive secondary trauma-related thoughts or memories
  - avoidance behaviors,
  - sleep disturbances,
  - irritability,
  - dissociation

(Bride, 2004; Dane & Chachkes, 2001; McCann & Pearlman, 1990).
Self-Care at Work

- Become Aware of Your Emotional and Physical Reactions.
- Notice your distress. Don’t ignore it.
- Know your limitations, Physical, Emotional, Psychological.
- Manage your time (at work and home).
Self-Attunement

- Adjust your home environment.
- Loosen mental ties to work when you are at home.
- Take time to Refresh & Recover from your stress.
- Focus on building your identity apart from your job.


Van Der Kolk, B. (2014) The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform
REFERENCES