

The Build-a-House Technique

A Family Play Therapy Assessment Activity

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Assessment is important to the formulation of effective therapeutic interventions. Too often assessment focuses on intra-psychic aspects to the exclusion of interpersonal and systemic. Understanding a child and their presenting issues within the context of the family is critical to deriving an effective treatment plan. This article presents the Build-a-House Technique, a family play therapy assessment activity created by Carla Sharp to "address the need for a child-friendly play technique that would assist the clinician in the assessment of the family system." It is founded in child therapy, family therapy and systems theory and play therapy.

Use of Play in Family Assessment

There are numerous benefits to using play in family assessment as noted by authors of family therapy and play therapy. Ackerman noted that "without engaging children in a meaningful interchange across generations, there can be no family therapy." Keith and Whitaker observed that "fundamental family functioning takes place at the non-verbal level. Play is the medium for expanding their reality." Play is a child's natural form of communication. Often the most relevant information about a family and about a child's presenting issues comes from the spontaneous verbal and nonverbal communication during interaction.

Play facilitates the inclusion of young children in the session. It is not necessarily the observation of young children that is important but rather the interaction with and reaction of parents and siblings to the young children. Carla Sharp notes that the technique tends to lower family defences, increases relaxation, facilitates natural modes of relating, highlights common behavioural patterns and reflects genuine affect.

Description of the Technique

Parents are informed at the onset of therapy that all family members will be asked to participate in a family play activity. It is commonly used at about the fifth session after the therapist has met with the parents for a session and with the child for a few individual sessions. It is contraindicated for use with families experiencing acute grief.

The family play activity itself is rather straightforward and takes about 40 to 50 minutes to complete. Family members are directed into a circle on the floor of the playroom, given a basket of 100 standard wooden blocks of various shapes and asked to build a house, any kind of house they want. They are told that they may put any items they see in the playroom into the house. Family members often place dollhouse furniture, dollhouse people figures and sand tray miniatures in and around the house they have built. They are told that the only rule is that they are to work on it together. The therapist tells the family that he/she will talk with them afterwards about what it was like to build the house. The therapist remains in the room observing family engagement. The therapist responds only to provide clarification or encouragement. The therapist provides feedback to the parents in the next session.

The therapist formulates observations about the process of building the house and about the house itself. Observation of the process provides information related to family structure and dynamics, roles and communication patterns, family strengths and weaknesses, decision-making style, power structure, parenting style, and quality of family relationships. The house can be viewed as a projective instrument of the family's issues particularly those related to boundaries, conflicts, subsystems and unconscious dynamics.

Role of the Therapist

The therapist does not offer interpretation but may validate observations by asking questions including if it is typical of home life. The therapist may ask family members about what they enjoyed or did not like about the process and who was in charge. The therapist will sometimes ask for further information about the process or aspects of the house. Carla Sharp encourages the therapist to provide the parents and family members with at least one strength and to share with the parents insights observed. The therapist has the sometimes difficult task of understanding the symbolism and metaphors used by the family both in the communication and in the house itself.

The manual includes a recording form that is useful for organizing observations. The form covers numerous areas including the following: spontaneous response to instructions; who initiates, helps or hinders; level of organization in the family's approach to the task; role of each family member; communication patterns; level of control exerted by parents; conflicts and level of resolution; family dyads or triads; manner in which parents relate to each other; family's use of humour, teasing or joking; who introduces and builds a bathroom, kitchen; family member boundaries; level of observed enjoyment; reaction to house falling; attachment; family cohesion; family adaptability, description of the house and symbolic objects; description of how the family members described the house and the process; and family strengths.

Areas of Assessment

Multiple areas of assessment are possible with the use of the Build-a-House Technique. Extensive coverage of all assessment areas are beyond the scope of this article, however, Carla Sharp in her manual covers the most relevant of these: quality of attachments, parenting styles, family structure and dynamics, and family adaptability. She cautions the therapist to keep in mind how the areas are impacted by the family's culture, developmental stage and family system stressors.

Carla Sharp utilizes the Calgary Family Assessment Model (Wright & Leahey) as an assessment framework that covers three areas: structural, developmental and functional. Within this, functional encompasses stages of family development, tasks of each stage and attachments.

Parenting style can be observed during the activity in how the parents manage the task, promote participation and cooperation and deal with conflict and child behaviour. Information can also be gained about differences between parents with respect to style as well as parental alliance. Carla Sharp refers to Baumrind's research on the influence of parenting style on child development as presented by Stollak et al and uses the categorizations of autocratic, democratic and laissez-faire.

Family structure and dynamics can be reflected by family member's interaction during the activity. Level of enmeshment and disengagement can be observed.

Family adaptability can be observed according to Carla Sharp utilizing the Circumplex Model (Olson & Killorin). The model evaluates family cohesion along a continuum of disengaged, separated, connected, and enmeshed and measures family flexibility along a continuum of rigid, structured, flexible, and chaotic.

Projective Use of the House

The projective use of the house built is of particular interest. Carla Sharp, based on her experience with using the Build-a-House Technique, has associated common attributes to distinct styles of houses including ordinary, fantastic, roofed, one room, extended, separate dwellings, chaotic, those with lack of exterior walls, unusual bathroom treatment, lack of marital bedroom, lack of kitchen, and bizarre house. Caution needs to be taken in interpreting the house as is true of all projective instruments.

House characteristics suggestive of the level of attachments and boundaries include the following: single house versus multiple dwellings, level of separate and differentiated rooms, presence or absence of common areas, presence or absence of doors and walls.

Family dynamics and roles are often reflected in the house and are characterized by the following: level of security, organized versus disorganized, ordinary versus bazaar appearance, ordered versus chaotic, elaborate versus impoverished, realistic versus fantastic, level of openness to the outside, extent to which family members build their own space versus the space of others, presence or absence of a kitchen and bathroom and family members attitude around the process of building these rooms.

Information that can relate to parenting style and parental alliance include the presence or absence of a marital bedroom and who builds it, and the presence or absence of separate areas for children and adults.

An ordinary house as defined by Carla Sharp is one characterized by the following: family members created house floor plan using play room floor and blocks to create walls, doors and windows; house is organized and looks like a house; each family member has their own space; common areas are present where family members gather as a family; presence of a kitchen and a bathroom; building process is cooperative and enjoyable for family members; all family members participated; reasonable level of creativity is used; and therapist would answer yes to the question would they want to live there.

Fantastic houses are often very creative yet atypical. They are not functional in that they may lack rooms commonly associated with everyday family life. Although imaginative, they often emit a sense of confusion and chaos. Houses with roofs are not very common and may suggest something about the family's need for protection and security. One-room houses and those without inside walls may suggest lack of boundaries and differentiation and enmeshment. Extended houses tend to encompass separate individual space yet lack common areas for family engagement possibly suggesting disengagement. Again, caution is warranted as this style may also be present with recently blended families.

Separate dwellings may suggest dysfunction or disengagement. Chaotic houses are consistent with families who have difficulty organizing around the activity. Exterior walls provide containment, protection and shelter and according to Carla Sharp a house built without exterior walls may suggest that a parent cannot "contain" the family or trauma may have impaired the parent's ability to do so. Houses that reflect unusual bathroom treatment are notable. Marital conflict or dysfunction can be associated with the lack of a marital bedroom. The lack of a kitchen or its unusual treatment can be suggestive of systemic issues and often relates to the level of nurturing and family engagement present. Bizarre houses are those that do not resemble a house, do not seem to offer security or nurturance and may include scary or uncommon household items.

Cultural Considerations

It is always important to address culture when considering the use of a therapeutic intervention. The Build-a-House Technique has been used effectively across multiple cultures. Cultural aspects need to be deliberated when interpreting both the family's process and the house itself. Nonetheless, the technique has both assessment and therapeutic value across cultures.

Conclusion

The Build-a-House Technique is an effective way to gather extensive clinical information about the child and family system towards formulating meaningful therapeutic interventions.

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