



School Counselors

Using Play and the School Based-Registered Play Therapist™ Credential

A Collection of Play Interventions for School Counselors

For more information visit a4pt.org

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PLAY VS. PLAY THERAPY

Everyday play occurs as a natural part of development while play therapy is a systematic approach with therapeutic purpose (APT, n.d.).

Background and Additional Information



What is play therapy?

According to the Association for Play Therapy (APT):

Play Therapy is defined by APT as “the systematic use of a theoretical model to establish an interpersonal process wherein trained Play Therapists use the therapeutic powers of play to help clients prevent or resolve psychosocial difficulties and achieve optimal growth and development” (APT, n.d.).

Play Therapy should only be provided by graduate-level mental health professionals who have met the required education, hold a license (mental health) or certification (school counselors), and additional specialized training and supervision specific to play therapy (APT, n.d.). For many school counselors, this will mean additional specialized training and supervision to augment their educational training. Fortunately, play therapy training is readily available and many university school counselor programs offer play therapy coursework.

How does play therapy differ from ordinary play?

Everyday play occurs as a natural part of development while play therapy is a systematic approach with therapeutic purpose (APT, n.d.).

Therapy goes beyond my professional scope as a school counselor...

APT recognizes this point and is introducing the term, play in counseling, as a way of appreciating the unique terminology and practices of professional school counselors. Play in counseling can be a component of a comprehensive school counseling program and is aligned with the ASCA National Model, ASCA’s mindsets and behaviors, and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). It also recognizes the importance of ethical practice as available in the ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors. When a student’s needs go beyond the scope of school counseling, it is appropriate to make a referral (preferably to a professional who is a Registered Play Therapist™ (RPT) or Registered Play Therapist-Supervisor™ (RPT-S) and/or coordinate with their intervention team to move them to a higher tiered plan.

What is the difference between experiential learning and play in counseling?

Experiential learning is commonplace in many education curricula, allowing students to learn by doing. Utilizing play in counseling as part of a comprehensive school counseling program takes the power of experiential learning to the next level. Given that play influences all stages of life development, this handbook offers experiential play activities that reach students across elementary, middle, and high school levels.

Based on a foundation of theories, utilizing play in counseling allows the counselor to intentionally select more directive play-based activities to meet specific learning outcomes. Direct teaching, as one of the therapeutic powers of play is especially relevant in school counseling play activities.

What does the research tell us about play therapy in schools?

The link between play therapy and academic achievement exists. Developing play therapy programs in the school setting has been suggested to be the most likely way children will receive mental health interventions (Blanco & Ray, 2011).

Armed with established evidence that a strong connection between play therapy and academic achievement exists, counselors, administrators, and parents can feel assured that play therapy and academic success are inextricably linked. When children's emotional needs are met in the developmentally and culturally sensitive play therapy approach, they engage more fully in the school experience helping them to reach their academic potential.

This growing body of evidence indicates play therapy, and specifically child-centered play therapy has shown positive and statistically significant effects with academically at-risk students across multiple academic subject areas or domains (Blanco & Ray, 2011; Blanco et al., 2015; Blanco et al., 2017; Holliman et al., 2022; Massengale & Perryman, 2021; Perryman, 2016; Perryman et al., 2020). Play therapy has also been studied with the general population of students with similar improvement in academic functioning (Blanco et al., 2017). These findings illuminate the evidence that play therapy offered in the school setting can serve as both a preventative measure for support and as an intervention across a wide range of children presenting with social, emotional, and behavioral concerns.

Gain your School Based-Registered Play Therapist™ (SB-RPT) credential.

Many people believe that only mental health professionals in clinical fields are eligible for a play therapy credential. APT recognizes that you, as a school counselor are a valuable front-line mental health and educational professional in your school. The SB-RPT™ is a credential just for you that fits your professional identity as a school counselor.

- **Gaining training:** This includes understanding the development of play therapy and its historical significance, recognizing seminal play therapy theories, effectively practicing the techniques and methods of a foundational play therapy theory, and understanding how to apply principles of play therapy to a variety of populations and issues.
- **Supervised practice:** As a specialty area, supervision during training by a Registered Play Therapist-Supervisor™ is essential.
- **Experience:** School counselors can integrate play into counseling through various aspects of their comprehensive school counseling programs.

For more about the requirements of APT's School Based-Registered Play Therapist™ credential, please visit: <https://www.a4pt.org/general/custom.asp?page=CredentialsHomepage>

Presenting the concept of play in counseling to school administrators & stakeholders

It is helpful to provide an *elevator pitch* - a simple statement to introduce the concept. This statement is most natural when it uses your own words, but here is a possible sample:

School counselors use many different tools in their comprehensive school counseling programs to support students' academic, social-emotional, and college-career development. One of those tools is the utilization of play in counseling, whereby school counselors use play as the child's natural language to promote those key areas and help students become ready to learn and be successful contributing members of society.

What can an SB-RPT™ do to support successful play in counseling practices as part of a comprehensive school counseling program?

Encourage stakeholder buy-in by:

- Providing a short, yet effective elevator pitch explaining the developmental appropriateness of play and its connection to successful learning.
- Connecting to school and district goals relating to academics, behavior, attendance, and other relevant local metrics.
- Further educating stakeholders about the basic principles of play in counseling as a viable intervention, using existing research to demonstrate its efficacy.
- Sharing that play in counseling is effective for diverse populations (i.e., all students!)

Learn more by visiting the APT website at: <https://www.a4pt.org/>

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Overview & Sample Play Activities

The following activities can be adjusted to work with your students. Be creative and make them your own! All activities can be adapted from individual counseling to small group, to classroom lessons.

Each activity is aligned with the American School Counselor Association's domains, mindsets and behaviors, and the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework. Play therapy theories or approaches are also identified to support the connection of theory-based decision making in play activities. The Therapeutic Powers of Play identify the agents of change that will be addressed through the play activity.

The play activities also leave room for you to:

- Add a beginning/introduction that can activate prior knowledge of specific unit skills.
- Apply an ending (specified as LEAP) that links their newly acquired learning to everyday life.

In addition, processing questions are presented with full recognition that when utilizing play in counseling, not all students are developmentally able to verbally express their thoughts and feelings as effectively as they can play them out! You are encouraged to adapt to fit the needs of your students. Enjoy!

Sincerely,

APT School Counselor Task Force

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The Worry Monster

Target Age Group: Elementary

Size: Individual

Purpose/Goal of the Activity: The student will identify and plan for the use of strategies to reduce worries through play.

ASCA Domain: Social-Emotional

ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors: M1, B-SMS 6, B-SMS 10

CASEL 5: Self-Awareness and Self-Management

Primary Play Therapy

Theory(ies)/Approaches:

Cognitive Behavioral Play Therapy, Solution-Focused Approach

Therapeutic Powers of Play:

Stress management, Abreaction, Direct teaching

Materials: Strips of paper, writing utensil, one piece of paper, assorted sizes and colors of craft pom poms, 1 tennis ball. Cut the tennis ball so it has a "mouth" and draw or glue on eyes – decorate as desired.

Procedures:

1. Introduce the topic of worries and how they are based on thoughts that are not helpful.
2. Have the student write several worries with each on its own strip of paper.
3. Then, have the student select pom poms and choose the number and sizes to show how big each worry is.
4. For each worry, prompt the student to identify one thing they can do to not feel so worried about that (helpful coping strategies).
5. Have the student draw that coping strategy on their paper to take with them after the session.
6. After they finish their drawing, have them feed the pom pom worries to the worry monster. They may playfully make sounds and act out how ferocious the worry monster is when getting rid of those worries.

**An alternate activity is to have the student select their biggest worry for the moment to prioritize.*

Processing: The counselor uses skills of reflection and tracking focused on the child's nonverbal play, drawing, or written words to bring awareness to the student of their thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

LEAP: What relaxation strategies can you use this week, so your Worry Monster doesn't eat as many pom poms?

Adjustments for online learning: (a) the school counselor can feed the worries to the worry monster over the camera so the student can observe, or (b) the student can use a found item in the home that can contain the worries and be the worry monster. If there are limitations in materials, the student can feed the worry paper slips directly to that found object container.

My Creature Learner

Target Age Group: Elementary

Size: Small Group

Purpose/Goal of the Activity:

Students who are struggling academically may lack awareness of the strengths that they can bring to the learning environment. Help students explore their learning needs and strengths through play.

ASCA Domain: Academic

ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors: M3, B-LS 2, B-LS 4

CASEL 5: Responsible Decision-Making

Primary Play Therapy

Theory(ies)/Approaches:

Solution-Focused Approach

Therapeutic Powers of Play: Self-Esteem, Direct teaching

Materials: Self-drying clay or play-doh, various small objects (sequins, paper clips, pom poms, wiggly eyes, feathers, etc.), paper plate

Procedures:

1. Ask the miracle question - "Imagine that you went to sleep last night, and a miracle happened. You are now the Creature Learner, and you are performing your absolute best at school!"
2. Provide each student clay, a paper plate, and a variety of small decorative items.
3. Direct students to use the items to make a creature that reflects what they would look like as their Creature Learner who is performing their absolute best at school.
4. Encourage/Cheerlead their progress as they create their Creature Learners.
5. Have students decorate their ideal learning environment on their plate and place their creature learner on it.
6. Set up the Creature Learners on a table and have students do a gallery walk to look at the Creature Learners in their ideal learning environments.
7. Have students encourage/cheerlead their group members' Creature Learners as they observe them.

Processing: If students would like to share more about their Creature Learner, they are invited to during the gallery walk.

LEAP: What can you do this week to look more like your Creature Learner?

Adjustments for online learning: If students have play-doh at home, they may use that to create their creature. Otherwise, they can draw their creature and identify learning qualities on the paper.

Career Puppets

Target Age Group: Elementary

Size: Classroom Counseling Lesson

Purpose/Goal of the Activity:

After exploring different career paths in a previous lesson, students will express themselves creatively through art and drama play/storytelling using puppets.

ASCA Domain: College & Career

ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors: M6, B-SS 2, B-LS 9

CASEL 5: Responsible Decision-Making and Social Awareness

Primary Play Therapy

Theory(ies)/Approaches:

Narrative Play Therapy

Therapeutic Powers of Play:

Direct and Indirect teaching, Social competence, Empathy

Materials: Puppets - Paper lunch bags, markers. Other optional materials – glue, yarn, wiggly eyes, felt, fabric scraps. The school counselor uses a prop microphone (this can also be made with a paper towel roll and tin foil).

Procedures:

1. To remind students of some of the careers they have already explored, the school counselor will write them on the board.
2. Puppet Creation:
 - a. Provide each student a paper lunch bag and a variety of craft materials.
 - b. Direct to create a puppet that identifies a career choice they are exploring.

**Depending on the developmental level and length of class, you may allow a class period just for the creation of the puppets.*

3. Puppet Play:
 - a. Divide the class into groups of 4-5 students and ask them to create a story with a beginning, middle, and end where the characters work together. Set the expectation for how to be safe and respectful when using puppets.
 - b. Each member will take on the role of a character representing a specific career.
 - c. The group should give their puppet show a title.
 - d. Each group will take turns presenting their puppet show to their peers from the other groups.
 - e. The school counselor will interview different members of each puppet show to assist with identifying areas where learning can be transferred to real life.

Processing: The school counselor will ask different characters about aspects of their story.

LEAP: What is a career that you learned more about by watching or participating in a story today?

Adjustments for online learning: Students can fold paper or use a sock to create their career puppet. The school counselor can use break-out rooms so that students can develop their puppet show/story narrative.

My Social Supports

Target Age Group: Middle School

Size: Individual

Purpose/Goal of the Activity: The student will explore their lifestyle and sources of connection and support through an expressive art/sandtray activity.

ASCA Domain: Social-Emotional

ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors: M2, B-SS 3, B-SS 8

CASEL 5: Self-Awareness, Social Awareness

Primary Play Therapy

Theory(ies)/Approaches:

Adlerian Play Therapy

Therapeutic Powers of Play:

Social competence, Direct teaching

Materials: Sandtray or piece of paper, a variety of miniatures

Procedures:

1. Provide a variety of miniatures that include animals, people, and other types of creatures. If the school counselor has a sandtray, then that can be used as the medium. Allow the student to pick out miniatures for the people in their life and place them in the sandtray. Otherwise, a blank piece of paper can serve that function.
2. Introduce topic: "Today, we are going to explore different people in your life that could be a source of support. Choose a miniature for each person who you see as already being a source of support or who has the potential to be a source of support if you communicate your needs to them. Then, choose a miniature to represent you. Arrange them in the sandtray (or paper)."

Processing: *Introduce this person. Please tell me about the figure you chose for them. How does this person support you now?*

How would you like for them to support you moving forward?

What goals do you have for your relationship with them?

What do you contribute to your relationship with them?

LEAP: What is something you can do to strengthen relationships with one person you identified today?

Adjustments for online learning: The student can pick out images online and insert them into a whiteboard to share with the school counselor or use a virtual sandtray website or app.

Middle School

My Career Goals Vision Board

Target Age Group: Middle School

Size: Small Group

Purpose/Goal of the Activity:

Students will explore aspects of power, freedom, and fun using expressive arts to create a collage (vision board) of their goals.

ASCA Domain: College & Career

ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors: M1, B-LS 7, B-SMS 8

CASEL 5: Responsible Decision-Making

Primary Play Therapy

Theory(ies)/Approaches:

Solution-Focused Approach, Reality Therapy

Therapeutic Powers of Play: Self-Expression, Direct teaching

Materials: Large paper/poster boards cut in half, various coloring materials, magazines (review for content first), glue sticks, scissors, any other art materials that you wish

Procedures:

1. Introduce the group topic by sharing how students can make decisions about their future that will help them feel satisfied with their life.
2. Share that today they will make a vision board to show what goals they have for their future self. Provide examples of completed vision boards for reference.
3. Provide students a poster board/large paper and art materials. Ask to select words and images to represent goals and action steps for their future self, including power, freedom, and fun. Describe these concepts.
4. As students are creating their vision boards, utilize silence to hold their therapeutic space.
5. After completion, allow members to share their board if they wish. Encourage students to offer support or encouragement of the vision boards of their peers.

Processing: *If you were to give your board a title, what would it be?*

What is something that your friends would add to your board about your goals?

LEAP: What can you do to add more power, freedom, or fun to your life right now?

Adjustments for online learning: The school counselor can direct students to use an online vision board application or website. Another option is to use Jamboard (Google extension) and provide each student a slide for their electronic vision board.

My Growth Mindset

Target Age Group: Middle School

Size: Classroom Counseling Lesson

Developed By: Ann Tilman and Daniella Winge

Purpose/Goal of the Activity: Help students develop a growth mindset by playing a game using bean bags and bowls.

ASCA Domains: Academic

ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors: M4, B-LS 1, B-SS 6

CASEL 5: Self-Awareness and Self-Management

Primary Play Therapy

Theory(ies)/Approaches: Cognitive Behavioral Play Therapy and Solution-Focused Approach

Therapeutic Powers of Play:

Creative Problem Solving, Resiliency, Direct teaching

Materials: Paper – enough bowls and bean bags to provide 5 of each for each group

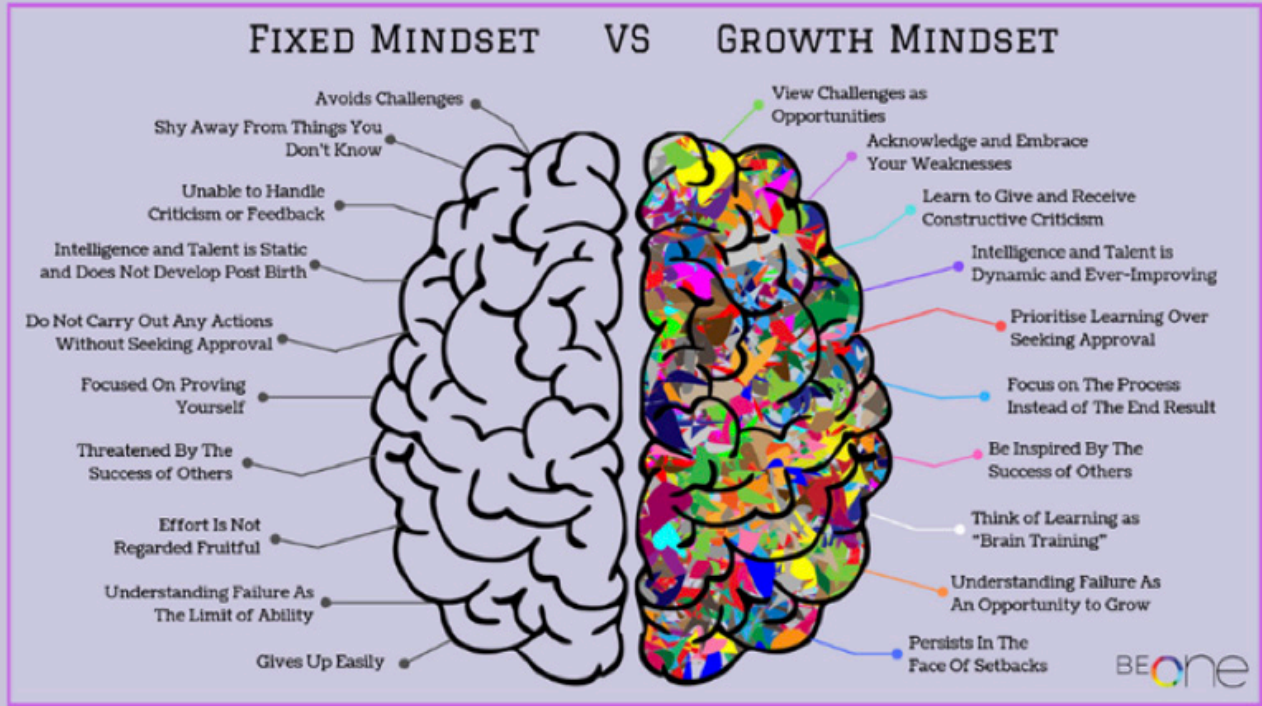
Procedures:

1. Divide up the class into groups of 4-5. Each group should have five bowls and five bean bags.
2. Start with the bowls placed on the opposite side of the room. Students in each group will take turns tossing the bean bags into the bowls.
3. Allow 1-2 rounds and stop the group. Ask them how they are doing at performing the task.
4. Define growth mindset (the way you think about an issue allows you to grow beyond it) and show the graphic.
5. In the next round, have them make a statement using a growth mindset before they throw the bean bag.
6. Have students cycle through for 1-2 more rounds and stop the group. Ask how they are doing now. If they are still facing challenges, they may need to make a more realistic goal. Each group can decide how they will adjust the activity to be more successful but must continue to practice verbalizing a growth mindset as they do so.

Processing: *What did you/your group do that helped you be most successful at getting the bean bags in the bowls?*

LEAP: What growth mindset statement did you make when you were most successful? How can you apply this to events in your typical day where a growth mindset would be helpful?

Adjustments for online learning: The school counselor can have students crumple paper and toss it into a trash can while using the same process.



Source: <https://ourteenbrains.org/teen-behavior/adolescent-brain-development-and-growth-mindset/>

Different Sides of Me

Target Age Group: High School

Size: Individual

Purpose/Goal of the Activity:

Student will use expressive arts to explore aspects of self-congruence and change to bring about positive changes.

ASCA Domain: Social-Emotional

ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors: M1, B-SMS 6, B-SMS 7

CASEL 5: Self-Awareness

Primary Play Therapy

Theory(ies)/Approaches:

Dialectical Behavior Therapy

Therapeutic Powers of Play:

Access to the Unconscious, Direct and Indirect teaching

Materials: Paper plates and coloring materials (markers, paint, paint crayons, crayons, etc.), scissors, hole punch, elastic.

Procedures:

1. Provide the student a paper plate. Cut out eye holes in advance of the session.
2. Direct them to draw on the curved (top) portion of the plate how they think others see them.
3. Then, have them flip the plate over and direct them to draw how they see themselves.

**If the student is having difficulty with the open-ended nature of the directives, you may add, "as a friend," "as a student," or "as a teen" based on what they are expressing as their concern. Use a hole punch and elastic to make it a mask where the elastic can be moved to either side.*

4. After they finish creating the mask, the student can choose to share the parts that they wish to share from each of the two sides of it.

Processing: The school counselor should use open-ended questions to encourage sharing.

LEAP: How can you use what you have learned about yourself today to feel more balanced or in congruence with yourself at school?

Adjustments for online learning: Students may use paper or a white board function in the online environment to draw their inside/outside of the mask.

Balloon Goals

Target Age Group: High School

Size: Small Group

Purpose/Goal of the Activity:

Students will identify goals through balloon play and design actionable steps to reach the goals.

ASCA Domain: Academic

ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors: M3, B-LS 7, B-LS 9

CASEL 5: Responsible Decision-Making

Primary Play Therapy

Theory(ies)/Approaches:

Solution Focused Approach

Therapeutic Powers of Play:

Direct teaching

Materials: Variety of balloons, permanent markers, stickers (optional), paper/pen (to record goals)

Procedures:

**Before the group, check to see if any students have latex allergies.*

1. Have each student choose a balloon color that symbolizes how they see themselves as a student. Then blow up their balloon. If needed, a balloon pump is helpful to have on-hand.
2. Have a student demonstrate what happens when air seeps out of their balloon (it makes a loud sound, travels, and/or deflates).
3. Introduce the topic that goals are like balloons. If they are not mindful of their goals, their goals will get away from them.
4. Provide background on SMART Goals.

SMART Goals are:

- Specific
 - Measurable
 - Attainable
 - Relevant
 - Time-Based
5. Have each student decide on an academic issue that they would like to address. Have them blow up their balloon again and tie it. Write this issue on the balloon using a permanent marker.
 6. Each student will tap their balloon into the air to another student. That student will help them with one step of SMART goal setting. They must keep the balloon aloft but may not pass it until they have added to the SMART goal.
 7. Repeat until all students have gone through the process to create a goal that is specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-based. The school counselor should write students' goals down. They should not let the balloons hit the floor.

**Example: "I have a 64% in Geometry. I want to raise my Geometry grade to a 75% (specific, attainable, measurable). Since my homework grade is low, I will complete 4/5 homework assignments each week for three weeks (relevant, measurable, time-based)."*

Balloon Goals -continued

Processing:

- *When you were able to keep your balloon in the air, what were you doing?*
- *How did you manage to do that despite it being difficult?*
- *How can you do more of that?*
- *What will be doing more of to reach your SMART goal?*
- *Who will notice when you are making progress towards your SMART goal? What will they notice?*
- *How will you know when you are making progress toward that goal?*
- *What would you do if you weren't hesitant or afraid?*
- *How would you rate your motivation to reach the goal you chose on a scale of 1-10 with 1 being not very motivated and 10 being extremely motivated?*

LEAP: How can you keep your goal "up in the air" and in your focus?

Adjustments for online learning: Students can write their goals on paper or use Jamboard. Since you lose the interactive nature of the balloons, the school counselor can direct them to search for memes or images that illustrate how they feel pre- and post-intervention.

Puzzle Pieces Challenge

Target Age Group: High School

Size: Classroom Counseling Lesson

Purpose/Goal of the Activity:

Help students explore and develop interpersonal communication and relationship skills through social play.

ASCA Domain: College & Career

ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors: M4, B-LS 1, B-SS 6

CASEL 5: Relationship Skills and Responsible Decision-Making

Primary Play Therapy Theory(ies)/Approaches:

Adlerian Play Therapy

Therapeutic Powers of Play:

Social competence, Creative problem solving, Direct teaching

Materials: Depending on the size of the class, bring enough puzzles to allow groups of 4-5 to complete each puzzle together.

Procedures:

1. Tell students that today they will be challenged to use their communication skills to solve a problem. The caveat...they may not talk.
2. Divide the class so that each smaller group consists of 4-5 students.
3. Provide each small group a puzzle.

**Based on your students, decide how simple or complex the puzzles should be but ensure equivalency across all groups.*

4. Set a timer and allow groups to assemble their puzzles without communicating verbally.
5. To increase the challenge, have one of the other groups' pieces in each of the puzzles. They must negotiate with the other groups to get their own puzzle piece back, but they still may not talk.

Processing: *Share how your group went about this puzzle task.*

What did your group do that helped you assemble the puzzle?

What could your group do next time to improve your communication?

LEAP: Provide an example of how you can use what you learned today in your own life.

Adjustments for online learning: Have students play out relationship and communication skills using charades. Or make puzzles with a puzzle generating website like <https://puzzle.org/>