

PLAY THERAPY IDEAS



Play Counseling in Schools

by Risë VanFleet, Ph.D., RPT-S

Throughout the U.S., school counselors, especially at the elementary and middle-school levels, are increasingly using play counseling to help students overcome obstacles to learning. One of the primary reasons for this is the *efficiency and effectiveness of this type of counseling*. This monograph provides a basic description of play counseling, the rationale behind it, the various forms it can take, and the research which has clearly demonstrated its effectiveness.

Play counseling is an established intervention that involves the systematic use of play methods by a trained counselor to bring about improvements in the student's ability to perform nearer to optimal levels at school. The counselor uses play-based interventions to...

- communicate with students
- help students build a wide range of skills
- improve students' adjustment to classroom and other school environments
- improve peer relationships
- prevent bullying, school violence, and other serious problems
- address the needs of at-risk students
- remove emotional and behavioral obstacles to learning.

In essence, play counseling stems from the broader field of play therapy, but tends to use the shorter-term interventions which are appropriate to the education-related goals which school counselors work toward with identified students.

Rationale

Play counseling is frequently the most appropriate and effective approach for several reasons:

1. Until students are approximately 12+ years old and develop the ability to use cognitive reasoning more fully, they tend to process information and develop their physical, mental, and social skills through their use of imagination and play. Although child students can talk and "reason" to some extent, their primary way of understanding the world is through their playful interactions with it. Play counseling is developmentally-attuned because it capitalizes on these mechanisms.
2. When confronted with problems which interfere with their learning, students frequently become resistant, withdrawn, ashamed, oppositional, helpless, defensive, etc. Play counseling provides an excellent way to avoid

or overcome these emotional obstacles to progress.

3. There is considerable research that shows that children learn best in hands-on, activity-based, and playful situations. Play counseling creates those types of learning opportunities in order to reach its goals.
4. Play counseling can be used in conjunction with other counseling methods, such as behavior management, parent and/or teacher consulting, classroom guidance, outside therapy.
5. Because of its developmental and learning focus, play counseling is more likely to address the root cause(s) of student problems.

Forms of Play Counseling

There are many different types of play counseling, but most school counselors select methods which are relatively short-term and focused on the more specialized goals of a school guidance program. For example, Adlerian play counseling and cognitive-behavioral play counseling approaches are commonly used in schools. Shorter-term forms of child-centered play counseling and social skills interventions are also effective. Dramatic play counseling is a form of behavioral rehearsal which helps students learn to behave more assertively or prosocially, as needed. Play counseling offers individual, group, and classroom formats which are easily adapted to meet specific student and school needs.

Research

A considerable amount of research has been conducted on the effectiveness of play counseling. Results show quite consistently that it typically yields significant positive changes in children/students. For example, one study showed that children with ADHD improved in nearly all problematic areas following a systematic set of interventions using play counseling. These improvements carried over into “real life” and were noted on commonly-used teacher and parent rating measures.

A recent meta-analytic review of play therapy and play counseling research has shown it to be very effective in addressing child and student problems. Because students can develop new skills, new ways of interacting, and new attitudes through play counseling, its results can be long-lasting. Of course, the results are much stronger when the counselor keeps teachers and parents informed of progress and assists them with other interventions that might be useful in the classroom and at home. A “team” approach can enhance any school counseling program.

In schools where the counselor initiates the use of play counseling, it is quite common for teachers to comment to the school counselor, “I’m not quite sure what you’re doing, but it’s working!” Play counseling does not solve all problems, but it represents an effective intervention that school counselors are employing more and more frequently.

A Few Examples

- Play counseling helped an anxious, perfectionistic student take more risks in her schoolwork, improving her performance which had suffered from her excessive fear of making mistakes.
- Play counseling helped a disruptive student cope more effectively with his angry reactions to his parents’ divorce so that his outbursts, “talking-back,” and general “acting out” on the playground, on the bus, and

at lunch were virtually eliminated.

- Play counseling has been extremely effective in the aftermath of several high profile and tragic school violence incidents. It has been used to help students express their fears and other reactions to such events and to return as much “normalcy” to the school environment as quickly as possible.
- Play counseling has been used to help a selective-mute student talk with her teacher and participate in classroom discussions once again.
- Play counseling helped an entire class welcome a badly burned and scarred student back to school without undue embarrassment, while helping classmates explore their attitudes and beliefs about handicapping conditions.
- Play counseling has been used to help ADHD students increase attention span, stay on-task longer, and be less distractible in class.

Dr. Risë VanFleet is the Director of the Family Enhancement and Play Therapy Center in Boiling Springs, PA. She is Past President of the international Association for Play Therapy, the author of numerous books and articles, featured on several educational videos, and is on the editorial board of the *International Journal of Play Therapy*. She can be reached at 717-249-4707 or through her website at <http://www.play-therapy.com>.

Copyright ©2001, VanFleet/Play Therapy Press. All rights reserved.

Back to Play Therapy Ideas
