

Play Therapy with Grief

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WHAT IS PLAY THERAPY

- Play therapy differs from regular play in that the therapist helps children to address and resolve their own problems.
- Play therapy builds on the natural way that children learn about themselves and their relationships in the world around them.

(Axline, 1947; Carmichael, 2006; Landreth, 2002).

WHO CAN PLAY BENEFIT?

TODDLERS

CHILDREN

ADOLESCENTS

FAMILIES

GROUPS



What do children grieve about?

- Death
- Loss
- Trauma
- Disaster



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Death of people

parents/grandparents/sibling/friend/extended family

Death of pets

Divorce

Loss of home

Loss of friends

Loss of stability

Break-ups

“first love”

sexuality

peer issues

Loss

moving/relocating

only Child Status

Disaster

natural disaster(fires, floods,hurricanes)

war/genocide

riots

Grief about Trauma

loss of innocence,

loss of physical ability,

loss of spiritual belief,

loss of family - siblings/extended family/non abusive parent

Play techniques effective with Grief

- Sandtray
- Puppets/dolls/figures
- Fantasy/Make-believe
- Expressive(art, music, writing, storytelling)
- Board and card games:
The Goodbye Game
- Role Playing

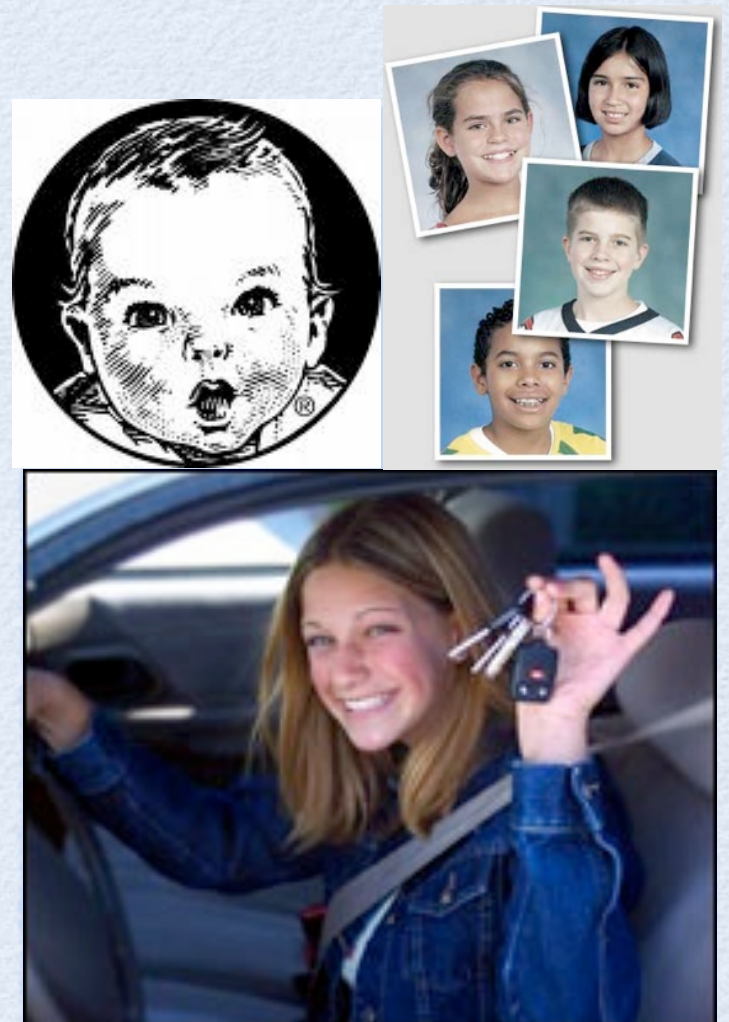


Play.Build.Grow.



DEVELOPMENTAL DIFFERENCES IN PLAY

- **Baby/Toddler (0-2)**
- **Young Children (2-7)**
- **Older Children “Tweens” (7-12)**
- **Adolescents (13-18)**



0-2

Oral-Sensory, Trust vs. Mistrust, Feeding (Erickson) or Sensorimotor (Piaget)

- What does it mean to grieve from 0-2?
- Who is your client?
- What are the goals?
- What tools do you need?



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Grief 0-2

Anger/Sadness
Regression

Client?

Caregiver and Child together or Caregiver alone

What are the Goals?

Help infant develop a trusting bond
Help child develop object permanency
Help child develop language
Help child develop movement

Prevent an attachment disorder

Tools?

Toys for grieving 0-2

Lovies (dolls, animals, blankets)
Space to move, run, crawl
Sandtray and figures (make sure you put up your choking hazard figures)
Baskets and “treasures” that the child can bury and unbury dump and scoop
Dolls/Stuffed animals
Box or basket that can be turned into a casket
Dr.Kit

Helpful Family Resources for grieving 0-2

Articles for caretakers re: healthy “normal” development 0-2
Suggested reading list
Articles about children and grief from 0-2

2-7

Autonomy vs. Shame/Doubt and Initiative vs. Guilt (Erikson) or Preoperational(Piaget)

- What does grief look like from ages 2-7?
- What brings you here today?
- What are the goals?
beware of euphemisms
- What tools do you need?



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Grief from 2-7

No to little sense of time - may not immediately understand what it means to be dead, Anger, Regression, Clinging, Whining, Crying, Sleep Disruption, guilt/responsible

Presenting Problem

Caregiver:

Anger, Frustrated, Exhausted, Depressed, Scared, Anxious, Financial Concerns, Alone/Isolated, Lost Incompetent, Unqualified, Uniformed, Incapable, Lack Coping Mechanisms, Not knowing how to or what would help the child

Child:

Forever is too abstract

May Blame themselves: Magical Thinking/Ego-centered

no separation from thought and deed - "I was mad at them when they died, I'm responsible for their death" or "mom and dad fight about me, it's my fault they are divorcing"

Goals:

Care Taker

Help express feelings (not to child) re: having to balance their own grief/loss against that of their child's

Help caregiver find support network

Help caregiver find ways to help child grieve

Help caregiver coping mechanisms for their grief and child's grieving behaviors

Help caregiver learn how to access information and resources for them and their children

Give caregivers information on "normal" development and milestones

Child

Help child express feelings re: Loss/Grief

Help child find a support network

Help child find functional coping mechanism

Help child communicate with caregiver

Help child achieve milestones - potty train, speech, social skills

Tools

Sandtray and figures

Expressive(art, writing, music, movement, gardening)

Dolls/Stuffed Animals

Dr.Kit

Pretend Play toys

Box or Basket child can make into a casket

Board Games

Your Ego

- What does grief look like from ages 7-12?
- What brings you here today?
- What are the goals?
- What tools do you need?



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Grief 7-12

Reduced Egocentricity, Realize death is permanent but not imminent, sense of invincibility

Sadness, behavioral outbursts, withdrawn, angry, mourning, embarrassed, self-conscious, regression, anxiety, somatic symptoms, difficulty adjusting

Presenting Problem?

Caregiver:

Same as previous + anger/concern re: behavioral response to loss, Unsure how to best engage child, balancing grief with resuming "normal" activities, Feeling manipulated by child

Child:

Concern over being different than peers

Aggressive Behavior

Increased Moodiness/Noncompliance at home

School Failure

Sleep/Eating Changes

Somatic Complaints

Goals

Caregiver:

Manage own grief/loss issues

Restore normalcy for child

Help child express grief appropriately

Work with school to help child make adjustment

Child:

Help child express feelings re: Loss/Grief

Help child find a support network

Help child find functional coping mechanism

Help child communicate with caregiver

Help child deal with peers

Tools

Board Games

Social Skills Groups

Support Groups

Expressive (art, writing, music, movement, gardening)

Dolls

Sandtray with figures

12-18

Adolescence, Identity vs. Role Confusion, Peer Relationships (Erickson) Formal Operational (Piaget)

- Adolescent grief vs. adult grief
- What brings you here today?
- What are the goals?
- Do Teens Play?



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Adolescent Grief

Don't "parentify" a teen they are still children(even if they don't think so)
Same feelings as adult NOT fully matured to cope/manage feelings

Presenting Problems:

Drug/Alcohol Abuse
School Problems
Compliance at home
Aggression
Truancy/Adjudication
DV/Stalking
Sexual Acting Out

Goals?

Caretaker:

Manage own grief/loss
Not "parentify" child
Help child individuate
Help child manage peer pressure

Child:

Help child find healthy expression of feelings
Help child find support
Help child communicate with caregiver/parent/adults
Help child with school/peer concerns

Tools:

Talk - be curious
Get out of the office
Expressive(music,songs,poetry,writing,art)
Sandtray
Role Playing
stereo/ipod w. small speakers

PLAY WITH FAMILIES AND GROUPS

- Ages, culture and composition
- Encourage the adults to play the play
- What is your role?



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- Make sure all age ranges and members participate
- Encourage the adults to play the play
- Be prepared to be both a witness and a participant and change those roles frequently and comfortably

Family Play Ideas:

Art projects
Games
Role Play
Pretend Play
Sandtray
Puppets

PLAY AND DEATH?

- What are the client's values/beliefs around death
- What feelings might the play trigger and is that okay?
- How do you deal with a family that has “forgotten” how to play?
- How do you deal with resistance?

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- Adults may feel it's disrespectful to “play” with death - explore that in the play or in the post-play process but don't avoid addressing it
- CHILDREN MAY FEEL GUILTY FOR HAVING FUN OR LAUGHING
- THE FAMILY MAY HAVE “FORGOTTEN” HOW TO PLAY
- CLIENT/FAMILY MAY BE RESISTANT TO TREATMENT AS IT IMPLIES “MOVING ON” - Play with the resistance

Treatment Plans, Progress Notes and Managed Care oh my.

The case for play with grief/loss

- Evidence based success
- Developmentally appropriate
- Works with broad client spectrum
- The “children’s hospital” of therapy



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- Play helps the client regain CONTROL, Heal the wounds, regain “normal functioning”- THE CREATOR OF THE PLAY CONTROLS THE OUTCOME thus giving a sense of control over their “universe”
- TO RESTORE NORMALCY - PLAY IS a DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE action FOR CHILDREN and can be healing for adults as well even if they are only playing “for their kids”
- HELPS CHILDREN EXPRESS THINGS THEY DON'T HAVE WORDS FOR
- HELP CLIENTS WORK THROUGH STAGES OF GRIEF IN A NON-THREATENING way. Less Scary, Designed at their level
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