

And Then They All Die

Common Play Themes Observed in Child-Parent Psychotherapy with
Families Who Have Experienced Domestic Violence

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Cultural Beliefs

What are our beliefs
about play?



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Beliefs About Play

- Young children often use play to understand what happened
- Play may have symbolic meaning even when it is not an “accurate” representation of what happened
- Play is a language
- Rather than being a linear narrative representation of what happened, play may express core themes (e.g. danger, absence of protection)

Beliefs About Play

- Through play children
 - Express how they are feeling (share emotions)
 - Share their experience
 - Make meaning
 - Repair: Make wrong right
 - Turn passive into active
 - Try out different and new ways of being



Dyadic Relational Fidelity



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Dyadic Relational Fidelity: Goals



Whether the work is done jointly with a caregiver and child, with multiple caregivers and the child, alone with a caregiver, or alone with a child . . .

- Intervene in ways that seek to strengthen caregiver-child relationships
- When possible, intervene in ways that address each person's perspective, translating the meaning of each individual's experience to the other
- Balance needs of caregiver and child to create a context where the caregiver can resume the rightful role as the child's historian, protector, guide, and nurturer

Overarching Goal

- Making meaning (not trauma narrative)
- As I develop my caregiver helps me
 - Understand and hold my life story
 - Connect experience to affect



- People who connect emotions to experience are less likely to repeat
- To differentiate between then and now, you have to know there was a then

Understanding Play

- Finding meaning in common games
 - Hide and go seek: separation, loss, and reconnection
 - Monster hunts, telling scary monsters to go away: danger & protection
 - Candy Land: separations and reunions

Trauma Narrative: Toys

- Children often need toys connected to their experience to begin playing what happened
 - Ambulances
 - Police cars
 - Doctor's kit
 - Baby dolls, toy animals, people
 - Puppets
- Children also need access to toys that help them regulate

See [Pinterest.com/CPPtreatment](https://www.pinterest.com/CPPtreatment) for a list of toys and books



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Emotional Process Fidelity: Cup Metaphor



- How do you feel when your cup is full?
- What can you do?
- What do children do?

- Tiny cups overflow faster
- Goal = "Grow a bigger cup"



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Trauma Narrative: Emotion Process Fidelity



Co-constructing a trauma narrative involves supporting affect regulation as much as it involves developing a narrative

- Typical patterns after remembering difficult events
 - Move - Get active
 - Fight - aggressive
 - Flight - leave or change the topic
 - Freeze - space out or seem unable to do anything
 - Tend and befriend - connect or get clingy
- Therapy done in “sound bites” or “pedacitos”



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Common Play Themes: Venting & Bearing Witness

- Everything is awful
- Play is chaotic but child may be organized and focused
- Babies and good people are hurt
- Protectors are ineffective
- People who should be helping, hurt others
- No one can help
- Bad guys seem all powerful

Role: Watch, bear witness, give voice to emotions, suffer, tolerate
Righteous anger



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Common Play Themes: Revenge Themes

- The “bad guys” are punished
 - Beaten
 - Jailed
 - Eaten by animals
- Aggression directed at a perpetrator

Role:

- Translate possible meaning for caregiver, so caregiver “leans in” and joins child in punishing the bad guys
- Give voice to feelings
- Join in punishing the “bad guys” (when allowed by child)
- When appropriate, help child and caregiver think about the motives of the “bad guy” (e.g. when the bad guy is a caregiver)



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The Bad Guys Are in Jail



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Play Themes: Damage to and Repair of the Protective Shield

Damage to and Repair of the Protective Shield

- Child is all-powerful (and big)
 - Child punishes perpetrator by self (showing capacity)
 - Caregiver wishes s/he could help
- Caregiver acknowledges past “failure to protect”
 - Caregiver did not know what was happening
 - Caregiver had problems before
 - It was an accident that caregiver wished s/he could have stopped, but s/he could not



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Co-construct Meaning: Repairing the Protective Shield

- What do children need from caregivers who have left them or acted in neglectful or violent ways towards them or in front of them?
 - Apology
 - Atonement
 - A clear statement that what the caregiver did was wrong
 - Real change



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Play Themes: Damage to and Repair of the Protective Shield

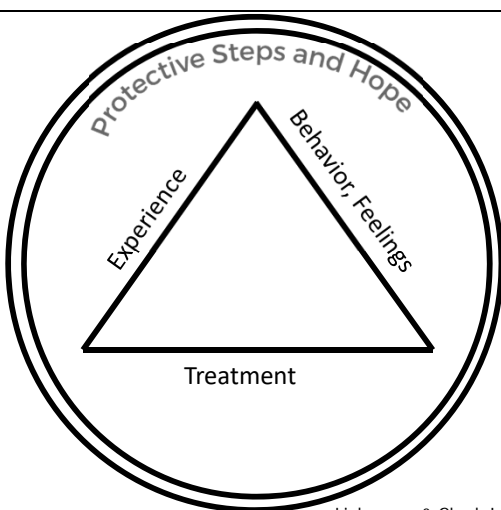
Protective shield play

- Caregiver stands up to or talks to “bad guys”
- Caregiver says s/he won't let child be hurt again
- Caregiver punishes evil-doers



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Using Play to Talk About Experiences



Lieberman & Ghosh Ippen 2014

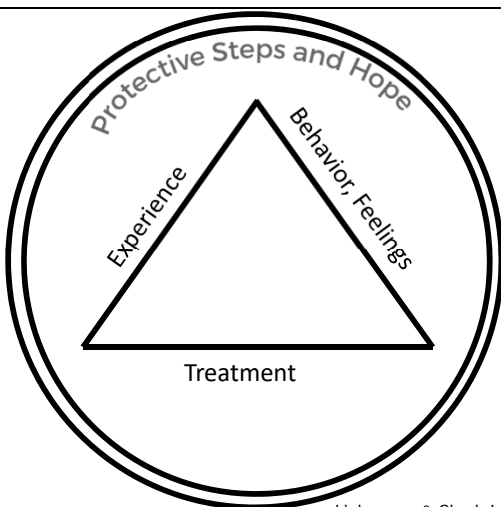
Past Experiences - “You have been through”

- “Receive” the child's perspective
- Support connection to affect
- Dialogue about different perceptions (as needed)



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Using Play to Talk About Experiences



Future Experiences - "In the future, this will/may happen . . .

- Use play to help children
 - Understand what will happen
 - Prepare
 - Make meaning of why it is happening
 - Share feelings and their perspective

Trauma Narrative: Common Play Themes

The Grown-Ups Explain They Do Not Make the Decisions, a Judge Does

- Common when child custody and visitation is being decided by the courts
- May be helpful for grown-ups to communicate to child what is happening
 - Foster care placements
 - Why they are having or not having visits with a biological caregiver



Circles of Support

When caregivers come and go

- Changes in placement
- Caregiver health or mental health problems



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Making Meaning: Trauma Narrative Importance of Involving Caregivers

- The work is done in sound-bites often outside of the therapy hour when children are remembering
- Through story, caregivers help children hold on to and remember their history
- When you know your history, you understand and can better cope with future reactions
- As caregivers help a child co-construct a narrative, they change their attributions to and responses towards a child
- The story continues to develop as the child develops

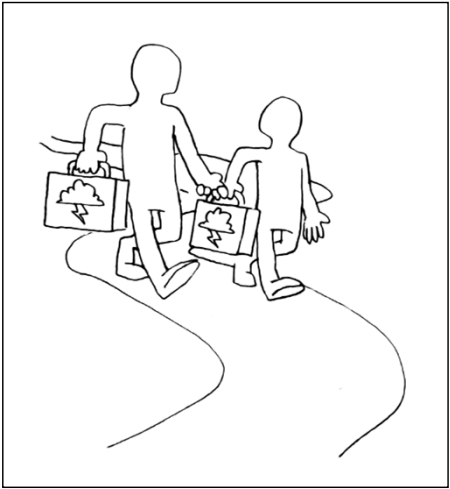


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Pretreatment



Post-treatment



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