

## **ABSTRACT**

This article discusses the critical role that play has in creating healthy attachment in children. By first identifying the importance of free play combined with the benefits imaginative play has in child development, the connection between natural child development and healthy attachment is formed. From here, the reader begins to understand the value of play, especially with primary caregivers, and the theoretical foundation of play therapy.

### **Attachment and Play**

Mindi Lunday Ed.D., LMHC, LPC

Attachment, child development, and play are three concepts that align to create healthy children. As such, it is natural that the most applicable form of therapy for children would be Play Therapy. However, to adequately understand Play Therapy as a theoretical orientation and intervention, an understanding of play, attachment, and child development must first be addressed.

### **The Importance of Play**

Play provides a multitude of functions in a child's life. Society is familiar with the basics, such as developmental milestones like gross and fine motor skills, but there are others, such as coping, processing, emotional regulation, and problem solving, just to name a few. Sweeney (1997) uses the child's game of "Ring Around the Rosies" as an example of how children naturally incorporate play to process and work through trauma. He talks about how "Ring Around the Rosies" was a game made up during the Middle Ages by children who experienced the Black Plague (Sweeney, 1997). The "rosies" refers to the blemishes and wounds, the "pocket full of posies" represents the practice of plague victims carrying flowers in their pockets to counteract the smell, and "ashes, ashes, we all fall down" referred to the

## ATTACHMENT AND PLAY

impending death (Sweeney, 1997). Free, non-directive, imaginative play is how children cope, process, and make sense of the world around them (Landreth, 2002; Sweeney, 1997). Free play for a child is non-goal oriented and provides opportunities to think outside the box, tapping into the child's natural ability to problem solve, regulate emotions, and employ creative energy (Landreth, 2002).

It is important to remember that children are concrete. Abstract thinking does not even begin to come online until age 11, but is not fully developed until the mid-twenties. Furthermore, words are abstract, thus signifying, again, the importance of play. Play bridges the gap between the concrete and abstract, and the symbolic function of play allows the child to turn concrete objects into something else he or she has experienced, providing natural coping strategies where an unmanageable world or experience becomes one the child can process (Landreth, 2002). Play is a child's natural form of communication and provides the child the ability to integrate complex cognitive, emotional, and social elements (Curry & Arnaud, 1995; Landreth, 2002).

### **Attachment and Play**

Attachment theory is prevalent and noteworthy; however, few adult theorists fully understand the importance play has in developing healthy attachment. But first, let's rewind. Research into attachment began with John Bowlby and was continued through the works of Mary Main and Mary Ainsworth who developed the four attachment styles and made waves with the "Strange Situation" research. Although this history is vital to understanding attachment, in order to save time and space, the basic attachment needs will be the focal point. Healthy

## ATTACHMENT AND PLAY

attachment is created through physical touch, emotional closeness, acceptance, unconditional love, safety, security, and play (Mellenthin, 2015).

Taking these concepts to the first and primary attachment created, that between parent and child, it is important to remember that play is the primary form of communication by children, including the primary way a child communicates with adults (Mellenthin, 2015). Therefore, if a parent is not playing with his or her child, there is a lack of communication between parent and child, and thus a vital piece of attachment is missing. Adults often want to pull children up into their world. The problem with this approach is a child is unable to be “pulled up” into an adult’s world due to brain and developmental barriers. When children are seen as, and expected to be, “little adults” and parents do not take into consideration the limitations of a child cognitively and emotionally, the child becomes frustrated, dysregulated, and begins to exhibit behavioral concerns such as meltdowns or defiance. More often than not, this defiance is actually a form of panic and anxiety due to the child’s inability to understand and communicate what is being experienced, and then is misinterpreted by adults; simply miscommunication.

In contrast, adults are more than capable of getting down on a child’s level by incorporating free play, where the child directs the symbolic play and the parent or adult “listens” to what is being communicated. Taking this concept back to attachment needs, play communicates to the child emotional closeness, acceptance, unconditional love, safety, and security, and often touch is incorporated in a child’s play. Healthy attachment complete!

One last concept that should be included in the discussion of play and attachment is oxytocin. Play is a universal attachment need that has a psychological and biological impact –

## ATTACHMENT AND PLAY

humans are wired to connect through play (Mellenthin, 2015). When people play together, laughter and eye contact happen naturally and the brain releases an attachment chemical called oxytocin. Oxytocin is a neuropeptide in the brain that serves many functions, but in relation to attachment, it increases empathy, trust, relaxation, and psychological stability, reduces anxiety, and is considered a pain killer (MacGill, 2015). Playing with children communicates four attachment needs to the child – *Seen* (I see the real you, all parts of you), *Safe* (because I see you, you are safe), *Soothe* (those who are safe can be soothed), and *Secure* (when soothed, security is established) (Mellenthin, 2015). The inability for parents to play with their children is the result of an inability to be vulnerable in the relationship, cutting off the flow of oxytocin in both their brains.

### **Play Therapy, Parenting, and the Importance of Parents in Therapy**

Play Therapy has many different theoretical orientations, but in relation to attachment, the concepts of Child Centered Play Therapy and the differing orientations that incorporate parents in the play therapy process are most applicable, i.e. Theraplay, Child Parent Relationship Therapy, and Filial. As therapists, the responsibility to meet the client where he or she is remains the most basic premise of counseling. This is especially true for the children who find themselves in counseling under the pretext they have something wrong with them. Unlike many adults, at the core, children want to be happy. Therefore when a child is unhappy or acting out it is important to speak his or her language to find out what they are trying to communicate, and help educate parents in the areas of child development, attachment, and play. Helping parents learn to reconnect with their children will go a long way in reducing acting out behaviors at home.

## ATTACHMENT AND PLAY

## References:

Curry, N. & Arnaud, S. H. (1995). Personality difficulties in preschool children as revealed through play themes and styles. *Young Children*, 40(4), 4-9.

Landreth, G. (2002). *Play Therapy: The Art of the Relationship* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York, NY: Brunner-Routledge.

MacGill, M. & Webberley, H. (2015). Oxytocin: What is it and what does it do? *Medical News Today*. <http://medicalnewstoday.com>

Mellenthin, C. (2015). *The Power of Parents in Play Therapy*. 32<sup>nd</sup> Annual International Play Therapy Conference, Atlanta, GA.

Sweeney, D. S. (1997). *Counseling Children Through the World of Play*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers.