

THE PROMISE OF PLAY

TRANSFORMING CHILD, FAMILIES, SCHOOL, HOSPITAL, COMMUNITY

Welcome! I bring you greetings from Barstow Acres Counseling Center, Maryland, a place where children and families are helped to feel their best using play, the creative arts and talk-therapy.

“If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in HIS language, that goes to his heart.” Nelson Mandela
The language of children in P L A Y!!!

TRANSFORMING THE CHILD

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The American Academy of Pediatrics lists various good reasons for play. The one that stands out for me is ***Healthy Emotional Development***.

From the time a child is conceived, parents begin the process of bonding through play by way of rubbing the belly, patting and singing to the unborn. Once the child is born, there is more singing, clapping, warm embraces, making of funny faces, body movement, use of colors, shapes, sounds and all sorts of ways to amuse and stimulate the child through play. When the child’s dependency needs are met in a predictable, loving and playful manner, emotional bonds, and healthy attachment are formed, which are critical for normal emotional development. This does set the stage for the development of *self-regulation*. Bruce Perry, M.D., PhD., researcher and author of several books on the developing brain and trauma describes *self-regulation* as the capacity to tolerate the sensation of distress that accompany unmet needs, and the capacity to put a moment between a feeling and an action. 95% of the young children receiving services in my practice have severe problems with self-regulation. Therefore play is vital.

As the child gets older, creativity, and use of imagination should be encouraged as it stimulates further brain development.

TRANSFORMING FAMILIES

Play in the context of families helps to:

- Strengthen emotional bonds, bring families together
- Build life-long memories
- Foster a sense of connection, one of the Crucial C’s (Adlerian parenting concepts).

“How much time are you able to spend playing with your child”. “What is done in your family for fun?” These are two standard questions I include as part of my initial assessment. A common

mistake parents make is placing children first above all else, including the marital relationship, resulting in loss of interest in each other and weakening of the emotional bond. A family in my practice took notes when I suggested that they consider hiring a baby sitter and begin dating once again. To my surprise, they cancelled several counseling appointments because they were going on a cruise, just the two of them and they reported playing and playing! Shortly after they began implementing other techniques, the therapy visits were decreased.

A teenager and her mother seen in therapy are constantly at odds. The parents are divorcing. While the teenager says "I am fine with it", she clearly is having difficulty expressing her feelings but uses creativity and imagination in a big way to remain connected to both parents. This teen is gifted artistically and is creative beyond imagination. During our last session she came dressed as "Sherlock Holmes" and even spoke with a perfect British accent!

I am always amazed of how much play is appreciated by children in a family setting when I observe children's demeanor and body language change from being bored, slouched in a chair, crawling under the table to smiling, uttering "ooh, aah," when Play-Doh or board game is brought to the table. Children begin to cooperate, be attentive and participate with glee. Family Play Therapy (use of play, art, sandtray, movement) was made popular by Eliana Gil, a clinical child psychologist, art therapist and Registered Play Therapist-Supervisor and is an integral part of my practice.

TRANSFORMING SCHOOLS

"It is paradoxical that many educators and parents still differentiate between a time for learning and a time for play without seeing the vital connection between them." Leo F. Buscaglia

By the age of five, children are expected to be attentive and sit in their seats in order to learn. During the early pre-school years children engage in lots of play in order to achieve socialization, resolve conflicts, and learn other social skills. The push in pre-school among some parents is more academics rather than so much play as they may not understand fully the purpose of play. The No Child Left Behind mandate resulted in decreased free time and recess for children in order to bump up additional time for math and reading.

During my Therapeutic Summer Day Camp, workers are given the opportunity to give feedback regarding the camp schedule and overall organization. Occasionally a comment made is: there are not enough scheduled activities. Our schedule is jam-packed with therapeutic groups, guest speakers, field trips and art activities to name a few. Adding more activities would limit the children's free play which is much needed. Camp participants are asked to name their favorite activities. The most common activity named is "free play". One reason the staff has difficulty with the free play is being uncomfortable with handling conflict that arises and children who do not know how to use their free time due to dysregulation and hyperactivity. More training is clearly needed in this area. A parent once requested observation of social skills group at my center. Her feedback was accurate and well received. The observation was that children did not seem to have enough play time where they could practice skills learned. We then incorporated more free time as well as a community outings to put into practice newly learned skills.

The Roof Top School is one of the most successful elementary schools in California where games and play in creative ways are used to make learning fun and playful. They ranked #1 in Reading and #2 in Math at some point. There is much to be learned about from this example.

TRANSFORMING HOSPITALS

My professional life was transformed when I accepted a position as Chief Nurse on an acute inpatient psychiatric ward with disturbed latency aged children. This was during the late 80's when chemical restraints and physical restraints were more common. We clearly were administering too many intramuscular injections to calm children down. One day a brochure came across my desk that had to do with "play therapy". It sounded interesting and had to do with children's mental health. Why did neither I nor anyone else on the unit know about play therapy? I signed up for the training and the rest is history! With the help of my mentor, I learned all I could about this new modality and began to implement its use on the psychiatric ward. Eliana Gil, PhD., RPT-S was invited to conduct training and I eventually created what is now Chesapeake Beach Professional Seminars Play Therapy Institute! We learned a whole new way to treat children and it made a big difference. (Play DVD) of Therapeutic Story that was created based on the one of the most difficult cases on the unit.

Child Life Specialists are professionals who are dedicated to reducing emotional trauma and suffering to children who are hospitalized for surgical or medical procedures and the physical and emotional demands of coping with hospitalization. These individuals conduct Medical Play by using props to explain procedures and help children deal with their emotions. CLS flourished in the United States and Canada through the pioneering work of Emma Plank and others who trained with Maria Montessori. This is a much needed and valuable service.

TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES

Use of play in the development of well-adjusted children leads to well-adjusted adults and communities. The construction of parks, recreation centers, therapeutic recreation centers, public swimming pools, playgrounds, youth centers, skateboard parks, after school programs, organized sports all incorporate various forms of play. Emphasis needs to be on less use of electronics and more human interaction and more outside play. In Jamaica sports is a major part of life for youth and adults. Usain Bolt, highly regarded athlete as a sprinter resulted in lots of outdoor play.

Dr. Stuart Brown reported in his research findings that play during childhood in the lives of some serial killers was a missing factor. The maximum security prison in Cebu, Philippines use dance routines as part of their daily exercise and rehabilitation. The inmates created a spectacular performance to the music, Thriller by Michael Jackson which was televised. They are really on to something. Information about the outcome of the use of dance and performing arts could not be found but they seem to be on the right track!

Keynote
Sonia Hinds
Dec 4 & 5

