

## **Child-Centered Play Therapy, Learning From The Child Through Empathic Listening**

Christine Storch<sup>1</sup>  
Kutztown University, Kutztown, PA

Play is a natural avenue for a child's self-expression and authentic immersion in their own self-guided world. Child-centered play therapy allows the child to play through their feelings in an environment that is supported with conditions set forth by Rogers (1957): congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathy. (Axline, 1969; Landreth, 2012). Children see the world with their hearts, while adults try to "fix" problems with their minds. As a CCPT, Landreth (2012) encourages therapists to relate to a child "heart to heart" and realize that what we know, as adults, is unimportant in the playroom. Be still within yourself and follow the lead of the child.

I am currently a graduate student at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania completing my masters in Marriage and Family Therapy. The following sessions were "practice" sessions toward my work as a child-centered play therapist and were my first sessions using a traveling play room and traveling sand tray. The first session was provided in 30 minutes and was my first session with this child. To protect his identity, we refer to the child as B throughout the session. I will also refer to myself as therapist or T throughout this session. The second session was provided in 30 minutes and was my first session with a 10-year-old girl who will be referred to as C throughout the session and I will be referred to as T or therapist.

The materials chosen for the sand tray session with B reflect a variety of non-specific toys, most of them wooden, specifically chosen because they are non-descript. They are a variety of miniatures such as people, animals, large and small wooden blocks, different wooden shapes, and vehicles as well as items to scoop, cut and hold the sand. They also represent a variety of ethnicities, races and genders as well as non-specific wooden "humans" that can be assigned whatever ethnicities, race or gender the child wants. I felt it was important to be conscious of picking items that did not already have a "background story" or were specific "characters" for the child. Using non-descript pieces allows the child to play freely and create the stories within their play. I wanted to make sure the "humans" could represent a variety of different people in the child's life and that they

---

<sup>1</sup> Christine Nardone Storch is a counseling graduate student, and also works for New Student Orientation/Veteran Services at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania. She can be contacted at chrstorch@kutztown.edu or nardonia824@gmail.com.

could identify with some of the miniatures in some way. I chose a wide variety of animals, including ones that might be deemed “angry or scary.” More specifically, I added fierce looking creatures so the child could possibly identify with that specific creature’s emotion or perhaps use it to depict someone in his or her life. I added blocks and other non-descript wooden shapes, so the child could use those pieces to “become” anything they can imagine such as a house, park, school or other building structure. (Axline, 1969; Landreth, 2012)

### **Sand Tray Child-Centered Play Therapy**

The client, B, age 8, is considered by his parents to “be well behaved in school as well as a good student, naturally athletic, witty, inquisitive and personality driven. He also can have a bit of a temper and hates to lose.” We started our session with an introduction about the “rules” of our space. (Cochran et al, 2010)

T- Hi and welcome to the playroom. My name is Ms. Christine and I am so happy you are here to play in this special room with all of these toys. In this room you can do *almost* anything. I will let you know if there is something that you can’t do, okay?

B- Okay.

T- I’ll let you know when we only have 5 more minutes to play and then again when we only have 1-minute left to play.

B- Okay! (Laughing)

B dives into the sand. He gets sand outside of the sand box, doesn’t notice. He starts piling toys into it, burying blocks and working on building something. He spills more sand out.

B-oops...sorry!

T- I told you that I would let you know if there was anything you can’t do.

B- Oh so I can put sand everywhere? (Eyes were very wide and excited)

T- you are wondering if you can put sand everywhere!

B- Can I?

T- you are really curious about putting sand everywhere.

B looks at me and then looks at the sand then looks at me again. He is thinking about all of this. He dives back in again to the sand with miniatures.

He “decides” to not purposely put sand everywhere but also isn’t being too worried about the sand flying out of the traveling sand box. He starts to build what looks like a bridge.

B-I have to make this bridge very secure because if it isn’t secure the cars can’t get over it and get to work.

T-you are making that bridge very secure.

B- Want to help me?

T- you are wondering if I want to help

B- Yeah take these sticks and put them here...no not there right here and then move the sand this way so it is secure. Okay? I will build this part so the police car can start going over.

T-You really have plans on how you want this built.

B- yes follow my directions and we can’t go wrong with the mission!

T- You want to make sure I follow your directions

B- yes – you are doing well...keep putting sand there.

B continues to play with a lot of energy and verve- he finishes his bridge and grabs what he is calling the police car (it’s a wooden car).

B-this is the police car, but it’s a good one. Not like the bad ones that do bad things to people they don’t like.

This play therapy session occurred approximately one week after the murder of George Floyd.

T- You want me to know this is a good cop, not a bad one.

B- yeah grandma was talking about the bad ones with papa and was sad about a man who died because a policeman made him die.

T- so you heard your grandma and papa talking about a man who died because of a police officer.

He began a long talk without taking a breath.

B- Yup- Papa said that police people are good and that I shouldn’t be afraid of them but sometimes there are mean ones. So I told him that maybe it’s like when my mommy said she didn’t like my doctor and she wanted to find a new one. Not everyone is going to like everyone or be good. I feel bad for my best friend- he is my very

very very best friend and dark skinned and I don't want the police to be mad at him and get him. (While he talks he is using the alligator toy to attack the police officer and car) So I am going to make a plan that if they try to get him I am going to tell them get me too and then call my mommy because my mommy said we have to protect our brothers and sisters and my best friend is my brother and so I will have them call my mommy or daddy and they will tell the bad police not to get my friend. Or I'll have them call papa- I know both my parent's cell phone numbers (he recites them) and that's what the plan will be. Is that a good plan?

T- You are wondering if that is a good plan for you and your best friend.

B- I know it's a good plan- I have very good plans- okay you take this police car and have it go help that tree that fell...that will be a helpful police woman. Be helpful and good okay?

I start my role as helpful police person.

T- hello tree I am a police person and I am here to help! Can I help you stand up?

B-Yes thank you I need help standing... get more sand policewoman!

T- here is sand to help you stand firm and strong

B- you are a really good policewoman

T-You think I am a really good policewoman

B-Yup

B continued to play in the sand happily and give me direction on how "to be a really good policewoman." He was given a five-minute warning to end his play session and then a one-minute warning to prepare him adequately for the end of our time together.

What was revealed throughout his play was his deep worry about something he had overheard and the amazing ability to process that worry using his play. B articulated what he was feeling and thinking in relation to intense social issues that are current in today's society. At times throughout the therapy I fought my own inclinations to interject or ask questions. However, allowing B to fully immerse and experience his play on his terms

while articulating his feelings throughout effectively allowed him to lead the way.

### **Child-Centered Play Therapy with a Traveling Toy Room**

The materials chosen for the traveling toy room reflect a variety of non-specific toys. They are a variety of miniatures such as people, animals, large and small wooden blocks, different wooden shapes, and vehicles. In addition, a nursing bottle, rubber knife, rolling pin, bendable doll family, small traveling PlayDoh, dart gun, handcuffs, 10 toy soldiers, play dishes and spoons, non-descript, bean bag balls, popsicle sticks, cotton rope, hand puppets, aggressive alligator toy, small bedroom, bathroom and kitchen furniture, band aids, and costume jewelry. All “human” toys represent a variety of ethnicities, races and genders as well as non-specific wooden “humans” that can be assigned whatever ethnicities, race or gender the child wants. It is important to be conscious of picking items that did not already have a “background story” or were specific “characters” for the child. Using non-descript pieces allows the child to play freely and create the stories within their play. I wanted to make sure the “humans” could represent a variety of different people in the child’s life and that they could identify with some of the miniatures in some way. I chose a wide variety of animals, including ones that might be deemed “angry or scary.” I added fierce looking creatures so the child could possibly identify with that specific creature’s emotion or perhaps use it to depict someone or something in his or her life. I added blocks and other non-descript wooden shapes, so the child could use those pieces to “become” anything they can imagine such as a house, park, school or other building structure. (Axline, 1969; Landreth, 2012)

The client, C is age 10 and considered by her parents to “be very conscientious with everything she does. She strives for perfection and she is extremely competent. She is her own worst critic and has presented forms of anxiety which cause tension in the home.” We started our session with an introduction about the “rules” of our space (Cochran et al, 2010). Our session lasted 30 minutes.

T- Hi and welcome to the playroom. My name is Ms. Christine and I am so happy you are here to play in this special room with all of these toys. In this room you can do *almost* anything. I will let you know if there is something that you can’t do, okay?

C- Okay (shyly)

T- I’ll let you know when we only have 5 more minutes to play and then again when we only have 1-minute left to play.

Child begins to take out all the Popsicle sticks and lay them in very neat frames. She begins to construct what looks like the frame of a house and is very systematic about it. Child is giggling as she builds, perhaps slightly anxious of the unknown? She then quickly draws her attention to the toys. She gets a very serious look on her face and begins her “work.” She seems very systematic about what she is choosing and where she places it.

T- You have a very specific plan about where you want everything.

C- uh hmmm...

T- You made a straight line with that.

C takes many wooden blocks and carefully looks each one over. She chooses to get rid of some. She puts those blocks back exactly where they came from in a precise way.

T- You don't want those anymore.

C- No they didn't work in my mind the way I wanted them to.

T- you thought they were going to do something else other than what they did.

C- Yes, they didn't make it look like I wanted.

T- You wanted it to look a certain way and they didn't look like that.

C-uhh--hmhhh

C continues play making very straight lines with the blocks and sticks.

T- Those are very straight lines

C- Bedroom. (she points) Bathroom (she points)

T- There is the bedroom. There is the bathroom. You know exactly where you want to put these pieces.

C- I do (giggling)

C gets serious again in her “work.” She works in silence and is very focused.

T-You are making sure it is very straight

C- I like things neat

T-You like things to be neat

C seems to be questioning where to put her remaining pieces of the house frame.

T- You are not sure how you want to lay that

C- Hmmm

Child happily put the piece where she wants after trying many different scenarios.

T-You are happy about how you laid that now

C- uh, hmm this is a toilet bowl (laughing)

T-You think it's very funny that that is a toilet bowl

C- Its very funny the toilet bowl (Laughing)

T- you find that very funny

Child gets right back to work.

T-You are getting everything just the way you like it

T-You are fixing the scarf around the house, you are very satisfied with how neat it looks.

C-I like things straight and neat

T- Making things straight and neat makes you satisfied and happy.

C- I feel calm when things are neat

T- You like things neat and it makes you calm when they are.

C- I hate a mess! (Laughing as she continuously makes everything just so...)

T- You don't like mess

C- Is that okay?

T- you are curious to know if I think it's okay to like things neat

C- Do you like things neat?

T- You want to know if I like things the way you like things

Child picks up a doll and hands it to me and says,

C- You are the mommy

T- Okay I am the mommy

She directs me to play out a scenario where I am the mommy and she is the child and she is cleaning up after making cookies. I fully take on the role I was assigned and she acts out a “scene” where the child cannot get the cookies right but eventually does and is cleaning up the kitchen after baking. I was conflicted here whether or not I was supposed to make it known, through my role as mommy, that I think its fine to like things neat but show that it doesn’t matter to sometimes be messy. I decided to let the child lead during this role-play. She asked if I liked the cookies and I commented the cookies were delicious and how grateful I was for C making them.

The theme I keep seeing here is this need for perfection; to be “good” and “neat.” I believe this is all linked to self-esteem; C is turning 11 and developing physically and emotionally. Her explorations are valid as she embarks into pushing away from her parents and grounding her own thoughts and feelings. However, these thoughts and feelings cause anxiety within her- an internal struggle to be perfect. Even within the therapy, you can see she puts tremendous pressure on herself to succeed and do things “right.”

C- Okay now the mom goes to work and the dad is on the toilet

A tremendous amount of laughter and giggling- she seems to really enjoy making me laugh as well.

T- (Laughing) The dad is on the toilet- you think it’s very funny that the dad is on the toilet

C-Yes, the dad is staying in there a really long time!

Again, C is laughing as am I.

T- the dad being on the toilet is very funny

C-Laughing....

She goes back to her play continuing to construct a house and barn, parking garage, and backyard. She notices a piece of furniture she had carefully placed keeps falling over. She corrects it several times.

T- The piece of furniture keeps falling and you are very frustrated it won’t stay in its place.

C- I am very frustrated- why won’t it stand up?

T-You are wondering why it won’t stand up!

C- I’m asking you why it won’t stand up! (laughing)

T-You are asking me and getting very frustrated about why this piece of furniture won't stand up.

C- (Lots of laughing)- you won't answer me!

T- You are frustrated that I don't have an answer

C- argghhh (laughing)

She eventually gets it to stand up with the aid of another piece.

Our session lasted for 30 minutes; I gave her a five-minute warning and then a one-minute warning to alert her time was over. At the five-minute warning I could have predicted she would begin to clean up, which she did. She very neatly began to put everything away exactly where it came from. She was very deeply involved in her play, creating scenery, characters and spaces that reflect her life. For adults, it is generally easy to talk about how they feel or what they want, or how what they want makes them feel! I suspect that for children, working that out in the playroom would alleviate any anxiety that might come with the need to "do everything right." Eventually, this particular child could begin to see, through play therapy, that situations can change, be messy, and still be okay. Play therapy can be the catalyst to show that in a world of rigid straight lines there might be beauty in the twists, turns and curves of all that life has to offer.

### References

- Axline, V. M. (1969). *Play therapy* (Vol. 125). Ballantine Books.
- Cochran, N. H., Nordling, W. J., & Cochran, J. L. (2010). *Child-centered play therapy: A practical guide to developing therapeutic relationships with children*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Landreth, G. L. (2012). *Play therapy: The art of the relationship*. Routledge.
- Landreth, G. (Director). (2012) Touching the inner world of children through play therapy.[Video/DVD] Center for Play Therapy. Retrieved from <https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/touching-the-inner-world-of-children-through-play-therapy>
- Rogers, C. R. (1957). The necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change. *Journal of consulting psychology*, 21(2), 95.