

History of Play Therapy

The use of play in therapy was first elucidated by the pioneers of Child Psychotherapy. Anna Freud (1928, 1964, 1965), Margaret Lowenfeld (1935, 1970) and Melanie Klein (1961, 1987) posited the theoretical premise for the use of play, for example, Klein (1961, 1987) stipulated that a child's spontaneous play was a substitute for the free association used within adult psychoanalysis.

Theories and practice surrounding play differ within each Child Psychotherapy tradition. However, each tradition is connected by the central proposition that play transmits and communicates the child's unconscious experiences, desires, thoughts and emotions.

Play Therapy has emerged from elements of Child Psychotherapy with the specific theoretical foundations emerging from the Humanistic Psychology tradition and Attachment theory.

In the 1940's, Carl Rogers (1951, 1955) established a new model of psychotherapy – client-centred therapy (later termed person-centred therapy). This new tradition was born as a protest against the diagnostic, prescriptive perspectives of that time. Emphasis was placed upon a relationship between therapist and client based upon genuineness, acceptance and trust. As such, the person-centred approach posited a new and original theoretical perspective of personality structure, psychological health, acquisition of psychological difficulty and the change process within therapy.

Largely influenced by this person-centred approach, Axline (1969, 1971) developed a new therapeutic approach for working with children – non-directive Play Therapy.

Utilising the person-centred theoretical foundations, Axline devised a clear and succinct Play Therapy theory and method. Her account of how she worked with a young boy called Dibs is well known (Dibs: In Search of Self, 1964). Axline described in great detail how she worked with Dibs and how he was able to heal himself over a period of time. She said “No-one ever knows as much about a human being’s inner world as the individual himself. Responsible freedom grows and develops from inside the person”. Her eight principles of the therapeutic relationship inform the work of many Play Therapists.

Clark Moustakas describes his work as being concerned with the kind of relationship needed to make therapy a growth experience. His stages start with the child’s feelings being generally negative and as they are expressed, they become less intense, the end results tend to be the emergence of more positive feelings and more balanced relationships.

For over 50 years, Play Therapy has been practiced and researched within America. This has been led by many Play Therapists, including Moustakas (1953, 1966, 1973, 1981, 1992), Schaefer (1976, 1986, 1993) and Landreth (1991,2002) who have progressed Axline’s original formulations and devised differing models integrating elements of systemic family therapy, narrative therapy, solution focused therapy and cognitive behavioural therapy.

In Britain, Play Therapy started to emerge as a new and differing tradition in the 1980’s. Initially the Children’s Hour Trust taught professionals the basic techniques of Axline’s Play Therapy used in a multitude of settings. In parallel, two Dramatherapists started using Play Therapy methods to inform their Dramatherapy practice with children. Sue Jennings (1994) and Ann Cattanach (1993, 1994, 1998) integrated elements of non-directive Play Therapy to formulate a British Play Therapy movement. In 1990, the Institute of Dramatherapy started to offer a Certificate and Diploma in Play Therapy.