

Elementary School Counselors' Perceptions of the Utility of Play Therapy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Play is fundamental to the optimal growth and development of children. Utilizing play therapy with children who require mental health intervention is of significant benefit to the child, as it allows them to express their needs through play, their first language. School counselors who work with elementary-aged students may find play therapy to be a beneficial component of their counseling program. However, little is known about the use of play therapy by elementary school counselors, the training they have received in play therapy, or whether they perceive it as a useful intervention with their students.

This study aimed to learn about elementary school counselors' perceptions of play therapy utility and if providing information about play therapy changed these perceptions. Participants were a sample of practicing elementary school counselors in the United States who answered questions about the utility of play therapy both before and after receiving information about play therapy. Overall, participants found play therapy to be useful even before receiving information about it. Results indicated a statistically significant increase in the rating of play therapy utility after viewing a brief informational video.

INTRODUCTION

Play is integral to the overall development of a child, a child's first natural medium of communication, and the most developmentally appropriate way for a child to communicate (Landreth, 2012). Because of this, the mental health needs of children are best served by providing children with a therapeutic intervention that is sensitive to and considerate of their developmental level. Play therapy is to children what counseling is to adults. Instead of relying on verbalizing their experiences, children utilize play within the context of a safe therapeutic environment. This allows for the processing of their inner experiences and feelings in the way that is most natural for them while experiencing full acceptance, empathy, and understanding.

School counselors are in a unique position to support the mental health needs of their student population. They are charged with implementing comprehensive school counseling programs that maximize student success and promote equity and access for all students (American School Counselor Association, n.d.). Additionally, there is existing research indicating that play therapy is effective in both addressing a wide array of mental and behavioral needs and supporting academic achievement in children. Moreover, in some geographical locations, school counselors may be the only mental health professional who students and their families can access. Because of this, it is imperative that school counselors are prepared with quality, short-term, and developmentally appropriate interventions for the students with whom they work.

Most school counselor preparation programs do not offer any coursework in play therapy. Without exposing school counselors to information about or training in play therapy, they may not have the opportunity to develop a skillset that will best serve their students. This study provided insight into the perceptions elementary school counselors have about play therapy and its utility, which may have implications on how school counselors are trained in the future.

METHODS

A survey known as the Play Therapy Utility Instrument (Hindman et al., 2022) was used to measure elementary school counselors' beliefs about the efficacy of play therapy in facilitating mental wellness and health in children. This survey is a 14-item self-report questionnaire that measures respondents' perceptions of the situations in which play therapy can be used to facilitate growth (i.e., "Play therapy is useful to learn social skills") and attitudes regarding the developmental appropriateness of play therapy for children (i.e., "Play is a child's natural way to communicate").

The survey was taken by 191 practicing elementary school counselors in the United States who held a master's degree or higher in school counseling or a related mental health field. Participants accessed and completed the survey online. Survey respondents answered questions about their perceptions of the utility of play therapy, watched a 1:25 minute informational video about play therapy, then answered the questions from the Play Therapy Utility Instrument again.

This study aimed to answer the following questions:

- What is the initial perception of play therapy by elementary school counselors?
- Does this initial perception vary based on three background variables: community classification, Title I status, and training in play therapy?
- Does exposure to information about play therapy significantly change elementary school counselors' perceived utility of play therapy services?
- If there is a change in perception, does this vary based on three background variables: community classification, Title I status, and training in play therapy?

Findings from this study provided several important insights:

First, although only just over half (52.9%) of survey respondents reported having any kind of prior training in play therapy, the data from this study suggested that all the elementary school counselor respondents viewed play therapy as useful, even before receiving any information about it. This may be due to elementary school counselors already having an understanding about the developmental norms of the age group with which they work, as most professionals who work with young children seem to hold the belief that play is valuable for children. This could also be because a school counselor who has no training in play therapy may know a play therapist as part of their professional network of peers, which could positively influence their perceptions of or knowledge about play therapy.

Next, these initial perceptions of play therapy were not impacted based on the kind of community where the school counselor worked (urban, suburban, or rural) or whether the building the counselor worked in qualified for Title I federal funding related to a population of low-income students. They were impacted, however, based on whether the respondent had reported prior training in play therapy or not. While there may be a perception that those who work in communities with a greater number of available mental health providers or in towns where a university or other organization has a play therapy training program may have a more favorable view of play therapy, the results of this study do not support that

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assumption. However, the significant differences in the perception of play therapy utility between respondents who have received play therapy training and respondents who have not makes logical sense. It was reasonable to assume that individuals who had prior training in play therapy would have a more favorable view of it.

Finally, overall perceptions in the utility of play therapy did significantly change after viewing an informational video. This significant change was detected after participants viewed a very brief informational video about play therapy. This seems to suggest that a very brief, basic illustration and explanation of play therapy can positively influence a person's view of it. However, similar to the results of the initial perceptions, the change in perception was not impacted based on community classification or Title I funding status, but changed based on their status of play therapy training.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings from this study, in conjunction with the large number of respondents despite the study's rather restrictive inclusion criteria, suggests that play therapy may be an important or interesting topic to school counselors. It is noteworthy that there were statistically significant differences detected between overall scores with a population that already has a robust understanding of mental health and a favorable view of play therapy. Elementary school counselors have the potential to help lay a strong social and emotional foundation for the students with whom they work. Understanding how elementary school counselors perceive the utility of play therapy and the factors that may or may not contribute to those perceptions provides valuable information for possible future research and practice.

RESEARCHER RECOMMENDATIONS

Counselor educators may want to consider how this study's data relates to the way counselors are trained in counselor preparation programs. While no one graduate program can prepare a pre-service counselor for everything they will encounter during their career, it could be beneficial to consider the provision of foundational coursework in play therapy as part of a master's-level counseling or school counseling program. This could provide an integration of instruction in developmental theory and skills practice in a format that allows the learning of play therapy skills and techniques, an effective intervention for children.

Additionally, the data from this study seem to suggest that elementary school counselors are an untapped population that is ripe for training and supervision in play therapy but may be experiencing some barriers to pursuing it. The elementary school counselors who participated in this study already saw play therapy as valuable, but only a little over half had any kind of prior training in it, and far less – under 9% – had pursued the extensive training and supervision necessary to hold an active play therapy credential. These numbers in conjunction with the high regard the participants had for play therapy seem to suggest a disconnect between attitudes towards and training in play therapy among elementary school counselors.

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CONTACT INFORMATION

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