

Integrating Non-Directive Play Therapy and Psychodrama

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A workshop, “Combining Play Therapy and Psychodrama – Easy as 123” was presented by the author and her colleague, Lori Martin MS, LPC-S, at the ASGPP 2016 conference. This article shows the similarities and differences in presentation between the two methods.

“Children’s imaginative play was one of inspirations of the inventor of psychodrama, J.L. Moreno” (Blatner, 1994). Moreno was watching children at play in the gardens of Vienna, noticing their creativity and spontaneity. That would result in a new creation, which Moreno called the “cultural conserve” (Camabucci, K., 2014). Zerka Moreno notes that some adults may lack spontaneity because as we grow older we are made to conform to social norms (Moreno, Z., 2004). Blatner (2004) states that psychodrama uses the natural capacity of imagination and “make-believe play” as seen in children. Play therapy overlaps naturally with Psychodrama. Blatner notes that play therapists use both play and psychodrama when working with kids and ado-lescents and that some principles and techniques of play therapy can be used with adults.

Recorded evidence of the value of observing children in play goes back to the 18th century (Landreth, 2002). In 1903 F. Froebel identifies play as the free expression of what is a child’s soul and that play is full of meaning and import (Froebel, 1903). In 1919 Melanie Klein began to use play to analyze children (Klein, M., 1955). Virginia Axline (1947, 1950) used the non-directive approach with children, describing the experience as the child having the freedom to express themselves. Although he worked very little with children, Sigmund Freud felt that a child’s play is full on import and not to be discounted (Freud, 1953).



Similarities and Differences between Play Therapy and Psychodrama

Similarities

- Both use the basic 5 Elements of a Psychodrama – A protagonist, a director, the stage, auxiliaries, and an audience;
- Both are action methods of therapy;
- Both use role theory;
- Both have Do-overs;
- Surplus Reality is seen in all non-directive play therapy as the child plays out a drama in Metaphor;
- The importance of the drama and its completion is seen in Psychodrama and in play therapy.

Differences

- 1) The way *affect* is experienced and expressed:
 - In Psychodrama – the protagonist may at times be tearful, laughing, angry etc.
 - In play therapy – Affect seen could be anger, frustration, and excitement, but rarely tearful.
- 2) The Protagonist:
 - In psychodrama, the protagonist is clearly known.
 - In play therapy, the child may present themselves by playing a role in metaphor (a store clerk, a princess, a ninja fighter, an orphan, etc.); or as a toy self-object.

Regarding the Metaphors

- In play therapy, a child selects a particular toy to be a self object and then creates stories about that self-object (Schwartzberger, 2005). Sometimes the story is more clearly understood as when, a child who has been in a tragic car accident, continuously creates and plays out a hospital scene, injured people, and helping professionals. Sometimes only parts of child’s story will be recognizable as being about the child, i.e. a child spends much energy in playing out fights between Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader (as they could be making sense of power and control in their life in some way).
- Toy animals can be used metaphorically to represent family members or the need for nurturing. Landreth believes that toys are the words of children and play is their language (Landreth, 1991).
- Metaphors used by the protagonist are concretized in action and add a rich layer of meaning; props can also represent metaphors.
- The use of metaphor in play serves a protective function.



Regarding the “Aside” and the “Stage Whisper” (times when characters briefly step out of role):

- In Play Therapy, the clinician could use a stage whisper to ask the child for direction as to how to play the role. (i.e. “Do I like this food?” or “What do I do/say?” etc.).
- In psychodrama, an aside

can be used where the individual steps out of role for a minute to relay thoughts and provide transitions.

Regarding “Setting the Scene” and “Tickling the Defenses”:

- In play therapy, Eliana Gil (2006) uses the term “Tickling the Defenses” which is placing an item representative of an avoided trauma in the room to allow the child to encounter the trauma;

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Play Therapy...

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- In psychodrama, once the scene is set and the protagonist steps in his drama, the protagonist can get past the internal defenses more quickly.

The author of this article contends that there is much overlap between play therapy and psychodrama as they rely on similar principles and techniques called by different names.

Happy Playing!!!!

Darlene Vanchura, MA, LPC-S has over 20 years of experience and is in private practice in TX treating children, adolescents, and adults. Darlene uses many therapeutic modalities, including sand tray, play therapy, & psychodrama. Ms. Vanchura has been in Psychodrama training with Katrena Hart since 2010 and with Daniela Simmons since 2014. Darlene is the East Region Director of the Texas Association for Play Therapy Board & is on the Board of Keller Counseling Association.

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