



# THE POWER OF PARENTS IN PLAY THERAPY

(2019) Clair Mellenthin



# Clair Mellenthin, LCSW, RPT-S

- Director of Child and Adolescent Services-Wasatch Family Therapy
- Salt Lake City, UT
- (801) 944-4555
- Email: [clair@clairmellenthin.com](mailto:clair@clairmellenthin.com)
- Follow Me ☺
- [www.clairmellenthin.com](http://www.clairmellenthin.com)
- <https://twitter.com/ClairMellenthin>
- [https://www.linkedin.com/profile/view?id=58690221&trk=nav\\_responsive\\_tab\\_profile\\_pic](https://www.linkedin.com/profile/view?id=58690221&trk=nav_responsive_tab_profile_pic)
- <https://www.facebook.com/clair.mellenthinlcsw>

# Attachment Centered Play Therapy Defined

- An integrative, prescriptive play therapy model that blends the original and current theories of attachment theory with the power of play therapy to create a holistic, systemic, approach to working with children and families.
- Allows the clinician to view the child within the framework of the family system

- Inviting the parents into the child's therapeutic journey is a critical aspect of ACPT. By maximizing the parent's role as the attachment figure and teaching the parent skills of play, nurture, unconditional positive regard, and crucial tenets of child development through the play therapy process we can begin repairing and strengthening the attachment system.
- If we invite from the beginning of treatment, we not only offer the parent a chance to be seen, safe, soothed, and experience felt security through the therapeutic process, but give the child-parent relationship a chance to heal together and progress together in a fluid process.

# Goals of Attachment-Centered Play Therapy

- First assess the attachment *needs* of the family

- Does the family need to

SEPARATE AND INDIVIDUATE = ENMESHED

OR

- Does the family need to

COME TOGETHER AND GROW CLOSER =  
AVOIDANT/WITHDRAWN

- Second goal is to identify the attachment wound or “rupture”
- Third goal aims to strengthen or repair parent-child attachment bonds and improve family communication.
- As the normative secure base is restored, parents become a resource to help the child cope with stress, experience competency, and explore autonomy.

# What is blocking YOU from inviting parents in?

- Turn to your neighbor and explore how you invite parents into play therapy or if you don't, why not?
- List three roadblocks you may have



- What we know is that our roadblocks are really a manifestation of our transference and countertransference that arises in our relationships with our clients
- As Dan Siegel says, “Name it to tame it”
- We have to be aware *of our own* attachment styles



# Create Your Roadblocks collage

- Choose different symbols to represent the roadblocks you have discovered in your practice
- Fold your cardstock in half lengthwise and then fold the ends 1/2 inch to make a stand up teepee.
- Collage left side of the cardstock representing your roadblocks
- On the right side, collage how you can bridge/overcome/bypass your roadblocks
- Glue flaps to the middle of your folder

# Why Parents Matter



(2019) Clair Mellenthin

- Parents are the **ONLY** ones who can create lasting change in the family system
- Kids **NEED** their parents to participate in their healing journey
- Parents are **AFRAID** we will judge, ridicule, shame, laugh at their parenting flaws and techniques

# Often, by the time a parent seeks out counseling, they feel...

- GUILT
- SHAME
- ANGER
- OVERWHELMED
- BURNT OUT
- ASHAMED
- DISCOURAGED
- FRUSTRATED
- HELPLESS
- SCARED





# Shame

- **Shame definition** – The intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging. (Brown, 2012)
- We have a visceral reaction to shame – we shrink.
- Shame grows with secrecy, silence, and judgment. If doused with empathy, shame can't grow.
- Empathy is the antidote to shame.
- Shame is a universal affect.

- We have to understand the **RELATIONSHIP** dynamics at play to understand the **PARENT'S ENGAGEMENT** or lack of engagement in the therapeutic process.
- To understand the relationship dynamics we have to understand **ATTACHMENT PATTERNS**
- Humans do not fit into neat little categories- attachment is fluid and unique to each relationship

# Attachment needs:

- Physical touch
- Emotional closeness
- Acceptance
- Unconditional love
- Safety
- Security
- Play



# Effects of Attachment Wounds on Children

- Belief that the world is not safe- my parent's can't protect me
- Develop unhealthy coping skills to defend against vulnerability; fear of the unknown
- Most children's behavioral symptoms manifest their need to be in control





# What Can We Do As Therapists?

## For Parents:

- Build Rapport
- Make “room” on our treatment teams
- Spend time getting to know the parent as an individual
- Establish boundaries and set expectations
- Encourage participation

## For Us:

- Take a deep breath and get out of our comfort zone
- Invite parents to be a part of your therapy sessions
- Meet with Parents **independent** of the child
- Seek out training in Attachment Theory and Concepts

# First Sessions

- When possible, meet with the parent(s) independently of the child on the first session
- Review *parent's* concerns and worries
- Obtain consent for treatment from BOTH parents if divorced
- Review Family Relationship Developmental Questionnaire (Mellenthin, 2019)

# Family Relationship Development Questionnaire

- 1. Please describe your childhood (give specific memories)
- 2. What kind of baby were you? What are family stories about you as a baby?
- \*\*\*Please give concrete/specific examples of each adjective in the next three questions:
- 3. What are five adjectives that would best describe your mom?
- 4. What are five adjectives that would describe your dad?
- 5. What are five adjectives that would describe your child/spouse/self?

- 6. Who are the significant people who took care of you as a child? (Attachment figures)
- 7. Describe separations and reunions with these important figures? (Give specific examples of memories of you as a child)
- 8. What would happen when you were sick or hurt?
- 9. Describe your favorite birthday.
- 10. Describe your parent's relationship.
- 11. Describe your current marital/friends relationship.
- 12. Describe your relationship with your child/mom/dad.



- 13. Describe memories of the following developmental milestones:

- crawling
- walking
- smiling
- tantrums
- training

- eating
- family losses
- illness
- child care
- family births
- sleeping
- school

# Inviting the Parent into the Play Process

It is important to evaluate if both the child and parent are ready to begin parent-child work

Helping the parent to become a resource to the child is critical in establishing healing and safety within their relationship

It is okay to be flexible and adaptable to the attachment needs of the family

- How we INVITE makes all the difference in how it will be received by the parent.
- We have to feel confident in extending the invitation to parents
- We need to be able to articulate why parents need to come into play therapy as participants

# Engagement Strategies

- Playful engagement strategies are useful in creating rapport with parents and helping them to feel comfortable in the play therapy process.
- Demonstrating for parents and inviting them to play can lessen their fear and worry about looking foolish or feeling uncomfortable

# Family Genogram

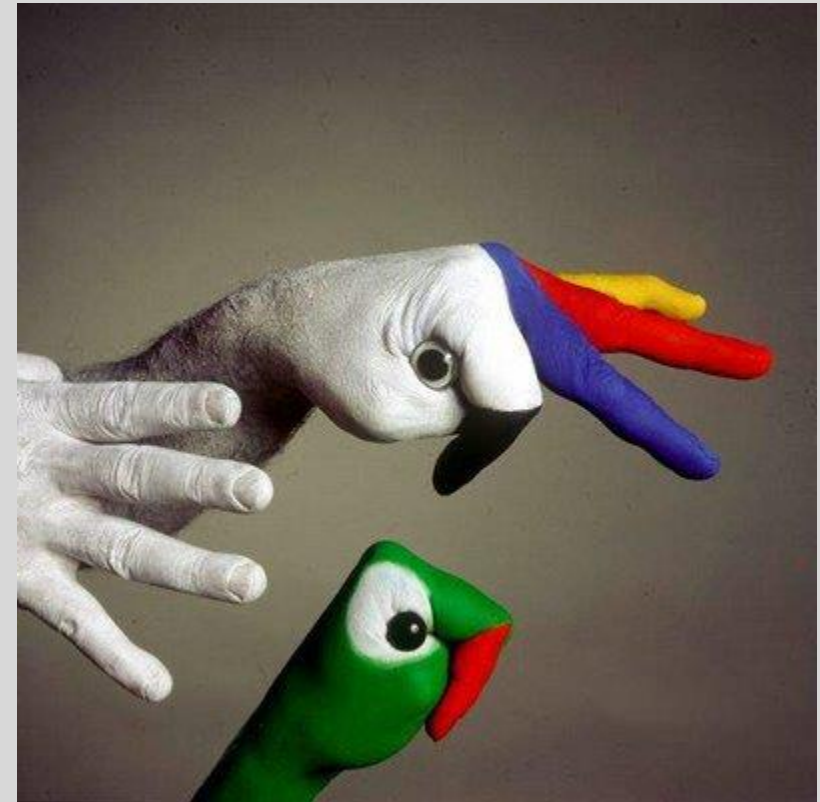


(2019) Clair Mellenthin

# Attachment Patterns Puppet Assessment

- Directions:
- #1 Ask each family member to create a puppet show around an activity that they feel is important to the family (Based upon Nims & Duba, 2011)
- #2 Ask each family member to create a puppet show demonstrating a problem or worry they have about their family





# Supplies Needed:

- Variety of puppets
- Make Your Own!
  - Socks, brown paper bags, finger paints

\*\* An important aspect of your attachment assessment will be dependent upon how intimate of an experience you choose to create\*\*

\*For example, painting hands into puppets can create high levels of intimacy which may be too vulnerable for avoidant/disorganized attachment systems

- Videotape each puppet show – parent/s and child and view together in the next play therapy session
- Assessment questions for therapist:
  - WHO is involved and engaged in this “game”?
  - WHAT is the family posturing and nonverbal communication?
  - WHERE are the family members in the puppet show?
  - IS anyone missing?
  - WHAT triangles are present within the family system?
  - WHAT is the overall attachment patterns within the system and subsystem?

# Aannnddd....Action!

- *You will need 1 smart phone or tablet for this activity*
- Get into groups of 5-6
- Choose 1 person to be the director, 1 to be the videographer, 2 to be parents/child, 1 to be therapist (you will rotate so each person has a turn to be each position)
- Film role play inviting the parents into the play therapy session and engaging in play therapy with parent and child.
- Watch video together and discuss what went right and what you would like to change
- Switch roles until everyone in the group has had a turn to be director



# Empowerment Collage

- Choose out words/pictures of encouragement, empowerment, etc
- Set goal to begin including parents in your regular play therapy practice
- Glue on the right side of your book

# Bibliography/Resources

- Baggerly, J; Bratton, S. Building a firm foundation in play therapy research: Response to Phillips (2010). *International Journal of Play Therapy*, Vol 19(1), Jan 2010, 26-38.
- Bowlby, J (1979). *The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds*. London: The Tavistock Institute
- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment*. London: The Tavistock Institute.
- Bowlby, J. (1988). *A secure base: Parent-child attachment and healthy human development*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bowlby, J, Ainsworth, M., Boston, M., & Rosenbluth, D. (1956), The effects of mother-child separation: A follow-up study. *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 29, 2 11-247
- Bratton, S., Ray, D., Rhine, T., & Jones, L. (2005). The efficacy of play therapy with children: A Meta-analytic review of the outcome research. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 36(4), 376-390



- Goodman, G. (2009). The impact of parent, child, and therapist mental representations on attachment-based intervention with prepubertal children. *Clinical Social Work Journal* vol 38. pp 73-84
- Johnson, S. (2004). *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy*. New York: Brunner-Routledge.
- Mellenthin, C. (2019). *Attachment Centered Play Therapy*. New York, NY: Routledge
- SAMHSA'S National Registry of Evidence-based Practices : Attachment-based Family Therapy  
[www.nrepp.samhsa.gov](http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov)
- Seigel, D & Bryson, T. (2012). *The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind*.
- Vanfleet, R., Ryan, S.D., & Smith, S.K. Filial Therapy: A critical review. In Reddy, L.A., Files-Hall, T.M., & Schaefer, C.E. *Empirically Based Play Interventions For Children*. American Psychological Association: Washington DC