



WAPT "News and Views"

In this issue: Letter from the President · Upcoming Events ·
Can Play Therapy Change the World?

Letter from the President

By Pat Stoehr

This is my third attempt to write this letter over the past three weeks. During my first attempt, I got side-tracked by craziness at work and didn't get back to it for two weeks. I actually had a pretty good start on the second attempt, but then the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, CT happened and I was completely derailed. The letter I had written seemed so trite and unimportant as I tried to wrap my mind around such a horrible, unimaginable event that took the lives of twenty young children and six adults. It really did shake me to the core, as I'm sure it did millions of people around the world.

As a parent and grandparent, I cannot begin to imagine the grief and overwhelming sense of loss that the families of the victims are experiencing. It is just so very sad and heartbreaking, especially since most of the victims were innocent children looking forward to the holidays. My heart goes out to the survivors, their families and the community of Newtown as they all try to process this truly horrific, life-changing tragedy. They are in my thoughts and prayers daily.

As play therapists we know that one of the most effective interventions for children who have experienced trauma is play. Children are able to express so many things through play that they can't begin to verbalize. Veteran and "rookie" play therapists alike have been witness to the healing powers of play therapy. Parents, grandparents and other caregivers can also attest to the benefits of play. They, too, can be agents of change just by engaging in a genuine, playful relationship with a child, allowing them to process the traumatic event and providing a safe, nurturing environment where children are free to explore their concerns and feelings. We are so fortunate to work in such an amazing profession.

For those of you who have parents, teachers or friends who are looking for information on how to talk to young children about a traumatic event, there are several good resources available online. You can search for "How to talk to young children about traumatic events" and several websites will come up. One of the most helpful resources I found was seasameworkshop.org. Search for the article entitled "Here for Each Other: Helping Families Deal with Emergencies". It is parent-friendly and provides simple, helpful tips. Other websites which have been recommended in the media are chla.org and rems.ed.gov.

I sincerely wish each and every one of you a joyous, peaceful and special Christmas with family and friends. May the coming year fill your heart with joy, your life with love and provide many opportunities to make lasting, wonderful, priceless memories. Give your children and grandchildren an extra special hug and let them know that you love them each and every day.

Featured Contributor: Jennifer Banks

This month on page two, Jennifer, who is a graduate assistant at the University of Wyoming, shares her thoughts about how play therapy can change the world. Thank you Jennifer for your contribution!

Can Play Therapy Change the World?

By Jennifer Banks

A couple years ago, I volunteered at the Rocky Mountain Play Therapy Conference. I had no idea what to expect and was hopeful it would augment my experiences in a local elementary school where I worked at the time. I started to get a little nervous after stuffing plastic bags for two hours with pipe cleaners, cloth, ribbon, clay, markers, and bubble wrap. Was this an art class or was this therapy? Turns out, it was a little bit of both. The goal of play therapy is not to cure the child with toys but to listen deeply and intently to the child through the most expressive language she knows—play.

The overarching goal of play therapy is to help facilitate a child's journey of self, to help her grow into who she is. Grow in a manner that is not infused with punishment or reward systems. I do not necessarily believe that it is children who have problems communicating. A more clear understanding might lie in the beliefs of adults who assume children communicate in standard, verbal, linear, ways. Adults expect conventional communication from children in addition to predictable behavior. Adults find the problem child confounding and a nuisance when realistically these behaviors could be indicative of a stage of development of an individual child. Or maybe it's just the child's way of expressing self. If this mode of expression does not fit within parameters that have been set by a particular society or culture, the child does indeed become the problem.

Does play therapy work? Can it really change the child? The play therapy model of prevention, education, and application could potentially shift the way we conceptualize the problem child. Children are profoundly and expertly capable of change just as they are capable of following rules that they find meaningful and important. The mode of change lies primarily in the relationship between child/therapist and child/parent. As parents cultivate better relationships with children it follows that other adult relationships will improve. A change in relationships changes a child's connection to environment that ultimately leads to societal change. An adult in a child's life who sincerely cares about that child can help facilitate change in the child. And really, change much more than that child. Families, societies, and cultures can benefit from play therapy.

Family systems are delicate and complex and mimic societal and global systems. Once balance is achieved in the familial system, change can occur on larger scales. All children, maladjusted or not, can benefit from a non-directive child-led approach that facilitates growth in uninhibited ways. Involving parents in filial play therapy empowers families to find balance in ways that are appropriate to that family system. Through meta-analysis, the effectiveness of play therapy is empirically supported and in my personal experiences, play therapy is capable of helping children in ways that are profound and inspiring. I think back on those bags filled with art supplies - who would have thought pipe cleaners could change the world?

Save the Date: Upcoming Events

Colorado APT Spring Conference, "Play Therapy: Inside the Mind of a Child"

April 5-6, 2013 - Cherry Creek Marriott Courtyard Hotel. Visit coloradoapt.org for more information. If you're a WAPT member, ask for CAPT member rates when registering.

Rocky Mountain Center of Play Therapy Studies & Early Childhood Leadership 5th Biennial Conference

June 27-29, 2013 (Supervision & Ethics Pre-Institute June 26) - Laramie. Special presenters include Dr. Garry Landreth and Dr. Richard Gaskill. Don't miss this opportunity to hear two world-renowned speakers. Get ready for more excellent play therapy training, fun professional networking, good food and great prizes!