

Play Therapy and the Hospitalised Child: Influence of Normative, Therapeutic and Educative Play in Reducing Emotional Distress

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to investigate whether play therapy reduces emotional distress for the hospitalised child. Three forms of play; normative, therapeutic and educative play were compared with a control group. Additional factors such as age of child, coping style – sensitisers and repressors and parental anxiety were also included. A range of measures were used to assess the emotional distress for both children and parents involved in the study. The children's measures include the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory for Children (STAIC), "My Play Book" and the Perception of Play Interview: "My Play Today" whilst the single measure used for the parents was the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI).

Children who participated in all three forms of play showed lower levels of emotional distress than children in the control group. The process of play was also found to increase positive affect where the emotions children reported feeling at the end of their play session were generally more positive than at the beginning of their play session. This pattern was also reflected in the intensity of the reported emotions. The study also gave further insight into children's play experiences in the different types of play, demonstrating that children were aware of the characteristics of their play experience and could correctly identify who was directing the play activities (i.e. themselves or the play facilitator). There was no significant difference in outcomes associated with the child's age, coping style and parental anxiety on the child's emotional distress.

The findings of this study support the need for play therapy with hospitalised children. The use of play therapy has the potential to maximise positive outcomes for children by helping to lower emotional distress levels that the child may be experiencing. Therapeutic Play is designed to present children with hospital related objects [e.g. syringes, bandages, stethoscopes] which are used to stimulate role playing providing opportunities for emotional release.

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