

CAPA NSW Professional Development Event: 6/8/14

Child-led play therapy: Why following their lead meets their need

Presenter: Jacki Short, Sydney Centre for Creative Change

PDE review written by Juliana Triml, CAPA NSW PDE Coordinator

On 6th August CAPA's members and friends were given an opportunity to experience an introduction to the therapeutic style that explained how toys are children's words and play is their language. To understand and help children, we need to allow them opportunities to express themselves in their own language through art and play.

Children, like adults, can become traumatized through experience of grief, separation through divorce, abuse and many other issues similar to those experienced by adults, including self-harming. It is always a legal obligation for the therapist to obtain permission from the parent or guardian. Further legal requirements are compliance with professional and ethical duty of care, having the certificate for Working with children check, being familiar with mandatory reporting and competencies deemed necessary for a registration with a professional body, such as having regular supervision and complying with Policies and Procedures of the organization.

The initial important task for a therapist is to engage the child by inviting him/her to choose a toy to play he/she wants to. When working with small children aged under six or eight years, it is not very productive to ask direct questions at the initial stages of therapy and the Person-Centered Rogerian style seems to be respectfully effective. Observing a child's choice of a toy and play is very useful for illustrating complex relationships and interacting with a support system since the play gives a child voice to express things and feelings that may be either suppressed or the child does not have adequate language to express it or to evaluate their situation. Whenever the child feels safe and ready, she/he is likely to bring up any troublesome issues in due course.

Jackie brought with her a very large selection of toys, cards, hats etc. that could illustrate a wide range of situations that the child may experience. We also watched a short video with a preschool age girl and a male therapist who demonstrated how to use reflective language effectively without parroting. The art of reflective language comprises avoiding questions and using reflective statements instead; the child is likely to elaborate on any incorrect reflections.

At the end we all did an experiential exercise, aided by a sheet of examples demonstrating Reflection Language, and we were all invited to choose a potential topic and a toy that would be suitable to tell the story. Many of us found that not asking a question in our verbal interaction was rather difficult but through practice it could become easier.

It was a very enjoyable evening and we learned new skills that could be applied to children or, in some cases, to adults. We were very grateful to Jacki for sharing her expertise and time.