Technology in Play Therapy:

A Collegial Debate Between Seven Veteran Play Therapists

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At the 2014 Association for Play Therapy (APT) conference in Houston, a couple of play therapists witnessed an organic conversation between Linda Homeyer and Terry Kottman about how children have changed over the years and how they do not play like they used to. Seizing the opportunity to expand upon these ideas and to include other veteran play therapists in the discussion while they were present at the conference, APT invited five other APT Director Emeriti and/or Lifetime Achievement Award recipients to discuss the subject with them the next day: Louise Guerney, Garry Landreth, Kevin O'Connor, Lessie Perry, and Charlie Schaefer.

APT recorded their discussion, and none of the seven play therapists had time to prepare formal remarks. Several debate lines were drawn spontaneously, including (a) meeting children where they are, (b) preserving the therapeutic relationship, and (c) including technology in play therapy. Although the latter point was not an intended end goal of this conversation, some interesting ideas and experiences emerged about how technology affects children's play and how their familiarity with it may make it an interesting medium to offer in the playroom. This is a recapitulation of their conversation; italicized words indicate speaker emphasis. Whether these veteran play therapists agreed or agreed to disagree, their insight and sharing pushed the debate forward amid head nods and laughter (sometimes nervous, but mostly heartfelt).

Meeting Children Where They Are

Linda opened their conversation by recapping how she and Terry had talked the day before about how some children they see in therapy do not play like children used to, specifically citing puppets as an example. Terry observed that, with the ubiquity of technology in modern society, "some children have forgotten how to play or never learned how to play." She explained that sometimes she has had to teach children what a toy is or "*how to pretend,* because some kids are so used to having a plot [to follow], they don't *naturally pretend* like they used to." She described how a 6-year-old child, who had played with electronics from a very young age, took a puppet and said, "What do I do with this?" When she responded non-directively that he could decide, he rebuffed, "But I don't know what to do with it. I've never seen anything like this!" Louise affirmed that she has "always seen that pattern," in play therapy. She said:
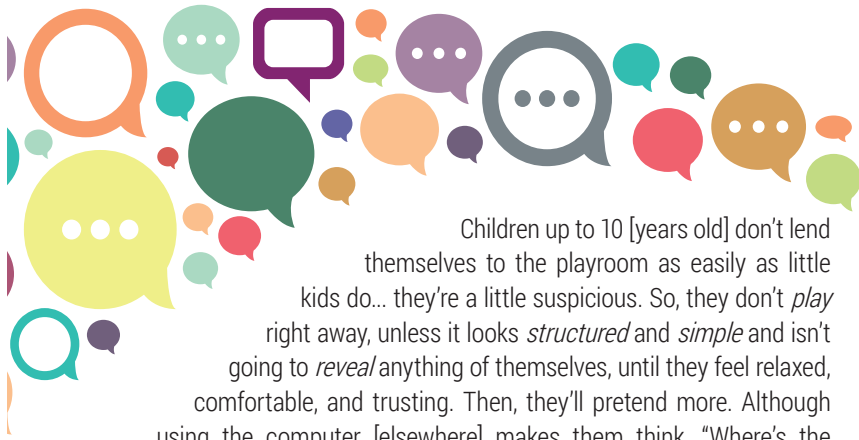
Children up to 10 [years old] don't lend themselves to the playroom as easily as little kids do… they're a little suspicious. So, they don't *play* right away, unless it looks *structured* and *simple* and isn't going to *reveal* anything of themselves, until they feel relaxed, comfortable, and trusting. Then, they'll pretend more. Although using the computer [elsewhere] makes them think, "Where's the *technology* [in the playroom]?" They *can* move from that. They're not *stuck* there, necessarily, but it takes longer because [the playroom] is a different world [than they're used to].

Lessie articulated concern that teaching children to play "a particular way" may not allow for free expression to "come out of the little person." From a child-centered perspective, Garry posited, "I don't think it means that they *don't* know how to play just because they don't use the puppet in the way that we might want it to be used." Garry disagreed that children need to be taught to play, framing play therapy as "a time for *discovery*. If we won't *fit* into the role they expect, telling them what something is for or what to do, and they don't *have* the electronic mechanisms in the playroom… they *will* discover," though "it takes some time for the discovery process to occur." From an ecosystemic perspective, Kevin shared:

> I don't think there's anything wrong with teaching a kid *options* for using a material because… [s/he] didn't grow up knowing what a puppet was. *Somewhere* along the line *somebody* demonstrated it. So, having some education is not interfering with children's developmental process. It's *facilitating* the developmental process.

The core questions for Terry, though, were, "Are kids not *encouraged* to be imaginative and creative anymore… are they dependent on technology?" She lamented that many families do not know how to play interactively together. When asked, "What does your family do for fun?" she said, "close to 90% of families reported, 'We play video games together or we watch television together.' " Kevin observed that "kids are using toys, but the themes are not *internal*" because "it's easier to take a theme you are given. So, sometimes the play ends up being an extension of a video game." He described a child who played Star Wars™ "verbatim." But, then, he "slowly realized it's not *verbatim*. It's modified… and what he's pulling out of it means something to *him*." According to Kevin, the play therapist's task is "to *watch* for how they've tweaked it in some way to put themselves into it."

Lessie professed disquiet that these themes were "all coming out of games" rather than lived experiences, stating, "I know there's life in television but it's not *real* life. It is *not* the family that I live in or the community or the neighborhood. It is something that is *staged* for me

to watch." Her comment reminded Kevin of reading children's fairytales with them. He made the comparison, "Fairytale content is as *bizarre* as some video-game content." This spurred discussion about whether play therapists need to be current with the latest children's trends. When Linda affirmed, "kids have *shifted* to video games and characters," Louise shared a generational perspective, highlighting the power of the therapeutic process for meeting children where they are.

> It's harder for us to relate to the things they do, but the process is still very much the same. And look what stays stable: They all love bop bags. And no matter what figure you put on them, a fighter with gloves or the current villains, they all know what to do with the bop bag. They like to push it and make it move. So, the process is still there, it's just a little *different* and I guess we have to get used to them as much as they have to try to come to our world.

Kevin asserted that "the issue is not the material or the toys in the playroom, it's that the electronics [may] interfere with the relational part" of play therapy. This idea was met with wholehearted agreement from the rest of the group. Garry tendered that "maybe what we're concluding is that the tablet shouldn't *be* there if it actively *does* interfere with the relationship." The discussion turned to the importance of preserving the relationship in play therapy when technology is used.

Preserving the Therapeutic Relationship

To quell concerns, Terry emphasized how "the relationship *is* foundational, an essential piece," of play therapy, while Linda called it "paramount." Kevin added that if tablet use "*starts* to interfere [with the relationship], then we have problems," with which the group largely agreed. Searching for parallels, Louise reiterated:

> If you keep it within the parameters that allow *you* to interact in a meaningful way with them, then they want to tell you and show you what they're doing, or include you. Do you see that as doing what we would've done in the old days with crayons?

Terry suggested it is "just the media" that changes. Kevin provided another analogy. There's no difference between "a kid bringing a book from home and saying, 'This is a really cool book! Let me show it to you,'

and a child showing you how to play Minecraft™." In a light-hearted and humorous exchange, Lessie reiterated the importance of therapist and child getting to know each other mutually, and her apprehension that tablet use could interfere with that.

Kevin offered that "*if* you could find a way to be relational with it," using technology might offer a worthwhile means of treating some children's concerns. Charlie inquired, "How do we strike a *balance* between the way

technology is *taking over* kids' lives from an early age, and [encouraging] the *creativity* that we would like to see [them employ]?" This stimulated a thoughtful discussion about technology's place in and between play therapy sessions.

Using Technology in and Between Play Therapy Sessions

Kevin uses online videos to do systematic desensitization, "because I couldn't get all those situations in the playroom, and I couldn't take them to places where the bugs that scare them are. But they can stop and start the bug on the computer, or make the image smaller" to overcome their fears. Louise conceded that in this context, using a tablet "*is* a form of play." Charlie concurred, "This is where technology *helps*. It's like virtual reality" (cf. Lamb, Etopio, & Lamb, 2018). When Kevin highlighted how "it's *fun*," Charlie proclaimed, "All right! We won't banish tablets, completely, then," to much laughter from the group!

Linda shifted the conversation to other potential uses of technology in play therapy, such as giving tablet homework between sessions. Linda and Charlie discussed apps for learning about and regulating emotions like anger, and Charlie acknowledged "it could be *helpful* if the assignment would carry on what we're doing in the playroom."

Garry questioned "the benefit of that if there's not another person there who knows what to do, knows how to build a relationship, knows how to contribute to it, knows how to communicate understanding to the child, and what the child's dealing with." Garry disagreed with Charlie's proposition that this kind of work could be suggested "several sessions in, when you've been working with the child in the playroom, after you've got a relationship"

(Charlie) on the basis that "we don't know what's going to *emerge*, and it is *always* the relationship that is needed in therapy" (Garry).

Kevin proffered that technology can enhance therapeutic outcomes by asking parents to video special play times at home on their smart phones and reviewing the recording in session. This idea met with less opposition, and Linda further suggested using tablets to work with older kids 8 to 12 years of age for journaling or art journaling, so they "feel more *comfortable* and might give more information, be more honest, and be more transparent." In this vein, Kevin suggested that it "is *amazing* what you can do with the painting app that you *can't do* with actual crayons and paper, *and* you get to keep it, keep *histories* of it, and do *series* of things."

Curious, Louise solicited more information about how using the app differs from using crayons. Charlie noted the large color palette; Terry added the 3-dimensional possibilities. Despite their enthusiasm, Louise wondered if "it becomes a chore [for children] or are they just *happy* to tell you about [their tablet creations]?" Garry echoed Louise's concern for the necessity of therapist interaction, to which Kevin offered, "You could create a whole children's book together, reading it together, spending time together," positing that the true utility of the tablet creation is that "it's permanent, it's familiar, it's *comfortable* [for kids to use], and it *feels* way more age appropriate if the child is a bit older."

Buoyed by the ebullient mood, Kevin joked that he would object to "a kid texting me *during* a session," to which the others laughed and nodded at the hilarity of this mental image. Kevin reported, "they are now texting me between sessions, though." Charlie questioned the acceptability of this practice, and Kevin specified the importance "especially when it's *crisis* stuff" being communicated.

In the last segment of the conversation, Linda accentuated how "*critical* it is to be *purposeful* and thoughtful about defining what we're using." Kevin reminded everyone of the neurological impact of using technology "with children that are *too young*" and Linda of Siegel's (2015) findings on how the adolescent brain is reorganizing during this crucial developmental time. Finally, Charlie underscored the importance of following the American Academy of Pediatrics's (AAP) guidelines on the potential for learning, the deleterious effects on development, and the need to *limit* the amount of time children and adolescents use television and tablets across settings (e.g., AAP, 2016a; AAP, 2016b; Reid et al., 2016).

Participants' Reflective Comments

The author solicited participants' reflective comments on this piece and their current positions on the subject of technology use in play therapy. Linda Homeyer offered that this discussion showcased their agreements and disagreements, as well as their "concerns of the digital

age, while still finally indicating that it is the relationship that is critical. How that relationship is built and/or maintained can vary with or without technology" (personal communication, April 12, 2018). She later added:

> Technology, as with any other media in play therapy, should be used with intention. What is the play value? Does the technology promote one or more of the therapeutic powers of play? How does the use of technology (in whatever form) impact the therapeutic relationship? And, finally, is the play therapist aware of how technology may enhance or inhibit various areas of child development, including the ability to self-regulate? (Personal communication, June 28, 2018)

Terry Kottman responded:

> Because so many children are playing out themes from video games in their sessions, play therapists need to educate themselves about the content (plot and characters) of video games and they need to know enough about video games to help parents understand which games are age-appropriate for children and which should be prohibited or limited at home. [She also believes] specific video games can be used to provide a way to use technology in play therapy sessions to achieve identifiable therapeutic objectives by giving children a chance to practice targeted skills (like cooperation, anxiety management, and frustration tolerance strategies) that can then be applied to other outside-the-playroom situations and relationships. (Personal communication, June 28, 2018)

She acknowledged that her "current stance was spurred by that conversation" and that she owes her " 'conversion' [on the issue of using technology in play therapy] to the conversation," (personal communication, May 27, 2018), citing her new self-published book (e.g., Kottman, Petersen, Kottman, & Lavenz, 2018) and workshops she has recently given with her son, Jacob (e.g., Kottman, 2017), as examples of how she has translated her recent changes in thought into practice.

Conclusion

The use of technology in the playroom is a personal choice that play therapists will have to weigh and measure continually. On one hand, children are comfortable and agile with electronic devices and the advantages of the digital traces they leave. On the other, children nowadays may have fewer opportunities to engage with an attentive adult in an un-plugged setting who can communicate understanding and build a relationship with them. Although play therapists will have to ponder whether and to what extent to include technology in and between sessions, all of us can agree that the relationship provides the true impetus for change through play therapy (e.g., Guerney, 2001; Homeyer & Morrison, 2008; Kottman & Meany-Walen, 2018; Landreth, 2012; O'Connor, 2016; Perry, 1994; Schaefer & Drewes, 2011).

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