

Chapter 1

Status of Play Therapy Research

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ABSTRACT

With today's focus on evidence-based treatment (EBT) for children, play therapists are ethically responsible to identify and deliver effective interventions as well as synthesize the considerable body of play therapy research to support their practice and to advocate for play therapy as an evidence-base practice. Play therapists' ability to articulate research findings is particularly important as they consult with the adults in children's lives who make decisions regarding children's wellbeing including parents, teachers, school administrators and other professionals. This chapter aims to present an up-to-date comprehensive review and synthesis of contemporary play therapy research with a focus on studies employing randomized control group designs in order to provide play therapy practitioners with a guide to understanding and utilizing the substantial research base for play therapy.

STATUS OF PLAY THERAPY RESEARCH

With an increased focus on evidence-based treatment (EBT) for children, play therapists are ethically bound to identify and deliver appropriate and effective interventions. In addition, play therapists are charged with the responsibility of understanding and using the considerable body of play therapy research to support their practice and to advocate for play therapy as an evidence-base treatment for childhood disorders that interfere with children's day to day functioning. Play therapists' ability to articulate research findings is particularly important as they consult with the adults in children's lives who make decisions regarding children's wellbeing including parents, teachers, school administrators and other professionals.

National focus on the shortage of adequate mental health services for children (Center for Disease Control, CDC, 2013; Mental Health America, MHA, 2013; President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, 2003; U.S. Public Health Service, 2000), along with the evidence-based movement has heightened attention on disseminating information about EBT's for treating childhood mental health disorders and resulted in several texts (Baggerly, Ray, & Bratton, 2010; Chorpita, et al., 2011; Reddy,

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Files-Hall, & Schaefer, 2016; Russ & Niec, 2011; Silverman & Hinshaw, 2008; Weisz & Kazdin, 2010) and websites (California Evidence Based Clearinghouse, CEBC, 2016; evidencebasedchildtherapy.com, 2015; Society of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology, SCCAP, 2016; National Center for Education and Evaluation, NCEE, 2016; SAMHSA National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices, NREPP, 2016) aiming to guide professionals to provide child interventions with evidentiary support. Although, with the exception of Baggerly et al. (2010) and evidencebasedchildtherapy.com (2015), these sources have paid little attention to play therapy interventions for children despite decades of research that supports the evidence base for play therapy.

Despite increased advocacy and research foci on providing EBT's for children over the past two decades, the number of children who go untreated continued to increase over this millennium (CDC, 2013; MHA, 2013; NCCP, 2014; U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). One possible explanation is the lack of currently recognized EBT's that are responsive to the developmental needs of children (Weisz & Kazdin, 2010; Bratton, 2015). Play therapy is widely recognized as a developmentally responsive mental health intervention for children (Landreth, 2012; Schaefer, 2011), yet continually criticized for lack of empirical support (Phillips, 2009; Russ & Niec, 2011). Our goal for this chapter is to respond to this misperception by presenting a comprehensive review of the evidence base for play therapy. Through synthesis of contemporary meta-analytic and systematic reviews and summaries of individual play therapy outcome studies meeting criteria for methodological rigor and treatment protocol, this chapter provides play therapy practitioners with a guide to understanding and utilizing the substantial research base for play therapy.

Contemporary Meta-Analytic and Systematic Reviews

Responding to previous lack of recognition of play therapy as an EBT, contemporary play therapy researchers have developed and disseminated a) comprehensive systematic reviews of outcome research (Bratton, 2010; Bratton, 2015; Bratton, Landreth, & Lin, 2010; Bratton & Ray, 2000; Landreth, 2012; Landreth & Bratton, 2006; Ray, 2011; Ray & Bratton, 2010; Ray & Bratton, 2015; Ray & McCullough, 2015), b) meta-analyses of controlled research studies (Bratton et al., 2005; LeBlanc & Ritchie, 2001; Lin & Bratton, 2015; Ray, Armstrong, Balkin, & Jayne, 2015), and c) online searchable play therapy research database (evidencebasedchildtherapy.com).

Meta-analyses and systematic reviews of controlled outcome studies are widely recognized as two of the most robust methods of evidentiary support for identifying evidence-based practices (Rubin, 2008). Researchers have conducted four meta-analytic reviews of play therapy in the 21st century. Bratton et al. (2005) conducted the largest meta-analysis of play therapy research to date which included a total of 93 controlled outcome studies spanning five decades. Play therapy, including filial therapy, demonstrated a large overall treatment effect (.80). Bratton and colleagues reported moderate to large treatment effects across presenting issue and target outcomes. LeBlanc and Ritchie (2001) reviewed 42 outcome studies from the same time period as Bratton et al. and found a moderate treatment effect (.66) for play therapy including filial therapy. Both Bratton et al. (2005) and LeBlanc and Ritchie (2001) identified parental involvement and duration of treatment as significant factors impacting children's treatment outcomes. Bratton et al. (2005) further pointed out that early studies in the field of play therapy were limited by lack of scientific rigor and recommended that contemporary play therapy researchers adhere to stringent research designs, sound methodology, and reporting guidelines.

Additionally, two meta-analyses (Lin & Bratton, 2015; Ray et al., 2015) were recently published focusing exclusively on the efficacy of child-centered play therapy (CCPT) approaches. Utilizing rigorous

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