

ADHC, play therapy and the yellow brick road...

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I had never done a training course for fifteen days straight before, but the opportunity to complete a certificate in Therapeutic Play absolutely outweighed the two weekends I would miss in completing the course. Although I had done several wonderful one and two day Play Therapy courses, it became apparent a few days into my training with Play Therapy International (PTI), that being submerged in the Play Therapy world for two weeks was going to provide a much more meaningful learning experience. The course provided participants with the opportunity to explore the use of clay, sand tray, craft, drawing, music, storytelling, movement, role play and visualisation as therapeutic tools.

After fifteen days, five ADHC colleagues and I emerged from our Play Therapy training not just equipped with new techniques and knowledge but with a much sharper awareness of our selves and our triggers. We also took with us a deeper understanding of what it may feel like to be a vulnerable client and a sense of the level of attunement a young client may seek in their therapeutic relationship with us. With all of this on board we were ready to embark upon phase two of the ADHC Play Therapy Pilot, hopeful to build upon the success of phase one, bravely initiated by Lucinda Mora (OT and Senior Clinical Consultant – SBIS) back in 2008.

In a nutshell, Play Therapy aims to help children to help themselves with emotional and behavioural problems, in a way that is most natural for them, without rely-

ing on words. The experience is different from that of playing with friends, siblings or parents in that the therapeutic relationship provides a specific environment.

This helps to improve self-esteem and self-confidence which then allows the child to resolve inner conflict, experiment with change, and learn about choice and self direction. Unlike 'talk' based therapies, in Play Therapy, the child leads and the therapist follows, while maintaining a few essential boundaries and reflecting back, so the child gains insight.

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Play therapy began to emerge in the first half of the 20th century as therapists and theorists like Anna Freud, Margaret Lowenfeld and Melanie Klein attempted to gain insight into a child's inner emotional world through play. Virginia Axline (1969) inspired by Carl Roger's client centred approach, developed eight principles which continue to guide the work of play therapists today. Two of these therapeutic principles which differentiate play therapy from other approaches include that the child is accepted 'as is' and the responsibility to make choices in therapy is theirs.

Although as occupational therapists, psychologists and behaviour clinicians the

Play Therapy Team had worked extensively with children within their respective fields, in many ways starting work with children as trainee play therapists has seemed like a brand new experience. One of the most significant differences in utilising this therapeutic model has been moving from the driver's seat, to the passenger seat and going on the child's journey, where ever that may be. This experience has given the phrase 'going with the flow' a whole new meaning. Personally, I have found the work refreshing because it is truly child centered. It has been exciting to see such quick shifts in clients in just a few sessions and to hear from parents the changes they can see happening for their child. Early qualitative feedback is suggesting that changes already occurring for these children include decreased anxiety, improved self confidence and increased communication.

In my experience, although sitting with a child and talking about their worries and concerns can be helpful for them, Play Therapy is advantageous because it opens up other ways of communicating, giving the client options depending upon their needs, abilities, preferences and mood. Some clients may choose to talk in a Play Therapy session. The beauty of this approach is that whether they talk, paint or thump a piece of clay, it's always their choice. It is having this choice that seems to be so empowering for clients and the improvement in their self confidence from week to week in most cases is astounding.

The Play Therapy Team members meet once a month as a group and once a month individually for supervision to reflect upon the content and process of the work, to develop understanding and skills and to connect theory and practice. This supervision is critical because it provides valida-



tion, and assists those on the team to utilise their personal and professional resources. Most importantly, supervision offers a space to reflect and clarify what is evoked by the work and to explore the therapist's reactions to these experiences. In this way the quality of the work being done with clients within the pilot is monitored.

There are several pathways that can lead to becoming an accredited play therapist. The Academy of Play and Child Psychotherapy (www.apac.org.uk) can provide information about international certification, including courses with Play Therapy International (www.playtherapy.org). To practice within Australia specifically, The Academy of Art and Play Therapy (www.artandplay.com.au) provides a vocational graduate diploma. Play Therapy Australia also offer courses in Perth (www.playtherapyaustralia.com). Play Therapy courses are becoming more available in Australia. Practitioners considering becoming Play Therapists will need to investigate providers and their accreditation options thoroughly. A short course in play therapy will not equip practitioners with all they need to work effectively and safely with children as Play Therapists. Play Therapists are certified by recognised professional organisations and participate in clinical supervision specific to Play Therapy.

The ADHC Play Therapy Team are currently accepting referrals for any child or young person who is an ADHC client, living in the Metro North region, aged between 3 and 17 years with a developmental delay or intellectual disability and an emotional age of at least 3 years. Our Play Therapy clients typically experience issues related to ASD, withdrawn or 'acting out' behaviour, communication, academic performance, attachment, nightmares, trauma, abuse, bereavement and loss, separation and divorce, social exclusion, being bullied or bullying others. Children with an emotional age of 3 will have some pretend play skills, may like to play alone or alongside others, may like to use mediums like paint or use play dough, can follow a few simple directions and knows a parent or carer will return. ADHC Met North Intake can be contacted on (02) 98419350.

The evidence base within the Play Therapy field is growing. However, in relation to children with a disability, the research is minimal. The ADHC Play Therapy Team is hoping to change that by providing Play Therapy specifically for children and young people with intellectual disabilities. This exciting work, it is anticipated, will further research within the Play Therapy and disability fields. ●

Introductory Reading

Axline, V. (1964). *Dibs in search of self*. USA: Ballantine Books.

Davalos, S. (1999). *Making sense of art: Sensory-based art activities for children with autism, asperger's syndrome and other pervasive developmental disorders*. Kansas: Autism Asperger Publishing Co.

McMahon, L. (2003). *The handbook of play therapy*. USA: Routledge.

Oaklander, V. (1989). *Windows to our children: A gestalt therapy approach to children and adolescents*. USA: The Gestalt Journal Press.

Rahmania, P., & Moheba, N. (2010). The effectiveness of clay therapy and narrative therapy on anxiety of pre-school children: a comparative study. *Procedia Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 5, 23-27.

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resources...

- The *Australian institute of health and welfare* has an online **Indigenous Observatory**. This is an Australian, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and Welfare statistics observatory. It includes information across the lifespan, child safety and much more. Visit www.aihw.gov.au/indigenous-observatory.
- The **BBC** have an entertaining blog called *BBC The Ouch! Blog*. A great international perspective on disability, visit www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/ouch/. There is now a podcast available from *BBC The Ouch!*, so download and enjoy.
- The **Association for Children with a Disability NSW** (ACD NSW) is a non-profit organisation run by parents of children with a disability seeking to help other parents. They have two publications available for purchase, 1. *Helping you and your Family \$5*: a pocket-sized publication designed for families with a child who is newly diagnosed with a disability. 2. *Through the Maze \$15*: a comprehensive guide to disability services in NSW. It covers the stages of diagnosis of a disability through to adulthood. Visit www.acdnsw.org.au to order your copies.
- www.socialneeds.net.au provides an easily navigable and searchable directory of key reports and submissions concerning **Social Needs in Australia** since 2007, with an emphasis on those released in the last 4 years. Each of over 500 reports and submissions can be directly accessed through the directory by clicking on the report or submission name.
- Every resident of NSW will have direct telephone access to expert mental health advice for the first time following the launch of a 24 hour telephone line by the Minister for Mental Health, Kevin Humphries. The NSW Government has established the 1800 011 511 Mental Health Line to ensure that people with a mental health problem, their families and carers can access the care they need whenever and wherever they need it.
- The **Museum of Contemporary Arts** at Sydney's circular Quay offers a variety of programs for students with specific needs. The *Bella program* for students with specific needs includes free, fun workshops for students who have a physical, intellectual, emotional or behavioural disability. Learn more about the *Bella Room* on the museums website www.mca.com.au/learn/specific-needs.
- **Relationship Skills: a photo resource**. A photo kit to support carers, counsellors and trainers in discussions with and education of people with disability. This kit can be used in developing friendship and relationship skills and a positive awareness of sexuality and personal safety. The kit includes 18 relationship photo cards (size A5) and a supporting booklet with activity suggestions, a cartoon friendship guide and dating guide, worksheet and handout. Cost: \$54, includes postage. To order email liz@relationshipsandprivatestuff.com.
- **IACAPAP** (*International Association for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Allied Professions*) has released an online textbook of Child and Adolescent Mental Health. This is a fantastic free resource, visit <http://iacapap.org/iacapap-textbook-of-child-and-adolescent-mental-health>

