

And Then They All Die

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

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Video





Cultural Beliefs
What are our beliefs about play?



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




Port of Entry: Definition




- Clinical opportunity
- Unit of intervention in CPP
 - Session in other interventions
- Developmentally appropriate unit of intervention for work with young children



Ports of Entry: Multiple Pathways





- Do what you believe will be change producing for the dyad
- Well-timed developmental guidance often effective



- If simple interventions fail, go deeper. Choose interventions that address resistance, mistrust, or psychological obstacles
- Multiple possible pathways (every port leads to a new port)

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Ports of Entry are Like Buses

- "Ports of entry are like buses. If you miss one, another one will come back around."
(Patricia Van Horn)
- Realize you missed the bus
- Share important ports with your team
- Practice responding to challenging ports as a team

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Reflective Practice Fidelity



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Reflective Practice Fidelity: Goals



For a specific family or session, cultivate . . .

1. Awareness of your own emotional reactions
2. Awareness of personal and/or cultural biases
3. The capacity to recognize and regulate your own strong emotions prior to intervening

Stance: Regulated and integrated
Underlying CPP Principles:

- It is difficult to think clearly when you are triggered.
- Engage your frontal lobes before intervening.
- When affect is strong, the first affect to regulate is your own.



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Reflective Practice Fidelity: Goals



For a specific family or session, cultivate the ability to . . .

4. Consider all perspectives (the caregivers', the child's, your own)
5. Understand beliefs, values, and behavior in the context of . . .
 - Development
 - Current ecological & cultural context (including ongoing trauma)
 - Historical context (trauma history, prior relationships, prior interactions with service providers)

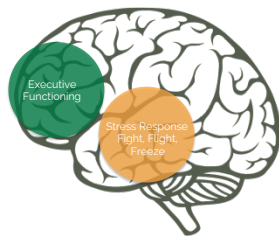
Stance: I want to understand you. I want to learn from you.
Underlying CPP Principles:

- Try to understand the motivation and roots underlying dysregulated behavior.
- Do not target for change what you do not yet understand.
- You do not have to agree with a belief, value, or behavior to have an empathic understanding of its emotional meaning.
- "Balance acceptance with change" (Marsha Linehan)



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Reflective Practice : Challenge





Working with Families Who Have Experienced Trauma

- Traumatic content → Potential to dysregulate
- When emotions are charged, executive functioning is disengaged
- Regulation is critical for thoughtful therapeutic intervention
- It is best not to intervene without your frontal lobes




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Reflective Practice & Diversity-Informed Practice 



- When we are angry we are . . .
- More likely to see people rather than situations as responsible for a problem
- Less likely to trust others
- **More likely to make judgments based on stereotypes**
- Positive affect is associated with increased flexibility in thinking and action


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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

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Overarching Goal

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



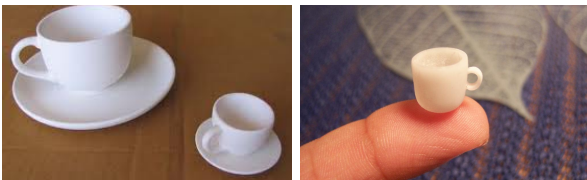
- People who connect emotions to experience are less likely to repeat
- To differentiate between then and now, you have to know there was a then

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

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"

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

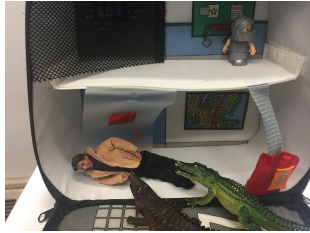
Role:

- 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



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

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

Daddy Fight the Monsters



Save Me Daddy



I Wish the Gorillas and Zebras Could Live Together



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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Protective Shield Play



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Internalization of Protection



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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



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Circles of Support

When caregivers come and go

- Changes in placement
- Caregiver health or mental health problems



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Circles of Support



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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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Trauma Narrative: Understanding Play

- Games can have meaning
 - Hide and go seek (separation, loss, and reconnection)
 - Go on a monster hunt, tell the scary monster to go away (protection)
 - Candy Land – can be about separations and reunions



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