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Play as therapy

An insight into a multifaceted approach to children's counselling.

By Bridie Fitzgerald

There are many ways a counsellor can approach children's counselling. According to the literature, play therapy is the most suitable intervention for counselling children under the age of twelve. This intervention may be in the form of directive or non-directive play therapy (Psychology Today, undated). In the case of non-directive play therapy, the therapist reflects and mirrors the client's experience through play, whereas directive play therapy involves the therapist directing the client in some way so that the client is engaged in a therapy task which provides them with the opportunity to self-express their issues (Psychology Today, undated).

According to Malchiodi (2014), art therapy is a suitable intervention to be used when counselling children because it does not require the child to articulate their experience into words. Typically, art therapy methods such as sand tray, drawing and painting are used. Music therapy literature, on the other hand, maintains that children who have experienced trauma such as domestic violence benefit from counselling that involves music therapy because playing



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However, my experience providing children with counselling, over 10 years, has been that a multifaceted approach to treatment is best. By combining each of these approaches the therapist provides the child with the opportunity to gain the most from their counselling experience. The example I provide to make my point is a case study of a girl, eight years of age, who had been referred to counselling by her foster carer. It was feared that Jasmine had experienced sexual abuse and significant domestic violence, as had her siblings; however, the reason for her removal from the family home was neglect. Jasmine had significant anxiety issues and had identified three main counselling goals: firstly, to be able to better cope with her anxiety; secondly, to be able to identify what was contributing to her anxiety; and thirdly, to be able to self-soothe when required.

Initially, treatment involved Jasmine crating a diorama – something she had learned about at school, the creation of stage sets. She created many characters for the diorama out of faces drawn on cardboard that were then glued to popsicle sticks. The characters Jasmine created were categorised into two groups: the mean and the nice people. She then proceeded to create a play in the diorama, a scenario where a character from

the mean group of people made the nice people feel threatened and unsafe because of their behaviour. In this instance Jasmine expressed, for the first time, one of her major trauma and anxiety triggers – that she felt threatened by a person's behaviour when she had difficulty understanding it or she experienced it as 'mean'. The therapist supported her to process this trauma meaning and shift in counselling through narrative therapy.

Jasmine then proceeded to engage in play therapy, accompanied by music therapy. She played with play items in the room and seemed to act out themes expressed in the diorama activity. For this reason, non-directive play therapy was chosen by the therapist during the session. The therapist then created a soundscape (instrumental improvisation) that accompanied Jasmine's play, making music at the appropriate times when emotion states such as fear and rage were being expressed. Finally, Jasmine decided to perform a story accompanied by a drumming solo. The story was about a girl who was happily travelling on a train until she was accosted by mean, older girls, an encounter that resulted in conflict and the loss of the girl's life. Once again, Jasmine expressed themes (continued page 50)

an instrument or listening to music can support the child to develop resources. This experience supports the client to overcome adversity and dramatically alter the way in which they perceive and respond to their trauma history and environment (Fairchild & Mraz, 2017). Furthermore, narrative therapy plays an important role in children's counselling because it engages the child in storytelling – something a child can easily engage relate to (Good Therapy, 2018).