

MORE THAN FUN AND GAMES

Play therapy helps young children cope better with life issues

BY KAREN MARLEY

Erin Hassall gets to play on the job. A lot.

Hassall, the services manager for the Family Support Center in Spencerport Central School District, is a licensed marriage and family therapist and registered play therapist.

Children see Hassall at the Family Support Center for a number of reasons — academic or behavioral issues, depression, anxiety, impulsivity, difficulties with family relationships, grief, self-harm or adjusting to changing family dynamics. These are serious issues that may not seem to merit the levity of playtime, but play, done in a certain way, is exactly what these children need.

ABOUT THE CENTER

Spencerport's Family Support Center is a no-fee, short-term counseling service available to all families with children in kindergarten through 12th grade who live in the Spencerport district. This includes students who are home-schooled or attend a private school within or outside the district.

Children are referred to the Center through a variety of ways. It might be a teacher, pediatrician,



school counselor or psychologist who suggests parents connect to the Center, which works with approximately 200 families each year to identify, access and coordinate the network of services

available within the community that can help a child.

SPEAKING 'PLAY'

When Hassall started at the Center 10

years ago, she was one of two counselors who provided short- and long-term counseling and relied primarily on talk therapy. That method works for junior high and high school students who are

Play therapy is an evidence-based practice designed to help a child build a greater sense of self.

older, but elementary children are different. Hassall recalls an early encounter that permanently changed how she interacted with younger children.

"I was trying to do talk therapy with a kindergartner, but he just wanted to play," she says. "It was my first year working with elementary students and I felt ill-equipped."

It's been recognized that elementary students lack the vocabulary and maturity to verbally articulate what's bothering them. At these ages, children use play to express any difficulties they are facing.

Hassall saw only one solution: Become a registered play therapist. Getting the title required hours of dedication. She had to attend numerous college classes, participate in multiple workshops and hire a supervisor to oversee her play therapy hours.

THERAPEUTIC

Play therapy is an evidence-based practice that helps a child build a greater sense of self. When engaged in play therapy, a child uses his or her entire self — mind and body — to express unconscious fears, thoughts, wishes and feelings.

"Play is natural self-expression and allows kids to play out their difficulties," Hassall explains. "A child's first language is through play. My training lets me interpret play to understand at a deeper level what is going on with that child. Whatever is stuck inside them, they will play it out."

PLAY BY THE RULES

There are two forms of play therapy that Hassall uses with children: directive and child-centered.

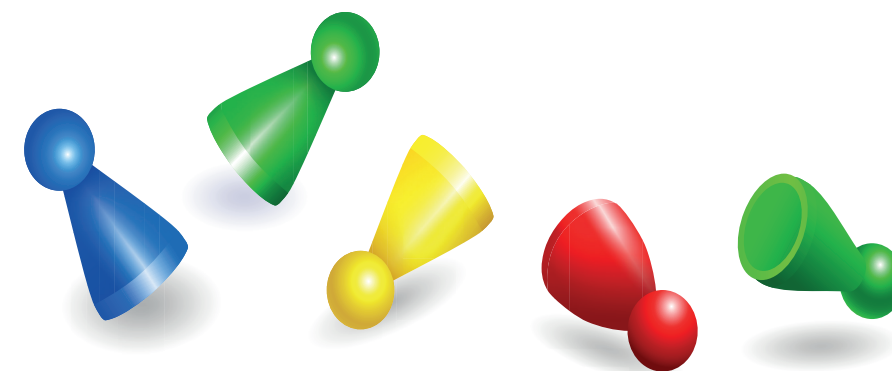
Directive play therapy is used for short-term therapy sessions, and involves the therapist directing the child what to do. Toys and games are used to connect the therapist to thoughts, feelings and behaviors, and the games serve several purposes.

"Don't Break the Ice" is a figurative and literal icebreaker. Plastic ice cubes have colored stickers on the bottom. Each color corresponds to a question like "What do you like?" "What don't you like?" or "What do you wish was different?" As the players break the board apart and dislodge ice cubes, they look at the sticker and its corresponding question. Children respond more openly to questions from the game as opposed to being directly asked from the therapist.

Another game, "Don't Bug Me," helps Hassall understand what is bothering a child. Hassall takes a pile of plastic bugs and with the child assigns each bug a worry or problem. Bugs are distributed through the office. Using a fly swatter, Hassall and the child go after each bug talking about different strategies on how to swat it.

"We practice strategies for real life and talk about what's bugging them," Hassall says. "The game usually generates lots of laughter and weird sounds."

Child-centered play therapy is a more intensive, long-term mode of therapy. As the name implies, the child is free to play however he or she wants. Thanks to a 2015 grant from Ronald McDonald House Charities of Rochester, Hassall was given a mobile play kit, a cart on wheels filled with a massive assort-





Erin Hassall, services manager for the Family Support Center in Spenerport entral School District, is a registered play therapist. Hassall brings her mobile play kit for child-centered play therapy sessions at Spencerport CSD's elementary schools.

and crafts, kitchen accessories, vehicles, dolls, play-dough, blocks and more. She brings her cart to the school and conducts the 30-minute sessions during school hours.

Hassall begins each session with the same phrase: "In here you can do almost anything. If there is something you can't do, I will let you know."

From this point, the child invites Hassall into his or her world of play. If a child gets stuck, Hassall will say things like, "You're not sure what to expect in here, or with me," "You're really frustrated" or "You're working really, really hard."

Hassall does not try to influence or make suggestions. She is simply there to observe, comment, and if a child requests, to play.

Hassall calls the child's parents, whether together or divorced, after each session. She may also connect with other participants in a child's network such as pediatricians or community-based program leaders.

It takes at least 10 to 15 sessions before parents or teachers will see some changes in behavior outside of the therapy room. Hassall emphasizes the parents must be committed to the weekly discussions.

Due to budget cuts eight years ago, Hassall is the only service provider in the Center and is limited on how many children can utilize the longer-term, child-centered play therapy. She can currently accommodate a maximum of five children each year for child-centered

play therapy. Directive play therapy sessions are limited to six meetings.

PLAY IS FOR EVERYONE

Hassall believes every child would benefit from more play.

"We have a new generation of kids coming into the school system who are struggling with self-management, self-regulation and social skills," she says. "Play develops these skills. Kids need to play."

Hassall feels absolutely blessed to do what she does. The kindergartner who sparked her initial interest in play therapy is now in high school.

"I wish every district had this program," she says. "It's a wonderful avenue to help with healing."