

KAREN STAGNITTI AND RODNEY COOPER (Eds.)

## ***Play as Therapy: Assessment and Therapeutic Interventions***

Jessica Kingsley, London, 2009, 240 pages

**Sally Young**

This is an edited book of papers on play by a number of prominent paediatric occupational therapists. I found it fascinating to read as its orientation both conflicts, overlaps, and from a different viewpoint, sometimes confirms an object relations view of play. Of course this is not a bad thing and may be a source of enriching two different ways of seeing things.

There is an emphasis on the functionality of play and its importance in the developmental assessment of cognitive and motor skills. The emphasis I appreciate is often part of the occupational therapist's task in health care settings: to assess developmental deficits and achievements. However, it also reminded me of Anna Freud's emphasis on the importance of play in mastery. It made me wonder how the concept of developmental lines can be made use of in developmental child assessments. An interesting paper by Lautamo on play in a social setting emphasizes that play is never just doing, it is 'doing with', and that even solitary play has 'an other' in mind. This of course is object relations redescribed.

In these play assessments there is an emphasis on the capacity to develop a coherent narrative in the play. The link with attachment capacity is made with this in mind. It seemed to me that the developments in knowledge from attachment theory were helping put the heart back into developmental play assessments.

However I was struck by an idea present in a number of papers that if play is not symbolic, in the sense of being representational, then there may be a play dysfunction, implying a developmental deficit. I am concerned that the inference here is that play is not meaningful, as an emotional communication. It made me think of

Winnicott's distinction between privation and deprivation. That if a child's play is chaotic and hard to make sense of, it can be both a communication of a chaotic internal world and relationship experiences, and/or can be an outcome of not having enough of the experience of learning how to play with another.

This book draws attention to the important dilemma of what is developmental delay and what is anxiety or trauma in children's play and thoughts. It teases out the differences and overlaps here.

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There is an interesting paper by Drewes on cultural considerations in play. Culturally it raises issues about the increase in electronic computer games. Do they lock children into a parallel play universe? Equally some writers observe that the capacity to play with others may be dependant on a capacity to appreciate that the other has a mind, and that this capacity for mentalization may be enriched by pretend play in which a child can step into the other's shoes. Stagnitti's interesting chapter on pretend play in children suggests the use of a cubby house—a sheet draped over two chairs—to provide a frame and containment for the play. It also brought to mind the idea of a curtained but contained stage that in some way might facilitate a sense of being able to pretend.

The lack of any historic reference to Klein is of concern. Winnicott is mentioned, but incorrectly—although perhaps understandably—he is described as a child psychiatrist. Erickson, however, is mentioned, partly in reference to his developmental orientation, which reflects more the spirit of the book.

I return to the title, *Play as Therapy* and I think that in my original reading I misread its implications. The emphasis in the book is more that the capacity to play is therapeutic developmentally for children rather than that play is a therapeutic modality. Ironically Cooper's last chapter is on play-focused therapy, which leaves the reader with a sense: there is more to hear from these authors.

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