



## The WCPA News

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### What is Play Therapy?

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Young students walk into our schools, classrooms, and offices everyday with a multitude of varying backgrounds. Many come from divorced parents. Some are having problems with peer relationships, adjustments in the school or home setting, or general difficulty with managing their feelings. Is there help for young children that fall under any or all of these circumstances? Yes, there is. Play therapy might be the answer.

Play therapy is a technique used to help children express themselves through their natural form of expression, play. Play itself is essential to a child's healthy development. Play provides a concrete form and an expressive means to the child's inner world. Many children, especially very young children, have difficulty expressing themselves through language. Play therapy helps them to express their feelings more easily through the use of toys instead of words. Toys are the words; play is the language. Play is viewed as a symbolic language that can reveal the child's:

- Experiences
- Reactions to experiences
- Feelings about experiences
- Wishes, needs, and wants
- Self-perception

What is the difference between play therapy and playing with a child at home? There are several significant differences. Play therapists are experts, specifically trained to provide an environment of caring, empathy, and understanding in the playroom. Toys are carefully selected for the room to facilitate creative and emotional expressions from children. Many different types of toys are chosen, knowing that children will play with them in a variety of ways that allows for decision-making. Play therapy helps children "play out" their reactions to life situations in the presence of a play therapist who is trained to identify the symbols represented during play.

Play therapy is not a time where the child plays with the therapist once and then is considered "cured." The length of time a child is seen for play therapy varies from child to child. It depends on the severity of the problem or trauma, the child's personality, and the child's responses and reactions. A professional play therapist will always keep parents updated about progress throughout treatment.

**Case Example:** Billy, age seven, was having difficulty following directions at school and home. He was getting into verbal altercations with peers at recess and his grades had recently dropped. During a parent/teacher conference, the school learned that Billy's parents had recently separated and were pursuing divorce. The teacher and parents agreed that the changes occurring in Billy's home life seemed to cause his increasingly negative behaviors at home and school. Counseling was suggested, and Billy's parents took him to a play therapist.

**Continued, Page 2**

## Play Therapy, Cont. from Page 1

In play therapy, the first several sessions were used to build rapport between Billy and the therapist and for Billy to become familiar with the toys in the playroom. As therapy continued, the therapist encouraged Billy to play freely and express himself while the therapist looked for specific themes and/or dialogue within Billy's play. The therapist looked for answers to questions such as, "What toys does Billy chose to play with? Does he play the same things over and over? How does he express himself during play? Does he need direction during play or can he play independently?" The therapist helped Billy build a feeling vocabulary and to take ownership of his feelings. During play therapy, Billy also developed age-appropriate coping skills to be used at home and school while he faced these difficult changes in his life.

When parents are considering counseling for their younger children, play therapy is an appropriate option. Schools can encourage parents to ask several important questions when choosing a play therapist:

1. Is the therapist a registered play therapist?
2. What is the therapist's experience in working with children of that age?
3. What are the therapist's hours of availability?
4. How will the therapist communicate and work with the family and with the school?

Play therapy meets the natural response of children to play. It is a highly effective way to help children who are struggling with problems at school and/or home. If you have further questions about play therapy or would like to schedule an appointment to see a registered play therapist, contact West County Psychological Associates at (314) 275-8599.

## Have Eating Disorders Impacted Your School?

If your school is like many others, the unfortunate answer is "yes." In the United States alone, approximately 7 million girls and women and 1million boys and men struggle with eating disorders. Even our elementary and middle schools are beginning to recognize and respond to problem eating patterns among students. They are wise to do so, as eating disorders often begin at earlier ages than many people ever imagined. Among Americans who suffer from eating disorders:

- 10% report onset at **10 years of age or younger**
- 33% report onset between ages 11-15
- 43% report onset between ages 16-20

Eating problems that are sometimes severe enough to be diagnosed as a disorder can cause serious concerns within the school environment. How do teachers recognize the problem? How should we handle these students in the lunchroom and on the sports fields? What do we do if parents refuse to acknowledge the problem?

If your school has become concerned about this issue, services are available to you through WCPA. Services include: educational presentations for faculty and/or parents, educational presentations for classrooms, case consultation, group counseling for at-risk students on-site at school, and individual assessment and therapy at the office. If you would like more information about any of these services, please contact Barbra Danin or Amy Maus at the WCPA office.

### Our Philosophy

We believe that individuals and systems:

- Are capable of permanent change
- Function best with clearly defined authority that stems from a family systems hierarchy
- Are accountable for both positive and negative aspects of behavior
- Achieve success by conscious choices that lead to strength and development of personal responsibility
- Control their environment by establishing boundaries that are consistent with their values

WCPA promotes change and growth by:

- Helping to establish order within the environment
- Meeting consistently in a collaborative relationship to achieve identified goals
- Helping to identify and process significant issues
- Aiding in resolving issues as they arise

The result for the system or individual is the development of a strong sense of identity and boundaries that allows for the achievement of goals.

## Have We Erred?

*WCPA tries very hard to maintain an up-to-date and accurate database of our newsletter recipients. However, due to frequent changes within schools and their personnel, this can be very difficult. If there is anything incorrect about your name, your school or organization's name, or your address on this newsletter, we would very much appreciate hearing from you. We want to get it right! Please call us or email us at [wcpa@sbcglobal.net](mailto:wcpa@sbcglobal.net) and we will be happy to make the necessary*

## Comprehensive Student Assessment Team Available

West County Psychological Associates would like to announce a new option in psychological testing – the Comprehensive Student Assessment Team. In addition to traditional psychological testing, the Comprehensive Student Assessment Team includes classroom observations of the student and extended interviewing of the student, family and school personnel. A feedback session of the testing is offered to both the family of the student and appropriate school personnel. The team was designed in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of both the student's mental health and educational needs. For more information, or to make a referral to the team, please contact Dr. Bob Poirier or Jodi Wilson, MA, LPC at our office.

## Introducing Michelle Serra, WCPA's New Play Therapist

Michelle Serra, M.Ed., LPC, NCC, RPT received her Master of Education in Counseling degree from the University of Missouri at St. Louis. She is a licensed professional counselor, a national certified counselor, and a registered play therapist. She has worked as an elementary school counselor for the past seven years. In addition, she has extensive experience in working with children as young as age 3 and their families on behaviorally and emotionally related problems. Michelle Serra uses her play therapy expertise to help children communicate through the use of toys instead of words. She is currently working as a therapist and consultant at WCPA. **Welcome, Michelle Serra!**

## From the Director

One of my greatest frustrations in recent years has been to watch parents who dote so much on their children that the children become excessively dependent upon them. For example, the mother who consistently reminds her eleven year old daughter that she has to wear her gloves in cold weather, or the father who religiously preaches to his son that he cannot leave the family car empty of gas after he has driven. I have watched with alarm as this overprotective behavior has spilled over into education. Jack, who is thirteen, cannot do his homework unless his mother is with him. Sarah's mother has to pick up college applications in the high school guidance office because Sarah never seems to remember. In many schools, the teacher now posts homework assignments online in case the child doesn't remember them, or so that parents can check to see what has been assigned in order to check their child's homework.

I'm confused and concerned. At what point do we teach children to assume responsibility for THEIR jobs? At what point do we teach children to assume responsibility for THEIR choices? I see parents, and even teachers, who attempt to save children from failing when the child has made the choice to fail. I recently talked with one mother who said that she was afraid to allow her son to receive a low grade because it would mean that she hadn't done her job as a good mother. She also spelled out all the catastrophic events that would happen if he failed his Algebra I test – ending in the fact that he wouldn't get into the college of his choice.

What we know is that the most effective learning comes when we are allowed to suffer the results of our choices. In other words, we learn from our mistakes. No child does well because his parent or teacher nagged him endlessly. We do well when we internalize the concept that this work is OUR job and we feel good about ourselves when we do it to the best of our ability. I think that too many parents have assumed such a strong protective role with their children that they have created a situation wherein the child remains in a delayed state of childhood or adolescence. As educators, we have to remind ourselves and our students' parents that the best thing we can do for children is to help them assume responsibility for their own actions in order for them to grow up.

– *Mary*