

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION: THE HEALING POTENTIAL OF ADULTS AT PLAY

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Susanna looked quite amazed. With an edge of anger and incredulity in her voice, she said, “You want me to play with this stuff? Well, I’m not going to.”

The therapist explained that there were no expectations, and they could work in whatever way felt most comfortable to her. She sat stiffly on the couch and they began by just talking.

It wasn’t long before curiosity won out. Over time, games were tried, art projects explored, and, eventually, the sand proved irresistible.

One day she took a great deal of time creating a scene using only three “neutral” objects. Then, sitting with her head resting on the edge of the tray, she gazed into it, tears falling silently.

When the session was over, she sighed, smiled, and quietly left. There was simply nothing to be said. Words would have been an intrusion.

The next morning, the therapist found a message on her voice mail. It was Susanna. “Thank you for letting me figure it out. I’ll see you next week.”

Play therapy is, indeed, a powerful tool for adults. Susanna had become stuck in her traditional talk therapy and was referred by her therapist who was “desperate” to help her unlock the deeply rooted and seemingly unspeakable feelings. Her therapist was right in referring rather than labeling Susanna *resistant*, for hope did find its way into her heart through the use of play.

PLAY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT

Play, joy, and spontaneity are rooted in all of our hearts. Infants, driven by curiosity in their quest for survival, playfully explore with their entire bodies the universe

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around them that is then translated into an inner world. Manipulation of the relationship between this inner self and the external world is a primary tool for growth. For adults, play continues as an important vehicle because it fosters numerous adaptive behaviors including creativity, role rehearsal, and mind/body integration.

Creativity

Carl Jung once said, “The small boy (himself) is still around, and possesses a creative life which I lack. But how can I make my way to it?” (Jung, 1965, p. 174). He subsequently learned that a key to unlocking his creative potential was to engage in the constructive play he had particularly enjoyed as a child.

Frey (1983) describes four categories of children’s play: physical, manipulative, symbolic, and games. Adult activities in each of these categories hold enormous creative potential. In her book *Your Child’s Growing Mind*, Dr. Jane Healy (1994) discusses techniques for creative people. These include play, humor, dramatizing, moving, imagining, listening, expressing, originating, and incubating. These qualities, too, are an intrinsic part of growth and are found in the literature on play therapy for adults.

Role Rehearsal

In their play, animals practice survival skills by engaging in play fighting and hunt and pounce games. We humans aren’t so different. Children bandage imaginary hurts; spend hours pretending to cook, shop, travel, and go to school; and be everything from a firefighter to ballet dancer. They enact funerals, weddings, births, and literally all of life’s milestones as they practice adaptive behaviors and grown-up roles.

Adults do the same thing, although in much subtler ways. How many of us have thought about or even had conversations aloud with ourselves in anticipation of a talk with someone else? How long do we stand in front of our mirrors trying on outfits, swaying to imagined music to be sure of how it (or I) will look? How often do we sit in awe at the circus and wish we could ride the elephants, too? And of course, there is the old favorite Halloween when, at last, we’re allowed to play dress up!

Mind-Body Integration

Play is a wholistic experience in that it invites our total being into the process. Starting at the top: It uses both hemispheres of our brain. The left, analytical, side is essential in deciding what to do next, which strategies get us the win, and

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how it can be verbalized. The right, artistic, side allows us to enjoy the experience of turning the shapes of the clouds into magical creations. Moreover, the value and impact of beta-endorphins on our overall sense of well-being is well known.

Moving down into the body, we can look at other major systems. When we are laughing, singing, moving about happily, or simply engrossed in a pleasant diversion (i.e., play), we tend to take fuller breaths, thus getting a better oxygen exchange. When our digestive process relaxes, we reduce the chances of gastrointestinal disorder-not to mention the easing of cardiac tension. General muscle tension is eased, as well, when we play, which reduces fatigue and generalized body aches and stiffness.

THE COMPETITIVE NATURE OF PLAY

Children are no longer given old pots and wooden spoons, but instead are offered electronic drums that blink brightly colored lights. The infant's natural joy-filled kicking is now a means to an end as his or her movements trigger lights and sounds. And so, it begins the notion that results matter. By the time the child is in preschool, he or she has begun to learn the basics of competition and the importance of external approval.

It is easy to see how our ability to play freely for play's sake has gotten lost amidst our societal need to excel. Sandlot games have been replaced with highly organized football, baseball, and soccer leagues. Too often, kids need to "try out" because it's really about winning, not just playing. Underdogs are seen occasionally in movies such as *Bad News Bears*, *The Little Giants*, and *Rudy*. Yet, even then, their ultimate win is the core of the happy ending.

The roots of today's national mania with competitive sports may lie in our Victorian ancestors who believed that most amusements were frivolous and seductive by nature. As early as the mid 1800s, vigorous physical activity was being suggested as a way of offsetting the pleasures of the modern world (Rader, 1996). Thus began organized sports.

For better and worse, the organization of sports has changed the way we look at play in American culture. Play had historically been a reflection of the child's and adult's needs to experiment. It reflected the ethnic flavor of the group's roots, yet universal truths rang true. The *Counting Out* game of Trinidad (Nelson & Glass, 1992) parallels the *Wonder Ball* sung and played in the United States. The *Child is Down* (Nelson & Glass, 1992), about sleeping and suddenly waking, played in Sweden, is much like *Ring Around the Rosie*, a song we all know that has its roots in the streets of London. Dice and a variety of hoops and balls have been found in archeological digs all over the globe.

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Traditional dances celebrating life events and reflecting the feelings of a culture are seen around the world. These are primarily adult activities with children as the learners. Anyone who has ever attended a traditional Greek wedding has probably been drawn into the joy and abandon of one of the many circle dances. Native American culture is also rich with ceremonial dancing. All across America today, a host of new and old traditional dances ranging from the chicken dance to country-western line dancing can be found.

That people of all ages have always played is clearly a historical fact. What is new is how we, in this culture, perceive and use it. In New Guinea, children play games in which neither side wins. The game ends when the two sides achieve equality. Japanese play focuses on group importance and interdependence rather than independence and self-expression. Native American children did not view “cheating” negatively. It was simply a creative trickster part of the game. That attitude changed after exposure to Euro-American culture (Rettig, 1995).

As our competitive society places rigid performance demands on us, childhood creativity is too often lost. In the need to score well on standardized tests, our inner drive to color outside the lines must be kept in check. Color-coordinated uniforms have replaced tee shirts and old shorts. Games must have a proven educational value and enjoyment must be kept in proper perspective. A woman was recently dismissed from her bowling team because she was having too much fun. Although she maintained a good average, it was felt that she wasn’t taking her game seriously! That may be more telling about the core of our attitude toward play than the recent Little League scandal in which a father lied about his son’s age in order to allow him to be on a winning team.

Small wonder that by the time we reach adulthood, we’ve lost touch with our ability to be loose and creative without worrying about what the other person is doing. There is a great line in the movie, *The Sure Thing* (1985), in which the heroine, in response to an accusation that she is uptight and repressed, defends herself by saying, “I am as spontaneous as anyone. I simply believe that spontaneity has its time and place.”

INCORPORATING PLAY INTO ADULT THERAPY

Play can increase our self-esteem. It invites access to states of well-being and calm as well as silliness and joy. When relaxed in play, we often have an increased capacity for empathy and intimacy. Play is affirming. Diana Fosha (2000) describes joy and emotional pain among the affective markers of healing. Play becomes a natural and gentle environment in which the inner landscape can safely be explored in any language. The results are easy to see.

Stress Release

We are, generally, a nation of adults who must relearn the art of playfulness. Actually, most folks are quite willing. They just need permission.

The staff gathered, notebooks in hand, for its regular staff meeting. The group knew the speaker on the agenda, and they expected an in-service; but what they got was two hours of pure fun.

The director of the agency had arranged (unbeknownst to her staff) for a play shop as a holiday gift. The table was cleared and teams were formed (everybody won). Markers, sparkles, and stickers were used to decorate goody bags for carrying the prizes (candy bars, erasers, and other such treasures) and snack foods (nothing too healthful) appeared. The games had *no* educational value whatsoever, but their healing potential was undeniable. It was amazing to watch these professional caregivers emerge into creative, spontaneous, silly, and often quite loud playmates.

Business leaders are discovering the power of play to refresh, nurture, and reduce stress. Organizational development professionals often work with staff in playful ways to invite the most genuine, rather than narrow, cognitive responses. In major corporations across America, gyms are being made available because the physical release of stress is now understood. In most stressful jobs from business executive to therapist, the interview includes at least one question on self-care. Perhaps top executives have always known this, which explains the importance of golf in business relationships.

Business awareness notwithstanding, playfulness remains a competitive art form. However, competition in the hands of a play therapist can be turned to an advantage. When caught up in a contest, our other defenses are often down; and inner truth can, and often does, emerge.

The game was simple. See who could make the longest list of answers (there were no right or wrong) to some ordinary questions.

“What things would you find at a party?”

“How many flavors of ice cream can you name?”

“How do you feel when someone you love dies?”

The “contestants” were so wrapped up in winning that filters were dropped and feelings that had never been expressed poured onto their papers. Even the guilt-provoking word *relieved* found its way into the open. Some didn’t even

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realize what they had said and so discovered some feelings they had never admitted to themselves before. Others knew what was on their minds and the hurried competition had allowed it to slip out. All of them discovered they were not alone; others had felt the same things.

Mastery

Competition, as powerful as it is, is not the only thing that invites play. Adults, like children, have a need to experience mastery. The ego is implicitly nurtured by the absence of failure. Play is the most natural tool because, in a therapeutic context, it is impossible to do wrong. As we saw with Susanna, having one's creativity witnessed and simply accepted invites the emergent self. "It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative the individual discovers the self" (Winnicott, 1971, p. 54).

They were just absently kneading the clay as they talked. She lined up four nondescript objects to prove that she was not at all creative.

Together they mused about the objects and the number four. A powerful memory emerged of an event that had happened when she was four years old. Through the clay, it found voice and the beginning of healing. The objects were kept in a special box and, from time to time, brought out to help piece together the puzzle of her past. The objects, though technically nondescript, clearly spoke the language of her heart.

Play Assessment

Therapy requires assessment, which is sometimes a fairly straightforward process. At other times, it can be elusive. This becomes even more complicated when the therapy and the client are to be eyed under the floodlights of a courtroom.

She was from a foreign land and was seeking asylum based on years of repeated abuse during her adolescence. Several court psychiatrists had said it was impossible to prove her allegations, and she would be deported. Fortunately for her, a savvy law student knew about play therapy and sought a consultation.

Over the course of three visits, several techniques were used. The woman she drew when invited to draw a person had a lovely smiling face but no hands or feet. Her sand tray was filled with themes of female helplessness, abandonment, and fear. And, although of average intelligence, it took her three times as long as an average seven-year-old to put together a puzzle that she had made as a metaphor for healing after trauma.

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While the discrete allegations couldn't be proven, there was sufficient "play assessment" evidence of psychic trauma to convince the immigration attorney to drop the move for deportation and allow her to remain in the country. She is now in therapy in a sexual abuse clinic and is on her way to a peaceful life.

Communication: Speaking the Unspeakable

She had been in nonplay therapy for over a year. Haunted with nightmares and overwhelmed with anxiety attacks, she could do little more than scribble the hideous thoughts onto paper, then lock them safely in envelopes to be stored in the therapist's office.

Eventually, she was able to write some of the thoughts into brief stories about someone else. Then, in a carefully planned extended session, two playback performers were invited in. The client and the therapist sat at the far end of the room. The client read the first story aloud.

The actors played it out and sat down on the floor. As though they were alone in the room, the client and therapist talked and, when she was ready, the client asked to read another story. Again, it was simply acted out at the other end of the room. It was projection personified. Merciful and powerful, it gave unspeakable truth enough distance to be safely witnessed without being relived.

Perhaps the most interesting point of this story is that the playback was initiated by the client who had seen it done as a public performance piece and felt that somehow it might help her. At first, it was the therapist who was resistant. But, because she was also committed to helping her client heal, she did the necessary legwork to learn about the technique and invite it into the session. This proves once again that the client often knows what he or she needs, and it is our job to respectfully follow even when that means stretching.

Insight

He couldn't explain why this time was different. After all, he had worked at the city morgue for years. It was his job to retrieve the bodies, and so he had been to many gruesome scenes. But this was different—he couldn't stop pacing, and he **WOULD NOT** talk about it. He also made it clear that he was "not about to draw any pictures!"

After looking around the room for a while, he decided to throw clay (the therapist had a wall in the office for this purpose). For a long time, they were silent, simply throwing. The therapist followed the rhythm and intensity of his throwing. Eventually, he started to talk about how good it felt just to

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throw something. They remained in parallel conversation, making little eye contact. As they continued throwing, the story unfolded, each time bringing another detail of the specific event and important side issues clearer into focus.

After about 45 minutes, he simply looked at the therapist and said, "Oh my God!" Then he sat and wept. Not just because of the story, but rather because he was so relieved to discover that he wasn't "crazy." As he threw and retold the story, he had found the answer. He was simply an ordinary man who had been caught in a complex convergence of extraordinary circumstances.

Combined Powers

Most of these stories illustrate combinations of the therapeutic powers of play therapy. All play by its nature invites mastery. Physical motion invites release; creativity nurtures insight. Play and its therapeutic value reminds us of the old song "Dem Bones," which says "the head bone's connected to the neck bones," and so on. Play, whether with games, puppets, drums, clay, sports, motion, drawing, drama, dolls, sand, or whatever else is available, invites a cascade of positive effects.

There are endless possibilities for the use of play therapy with adults. Traumatologists have been using various play techniques for both debriefings and therapy for many years (Pynoos & Nader 1988; Shelby & Tredinnick, 1995). Marian Shapiro (1988) describes the use of hypno-play therapy as a technique that uses age regression in combination with play therapy. This results in ego reformation rather than just ego enhancement.

It must be remembered that play exists side by side with talk therapy. Play is not a means to get someone to "talk about it." Like children, adults can heal in the metaphor. Susanna is one example: Her therapist had, in fact, no idea what Susanna had "figured out" as she sat crying by her sand tray. It never emerged in subsequent sessions and, apparently, it never needed to. Exploring what happened may not be essential. Play therapists must be mindful of when and where to interject cognitive conversations.

The client couldn't find the right words and the therapist just couldn't "get it." They were both getting frustrated until finally they decided to dance. Using pieces of colored cloth and spontaneous dance moves, the client showed how she felt. Then the therapist repeated the move over and over until she "got it." It was fun, it was clear, and it allowed for a complete communication that could not be achieved with words.

That is the power and beauty of play. It is as much an art as it is a science.

THE PLAY THERAPIST AND THE PLAY ENVIRONMENT

We must be playful because we cannot expect our clients to go anywhere that we won't. But, playfulness is not necessarily a universal trait. A Playfulness Scale for Adults developed by Schaefer and Greenberg (1997) lists five factors: is fun-loving, has a sense of humor, enjoys silliness, is informal, and is whimsical. It may be useful to take a self-inventory before embarking on this kind of work.

A play therapist must be comfortable with metaphor and silence as well as words. He or she must have a courageous and trusting heart because the therapeutic use of play with adults is new territory. Like the therapist who tried out playback, we must be willing to listen to our clients and invite their wisdom into the healing plan. Playing with adults as they struggle with unseen issues is like walking in a minefield. We must be brave and very careful. Even so, it is well worth the effort. (Remember that the next time you're vacuuming sand and cleaning paint brushes.)

It is utterly wonderful work because it brings an enormous depth to the process. Often, when talking, we see only the "now" while hearing about the "then." Engrossed in play, however, the "then" comes fully into the room. Look into the eyes of a person smashing clay and you see the moment and truth of the pain, not just the memory. It is awesome.

Such power demands an appropriate environment. It must invite playfulness, but not appear childish for, above all, we must be respectful. One might carve out a corner of the playroom and make it the grown-up area with a small sofa or comfortable chairs. That is not to say that some people wouldn't sit happily on the floor, but many need to find their way there more slowly. We must also be mindful that certain toys may trigger traumatic memories, so we need to have a neutral space until we know the issues.

If you are starting in an already adult office, it may be a bit easier to accumulate the toys and games in one area of the room. Adequate soundproofing is needed because play often becomes quite exuberant, and many adults can become embarrassed by their capacity for abandon. And, you don't want to intimidate whoever is in the waiting room.

CONCLUSION

There is a story about soldiers lining opposing trenches during World War I. It was Christmas Eve and all shooting had stopped. Throughout that night and during Christmas day, first tentatively and then with greater enthusiasm, men came out of the bunkers. Carols were sung and a spontaneous soccer game broke out among the opposing soldiers to fill the hours of the truce.

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Myth or miracle—either is a tribute to the power of play and the hope of the human spirit.

Play is a natural and enduring behavior in adults. It has healing powers for the mind and spirit that we are only beginning to appreciate and learn to use. The results of integrating play into our psychotherapeutic practice with adults are becoming clear and measurable. This volume lists a wide array of approaches and techniques, but they are just the beginning. It is now up to our clients and us to till this fertile and compassionate soil.

It was her first day of work as a counselor. She knew she had chosen well when she saw hanging on the wall in the office an embroidered quote attributed to C. Jung. It read, “Learn your theories as best you can, but lay them aside when you touch the miracle of the human soul.”

With Jung’s permission, perhaps we might add something:

Learn your theories as best you can, but lay them aside when you touch the miracle of the human soul. *Lay them aside and play!*

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