

LOUDER

than words

For children, play is a language that can have considerable therapeutic benefits, says **Judit Horvath**...

In early years education children are encouraged to engage in a variety of academic and play-based activities. For children, however, play is not only an activity but a method of communication, through which they can express themselves, their thoughts and their opinions about the world.

Aside from using spoken words, there are a number of different ways in which people can communicate; for example, we can use sounds, gestures or pictures. Children with complex communication needs rely on these alternative methods as their main channels of communication, using them during play to express themselves and engage with others. Play is children's language, through which they tell their own stories – stories which they may have difficulty putting into words – and in the telling they reshape their experiences. It is a child's natural way of recovering from daily emotional upheavals.

A UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE

Understanding that play has a significant part in promoting children's development raises a question: 'What happens to a child who has no toys, equipment or material to play with? Don't these children play and develop?' The magic of play as a language is that in children's innate need to communicate, they find their own play equipment from the objects and materials available to them in their environment, making the experience of pushing a cardboard box more or less the same as that of a child from the upper-middle class with an expensive toy. Therefore, financially disadvantaged children do not lose the advantage of play. Children are, however, often deprived of play opportunities for other reasons.

Like any other language, play requires the user to spend time to develop it. Children, therefore, need spaces inside and outside, company to communicate with, props such as toys, and real objects to learn to manipulate and symbolise. They need to, and love to, make choices about when, what, where, how and with whom to play.

Play therapy

When children are troubled and struggling to adapt, play therapy offers a means for adults to focus on providing the right conditions for them to develop their methods and means of play. In turn, this can enable them to learn to solve problems, to get along with others and to develop the skills they need to grow and learn. Commonly, play therapists will take children into a playroom that has a wide range of toys, chosen for their capacity to help children express their feelings and problems. Children are allowed to select the toys, and to choose the ways in which they want to play with them. During the sessions, the therapist will observe the child's actions and feelings closely, sometimes engaging in imaginary play, and set limits if the child's behaviour becomes problematic. Using this approach, children's problems or issues usually come out naturally in their play.

Ideally, parents are their children's first and best playmates. Children tend to be more creative when their parents are involved in their play, and the best play occurs when the adult plays alongside the child whilst listening to them, rather than just providing toys or supervising. When children have a lack of healthy play situations, the therapeutic use of play is based on the missing early learning foundation and 'replaces' the playful environment with simple rules and a completely child-led approach. The aim of play therapy is to decrease difficulties that interfere significantly with a child's normally functioning play, achieving improved communication and understanding between the child and others, developing self-observation skills, resulting in improved impulse control, and more adaptive ways of coping with anxiety and frustration, and an

improved capacity to trust and to relate to others.

The set of basic rules when playing with children, as summarised by psychologist and play therapy pioneer Virginia Axline, is a gift that play therapy has to offer to all people involved in young children's lives. Axline stated that adults should:

- develop a warm and friendly relationship with the child;
- accept the child as she or he is;
- establish a feeling of permission in the relationship so that the child feels free to express his or her feelings completely;
- be alert to the feelings the child is expressing and reflect these feelings back in such a manner that the child gains insight into his or her behaviour;
- maintain a deep respect for the child's ability to solve his or her problems, and give the child the opportunity to do so;
- avoid attempting to direct the child's actions or conversations in any manner as the child leads the way;
- avoid hurrying the time along as play is a gradual process;
- only establish those limitations necessary to anchor the time to the world of reality and to make the child aware of his or her responsibility in the situation.

Nb. It is important to recognise the difference between the therapeutic benefits of play for all children and the use of play therapy for the 20 per cent of the UK's children who suffer from a social, behaviour, emotional or mental health problem. There are risks in using play for therapeutic purposes without training and clinical supervision – see 'How to train' below.

Practical applications

Play, and play therapy, can support children's development in a variety of ways, as the following examples demonstrate...

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

A range of play activities can be used to promote the expression of feelings and

emotions. If we consider expressive arts, the use of *clay* tends to promote the expression of aggression, sorrow and concern, as it allows children to be creative, and it's through this creativity that emotions are likely to emerge or be expressed. *Drawing*, on the other hand, allows children to get in touch with their inner self and can be used to illustrate the development of their strengths. Children can be asked, for instance, to create a representation of what is troubling them. A child may also show in a drawing the development of their learning from infancy to the present day to highlight memorable milestones and how much they have grown and accomplished over the years. *Finger painting* tends to promote emotions of joy, celebration, and happiness.

Imaginative pretend play helps children learn about social skills and observe situations in a safe environment. *Puppets and soft toys* can help them to learn and practise behaviours that are socially accepted. By getting involved in puppet play with the child, adults can mimic situations that motivate children to respond in a variety of ways, so the children can indirectly explore the appropriateness of their own social behaviour.

COMMUNICATION

By expressing themselves symbolically through toys in play (or play therapy), children are able to separate themselves from complex feelings and memories that are too

difficult for them to directly communicate to others. Creating an opportunity for children to bring their problems, wishes and desires to the surface, even if it is done symbolically, can be very beneficial. An *imaginary journey* taken with the children, a personal story, allows them to get in touch with their memories in order to relate critically to their perception of the events, through dramatic role play. *Miniature animals and sand play* provide visual pictures by touching the psyche, encouraging children to talk about whatever may be troubling them. The use of symbols in the sand tray can help them develop a visual picture of events they have experienced.

Telling stories can encourage children to create their own story: it is highly likely that children will project ideas from their own lives onto the characters and themes in the story, and may even include themselves in events. Telling stories enables children to express their wishes, fantasies and hopes. This is particularly useful for children who are experiencing traumatic happenings in their lives, as it gives them an opportunity to express their hurt.

HOW TO TRAIN

The Academy of Play and Child Psychotherapy (APAC) is the only training provider whose courses meet the Play Therapy UK standards required for the PSA Approved Register of Play and Creative Arts Therapists. Courses are run throughout the UK and at a summer school in the south of France. Visit www.playtherapy.org.uk



about the author

Judit Horvath is manager at Olympus KeyMed Day Nursery in Southend, Essex.

