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Therapeutic Approach to Guided Play for Preschool Children

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Abstract

Play is closely associated with the symbolic expression of children's desires and inner feelings. Through play, children express their problems, conflicts, and frustrations. In a symbolic manner, they narrate the story of their lives, reflect the emotional climate within their families, and reveal the nature of their relationships with others. Consequently, play is no longer regarded merely as a form of entertainment or solely as a means of promoting physical, motor, and sensory development. Rather, it has become an essential tool for fostering balanced development across its various dimensions. Play therapy is a structured approach that facilitates insight into and understanding of the child's inner world, while also serving as an effective means of relieving psychological stress and modifying behavior. It helps reduce anxiety and tension among preschool children, enables them to reinterpret reality in ways that align with their needs and wishes, and mitigates the impact of painful experiences they may encounter.

Keywords: Play Therapy; Preschool Children; Psychological Stress; Behavior Modification.

Introduction

Human development is one of the divine miracles whose full meanings and implications remain beyond complete human understanding. Despite the distinct psychological characteristics associated with each developmental stage, most specialists emphasize the crucial importance of the early years of life, as this period lays the foundation for an individual's future personality. During early childhood, play constitutes the core of children's activities and serves as the primary catalyst for the development and advancement of all other aspects of growth, particularly during the preschool years, commonly referred to by specialists as early childhood.

At this stage, children's interest in play increases significantly, as it represents their predominant form of behavior. Consequently, a considerable portion of their time is devoted to play compared with later developmental stages. Children also become more inclined toward cooperative and group play, reflecting their growing social development and their need to establish relationships with others, especially peers of the same age. Furthermore, their play becomes increasingly diverse; children rarely remain engaged with a single game for an extended period but instead seek variety and gradually become interested in more complex forms of play, particularly toward the end of early childhood. Simple games no longer satisfy their interests, owing to the broad range of experiences they have acquired. They increasingly prefer games governed by clear rules and regulations that define the role of each participant within the group, reflecting their growing understanding of game rules and the progressive development of their cognitive, social, and emotional capacities. Although children's play during early childhood is characterized by spontaneity, it gradually becomes more realistic, a characteristic that becomes even more evident after they enter school.

Problem Statement

Play serves as a gateway to children's inner world, a functional entry point into childhood, and an educational medium through which personality is shaped. It plays a fundamental role in fostering changes across the various dimensions of a child's personality, including cognitive, emotional, affective, motor, and social development.

Spontaneous play, in particular, is a defining characteristic of children's lives, shaping their unique world through its contribution to the development of their abilities, the refinement of their skills, the stimulation of their latent potential, and the expression of their inner psychological experiences. Contrary to the belief that play is merely a frivolous activity or a waste of time—especially during the preschool years—it is, in fact, an effective means of self-discovery, self-expression, and positive interaction with the external world. Beyond fulfilling children's needs for enjoyment, recreation, and the constructive release of energy, play is a key factor in promoting balanced development. Consequently, play has emerged as a valuable educational resource that can be systematically employed to achieve educational, preventive, diagnostic, and therapeutic objectives. This raises the following question: To what extent can play contribute to the treatment of behavioral and psychological problems and disorders among preschool children?

Definition of Play

The concept of play has been defined in various ways, with each scholar approaching it from a different theoretical perspective. Some of the most prominent definitions include the following:

According to the *Dictionary of Education*, play is a purposeful activity performed by children for the purpose of enjoyment and recreation (Abd al-Latif, 2005).

Play has also been defined as an activity in which an individual engages primarily for the enjoyment inherent in the activity itself, regardless of any outcomes achieved at its conclusion. It is characterized by spontaneity and freedom from external pressure, coercion, or compulsion (Al-Ahmad & Mansour, 2011).

Friedrich Fröbel viewed play as an expression of human development and the free manifestation of the inner life of the young child. He considered it the foundation of the child's comprehensive and integrated development (Jallab & Buairi, 2021).

According to Nasim and Mohammed (2013), play is the simultaneous utilization of physical and mental energy through an activity that may be either structured or unstructured. Children typically engage in play for enjoyment, recreation, and indirect learning, while adults may employ it as a means of fostering cognitive, physical, emotional, and social development.

From Hanna's perspective (1999), play is any activity undertaken for the pleasure inherent in the activity itself.

Based on these definitions, play can be understood as a natural and spontaneous form of behavior that may be either guided or unguided. Although it serves as a source of enjoyment and amusement, it also fulfills numerous developmental functions that contribute to balanced growth. Its nature, form, and intensity vary according to the child's developmental stage.

Theories of Play

Numerous theories have attempted to explain the nature and function of play. Among the most influential is the **Surplus Energy Theory**.

Surplus Energy Theory

The Surplus Energy Theory, proposed by Friedrich Schiller and Herbert Spencer, is one of the earliest classical explanations of play. Schiller described play as an expression of surplus energy and regarded it as the origin of all artistic activity. He famously asserted that "*Man is fully human only when he plays*" (Jallab & Buairi, 2021). According to this theory, play functions as a mechanism for expending excess physical and mental energy that exceeds the demands of everyday life. Since this surplus energy cannot be utilized through ordinary activities, it is naturally released through play. The Surplus Energy Theory gained considerable support from many scholars and practitioners and influenced the establishment of playgrounds, sports facilities, and recreational spaces for children. However, critics of this theory questioned the source of this supposed surplus energy and argued that play is not exclusive to individuals with excess energy, since weak and ill children also engage in play (Al-Khawaldeh, 2003, p. 27).

Preparatory Theory (Practice Theory)

The Preparatory Theory, proposed by Karl Groos, views play as an essential biological function for living organisms. According to Groos, play serves to exercise and strengthen the body's organs and abilities, enabling children to gain complete control over them and use them effectively in adulthood. Thus, play prepares the individual for the serious responsibilities of future life. Groos further argued that play is closely associated with imitation, maintaining that children's games are imitations of adult roles. Since imitation is an innate instinct, children learn adult behaviors and acquire the skills necessary for their future lives through play. This theory focused on several forms of play, including fighting games, movement games, exploratory activities, and memory games, assuming the existence of both play and imitation instincts. However, it paid little attention to adult play as a means of developing or maintaining skills (Al-Khatatneh, 2013; Kridis & Bahadhiq, 2019).

Psychoanalytic Theory

The pioneer of the Psychoanalytic Theory was Sigmund Freud, whose work focused extensively on children's psychological development. Freud introduced psychoanalysis as a method for treating individuals with psychological

disorders, and subsequent scholars established a close relationship between play and psychotherapy. According to Al-Khatatneh (2013), Freud interpreted play as the projection of unconscious wishes and the symbolic reenactment of conflicts and painful experiences, allowing children to gain mastery over them. These ideas led to the development of personality assessment methods based on the assumption that play and fantasy reveal aspects of an individual's inner life and underlying motives. Consequently, imaginative play involving dolls, storytelling, inkblot techniques, and other projective methods has been widely employed in both clinical diagnosis and psychological treatment.

Behavioral Theory

Among the principal advocates of Behavioral Theory are John B. Watson, Ivan Pavlov, and B. F. Skinner. This theory assumes that human beings are born with behavioral predispositions that facilitate learning and that learning occurs through the interaction of motivation, stimuli, and responses. Behavioral theory offered several explanations of play and relied primarily on observation and experimentation. Nevertheless, most of its empirical studies were conducted on animals. It also regarded play as a learned behavior independent of the individual's internal psychological processes.

Cognitive Theory

The principal proponent of the Cognitive Theory is Jean Piaget. The theory is based on two fundamental processes: assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation refers to the child's cognitive activity of incorporating new experiences and information into existing mental structures, whereas accommodation involves modifying these cognitive structures to adapt to the external environment. Piaget classified play into four major categories: functional play, symbolic play, games with rules, and constructive play. He emphasized the close relationship between play and cognitive development. However, this theory has been criticized because of the difficulty of translating its theoretical assumptions into rigorously controlled experimental research (Kridis & Bahadhiq, 2019).

Recapitulation Theory

The Recapitulation Theory is rooted in theories of human evolution, particularly those inspired by Charles Darwin and presented in his work *On the Origin of Species* (1859). The educational psychologist G. Stanley Hall was strongly influenced by Darwin's ideas and further developed them through his observations of children in his book *Adolescence*. According to this theory, play represents a recapitulation of humanity's evolutionary past. As children engage in play, they symbolically reenact the successive stages of human evolution, from primitive life to contemporary civilization. Children's games and movements are therefore viewed as repetitions of instinctive behaviors that characterized earlier stages of human development. For example, a child climbing trees is interpreted as reenacting the behavior of early humans before progressing to group games that symbolize tribal life. This theory has been criticized on several grounds. One major criticism is that acquired knowledge and skills cannot be inherited genetically from previous generations (Jallab & Buairi, 2021, p. 58). Moreover, children are not miniature replicas of adults; activities such as riding bicycles or using mobile phones are not reenactments of ancestral experiences but rather products of the contemporary generation and its unique social context (Al-Khatatneh, 2013, p. 66).

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Recreation Theory

The Recreation Theory maintains that individuals engage in play to restore fatigued muscles and relieve mental and nervous exhaustion resulting from work. According to this perspective, when people use their muscles and nervous system in activities different from those performed during work, they provide overworked organs with an opportunity to recover. However, this theory has been criticized for reducing the function of play to merely restoring physical and mental energy. Such a narrow interpretation overlooks the broader role of play as a fundamental human activity that actively contributes to children's overall growth and development.

The Islamic Perspective on Play

Muslim educators have long emphasized educational methods that address children's developmental needs from an Islamic perspective. They recognized the close relationship between physical activity and intellectual development, acknowledging that children's natural inclination toward movement enhances mental alertness and cognitive clarity (Al-Khalidi, 2008). Mardan (2003) argues that the Islamic view of play stems from the special importance accorded to childhood and from an appreciation of children's need for movement, activity, vitality, and enjoyment. Play is regarded as a fundamental requirement of childhood and a basic psychological need that contributes to emotional stability, nurtures children's talents, provides insight into their inner world, and instills values such as strength, courage, and good humor (Idris, 2017).

The Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) encouraged adults to play with children during their early years. Muslim scholars likewise emphasized the educational and recreational value of play, recognizing that Islam takes human nature into consideration by permitting lawful recreation and amusement. They believed that excessive fatigue weakens the heart and diminishes intellectual ability. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali emphasized the educational value of play, stating that children should be allowed to engage in enjoyable play after completing their studies so that they may recover from the fatigue of learning. Preventing children from playing and overburdening them with study, he argued, weakens their hearts, diminishes their intelligence, and causes them to dislike learning. Similarly, Ibn Miskawayh maintained that children should periodically be allowed to participate in pleasant play to recover from the demands of education without experiencing excessive physical strain. Ibn al-Jawzi also stressed the importance of play, considering it a form of physical exercise that strengthens children's bodily development while serving as a means of assessing their intellectual abilities, intelligence, and alertness. He particularly emphasized the importance of group play in promoting children's social development. Likewise, Avicenna advocated providing children with opportunities for movement and recreation to relieve boredom and psychological fatigue.

The preceding theories differ in their explanations of play and its underlying motives. Nevertheless, they unanimously acknowledge its fundamental importance in children's lives and its significant contribution to healthy cognitive and intellectual development, as particularly emphasized by Piaget's cognitive theory.

Characteristics of Play During the Preschool Years

Play is not confined to a particular age group but extends throughout the entire lifespan, although its forms, purposes, and duration vary according to developmental stage. Even older adults engage in play, albeit in different ways. Play begins during the earliest stages of development, and certain forms are more prevalent at specific ages regardless of children's environmental, social, or economic backgrounds. The preschool years constitute a particularly critical developmental

period and provide a fertile foundation for nurturing children's abilities. Consequently, this stage should be utilized effectively because of its unique developmental characteristics.

Play during the preschool years possesses several distinctive features, particularly toward the end of this developmental stage. Hanna Fadel (1999) and Swalha (2007) observed that spontaneity is one of its defining characteristics and that the primary purpose of play is the experience of pleasure.

Imaginative play continues throughout this period, during which imagination and fantasy perform important psychological functions related to creativity and self-expression.

Another characteristic is the gradual transition from spontaneous to more organized forms of play. Although the quantity of play activities tends to decrease, their quality and complexity increase. Patterns and levels of play are influenced by numerous environmental and hereditary factors. Physical activity gradually declines while cognitive activity becomes more prominent, and gender differences in play preferences become increasingly apparent.

Play nevertheless retains a subjective character, as children create and shape their own games based on their understanding of everyday events and phenomena, expressing their attitudes toward them. Even when playing the same game, children often perform it differently depending on their social background, gender, and intellectual abilities.

A fundamental characteristic of play during this stage is that children symbolically represent the world around them. Through play, they recreate everyday activities, social relationships, and human interactions within imaginary situations constructed by their own minds. Young children's play frequently involves imitating adults, thereby contributing to the transmission of traditional games and cultural practices from one generation to the next.

Jean Piaget referred to this period as the symbolic play stage. During this stage, language emerges as a primary means of communication, accompanied by pretend and imaginative play. Symbolic play evolves from simple sensorimotor practice and random movements into activities in which children pretend to sleep, eat, or perform adult roles. Such behaviors demonstrate that actions acquire symbolic meaning beyond their literal execution. As children mature, symbolic play becomes increasingly sophisticated, enabling them to use one object to represent another and to engage in more complex forms of symbolic representation.

The Therapeutic Role of Play

Play constitutes the symbolic language through which children express themselves. By observing children's interactions during play, adults can gain profound insight into their inner world. Children often reveal far more about themselves through play than through words, expressing their feelings toward themselves, significant people in their lives, and the events they have experienced. Consequently, play has been described as the child's language, and toys as the child's words (Kamelia, 1991, p. 51).

Within the fields of mental health and psychotherapy, play is regarded as an essential means of understanding children's behavior, identifying their problems, and providing appropriate intervention. Guided play therapy represents a well-established therapeutic approach designed to provide psychological care for children experiencing behavioral disorders, emotional dysregulation, hyperactivity, anxiety, anger, aggression, depression, and certain learning difficulties. Play therapy is also considered one of the most effective techniques for establishing communication between the psychologist and the child. Through play, the therapist gains access to the child's dynamic psychological world, allowing the child to become, metaphorically, an open book. Play therefore enables clinicians to understand and analyze the underlying causes of children's psychological disturbances.

Accordingly, play serves as an effective intervention for psychological difficulties. It broadens children's social relationships, reduces isolation and feelings of loneliness, and diverts attention from distressing experiences that contribute to psychological disorders (Abd al-Baqi, 2001).

Any activity that provides enjoyment, pleasure, and recreation contributes to shaping children's personalities across sensory, motor, social, emotional, and cognitive domains. On the one hand, play produces qualitative changes in children's psychological, social, and cognitive development; on the other hand, it provides the foundation for the educational and instructional activities that characterize the subsequent stage of formal schooling. In this regard, Erik Erikson argued that children use play to overcome their distress, frustrations, and feelings of inadequacy, particularly during the period preceding the development of clear verbal expression (Hanna, 1999).

The capacity to enjoy play is itself considered an indicator of psychological well-being. It reflects not only the presence of competence and interest but also relative freedom from anxiety, guilt, self-blame, and other forms of emotional distress. Healthy individuals are expected to experience enthusiasm, excitement, spontaneity, and joy during play (Nahwi, 2016). According to Hanna (1999), Al-Khawaldeh (2003), and Badir (2007), play constitutes a therapeutic method employed by psychologists, educators, and specialists to help children resolve various psychological conflicts and developmental difficulties, including personality, emotional, cognitive, and motor disorders. Slavson likewise emphasized the therapeutic value of play, highlighting the influential role of group interaction in children's behavior. Through play, children are able to release emotional tension arising from physical limitations or internal conflicts, while at times also concealing their true motives and personal concerns. During play, children symbolically express their problems, conflicts, and frustrations, narrate the story of their lives, reflect the emotional atmosphere within their families, and reveal the nature of their relationships with others.

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Play is no longer regarded merely as a recreational activity that children engage in to occupy their leisure time, nor is it viewed solely as a means of promoting physical, motor, and sensory development. Rather, it has become an essential instrument for fostering children's holistic and balanced development. Accordingly, play therapy is recognized as a structured therapeutic approach that promotes insight into and understanding of the child's inner world.

The psychoanalytic school was among the first to employ play as both a therapeutic and counseling technique for interpreting children's unconscious motivations. In this regard, Anna Freud emphasized the importance of establishing a positive therapeutic relationship between the therapist and the child, particularly during the early stages of development. She highlighted the role of play in facilitating a constructive emotional bond between therapist and child. Likewise, Melanie Klein argued that every act of play possesses symbolic meaning and that spontaneous play in children is comparable to free association in adults. She maintained that children possess the capacity to resolve many of their psychological conflicts through play (Mulhim, 2006, p. 297).

Many of the psychological problems experienced during childhood can be most effectively addressed through play, owing to children's natural inclination toward playful activities during this developmental period. Children's play is rarely random; rather, it is shaped by their emotions and affective experiences. Consequently, several followers of Freud adopted **free play** as an alternative to verbal free association in child psychotherapy. Freud assumed that human behavior is governed by the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Individuals naturally seek experiences that generate pleasure while avoiding those associated with discomfort. When behavior is not constrained, it is driven primarily by instinctual wishes. Thus, as in dreams and fantasy, play provides a psychological space in which the limitations imposed by external reality are temporarily suspended.

Susanna Miller further argued that although children distinguish between play and reality, they draw upon elements of the real world to construct an imaginary world of their own. Within this symbolic world, they are able to recreate pleasurable experiences repeatedly and reorganize reality in ways that maximize enjoyment. For example, children often wish to become adults and perform adult roles, aspirations that can be realized symbolically through play (Miller, translated by Hassan Issa, 1987).

Similarly, Friedrich Fröbel described play as a **safety valve** for children's emotions and feelings, considering it one of the clearest means through which children express experiences that they cannot yet articulate verbally. By carefully observing children's activities and the manner in which they interact with their toys, adults can gain valuable insight into their inner world and thereby provide appropriate support. Play also functions as an effective mechanism for releasing repressed emotions. A child who is unable to respond directly to adult punishment often experiences psychological tension and emotional imbalance. Through play, such children attempt to restore emotional equilibrium by symbolically directing their frustration toward their toys (Hanna, 1999, p. 31).

Therapists should therefore pay close attention to children's verbalizations during play. Children frequently construct narratives while playing, and these narratives often reveal profound emotional experiences. The therapist's task is to identify and reconstruct the story embedded within the flow of children's play and conversations, much as Freud interpreted hidden memories and symbols to formulate meaningful narratives. With encouragement and supportive listening from the therapist, children often experience pleasure and emotional relief while narrating their experiences through play.

Everything a child narrates or symbolically represents during play contributes to the construction of a self-image that therapists can use to understand the dynamics of the child's personality. Whenever children describe an experience that they or others have undergone, they reveal part of their personal history while simultaneously expanding their self-awareness. By communicating this awareness to others, they broaden their understanding of themselves and of the surrounding world. In this sense, play becomes a unique medium through which children communicate their individual experiences and personal perceptions of reality (Susan Engel, 1995).

Characteristics and Roles of the Play Therapist

For play therapy to achieve its intended therapeutic outcomes, the therapist must possess professional competence, sound judgment, wisdom, and appropriate interpersonal skills. The therapist should be capable of adopting clear and consistent attitudes toward both the child and the play process, while remaining fully aware of the potential outcomes and therapeutic implications of play. Moreover, the therapist must be able to manage therapeutic sessions effectively and positively, as play constitutes the child's primary occupation and one of the most important means through which children express themselves and make sense of the world around them. Although play is generally beneficial, it may sometimes become a source of disturbance for others. Therefore, psychologists and counselors working with children should demonstrate patience, empathy, warmth, and a caring parental attitude.

To effectively employ play as a therapeutic intervention, several fundamental steps should be followed, providing a general framework for play therapy (Al-Khatameh, 2013; Taha, 2015):

1. **Establish a warm therapeutic relationship** between the therapist and the child, as mutual trust cannot develop without a supportive and caring relationship.
2. **Provide an appropriate therapeutic environment**, including a safe and comfortable play setting equipped with suitable toys in terms of both quantity and variety, while ensuring opportunities for continuous observation, monitoring, and evaluation.
3. **View play as a structured therapeutic process**, which requires the following conditions:
 - Allow children sufficient opportunities to develop and to acquire a realistic understanding of themselves.
 - Encourage forms of play that facilitate both emotional expression and creative self-expression.
 - Utilize play as a medium for behavior modification by implementing intervention plans designed to reinforce desirable patterns of behavior.

The therapist should refrain from interfering with children's spontaneous play, drawing attention to their activities, or making them feel that they are being closely observed. Such interventions may undermine the therapeutic value of play by restricting children's freedom of expression and diminishing the authenticity of their behavior. Furthermore, the therapist should participate in the child's play only when the child willingly accepts and welcomes such involvement.

With regard to play materials, specialists should carefully select toys that are engaging, developmentally appropriate, and completely safe for children. Toys should correspond to the child's chronological age as well as developmental needs. In this context, Miles (1994) observed that children naturally seek toys and activities suited to their developmental level. If an activity is excessively simple, children quickly lose interest and gain little from the experience. Conversely, if it is too difficult, they may abandon purposeful play, manipulate toys aimlessly, or even damage them before eventually losing interest once they become developmentally appropriate. Consequently, children require guidance from parents, educators, and therapists in selecting activities that match their developmental abilities while remaining sufficiently stimulating and enjoyable. In addition, the play environment should be relatively free of excessive distractions to ensure that children's attention remains focused on the therapeutic activity and its intended objectives (Christine Miles, trans. Al-Razzaz, 1994).

Conclusion

Play plays a fundamental role in assisting psychologists during both the assessment and therapeutic processes, as the play behavior of children with psychological disturbances differs significantly from that of typically developing children. Through play, children symbolically express their problems, conflicts, and frustrations, providing valuable insight into their emotional and psychological experiences.

Accordingly, play occupies a central position in the treatment of psychological and behavioral disorders among preschool children. During play, children communicate the conflicts and difficulties they experience by projecting their emotions onto toys and play materials, particularly feelings toward adults that they may be unable to express directly for fear of punishment. This symbolic projection enables therapists to identify the underlying causes of psychological disturbances more effectively.

Play is widely adopted as a therapeutic approach because it provides children with opportunities for free expression, spontaneous interaction, and active engagement. It is considered one of the most effective methods for the psychological assessment and treatment of children, primarily because young children often lack the verbal ability to communicate their emotions and personal difficulties clearly. Moreover, play facilitates the development of trust between the therapist and the child, thereby establishing a strong therapeutic alliance. Consequently, play may be regarded as one of the most valuable tools for understanding children's personalities and promoting their psychological well-being.

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