What's new from Lorri

Consulting with Children Before Sharing with Others: Honoring Children's Rights

When thinking about children's rights, I can't underestimate the importance of consulting with children before bringing feedback to parents and third parties. Play Therapists are trained in how to describe the therapy process to children and youth and generally provide a developmentally appropriate description of "private but not secret" which helps children understand what to expect during the play therapy process.

The private but not secret guideline means children are free to share anything with their parents or carers (or others), and therapists commit to keeping the children's sessions private. The limits of confidentiality can also be explained in child-friendly ways. I have coined the "4 Hurts" as four main reasons where something shared by the child could not be kept private. The 4 Hurts include: 1) Someone is hurting you, 2) You are hurting yourself, 3) You know about someone else getting hurt and/or 4) You are hurting someone else or planning to hurt someone else (Yasenik & Graham, 2022, Yasenik and Gardner, 2024). If a child shares one of the 4 hurts with the therapist, safety overrides confidentiality. Having said that, it is still important to consult with children regarding how, in what way and with whom you will share.

Canada signed the United Nations on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1991. Articles 13 and 5 are highlighted for the purposes of reflecting on the rights of children to be consulted. Article 13 considers the rights of children to seek, receive and provide information and ideas in any form (written, oral, art or any other media of the child's choice). This includes the right to being provided information about the processes in which they are involved. Article 5 considers the evolving capacities of the child the direction and guidance parents (and others) give children should reflect the evolving capacities of each child.

When a child is younger, they will need more protection, as they may be more likely to make choices without considering or understanding the consequences. These articles are particularly important when consulting with children.

Consulting with children before sharing feedback with parents or third parties is essential in building trust and maintaining a safe therapeutic space. When children feel that their thoughts, emotions, and expressions through play are protected, they are more likely to engage openly and honestly in therapy. If a therapist shares sensitive information without the child's awareness or consent, it can lead to feelings of betrayal, causing the child to withdraw and ultimately hinder the therapeutic process. Parents may place pressure on play therapists to share the details of their child's sessions. This can lead well-meaning play therapists to share too much and, in the moment, describe something that happened in the play therapy setting that was not previouslydiscussed with their child client. "How" to share with parents is one of the play therapy skills.

Play therapists are encouraged to consider reporting on general or repetitive thematic representations in play versus describing a child's specific play actions or verbalizations. Parents are typically interested in their child's progress and in what they could do to assist. Therapists can be very helpful by using a variety of ways to speak about progress using theory and practical outlines based on child and play development, temperament, sensory system, and trauma to name a few.
Children have the right to be active participants in their own therapy, which includes having a say in what is shared outside of the session. While therapists must balance this with their duty to ensure the child's safety, involving the child in decisions about disclosure empowers them and fosters a sense of control over their own experiences. By consulting with the child, therapists can help them understand what information might be beneficial to share and work collaboratively to frame feedback in a way that aligns with the child's comfort level. This process also teaches children important skills in self-advocacy, boundary-setting, autonomy and effective communication, which can serve them beyond the therapeutic setting.

Considerations for Practice

- Prior to beginning Play Therapy explain “Private but not Secret” and the “4 Hurts”
- Let children know (in front of parents) You will always ask them before you share things about them with their parents
- Let parents know that children have a right to privacy as many parents will be unaware of the formality of children’s rights
- Ask the parent(s) not to question the child about their therapy sessions
- Ask parent(s) to commit to allowing their child privacy in presence of the child
- Let the child know (in front of the parents) that you will check in with them to see if they think their parents supported their right to privacy and note that sometimes parent(s) “forget”
- Create a process for circling back to children. Let them know what you have learned about them and check to see if you have gotten it “right”.

References

Yasenik and Graham (2022). Meeting with children: A child centered approach training manual. 3rd Ed. International Center for Children and Family Law.
United Nations. General Assembly, & Canada. Human Rights Directorate. (1991). Convention on the Rights of the Child. Human Rights Directorate.
Yasenik L., & Gardner, K, (2024). Play therapy dimensions model: New insights for integrative play therapists. JKP