

Play therapy in the SOS Children's Village Lekenik

SOS Children's Village Lekenik has recently enriched its spectrum of psychological support to children with a unique form of play therapy. The therapeutic work is carried out by Slavica Dević and Maja Bošnjak Goleš, a pair of graduate psychologists qualified for implementation of Integrative child play therapy. This one-year pilot-project is a joint venture between the SOS Children's Village Croatia and Center for Child Psychosocial Well-being "Children matter" from Zagreb.

This specific project is promoting the benefits of horizontal cooperation among service providers and modeling the flexible use of existing know-how, that may be relevant for different settings in which children at risk receive protection. The aim of these efforts is to raise the quality of social services for children and youth without adequate parental care, whose complete recovery cannot be achieved without special attention to unresolved psychological issues. In addition, the Child Rights approach to their needs implies the development of skills and competences for social inclusion and independent life, which are important ingredients of socialization in family substitute environment as well as crucial when leaving care.

The project is being financed within the government public works program "Help yourself and others" and it is, at present, in the middle of its implementation cycle.

Until now, the key method applied by the therapists in the individual work with children (beyond 5 years of age) has been the game "The World" (*Polcz Elaine*). It disposes considerable set of therapeutic toys which represent main categories of live beings and objects in our everyday surroundings (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: The set of therapeutic toys belonging to the game "The World" with the tray for construction



Among the available toys the child recognizes representations of her/his inner occurrences and creates her/his own worlds – scenes of therapeutic games. The very process of construction of the world may bring catharsis to a child, while chosen figures and their interrelationships on the tray point out the problems or domains of functioning for which the child calls for assistance and support. Common exploration of the world constructed by the child orients the therapists towards possible interventions, while the play which follows facilitates to the child to participate in the encounters and dialogues, to change the outcomes of the story as well as to explore new opportunities and behavior patterns. Often the play that started on the tray expands into wider physical space.

The play as natural and developmentally adequate medium moves the child's barriers towards opening and confidential sharing but also protects them through the self-regulated consumption of needed support.

Implementation of this method of psychological support is immersed in the holistic approach to child needs. Therefore, the process requires specific inputs from relevant stakeholders of the child's development and welfare. In other words, the intensive psychotherapeutic treatment (carried out through at least 10 sessions of 90 minutes)

accompanies continuous cooperation of the therapists with professional team and SOS mothers. As needed, the wider child's social network also participates in the process (SOS aunts, kindergarten staff, teachers and leaders of leisure time activities).

The overall institutional culture of SOS child village already cherishes assessment and treatment of each child at risk as a unique individual and a participant in her/his development process. Therefore, the internal work methods allow for adequate selection of children in need for individual psychotherapeutic treatment. The play therapy is a method of choice when such treatment is in a short supply in the regular service, when either judged to be more beneficial or needed in addition to conventional psychiatric treatment or when emerging due to new social circumstances (e.g. changes within biological family, escalation of unacceptable behavior, preparation for leaving care etc.)

The sessions and consultations are thoroughly recorded and analyzed to be used for evaluation and research purposes. The significance of around 100 therapeutic plays realized so far emphasizes child's involvement in his/her own therapeutic processes. However, the post treatment follow-up will report about outcomes of the therapeutic work for individual cases.

Our experience suggests that the children quite rapidly become aware that the play therapy is not just a "child's play". In the specific therapeutic relationship, in which the therapists play a role of surrogate parents, the children vigorously face suppressed emotions, traumatic experiences, actual conflicts as well as anxiety associated with future uncertainties and challenges. The effort that the children invest in this process of healing is worth of sincere respect by adults, who less than often embark in the activities which require self-reflection and personal change.

The changes brought by play therapy are various as are the problems that the therapy addresses. Sometimes these changes are evident and objectively measurable, but sometimes subtle and recognizable only by very motivated observers. Each one of these changes is valuable, and the children express them in authentic way such as: "*I had enough, I don't need it anymore*" (boy, 11 years)... "*I am just now learning to go into deep water*" (girl, 6 years)... "*I stood up... on my feet*" - a toy that represents him in "The World" (boy, 5 years).