

Example Family Play Therapy Activities

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PARENT-CHILD PLAY THERAPY APPROACHES

Filial play therapy and Theraplay® are our most well-researched and comprehensive forms of family play therapy that have been developed thus far. APT (2020) recognizes them both as “seminal theories”:

- Filial play therapy (Guernsey, Jr., 1964; Guernsey & Ryan, 2013; VanFleet, 2013) and Child-Parent Relationship Therapy (Landreth & Bratton, 2020)
- Theraplay® (Booth & Jernberg, 2010; Norris & Lender, 2020)

NON-DIRECTIVE FAMILY PLAY SESSION

Description: 20-30 minute session between two or more family members (the more family members that can participate, the better)

Materials: Playroom with a variety of toys and materials

Instructions: “Now you are going to have a special playtime as a family. This is another way for me to get to know your family. In here, you can play with the toys in a lot of the ways that you'd like. I'll let you know when you have 5 minutes left.”

Processing: What was that like for you all? What did you notice happened? What happened in here that is similar to what happens outside of here? What happened in here that is different than what normally occurs?

Benefits: This activity would be particularly beneficial as part of an intake/assessment process. This activity (1) provides the therapist with an opportunity to observe and to assess the nature and the quality of the family's interactions, (2) makes it more likely that presenting concerns will be elicited due to the presence of people who are familiar to the child, (3) is inclusive of very young family members.

FAMILY PLAY ASSESSMENT (FPA) (Fagot & Kavanagh, 1991)

Description: 15-20 minute session with the following components:

1. A decision process in which a shared activity is chosen [*Question to self*: What is the process of decision-making like in this family?]
2. 10 minutes of shared activity [*Question to self*: What are the interactions like between members, and what significance might there be in the content of their play?]
3. Clean up [*Question to self*: How do the parents do in providing structure? How do the children respond to the parental directive(s)?]

Materials: Playroom with a variety of toys and materials

Instructions: “Now I would like all of you to play together. This is another way for me to get to know your family. Try to relax and have fun. I would like you to first decide what you are going to play with together, and then you can start playing. I'll let you know when you have 5 minutes left. At that time, I would like you to ask the children to put all the toys away.”

FAMILY SANDTRAY THERAPY (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2017)

Description: "an expressive and projective mode of psychotherapy involving the unfolding and processing of intra- and inter-personal issues through the use of specific sandtray materials as a nonverbal medium of communication, led by the client or therapist and facilitated by a trained therapist" (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2017).

Materials: Sandtray(s) and a variety of miniatures (see Homeyer & Sweeney, 2017)

Instructions: Prompts can vary depending on therapeutic intent and developmental abilities:

- Show me what your family is like / Build your family's world
- Choose something that is most like each person in your family, including yourself. [optional] Choose something that shows what the relationships are like between people (Carey, 2010)
- Create a picture in the sand of the problems your family is facing
- Show me things you like about your family / your family's strengths / things your family values / what's kept you together as a family despite the problems you've faced
- Show me how things are going in the family / how you want them to be / what it will take to get things from where they are to where you want them to be
- Show me what a typical day in your family is like
- Show me how you are feeling towards your family / your family's feelings towards you
- Show me what you need from your family / what your family needs from you
- Show me what is easy for your family / show me what is hard for your family
- Choose things that would show the roles you tend to play in your family [would likely require a brief introduction to the concept of family roles]
- Choose things that would tell me about your family's rules [would likely require a brief introduction to the concept of family rules]

Benefits: Sandtray therapy with families is particularly beneficial because it (1) allows for multiple applications (it can be utilized multiple times within sessions or across sessions with only slight changes in prompts); (2) utilizes the power of imagery and symbolism; (3) because the images are already provided for the family, there may be less self-consciousness compared to family play therapy activities that require more creative efforts; and (4) is more regularly used with clients across the lifespan so it may seem less "childish" to older family members.

FAMILY DRAWING (Bratton, 2009a)

Materials: A large sheet of butcher paper (roughly 3 feet x 5 feet depending on size of family, taped to the wall at a height where all members can reach) and coloring utensils

Instructions: Prompts can vary depending on therapeutic intent and developmental abilities:

- Draw everyone in your family doing something
- Draw a picture that would help me get to know your family
- Draw why you think you're here
- Draw what you want for your family
- Draw your family 5, 10, 20 years into the future
- Draw the worst/best time ever for your family
- Draw the greatest challenge your family has faced
- Draw a timeline of your family's "ups and downs"
- Draw your family as animals
- Draw a family crest that includes symbols important to your family
- See additional example prompts from family sandtray therapy

Processing: See example processing for family sandtray therapy

FAMILY SCRIBBLE (Gil, 2015)

Materials: Large pieces of drawing/easel paper and coloring utensils

Step 1 Instructions: “Everyone take one piece of paper and a color. Now, I want everyone to take their color in their hand and practice making large scribbles in the air. Now that you have that movement down, I want you to find your paper, close your eyes, and make a large scribble on your piece of paper.”

Step 2 Instructions: “Now, you, as a family, are going to choose one scribble drawing to make into a picture of something – you can add colors, lines, shapes, etc. to turn the scribble into a picture. So, look at everyone’s scribble drawing. Feel free to turn the paper around in different directions to help see if something comes to mind. After you’ve chosen one scribble as a family, you can start working on completing the picture together.”

FAMILY CLAY SCULPTING (Bratton, 2009b)

Materials: Cut each family member a block of clay (approx. 4” square), Play-Doh®, or Model Magic®

Step 1 Instructions: [allow them to play with clay while you check in with the family and then provide the instructions] “Think of an animal you identify with or that you are most like or best symbolizes you... then make that animal out of your lump of clay—it doesn’t have to be a real animal, or it can be part real and part imaginary.”

Processing: Have each member “tell about” their animal and why they chose that animal. Possible questions:

- What is your animal really good at?
- What does it have a hard time doing?
- How does your animal get along with other animals?
- How does your animal take care of itself?
- What kind of things does your animal like to do?
- What does your animal need that it doesn't have?

Step 2 Instructions: Provide access to a variety of art and craft materials. A large piece of paper or box can serve as the base for the environment. “I’d like you to work on creating an environment for your animals to live in together. You can use any of these materials to work together on your environment. Make sure everyone has a place in the environment where you will feel comfortable. When you are through creating the environment, each person place your animal in your favorite part: the place where you would be the most comfortable.”

Possible questions:

- Tell me about your environment.
- Tell me about where your animal is.
- What is the best part about “your spot”?
- What else does your animal need in here that it doesn't have?
- If you could change something about the environment, what would it be?

HURT HEARTS & HEALING HANDS (Bidwell & Garratt, 2010)

Materials: One large piece of butcher paper or poster board, one extra large piece of construction paper, multiple colors of 9 x 12 construction paper, scissors, glue, coloring utensils

Step 1 Instructions: "I want each of you to choose a color of construction paper. Then, I want you to cut out as large of a 'heart' as you can from your piece of paper. Divide your heart into four sections and respond to the following as you think about what brought you here as a family:

1. What scares you?
2. What angers you?
3. What saddens you?
4. What worries you?

Processing: Have each family member share her/his individual heart with the family, allowing time for discussion.

- What was it like to share your hurt heart with each other?
- What similarities/differences did you notice about your hurt hearts?
- How has sharing your feelings been helpful?

Step 2 Instructions: "Now, I want someone from your family to cut out a big heart from this large piece of construction paper. This will be your family's heart. Then, you will divide this heart into 4 sections. Each family member chooses one hurt from each section of their individual heart to write in the family's heart. Then, you will glue your family's heart in the center of the poster board and glue your individual hearts around it."

Step 3 Instructions: "Now, I want each of you to choose two more sheets of construction paper and trace your left and right hands. On your right hand, write 5 things you need from your family to heal your hurts. On your left hand, write 5 things you need to give to the family to help heal the family's hurts."

Processing: Have family members share what they have written.

- What can others in your family do to help you with your hurts?
- What can you do for your family to help them with their hurts?
- How will you feel once you have received help and support from your family?

Step 4 Instructions: "Now, I want you to glue your hands around your family's heart."

SEED PACKETS (Darley & Heath, 2008)

Materials: Large envelopes or large pieces of paper for each member of the family and coloring utensils. It can also be helpful to have an actual seed packet or a picture of the front and back of a seed packet as a visual aid when giving instructions.

Step 1 Instructions: Ask family members to imagine themselves as a flower – one that the world has never seen. What would they look like? What colors would they be? What shapes would they be? What would their petals look like? What would their stems and leaves look like? What size would they be? Is the flower delicate or strong? Is the flower more open or closed? Invite family members to draw their flower on one side of the envelope or paper.

Step 2 Instructions: Next, you can show family members an example seed packet where there are usually directions and instructions for how to care for the plant on the back. Ask family members to think about what kinds of conditions their flower needs in order to grow and to be healthy. Where does the flower need to be planted? What kind of care does their flower need? Invite the family to draw or write instructions for the flower's care on the back of their envelope or paper.

Processing: Invite each family member to share about their flower, what their flower is like, and what their flower needs in order to grow and to be healthy. Use therapeutic judgment to decide whether and

when to invite family members to make more direct associations between themselves and what they say about their flower if they do not naturally do so on their own.

WHAT IS MY ROLE IN THE FAMILY? (Venitucci & Gershoni, 2010)

Materials: Paper, black marker, the following roles written/typed one per page: The Scapegoat, the Dominator, The Nurturer, The King of the House, The Pleaser, The Goofball, The Entertainer, The Money Maker, The Housekeeper, The Worrier, The Planner, The Organizer, The Diva, The Baby Bear, The Positive Thinker, The Negative Nelly, The Hater, The Lover, The Secret Keeper, The Excuse Maker, The Quiet One, The Talker, The Mystery, The Wizard, The Mediator, The Ignorer, The Ignored, The Boss, The Fairy Princess, The Observer, etc.

- Spread the sheets of paper out on the floor.
- You can also include blank sheets of paper for family members to write other roles.

Step 1 Instructions: *"Today, we are going to play a game that will help you identify the roles that you play in the family. As you can see, there are a lot of papers on the floor with different titles on them. Now, I would like each of you to choose 2-3 titles that you feel describes the roles that you play in your family. For example, let's pretend that in Sally's family, both her older brother and younger sister come to her when they have a problem, but they ask her not to tell anyone else or they will get mad at her. Her first choice might be The Secret Keeper. At the same time, she might also be one in the family that is always performing and telling funny stories, so her second choice might be The Entertainer or The Goofball. She might also feel like she gets blamed for everything when things go wrong, so her third choice might be The Scapegoat."*

Step 2 Instructions: After family members have chosen their roles, say, *"Now, I am going to read a question, and I want you to hold up the sign that represents the best answer for you..."*

- Which role are you good at? Which role do you struggle with?
- Which role feels good to you? Which role hurts?
- Which role gets you the most attention?
- Which role do you think is the easiest? Which role do you think is the hardest?
- Which role would you like to give away?
- Which role do you want to improve on?
- Which role makes you feel [angry, sad, anxious, lonely, tired, mean, happy]?

Processing: What did you learn about the roles played by each person in your family? How do you wish things were different at home? What do you like about the roles played by each person in your family? Which role would you like to try for a day? What is one thing you could do to change the role you play in the family? Who could you ask to help you with your role? Who do you want to thank for the role they play?

BEACH BALL GAME (Post Sprunk, 2010)

Materials: Need beach ball with 6 colors

Directions: Have family sit in circle and toss ball to each other. Note which color the person's [right] thumb is on at moment of catch. Therapist reads question corresponding to color:

- Red: My family likes to...My family is proud of me when...I feel bad if my family...I let someone in my family make me feel...I wish my family...
- Yellow: Something funny that happened in my family was when...Someone in my family gets angry when...I feel disappointed when...I hate it when...When a person is sad, he/she should...

- Blue: I love to give...Once someone helped me...When something is hard for me I...I don't like to...I would hate to lose...
- Green: I just love to...I'm the kind of person...My parent(s) thinks I...If someone loves you, they...At home I really like...
- Orange: My happiest memory with my family is...I need...I feel hurt when...I would not like to have...I'm expected to...
- White: I like the way...Something I appreciate about my family is...I'm sad when...I get angry when...My parent(s) and I like to...

FAMILY AQUARIUM (Gil, 2015)

Materials: poster board (can choose blue to represent water – also can use white & let client[s] choose color of the “environment”), various color cardstock or construction paper, markers, crayons, glitter, sequins, feathers, other decorative material, glue, scissors

Directions: Each family member creates a fish (no restrictions on type of fish or size). Decorate & cut out, and set aside fish. Family creates an aquarium – or, “fish home”. This can be an aquarium, ocean, river, lake, etc. May provide a prompt: “Put in everything this family of fish needs”. Then – family members place their fish (sometimes they will chose another kind of sea creature) wherever/however they choose into this environment.

Processing: Wonder what it's like to live here....Wonder if these fish [or – your fish] need anything else to live here...Wonder what these fish [or – your fish] might be saying to other fish...

FAMILY PUPPET INTERVIEW (Irwin & Malloy, 1994)

Ask each member to define the problem (typically, one member will be defined as the problem).

Instructions: *“The purpose of our meeting is to get to know you as a family. One way to become better acquainted is to ask you to do something together. Sometimes, it is difficult at first, especially for kids, to feel comfortable talking about problems and feelings. We have found that this is made easier when parents and children join together in an activity. I am going to ask you as a family to play together for a while. Here is a basket of puppets. Take a few minutes to look through them and choose a few that interest you.”*

- Spread out puppets on the floor and encourage family members to get out of their chairs and look through the puppets.
- Ask each family member to introduce their puppets by giving them names and making a statement or two about each one. This can help warm up the family to the activity while also providing an opportunity to see if there is any meaning to what the family members selected.

Additional Instructions: *“Now I would like you to work together to make up a story with a beginning, middle, and end using these puppets. It is important that this be a made-up story, not one you have seen or read.”*

- After the family has their story roughly planned, have the family members introduce each puppet character and then encourage them to begin showing their story (if reluctant, cue them: “Let's see what happens in the opening scene of the story” etc.)
- Encourage family members, if need be, to show the story using the puppets as opposed to narrating the story.
- Often times, the story will come to a natural ending; however, if the story becomes stuck, the therapist can collaborate with the family to come to an ending or explore alternative endings that family members might prefer.

Processing: The therapist can first process the story/interactions of the family by directing questions at the puppets themselves. Later, family members can be asked questions like:

- What would the title of this story be?
- What might be learned from the story?
- The character each would most like to be? Least like to be?
- Ways in which the story is representative of their family?

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