

Comments by Clinical Editor

The authors describe a Child Centered Play Therapy group approach for use in elementary schools and share the experiences of practitioners who have utilized CCPT groups in elementary schools in the U.S. and in Thailand.

# Who's in Charge Today?

## *Implementing Child-Centered Play Therapy Groups in School Settings*

The weight of responsibility for every child in a school causes the school counselor's office to resemble a revolving door. After the demands of guidance lessons, team meetings, crisis intervention, and classroom teachers' struggles, many school counselors have difficulty meeting the needs of students with social skills deficits or low self-esteem. Too often school counselors find themselves lamenting, "I wish I had more time to meet with individual children!" Because of this all-too-realistic scenario, Mary Roy, a licensed school counselor, began to seek ways to implement Child-Centered Play Therapy (CCPT) in elementary schools. Slightly modifying the typical principles of CCPT groups to include a specific structure for group leadership, Ms. Roy developed a method that has now been implemented at several schools in the U.S and at an international school in Thailand. This article will highlight an innovative use of the basic CCPT group method, as modified by Ms. Roy, and relate the experiences of involved counselors and teachers.

By Pamela S. Davis LPC & Mary L. Fry LCPC, RPT-S





## **“The group modality is one way for children of different cultures to understand and share their cultural heritage...”**

Child-Centered Play Therapy groups are built on the premise underlying individual CCPT, which acknowledges that children have the capacity to set their goals and act out their problems through play (Landreth, 2002). Through the relationship that develops between child and counselor, as well as through the child's interaction with toys in the playroom, a child is able to successfully work through issues. Group CCPT builds upon this principle, extending the importance of relationships beyond child and counselor to include the other children in the group (Baggerly & Parker, 2005). This leads to the development of effective social skills, improved behavior, and increased self-esteem for group members (Ginott, 1999).

Because a key condition in any group counseling is the development of the group climate, Geroski and Kraus (2010) suggest that the primary role for a counselor leading children's groups involves creating a climate that encourages safety and allows challenge, risk, cohesiveness, empathy, and caring. To create this kind of climate, the CCPT group counselor uses the basic client-centered skills of reflecting, tracking, and setting limits for safety. Since there are several children in the room, it is important for the counselor to reflect actions and behaviors equally among all the children and intentionally use each child's name. As the group play continues, the counselor brings into focus what is happening in the here-and-now of the play, and does not interrupt the children's play to correct behavior or teach social skills. Therapeutic change occurs because of the interplay between the group members and the environment (Landreth & Sweeney, 1999).

The environment for CCPT groups is cornerstone to the process. The room needs to be large enough to handle several busy children who are at play. Four types of toys should be available in the room: real-life toys, such as a doll family, cars, baby bottle and telephone; acting-out aggressive-release toys such as plastic swords, dinosaurs, and army men; toys for creative expression and emotional release, including art

supplies and play doh; and board games (Landreth, 2002). Another ingredient that may be added is a sandtray with miniatures, although this may not be available in all settings.

To implement the group in a school setting, teachers are asked by the school counselor to identify students in their class who would benefit from a group counseling experience. Sometimes parents might also alert the school counselor to specific student needs. There is no attempt to group the children according to similar problematic issues as might be done in a psycho-educational group. Instead, the school counselor sets up groups of four students of the same grade level. Landreth and Sweeney (1999) recommend that children under age nine may be mixed genders, but after age nine it seems to be more effective if the students are like gender.

After the school counselor receives the signed parent consent forms, the group has its initial session. At this time, each child in the group draws a number from 1-4. The child who draws number 1 becomes the play leader for the first session; the child who draws number 2 leads the group for the second play session, and so on until all four children have led the group. The group meets for eight sessions, thus allowing each student to have two times to be “in charge.” Each group meets for 30–45 minutes, depending on the school schedule and the age of the children involved.

In leading these groups, Roy (personal communication, January 28, 2010) finds that the children look forward to their day to be in charge of the group and will stop her in the hall to tell her what they are planning. Teachers have related that quiet, shy students who have participated in a CCPT group begin to be more assertive in class. One girl, Talika\*, who recently moved to the U.S. from another country, was not speaking in class even though her parents said that she spoke English at home. On the first day of group, Talika drew a 4, which gave her three weeks to watch the other children choose the activity for the day. On her “day,” Talika looked around the room and



another, more assertive girl in the group said, “I’ll talk for Talika because she doesn’t talk.” At that moment, Talika spun around and very clearly said, “I DO TOO SPEAK!” From that moment on, Talika spoke for herself both in the group and in class.

In addition to being beneficial in elementary schools in the U.S., the CCPT group experience has also proven effective in an international school setting. The group modality is one way for children of different cultures to understand and share their cultural heritage, thus allowing for a breakdown of possible cultural barriers (Chang, Ritter, & Hays, 2005). Many counselors believe that CCPT groups are effective not only to promote understanding among children in the group, but also to provide a culturally sensitive way for counselors to work successfully with children whose ethnic background is different from their own (Glover, 1999). The use of play relieves the stress of a language barrier. The acceptance and nonjudgmental reflections offered by the counselor promote understanding among all group members. However, Glover (1999) cautions counselors to gain an understanding of each child’s cultural makeup and the problems they face, as this will allow the counselor to better interpret the play. In addition, the counselor may need to modify the play language or some of the toys used, in order to promote multicultural sensitivity within the group. For example, the inclusion of ethnic dolls and puppets, specific ethnic play foods, dress-up clothes, and sandtray miniatures representing different cultures will help to enhance a play group sensitive to multicultural needs (Chang, Ritter, & Hays, 2005).

In response to the need for an effective multicultural group strategy, one of the authors (Davis) used this CCPT group model with four kindergarten students attending an English-speaking international school in Thailand. Each child in the group represented a different ethnicity: Vietnamese, Korean, Thai/German, and American. All of the children were fluent in at least

two languages, and three of the children spoke a language other than English at home. The kindergarten teachers selected two boys and two girls based on social skills needs that were apparent in the classroom. Two of the children displayed traits of being overly assertive while two of the children were inhibited. After obtaining informed consent from the parents, the group progressed utilizing the modified CCPT method outlined in this article.

In this situation, the CCPT group model proved to be a successful way to allow the children to learn new social skills and to become more comfortable with different cultural values. One boy named Stu\* had recently been adopted internationally after having spent the first four years of his life in an orphanage. He was frequently aggressive in the classroom and struggled to share toys or space with other children. In the context of the group, Stu often took control of the toys and the play, even on the days when it was not his turn to be “in charge.” The other children in the group seemed hesitant to challenge Stu for leadership. One Thai child in the group, named Jay,\* responded as is culturally appropriate in Thailand, backing down rather than creating a conflict with Stu. The counselor, operating from a CCPT framework, did not intervene to make Stu share the toys or teach Jay to be more assertive. Instead, she stated to the children what was happening in the room: “I wonder what Jay might do so that Stu would be willing to share the oven,” and “I wonder what Stu feels like when he keeps the oven all to himself.”

The turning point in the group occurred the day that Stu was absent due to illness. That day, Jay was designated as “in charge” and expressed that he was glad Stu was gone, because “now I get to use the oven all for myself and not worry about Stu who doesn’t share.” The counselor affirmed Jay’s leadership that day and suggested that Jay could practice what it’s like to be “in charge,” so that when Stu returns, Jay knows how to be

the leader. And that's exactly what happened! The kindergarten teacher soon reported that Jay began asserting himself in the classroom, something he had never before done, and even challenged Stu one day for a front row seat at storybook time.

The following week when Stu returned to the group, he initiated a vigorous foam sword fight with Jay, and then stated a few minutes later that he and Jay could "share the oven."

According to his teacher, Stu also began sharing toys in the classroom. One day, Stu even took special notice of another child in the class who was left out, saying, "We need to share the toys so that Lucy\* can play too." Thus, the group became a safe place for these children to discover aspects of behavior that are culturally and socially acceptable and to try out other behaviors that elicit peer group approval.

These experiences with CCPT group therapy, having been successfully implemented in schools both in the U.S. and internationally, highlight one strategy that school counselors might use to allow children to experiment with new and more satisfying ways of relating to their peers. In so doing, counselors can meet the needs of more children, even in the midst of a busy day. \*names changed

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