

The Healing Power of Play

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Mental health professionals tell us that children who go through traumatic or very stressful experiences will experience a myriad of uncomfortable feelings that result in behavioral issues. Children don't intend to respond in those ways; those are normal responses to abnormal circumstances. Fortunately, however, mental health professionals tell us that play can help heal some of those responses. Through formalized play or even informal play activities, with the help of caring adults, many recover. Life will never be the same for these children, but often these resilient survivors live very normal and creative lives. Some even excel, transforming the tragedies of their experiences into motivation to take advantage of learning opportunities

Introduction:

Mental health professionals tell us that children who go through traumatic experiences frequently result in having:

- feelings that life is out of control
- a loss of faith in the future
- a break in relationships
- loss of feelings of self-confidence
- confusion and fear
- difficulty in regulating emotions

Children don't intend to respond in those ways; those are normal responses to abnormal circumstances. Fortunately, however, mental health professionals also tell us that play can help heal some of those responses. Through formalized play or even informal play activities, with the help of caring adults, many recover. Life will never be the same for these children but often these resilient survivors live very normal and creative lives. Some even excel, using the tragedies of their experiences as learning opportunities.

For many years, my work has focused on designing and supporting play opportunities for young children in crisis situations. One of the ways that we, as adults, can help is to encourage children's play. All of the benefits of play - healing from traumatic experiences, physical development, developing problem-solving skills, brain development, learning to negotiate, enhancing executive function skills, or developing creativity - are skills children learn through play.

In many parts of the world I have observed children's play. Some of it was spontaneous individual play, while at other times children were playing with others. Some of the play might be called "free play" while other play was more directed. In our Western competitive forms of play we frequently are very interested in who wins the game and who loses. That was not always the case in some of the play I observed

Communicating through play

The 7 or 8-year-old Syrian refugee girl in Amman, Jordan and I had been playing her unique version of the card game, "fish". My serious game-partner had changed the rules frequently while we were playing and I, with very limited Arabic, continually tried to figure out what rules applied as the game progressed. When it was time for another activity and we had to end the game, I began straightening my stack of "books" to compare with hers to see who had won. It didn't take me long to realize that my partner was putting her cards back into the box; not at all interested in who won or lost. This child wasn't even interested in who won the game! For her, the process of playing was the important part. She had been in control. She also had enjoyed the special time of playing together and the relationship we had developed even in those 15 short minutes. Developing relationships can often assist children in the healing process of tragic experiences from which many refugee children survive. She was not interested in winning or losing!

Similarly, I remember a 9-year-old refugee girl from Kosovo who was temporarily living with her family and several hundred other refugees on a military base in Toronto, Canada. I had been asked to go to Canada to help train child caregivers and to work with the children whose families were taking shelter at the military base. I noticed a particular child who seemed bored with the play equipment and

supplies that we had at the drop-in center. I decided to play with her. But since I couldn't speak any Kosovar, and she could not speak English, I picked up a puzzle and asked her with my eyes if she would like to play. She smiled, which I took as an answer of "yes". We went over to a bench and I dumped out the puzzle and held up one piece and asked her, again with my eyes, where I should put it. She pointed to a place on the puzzle board and I followed her directions by placing the piece in question on that spot. We continued the process and when the puzzle was completed, we dumped out the pieces and started over again. After several more successful completions, she took a piece, asked me with her eyes where she should put it. I pointed to the appropriate place, and she followed my directions. We continued playing for at least another **10 minutes or so**.

Neither of us could speak the language of the other, but it didn't matter. We knew what the other person was communicating. Furthermore, the child had an opportunity to be in control of her life for the 20 minutes or so that we played. She made the decisions. Even a simple activity like playing with a puzzle can give a child an opportunity to experience at least a bit of control again. During those few minutes we were also able to establish a caring relationship with each other. We had fun.

Importance of relationship

And so it was with children at the drop-in program at the Family Assistance Center in New York City following the 9/11 tragedies. My 2-week volunteer assignment was almost complete when a young boy, maybe 10 years old, came into the center with an older woman, who could have been his grandmother. While grandmother sat and rocked in the rocking chair, the young boy started walking around the large center disturbing other children's activities. A kick here, a push there, a gruff word some other place, all were clearly upsetting the other children as they used the equipment and supplies that were available to help relieve some of the stress they had experienced.

Noticing the young boy's disruptions, I approached him and said that I was thinking about playing with a train (I knew there was a small wooden train on a shelf nearby) and asked if he would he like to play with me. With a gruff "Yeah" we got the train and sat down on the floor and started playing.

I decided my role was, 1) to be there with him, and 2) to help extend his play whenever he became disinterested. So that was the way it worked. He played with my sitting on the floor beside him, periodically bringing another small article for him to use. He played quietly and thoughtfully, finding ways to use all of the things I occasionally supplied. He also enjoyed the one-on-one special time we had together in the safety of our drop-in center and the lack of confusion that surrounded our small space on the floor. Lack of safety and confusion are often results of traumatic experiences.

It's hard to tell how long we sat there playing, maybe 3/4 hour, I'm not sure. But eventually it was 8:00 pm, closing time. After we put the train, and other items, back on the shelves and I was thanking him for playing with me, he reached into his pocket and pulled out an unopened package of gum. As he thrust it toward me, he said, "Here".

My immediate verbal response was, "Oh, no. I can't take that. It's yours." He quickly said, while again pushing the package of gum in my direction, "Here, take it! I never had a friend before!"

We only served children whose families had in some way been affected by the recent events, but we never asked what they had experienced. So I don't know what had happened to that child, nor what he did when he left our center. I don't even remember his name. But for a few short moments, at least, he had a friend. He had someone who cared about him, unconditionally. And for a few short moments he could think about something else than whatever it was that had caused him distress from the tragic events that had happened, only a few short days before we met each other.

There is power in play

Children love to play. Whether I'm interacting with the children in the Republic of Moldova (Eastern Europe) whose parents have left the country to work; or Syrian, Palestinian, and Iraqi children who are living in dangerous refugee camps; or children in the Philippines who are stressed from a volcanic eruption or major typhoon; or refugee children in Jordan who enjoy my halting Arabic, or Egyptian children who play on the banks of the Nile River; or Turkish children who play in the dirt, or American children that play in a mud puddle after a hard rain, I love to

watch children play. Children find things to do to give them pleasure and often find companionship no matter where in the world they live.

So, yes, I believe there is power in play. And my friend, Beatrice, supports that belief. I'll never forget Beatrice, the daughter of my assistant in the Head Start class. Beatrice and her mother were immigrants from Ghana only a few short years before I met them. In that Head Start classroom one could count on Beatrice doing almost exactly what the children were told not to do...

If children were not to climb trees on a field trip - it was not long before Beatrice had found just the right tree to climb and was up on a branch before we noticed! If the rule was to walk in a particular area at the center, you could count on Beatrice running. If children were instructed not to **"do it", it seemed that "doing if" was** exactly what gave Beatrice the most pleasure.

Beatrice finished Head Start and went on to kindergarten, grade school, and beyond. I lost track of her. Years later I saw her mother at a gathering and after greeting each other, Mrs. Sampong asked me to wait right there, because she was going to find Bea. I made no mental connection with "Bea" and the young girl who had been in my Head Start classroom. After just a few moments, down the hallway, running toward me, rushed a tall, beautiful, well-dressed young woman.

When she reached me, she threw her arms around me and exclaimed, "Mrs. Cheal! how wonderful to see you!" or words to that effect. It was Beatrice. Beatrice, who had lived in a rather violent part of the city with few family resources, but who came every day to Head Start. The Beatrice who, in her exuberance for life, could hardly be contained. The Beatrice who seemed to love to break all the rules. The Beatrice who loved to play.

The young woman who was sharing my embrace had recently graduated from Harvard and had been hired to work in the television industry. She was well on her way to help make the world a better place and I believe her ability to play gave her some of the skills she used at Harvard and skills that will be used in whatever she finds in life.