

CLINICAL EDITOR: Play therapists, like other mental health professionals, need to constantly assess their skills and work to increase their proficiencies. In this article, the author discusses the necessity of cross-cultural competencies for play therapists.

The Importance of Multiculturalism for Helping Professionals:

The Relevance in Play Therapy

Play therapy is a valuable therapeutic intervention for children across cultures. Being cross-culturally competent is important and beneficial for the child in treatment however most play therapists tend to view and treat the child from their own cultural context (Gil and Drewes, 2005). It is also important for play therapists to be cross-culturally competent because the amount of minority children in the United States is continuously increasing. Current research suggests that the amount of minority children will be larger than the amount of Anglo American children by year 2025 (Hinman, 2003).

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A play therapist's awareness about cultural issues can help enhance cultural competency. In order for a helping professional to become truly culturally competent, it is suggested that the professional become immersed in the population and get hands-on experience (Gil and Drewes, 2005). Culturally competent play therapists understand that play has various meanings across cultures and understand the meaning of play in their child clients' cultures. Because becoming cross-culturally competent is vital in our field, the purpose of this article is to educate play therapists of two models of cultural competency, as well as cultural specific implications for play therapy.

According to Gil and Drewes (2005), in order for a clinician to become culturally competent, the clinician should build sensitivity to other cultures, acquire knowledge about other cultures, and also show knowledge and sensitivity through behaviors and practice. Gil and Drewes (2005) explain that only acquiring one or two of the three important phases is problematic and can ultimately lead play therapists to become insensitive to culture. It is important for clinicians to be aware that becoming culturally competent takes considerable effort, time, and focus.

Becoming culturally competent involves identifying one's own culture and ethnicity. It also involves identifying one's biases

and ideas about cultures, according to Tatum (1997) and Webb (2001). If biases, ideas, and one's own culture are identified, then the clinician is able to build sensitivity to other cultures adequately.

According to Gil and Drewes (2005), acquiring knowledge about other cultures is the second step in becoming culturally competent. It is important for mental health professionals to continually learn about other cultures. A beneficial way for clinicians to gain knowledge about other cultures is by treating a range of diverse, multicultural children. Exposing one's self to different cultures is the most powerful way to gain cultural competency.

Once sensitivity and knowledge are thoroughly obtained and learned, it is imperative for clinicians to alter their behavior in accordance to culture (Gil and Drewes, 2005). Many helping professionals think that if they obtain knowledge and gain sensitivity to culture and cultural issues then they are culturally competent. As a result, their behaviors do not change in practice. This is a recurring problem among clinicians. Changing behavior in practice is the most important step to follow in order to become culturally competent. If all of the steps presented by Gil and Drewes (2005) are achieved, cultural competency will flourish.

Hinman (2003) suggests there are three ways play therapists can enhance their cultural competency. First and foremost,



play therapists should boost their understanding and awareness of the cultures of children they specifically treat. Second, play therapists should improve their capacity to evaluate culture and how it influences the children they are treating. Lastly, play therapists should expand their comprehension of the stressors children deal with that stem from racism.

If a play therapist learns about the child's culture, then the therapist is provided with a preliminary set of values and beliefs, according to Phinney (1996, as cited in Hinman, 2003). This is beneficial for the therapist to gain a better understanding of the child. Although it is crucial to understand the culture, values, and attitudes which are likely to stem from culture, individual differences need to be honored. Understanding the culture of the child helps the play therapist to collaborate with the parents and implement a play evaluation technique (Hinman, 2003).

Even if the play therapist plans on solely working with the child, collaboration with the child's parents can only aid in the clinical realm. Establishing rapport with the parents is the first step in implementing an effective strategy for the children they are treating (Hinman, 2003). Parents play a vital role in deciding whether or not the child should remain in therapy. They are also

an important source for treatment and evaluation, according to Kazdin, Holland, and Crowley (1999, as cited in Hinman, 2003).

Parents may aid the play therapist in understanding the cultural perspectives of play in the child's salient culture. How the child's culture makes meaning of play influences how a child plays. Furthermore, understanding how the child's culture values play allows for the play therapist to make accurate assessments about the child's behavior during play. Thorough assessment includes an ability to identify the cultural issues within the family. Although play is present in all cultures, play behaviors are not analogous cross-culturally (O'Connor, 2005).

It is crucial for play therapists to understand how culture influences the children they are treating and to follow a cultural model, such as one that was discussed in this article, in order to become culturally competent. Cultural competency allows play therapists to devise more successful and appropriate treatment for children. It also allows the play therapist to establish adequate rapport and therapeutic alliances. Being culturally competent is an important tool for mental health professionals in order for clients to have a satisfactory therapeutic experience. Culture and diversity should be incorporated into therapeutic practices, and also be appreciated, especially in play therapy.

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