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CRITICAL REVIEW OF PLAY THERAPY ASSESSMENTS

Stephanie L. Brooke
University of Phoenix

Abstract: *As part of the creative modalities, play therapy offers a therapeutic mode for diagnosis, assessment, and treatment interventions. The purpose of this paper is to critically review three play therapy interventions: The Developmental Play Assessment, the Marschak Interaction Method, and the Family Systems Test. A brief introduction to each assessment will be presented. Additionally, validity and reliability data will be addressed. The overall evaluation will include the assessments desirable as well as undesirable features, which is of critical importance to play therapists and those therapists using play as a method of diagnosis and assessment.*

Assessment is a valuable tool for creative art therapists. It has been a critical part of this writer's experience as an art therapist working with emotional disturbed children and survivors of sexual abuse (Brooke, 1997; 2004). Whether using play or art therapy modalities, assessment can be a useful tool for indicating the client's current level of functioning. Given that many creative therapists use assessment as part of the initial interview process, it is critical that they are armed with factual information regarding the assessment's reliability and validity, a particularly important point for therapists serving as expert witnesses in court proceedings (Ryan & Wilson, 2000; Turner, 2000).

Play therapy, like other creative therapies, derives its methodology from epistemology; therefore, it is essential that therapists who use these play therapy assessments examine the premises and research which led to their development. This review will examine three

Stephanie L. Brooke is an instructor for the University of Phoenix teaching psychology, sociology, and philosophy. For more information or to contact Dr. Brooke by email, see her website at <http://www.stephaniebrooke.com>.

play therapy assessments: The Developmental Play Assessment, the Marschak Interaction Method, and the Family Systems Test, in an effort to provide an overall view of the assessment's strengths and weaknesses.

DEVELOPMENTAL PLAY ASSESSMENT (DPA)

Introduction

The Developmental Play Assessment (Lifter, Edwards, Avery, Anderson, & Sulzer-Azaroff, 1988) was designed to evaluate the play activities of individuals displaying development disabilities and delays. The DPA was created to determine the child's present level of cognitive abilities as well as project future aptitudes. Additionally, the DPA was based on the assumption that developmental relevance does influence the quality and rate of play activities acquired by the child. Lifter explained, "In a global sense, developmentally relevant activities mean activities that the child is ready to learn" (as cited in Gitlin-Weiner, Sandgrund, & Schaefer, 2000, p. 236).

Purpose and Recommended Use

The DPA is recommended for planning educational and therapeutic interventions. Further, Lifter (1996) noted that the instrument can be used for screening and diagnostic purposes. Data gleaned from the DPA may be utilized to foster a play therapy treatment program. Although designed for children with developmental disabilities, Lifter (1996) stated that the DPA could be adapted to assess older or younger children. However, guidelines for adapting the DPA for such populations were not discussed.

Test Dimension

The DPA is broken down into eight levels (Lifter, 1996). Each level contains categories with operational definitions. In addition, examples of each category were provided by Lifter. The DPA levels progress from indiscriminate actions with objects (i.e., level one) to more complex play behaviors that involve adoption of roles or fantasy characters (i.e., level eight).

Administration Procedures

The administration of the DPA involves an "interactant" who administers the assessment and a person responsible for the video recording. Administration qualifications of the interactant were not discussed. To administer the DPA, the video camera should be set to the same level as the child's face. Further, the assessment should take place in a familiar setting, such as the child's home. Four groups of toys are required to administer the DPA. For example, Group 1 toys allow for manipulative play and include puzzles, beads in a bowl, a small dump truck with two drivers, six unpainted wood blocks and a stuffed lamb. The child should have roughly seven to eight minutes to play with each set of toys. Lifter (1996) stated that the time period could be lengthened or shortened depending on the child's behavior and interest level. The child's play activities are recorded for 30 minutes. The interactant's role is to take the child to the toys, telling the child that he/she can play with them, but not direct the child.

Interpretation

Coding of the child's behavior occurs in three steps. The first step entails recording the raw frequencies of the play actions of the child. The second step involves reorganizing the actions into categories of activities. In the last step, the scorer summarizes the actions according to the developmental sequence outlined by the test authors. The results are categorized as follows: Mastery of learning, Emerging learning patterns, and Absence of play categories. Mastery was operationally defined as the occurrence of at least 10 instances of the categories with at least four different types represented within the 30-minute time period. Emergence was defined as the occurrence of at least four instances of the category with a minimum of two different types presented.

Validity and Reliability

Lifter, Sulzer-Azaroff, Anderson, and Cowdery (1993) used the DPA as a tool to identify developmentally pertinent intervention targets with respect to the child's developmental level. In a sample of primarily autistic children, the DPA provided support for the incorporation of