

Utilizing Play Therapy Within the ASCA National Model

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Abstract

School counselors are uniquely qualified to meet the increasing mental health needs of students within the school setting. Play therapy is an evidence-based intervention used by school counselors to address the mental health needs of youth. Job demands require school counselors to provide goal-focused and time-sensitive interventions. Accordingly, this article describes how to utilize play therapy within the ASCA National Model and provides examples for elementary school counselors implementing play therapy interventions with students. A case example illustrates individual play therapy goal setting.

Keywords: play therapy, school counselor, ASCA National Model

Utilizing Play Therapy Within the ASCA National Model

School counselors are uniquely trained to meet the academic, career, and social/emotional needs of students (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2014) and are compelled to do so using best practice approaches guided by frameworks such as the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2019). Working within the ASCA National Model, school counselors are prompted to deliver developmentally appropriate interventions to impact the mindsets and behaviors that all students need for postsecondary readiness and success (ASCA, 2019). However, for some students, postsecondary readiness is impeded by mental health-related concerns, which manifest in the school setting. These mental health concerns adversely affect students' emotional functioning given that approximately 17% of youth (ages 6-17) experience a mental health disorder each year (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2019).

Because students receive 70-80% of mental health services in school settings (Farmer et al., 2003), school counselors are well-situated to provide counseling services to those in need (Lambie et al., 2019). Moreover, although students across K-12 settings have mental health needs, the elementary school setting is an important milieu for particular types of counseling interventions such as play therapy, the successful delivery of which may improve the academic trajectories of students over time (Blanco & Ray, 2011). Play therapy is an evidence-based counseling intervention appropriate for use in elementary school settings to address the mental health needs of youth (Bratton et al., 2005). However, Ray et al. (2005) found that many school counselors were unable to engage in play therapy due to time constraints. Consequently, this article

presents short-term strategies for elementary school counselors using play therapy counseling interventions to set goals with students guided by the ASCA National Model.

Play Therapy

Play therapy is a dynamic, interpersonal relationship between a child and counselor (Landreth, 2012). Play is the child's natural mode of communication and the materials are used to allow them to express and explore the self (Landreth, 2012). Play therapy can be applied in a variety of settings, including schools (Trice-Black et al., 2013). Specifically, child-centered play therapy (CCPT) is an evidence-based treatment that is effective in treating emotional and behavioral disorders of children (Bratton et al., 2005). Despite CCPT's effectiveness, not all school counselors are trained in play therapy principles and practices (Ray et al., 2005). Specifically, 67% of the school counselors sampled reported they had not received training, such as a university-level play therapy course (Ray et al., 2005). For school counselors utilizing CCPT in practice, a common theme of concern was whether they were incorporating techniques correctly (Shin & Gonzalez, 2018). Given that school counselors may be charged with implementing interventions that are developmentally appropriate (ASCA, 2019), it is important for elementary school counselors to effectively implement play therapy interventions and techniques.

School counselors reported a lack of time, resources, support, and training, all of which affected their ability to incorporate play therapy (Ray et al., 2005). Although Ray et al. (2005) reported that some studies in their meta-analysis suggested that CCPT could be provided in short-term, intensive formats, which included 30-minute sessions with as few as 14 meetings; overall effectiveness improved with increased number of

sessions (up to 35 sessions). Relatedly, the ASCA National Model (2019) recommends school counselors provide short-term counseling interventions. Given ASCA's emphasis on short-term counseling and counselor time constraints (Ray et al., 2005), it may be helpful for school counselors to utilize focused play therapy with CCPT (Rasmussen & Cunningham, 1995). In focused play therapy, counselors structure counseling interactions, focus on specific goals, and actively guide the therapeutic process. Focused play therapy techniques often include creative activities that are specific enough to address pertinent presenting problems in counseling (Hall et al., 2002). Green and Christensen (2006) found that elementary school children who engaged in play therapy expressed preference in the freedom to choose activities during play therapy, yet benefitted from structured play to assist in expressing their feelings, facilitating autonomy, and developing problem-solving skills. Focused play therapy can be readily integrated into the framework of the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2019).

Integrating Play Therapy Goals and Interventions

The ASCA National Model, first published in 2003, is now in its fourth edition (2019). The ASCA National Model (2019) contains four sections: define, manage, deliver, and assess. The define section describes the program and outlines student and professional standards that define a school counseling program (the *what*). The manage section includes planning tools useful in guiding the design and implementation of a school counseling program (the *need*). The deliver section describes developmentally appropriate activities and services that school counselors use to deliver a school counseling program provides (the *how*). These services include direct (delivered to

students directly) and indirect (interactions with others on behalf of students). Examples of direct services include instruction, appraisal and advisement, and counseling.

Within the deliver section, instruction is provided at the classroom, small group, and individual levels. Counseling is defined as being proactive or responsive, and includes professional assistance and support provided to a student or groups of students in transition, stress, critical change, or other situations that impede student success (see ASCA, 2019, p. 80). Counseling is short-term, based on counseling theories and techniques that are effective in the school setting, and promotes academic, career, or social/emotional development. Mindsets and behaviors standards (ASCA, 2014) are included to focus goal setting of the counseling process.

The ASCA National Model (2019) recommends school counselors incorporate developmentally appropriate theories and techniques. Play therapy practices are appropriate to incorporate in the elementary school setting to meet the social emotional needs of students (Bratton et al., 2005). There is limited information on how to integrate individual counseling interventions within the ASCA National Model. Therefore, this article outlines a practical way to integrate play therapy interventions within the ASCA National Model (2019) for goal setting of individual counseling interventions. We present how school counselors identify: (a) presenting problems (*what*), (b) student counseling goals (*needs*), and (c) play therapy interventions (*how*).

Presenting Problems (*What*)

When counseling students, school counselors must first identify or describe the presenting problem. Play therapy is applicable for a variety of child needs, including, but not limited to, child abuse and/or neglect, trauma, aggressive and acting-out behaviors,

anxiety and/or withdrawn behavior, behavior problems, chronic or terminal illness, depression, parental stress, substance abuse, divorce, grief, and social problems. School counselors may identify problems based upon observations or self-reports from the student, teacher, parents or guardians, or other service providers of the child. Kottman (2011) provides information on a number of studies that have been effective with play therapy interventions. Additionally, school counselors utilize the ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success (2014) to define the attitudes, knowledge, and skills that students need to improve their academic, career, and social emotional development.

Student Counseling Goals (*Needs*)

Counseling goals may be based on the presenting issues, student needs, or theoretical orientation of the practitioner (Henderson & Thompson, 2016). Focused play therapy goals are often based upon cognitive behavior therapy and include: increased coping with problem situations or stressors, increased expression of feelings, decreased maladaptive thoughts and perceptions, increased positive self-talk, and increased use of problem solving skills (Kottman, 2011). In CCPT, the relationship is the therapy and general goals focus on discovery of personal and internal strengths (Landreth, 2012). The relationship is meant to assist the individual in meeting goals, such as those described above. School counselors may incorporate both types of goal setting to provide a counseling space that displays empathy and self-direction for students.

Goal Alignment With ASCA Standards

According to the manage section of the ASCA National Model (2019), school counselors collect data to assess their effectiveness. Within the ASCA National Model,

achievement, attendance, or discipline are a few example of the types of data that may be collected. Additionally, ASCA provides outcome data examples for elementary schools to include: promotion rates, days absent, discipline referrals, loss of instructional minutes. The ASCA National Model (2019) contains a template for constructing SMART goals. The Mindsets and Behaviors (2014) can be converted to SMART goals using the Annual Student Outcome Goal Plan Template. This step will be illustrated with a case example later in this article.

Play Therapy Interventions (*How*)

The deliver section of the ASCA National Model (2019) describes the use of counseling interventions that school counselors may use to assist students. For play therapy interventions, there are numerous play therapy techniques school counselors may utilize and they vary based on whether they are using focused play therapy or CCPT. For the scope of this article, we will highlight focused (time-sensitive) play therapy techniques, which include creative techniques such as storytelling (bibliotherapy), drama, metaphors, music, art-based activities, clay, puppets, sand tray (and miniature), relaxation exercises, topic specific worksheets or activity books, unfinished sentences, games, and therapeutic writing (Desmond et al., 2015; Hall et al., 2002). The following case example will highlight its use in practice.

Case Example

You are an elementary school counselor in a rural school district. A few weeks into the school year, one of the fourth grader teachers confides in you that one of his students, Alex, is already having difficulty in his classes. Alex is a student you have interacted with in previous school years. You are aware that his father died in July. His

death was sudden and unexpected. In previous years, this student received grades of mostly As, and a few Bs. He shared with you last year that he was looking forward to joining band and baseball. Teachers report that Alex does not want to join any extracurricular activities and has not turned in any of his homework. The teachers are sympathetic but frustrated because he does not want to talk to anyone about why he is struggling in school. Alex's mother states that he has been withdrawn at home and does not want to do "anything." He has often been seen playing by himself on the playground and you have noticed that a few students have started to target him because his general appearance and hygiene have become concerning. Alex's mother agrees that it would be helpful for him to meet with you for a few counseling sessions. Alex agrees to meet with you once a week during his lunchtime. Alex is mostly quiet during the first session and reported he does not want to come to school anymore. After the first session, you conceptualize Alex's goal for counseling within the ASCA National Model and choose play therapy techniques that may help achieve his goal.

Case Example Application

Presenting Problems (What)

Alex is mostly likely experiencing grief due to the death of his father. His behavior is withdrawn and he may be experiencing symptoms of anxiety and depression. There is parenting stress at home. Alex is experiencing social problems at school due to his poor hygiene. Referring to ASCA's Mindsets and Behaviors standards (ASCA, 2014), the school counselor may address mindset standards M1 or M3 with Alex. Mindset M1 is a belief in development of whole self, including a health balance of mental, social

emotional, and physical well-being. Mindset M3 is a sense of belonging in the school environment.

Referring to ASCA's Mindsets and Behaviors standards (ASCA, 2014), the school counselor may address the following behavior standards: LS10 (learning strategies 10): participate in enrichment and extracurricular activities; SMS 7 (self-management skills 7): demonstrate coping skills; SS 2 (social skills 2): create positive and supportive relationships with other students.

Student Counseling Goals (Needs)

Alex will benefit from increased coping from the stress of losing his father and increased problem-solving skills.

Goal Alignment With ASCA Standards

We chose Mindset: M3 and Behaviors: B-LS10 and B-SS2 for SMART Goal formulation. Therefore, Alex's SMART goal will be by the end of the second quarter, Alex will increase his sense of belonging by joining one extracurricular activity. An alternate SMART goal will be by the end of the first quarter Alex will have turned in 75% of his homework.

Play Therapy Interventions (How)

The school counselor and Alex will work on his SMART goal by engaging bibliotherapy, games, art-based activities, puppets, and therapeutic writing (among other creative technique options) to work through his grief associated with the loss of his father, which may be affecting his sense of motivation and accomplishment.

Summary

This article provides suggestions for elementary school counselors regarding how to set goals and provide play therapy interventions within the ASCA National Model framework. In addition, practical strategies for problem identification, and for brief, short-term goal setting within counseling interventions are included. It may additionally provide guidance to those practitioners who have not completed formal training in play therapy (Ray et al., 2005). This framework ensures elementary school counselors are using theoretical, evidence-based interventions and techniques (i.e., play therapy) that are effective in school settings. The proposed framework is not intended to replace CCPT. Students' individual needs may warrant increased mental health services beyond those that can be provided by a school counselor and should be assessed on an individual basis.

Future research may use the framework with single case studies and collect data using the ASCA National Model, to determine whether short-term goal-setting interventions facilitate growth and development in the academic, social/emotional, or career domains for elementary students engaged in play therapy. It would be helpful to research whether or not this guideline for integrated practice facilitates school counselors' self-efficacy of play therapy and use of play therapy techniques in counseling with students.

A brief intervention is provided to demonstrate how school counselors can integrate the ASCA National Model with individual play therapy for goal setting. The case study illustrates how to apply this intervention in school counselor's practice. This practical guide is meant to align evidence-based and developmentally appropriate

practices of play therapy with the increasing mental health needs of students. It is meant as a starting point to bringing counseling into school counselors' focus with goal setting and play therapy techniques.

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