

**Child-Centered Play Therapy:
A Practical Guide to Developing
Therapeutic Relationships
with Children**

*Nancy H. Cochran, William J. Nordling,
and Jeff L. Cochran*

Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons,
Inc., 2010. Foreword, preface, images,
references, index. 464 pp. \$65.00 cloth.
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Child-Centered Play Therapy

*Risë VanFleet, Andrea E. Sywulak, and
Cynthia Caparosa Sniscak*

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Foreword, references, index. 236 pp.
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Teaching child-centered play therapy (CCPT) is not an easy task. It is exhilarating, joyous, challenging, rewarding, and stimulating—but not at all easy. Those who teach, research, and write about this approach would agree with the notion that being skilled at CCPT requires more of the practitioner than flawlessly executing a therapeutic methodology. The skillful CCPT practitioner enters the child's world empathetically and understands how to be with each and every child in each and every moment. CCPT requires the practitioner to accept, prize, and allow the child to lead while maintaining the structure of limits and boundaries. It asks the therapist to be fully attentive, vulnerable, and genuine, and to communicate an unwavering and steadfast belief in the innate ability of the child to grow in positive directions. Thus, teaching play-therapy techniques requires the ability to explain a concept clearly and to model it authoritatively; however, fostering a profound belief in the child-cen-

tered way of counseling children requires the teacher to inspire her students to view and relate to children in a new way. Both novice and experienced practitioners will find that very inspiration in each of these highly informative texts.

For years the study and practice of CCPT has been guided by Dr. Garry Landreth's iconic text, *Play Therapy: The Art of the Relationship*. Landreth's writing espouses a model of CCPT which includes the ACT model of limit setting (Acknowledge a child's wishes, feelings, and wants; Communicate the limit; and Target alternative behavior) and a discussion of his ten-week filial therapy model: Child-Parent Relationship Training. The importance of Landreth's work cannot be overstated, but another variation of CCPT exists. In the 1960s, Dr. Bernard Guerney developed filial therapy as a way to improve parent-child relationships. He and his wife, Dr. Louise Guerney have been pioneers in CCPT and filial therapy through research, supervision, teaching, and scholarly writing. Their organization, the National Institute for Relationship Enhancement, continues to offer training and supervision in play and filial therapy. Fundamentally, the variations in CCPT stem from the groundbreaking work of Dr. Virginia Axline in the late 1940s. Axline's books on nondirective play therapy have inspired countless practitioners to improve the lives of children through play. Potential readers will do well to understand the gravity of these brief historical facts in order to realize the significant contributions that these books offer. It is my understanding that the Guerney variation of CCPT has never been published in book form. Therefore it is uncanny yet delightful for child thera-

pists that two books were published in the same year that elucidate Louise Guerney's variation and approach to child-centered play therapy. Collectively, these books share a foundational approach to CCPT but singularly stand uniquely and powerfully on their own. The collective sets of authors are richly experienced practitioners and scholars, and they provide the reader with fascinating case examples and practical knowledge of child therapy that informs their distinctive treatment of the subject.

The use of "a practical guide" in Cochran, Nordling, and Cochran's title impeccably characterizes the essence of their book. Structurally, the authors designed the chapters to have an initial case focus, overview, and skill objectives that act as an anticipatory set to motivate and inform the reader about the content of each section. Further, chapters are stocked with well-written and easy-to-read content, practice activities, vignettes, real-life examples of CCPT, and ideas for future study. As a former student of Nancy and Jeff Cochran, I was reminded of their thoughtful, passionate, and empathic teaching style in the pages of this text. Even a quick scan of the book will reveal its utility as an integral part of a play-therapy reading list.

The expression of empathy is at the heart of Cochran, Nordling, and Cochran's work. Conveying empathy is perhaps the most difficult skill in CCPT. In chapter 6 the authors state: "Empathy requires the therapist to engage in an active process of identification with the inner life of the child, and this is not truly possible without the core therapist attitudes and values of acceptance and unconditional positive regard" (p. 113). In order to assist read-

ers in this pursuit, the authors convey two concepts about empathy that make the cost of the book a bargain. They clarify the five dimensions of empathic responses by providing direct examples of how to respond to a child's feelings, preferences, intentions, beliefs, and relational needs. The authors also share their "Empathy Sandwich" response model that reminds the play therapist to continually validate and understand the child's inner world in limit-setting situations.

The Cochran, Nordling, and Cochran text provides the reader with a full understanding of CCPT, but there are some chapters that stand out to me as a play-therapy educator. In chapter 10, the authors extend the earlier writing of Nordling and Guerney regarding the stages of play therapy in order to give the reader a sense of how children may progress in CCPT. They treat the subject with care making clear that, even though stage-like progression may be evident for many children in play therapy, each child's journey is unique. With this understanding, the authors serve the reader well by identifying transitional stages and challenging play therapists to observe the complex nature of a child's experience. In consideration of a child's journey in CCPT, the authors also hit the mark with the chapter on goals, treatment planning, and evaluating progress. This is a complex topic in the nondirective atmosphere of CCPT but one that must be addressed in the current climate of outcome-driven care. Cochran, Nordling, and Cochran demystify goal setting and evaluation by helping readers understand how children in CCPT may experience levels of change from symptom reduction to personality change and well-

ness. The authors further strengthen this discourse by providing information and examples about forming realistic, clear, and measurable outcomes.

The power of VanFleet, Sywulak, and Sniscak's *Child-Centered Play Therapy* is quickly established in several ways through a clear, academic, easily accessible writing style; rich case examples; and real-world experience. My experience has been that when people use the phrase "play therapy" they most often are referring to CCPT because it represents one of the most frequently used modalities of play therapy today. I found it refreshing to see the authors briefly situate CCPT among the other forms of play therapy in the first chapter to help the reader understand the scope and history of this field.

VanFleet, Sywulak, and Sniscak hit many high notes throughout and, much like the Cochran, Nordling, and Cochran text, this book would also be a welcome addition to a play-therapy course reading list. In fact, of subtle importance and utility to this text are the references to the questions a novice play therapist might ask. For example on page 36, the authors discuss the hesitancy of beginning play therapists to make statements about a child's feelings rather than asking questions for fear of "putting ideas into the children's heads." By identifying the novice play-therapist's questions and concerns, the authors normalize the CCPT process and also give the sense of, "It is OK, we have been there. Others have struggled with this, too!" I firmly believe that a good course textbook accomplishes the goal of speaking to students on their level while also helping teachers and trainers to see their students in the pages. There were

many instances in which I heard my past students' voices come through these pages, and by reading this book, I also felt more prepared to respond meaningfully to them in the future.

Two standout chapters include one on the use of touch in CCPT and the recognition and interpretation of play themes. As a play-therapy educator, I find it imperative to discuss the topic of touch across courses; as a practitioner, I think it essential to educate parents about how and why touch may be a part of CCPT with their child. VanFleet, Sywulak, and Sniscak eloquently define the role of touch in CCPT and clearly delineate appropriate touch from inappropriate touch. Further, the authors share personal stories to identify the risks involved in incorporating touch as a way to help child-centered, and most likely all, therapists to become more thoughtful and intentional about how touch is used with children and communicated to parents and care givers.

VanFleet, Sywulak, and Sniscak provide the most comprehensive and useful chapter on play themes that I have read in some time. The authors introduce readers to common themes like power and control, good versus evil, winning and losing, and how to recognize them through observing repetitive play, changes, and continuity of play. The authors carefully explain and are thoughtful about how the interpretation and communication of play themes is accomplished in their model of CCPT. With that said, the text will help individuals improve their understanding of a child's play by considering such elements as the content, intention, psychological meaning, and relationship of play to life outside the sessions. Through another level

of analysis, readers will be challenged to consider play themes through contextual lenses that respect the unique personhood of the child.

This combined review of two new child-centered play-therapy texts barely scratches the surface of the inherent value that each work offers to novice and experienced play therapists alike. As a passionate child-centered play therapist, I found those Ah-ha moments rise up in me as both texts challenged me to think about my own approach or reminded me of an idea that I need to reconnect to. We are fortunate to have two books that complement each other and provide unique perspectives on the same topic. Much like the work of Axline and Landreth, these books will become an integral part of the child-centered play therapy canon.

—Stephen Demanchick, *Nazareth College, Rochester, NY*

Transactions at Play: Play & Cultural Studies, Volume 9

Cindy Dell Clark, ed.

Lanham, MD: University of America Press, 2009. Notes, charts, references, index. 190 pp. \$29.99 paper.
ISBN: 978076184485

An outstanding collection of original research and new insights on play, this is the ninth volume of a series of annual publications by The Association for the Study of Play (TASP), a scholarly organization of play researchers. The variety of articles—organized into three sections, each of which includes three articles and

an introductory commentary by an eminent play researcher—testifies to the broad spectrum of TASP membership, which includes psychologists, folklorists, sociologists, educators, anthropologists, historians, animal researchers, and therapists, all of them with their own ideas about play. The forward, by series editor James E. Johnson, refers to the book as “a box of jewels,” and I agree.

Helen Schwarzman introduces the first section, “Play and Culture,” with a thoughtful critique of the articles, sometimes agreeing with and sometimes challenging their interpretations. Suzanne Gaskins and Peggy Miller’s “The Cultural Roles of Emotions in Pretend Play” compares the pretend play of middle-class, European-American children and Yucatec Maya children and describes the cultural differences that promote more emotion and fantasy among the Americans. Avigail Morris’s “Nine a Side Basketball in the Kingdom of Tonga: A Case Study in Negotiating Gender Roles” describes the concept of femininity in Tonga culture and how an imported basketball game, adapted by Tongalese girls, provides a more feminine alternative to Western sports. The third piece views culture quite differently. In “Is Hazing Play?” Jay Mechling traces the history of hazing, painting disturbing images of physical and mental abuse during hazing in institutions from fraternities to the military. Mechling opposes dangerous practices but argues that “stylized aggression” resulting in humiliation exists “in the play frame.” Whether one agrees or disagrees, Mechling’s article is a thought-provoking challenge to the view that play is necessarily fun for all the players.