

The Meaning Home for Children and the Use of Doll Houses in Play Therapy

What is the meaning of “home” for children? The literature points to five dimensions: 1) A place to retreat; 2) A place of psychological and emotional well-being; 3) Meaningful relationships; 4) Routines and rituals and 5) A physical dwelling (Natalier and Fehlberg, 2015, Mallett, 2004, Campo, et al., 2020). Other important considerations include the development of trust, a sense of self and belonging and personal agency.



A key tool to understanding a child’s view of “home” is the doll house in which miniatures or other items can be placed. Play therapists often work with young people whose main place(s) to live has been disrupted or the young person may live in abusive or high conflict spaces which interrupts each of the five main dimensions listed above. House structures in the playroom invite children to show and tell us more about their core well-being. It may be through doll house play that children can order and organize an otherwise chaotic home life. Children may also disclose both positive and negative home life experiences which offers the play therapist a more complex view into family structures and interpersonal relationships.

As a play-based practitioner, you may view the doll house as an item that appeals to younger children or cis gendered girls. This thinking may lead you not to bother having one or more doll house structures because you work with “older children and youth”. I would like to expand this thinking based on the important meanings of “home” to all young people and the critical nature of “home” to the overall development of a child/youth. The following considerations are offered to play therapists as they review the use of the “doll house: in play therapy.





Considerations for Use of “Houses” in Play Therapy

- Have more than one structure that could be used as a house-
- Choose house structures that are all-gender (colours, style, etc.)
- Think about your clientele: Are there culturally significant structures that you could include? For instance when I have worked in Cambodia – the houses are on stilts
- Think about variety in terms of size and shape. For example, Polly Pockets are very tiny with tiny characters, and castles often evoke wish fulfilment or magical powers that can increase empowerment scenes

- Do you have a barn where animal families can live?
- Are there windows, doors and places for furnishings?
Is there a roof? Can you completely close the structure?
- Do furnishings and figures fit in the house space – Do you have the basic furnishings for a house?
- Do you have a variety of house structures (sizes and styles) that could fit into your sandtray?



- Do you have materials or a structure a child can get inside? A tent for instance?
- Do you have vehicles that could fit with the “doll” house? Size may be important and can characters get inside the vehicles?
- Sounds that are part of the structure may be another draw for children (door bells for instance) or you could have your percussion instruments handy for the integration of sound (rain sticks and boom whackers are useful)
- Provide non-conventional items such as bits of fabric, little containers, sensory materials, rocks, water source and nature items
- For older children place the house structures on a table-top and invite them into the world of “houses” versus using the term “doll” house.
- Have portable fold-out houses available for travel – these can also be useful when you share space with other play therapists and you need to move around
- Making houses with children or youth can be very powerful – a variety of sizes of boxes and craft materials would be good staples to have available

Summary

The power of the “doll” house can’t be underestimated as a projective tool in the play therapy room. By offering very small to life-size structures, we can learn a lot about a child’s psychological, emotional and relational experiences. It is my suggestion that play therapists create a template to help track the themes that arise during “house” play using the five dimensions of meaning of “home” for children (see above)

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