

Spring is Coming! Refresh Your Play Room?

Each season brings a fresh vibe and energy. Change occurs in the natural world which brings along new colors, activities and sensory experiences. It is a wonderful time to bring in new items that correspond with the season. Don't throw the old out, just move some of the old to make room for some of the new! There are play materials that always remain essential to the playroom. This includes play objects that support the various categories of play such as construction materials, projective items such as a miniature collection, puppets, role-play dress-up items, art materials, musical instruments, movement items, games and sensory materials such as sand, water, sensory baskets and other items that engage the seeking system..



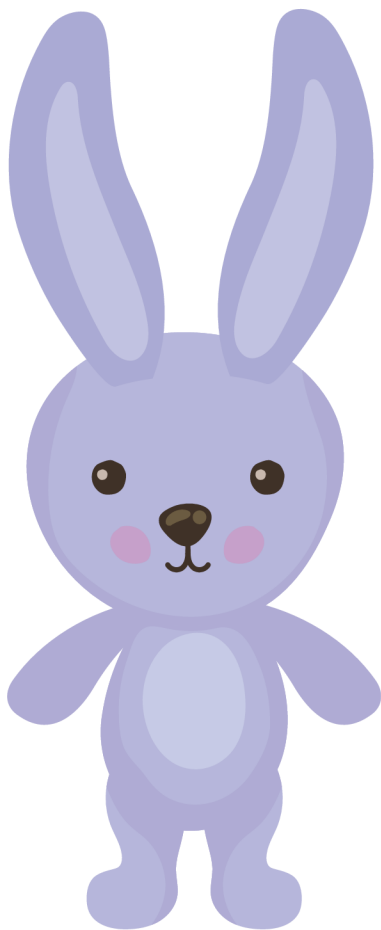
Play therapists have the ability to select things in and out of the therapeutic space using the change of season as a timely opportunity. Let's think about a theoretical underpinning that might clinically support the reason for changing things up. Brain research supports the existence of at least seven primary-process emotional states: Seeking, Rage, Fear, Lust, Care, Grief and Play (Panksepp, 2005). For the purposes of this discussion, I will focus on the seeking system. The primary emotional states are concentrated in subcortical regions of all mammalian brains. The seeking/expectancy system when activated changes an individual's attitude towards the environment promoting an "energized appetitive disposition" allowing animals to anticipate the presence of future rewards (Alcaro & Panksepp, 2011). So, what does this mean to you as a play therapist?

The seeking system is ignited when children are in environments that are engaging and interesting. Seeking is activated when new and novel objects are available. The seeking system urges children to explore and learn. Play therapy spaces assist in nurturing the seeking system. Although you may have all of your core play therapy tools available, regularly enriching your play rooms can increase a child's drive towards exploration, further skill development, increased physical experiences, unique sensory experiences, potential challenges and social interactions. Brain development such as increased neurogenesis (development of new nerve cells), synaptogenesis (creation of connections), activation of synapses (connections) and positive hormonal and chemical balance in the brain are positive outcomes from activating the seeking system.



Seasonal Tips for Enriching the Seeking System in Your Playroom

- What colors remind you of spring? Add pastel paints, bright colored construction paper or different colored pool noodles or “spring” colored scarves for movement. These items are put in prominent spots to invite curiosity.
- Spring Sensory baskets. Collect objects of nature found in spring. Add a variety of spring-like essential oil sprays for children to choose from to spray onto the nature objects. Perhaps earthy or spring flower smells. Children can choose an item and smell for deep breathing, relaxation or transition in or out of the play room.
- What musical sounds relate to spring? Maybe rain sticks? What about sounds of thunder, wind or bird sounds? Have a range of materials available to make sounds of spring. (boxes, cardboard tubes, small stones, beads, balloons, tambourines, chimes, music boxes, little whistles).
- What activities remind you of spring? Fluorescent skipping ropes? Hoola hoops in multiple colors? Hop scotch? Marble games? New soccer ball? Spring colored beach balls? It will all depend on what you did during spring.



- A few new miniatures that represent spring-like events, actions, people? There may be rituals that come around each spring such as colored eggs, easter bunnies, and/or crosses for those celebrating Easter. Ramadan occurs in spring in Canada which may include special flowers, crescent moon/star, lanterns, the color green. For Indigenous peoples the spring equinox is celebrated with the idea of new beginnings, transformations and re-birth. Special objects of nature symbolizing these beliefs may be added. Think culturally. Understand the importance of this time of year for your diverse client group. Seek to understand what little things you might add to your collection.
- Animal miniatures may be added during spring. New birth ideas- bird nests, eggs, baby birds or bears and cubs for instance. This may be a way to grow your animal families.
- Add a new box of non-conventional materials! Colored twine, cardboard boxes and pieces of cardboard, bubble wrap, containers, odd pieces of fabric, odd shaped items, long pieces of colored fabric, paper bags, balloons, tulle, sticks, etc. The material box is an invitation to make or be anything.

There is no limit to what you might do to infuse your playroom this spring. Remember it doesn't have to be a lot, but it needs to be purposeful. It will help you stay engaged and positively activated as well. I have had a playroom for 30 years and it got to be a challenge to feel connected and interested in the space because I spent so much time there. Inviting my own seeking system into the play therapy space also helped me to feel re-energized in my work with children. It turns out enriching your environment from time to time creates a reciprocal positive effect!

References

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- Panksepp, J. (2005). Affective consciousness: Core emotional feelings in animals and humans. *Consciousness and cognition*, 14(1), 30-80.

Other Readings

- Badt, K. L. (2015). A Dialogue with Neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp on the SEEKING System: Breaking the Divide between Emotion and Cognition in Film Studies.
- Watt, D. F. (2017). Reflections on the neuroscientific legacy of Jaak Panksepp (1943–2017).
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