

600 Theraplay® Groups in Head Start Classrooms

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I was motivated to return to graduate school to obtain an MSW in 1996 after adopting a sibling group from an orphanage in Russia. This same experience also introduced me to Theraplay. After graduating in 1999, I was hired on a part time basis by the Two Rivers Head Start Agency to provide developmental screenings, implement IEP's, and interface between the program and the school district for children with special needs at their Aurora (IL) Center which serviced about 240 children aged 3 to 5 years. A very dedicated teacher approached me one day and shared her thoughts about "special services" being available to the entire classroom and not just a few children deemed exceptional. I began "experimenting" in her classroom with some traditional styled social skills groups without much success. During the summer of 2000, being in need of some CEU's and living close to The Theraplay Institute, I completed the week long Introductory training and decided to try Theraplay groups in the classrooms at the Aurora center.

I initiated the process by presenting a proposal to my direct supervisor outlining the theory, benefits and format of a Theraplay group. After her approval, I next approached the center supervisor who indicated if any teacher agreed, I could proceed. The first set of teachers turned my down; however, one fun loving pair offered to give groups a try. Their enthusiasm for the groups within their classroom influenced some of the other teachers, and soon I was providing 6 groups a week in that one center. I met with each group of classroom teachers individually prior to each group to share my ideas for group activities, discuss concerns, and address any specific needs of the teachers or children. All the teachers and I met together twice a year to set overall goals, and they all completed a survey for me at the end of the year. It truly was the input of those teachers that first year that enabled me to develop a format for Theraplay groups that became recognized within our Head Start program as an effective and innovative means of promoting positive child development. Perhaps one of the crowning moments for me was when the teachers who had initially declined the play groups met with the center supervisor to complain that it was unfair that they were excluded from having play groups in their classrooms.

However, as the groups became more popular, they also came under more scrutiny. The Executive Director was concerned that I was spreading germs by lotioning kids, and the Associate Director was concerned that I was rewarding with food. The Early Head Start Coordinator had some exposure to Theraplay and felt it was an intrusive, damaging model of interaction. The groups were observed and teachers were interviewed by everyone from the Mental Health Consultant to the Education Consultant to the Child Health Coordinator. Making some minor changes and standing my ground, most everyone was happy and endorsed the groups. Other centers within Two Rivers Head Start Agency began requesting groups in their classrooms. What began as casual meetings with a few teachers at one center and 6 groups per week grew into a formal training for teachers at the beginning of the year and upwards of 20 groups per week. I led over 600 Theraplay groups during my almost five years with the agency. What everyone noted was a significant decrease in reports of behavior problems in the children, more capacity within the classroom for cooperative activities, and teachers that were rated as significantly more empathic and supportive of the children.

Introducing a new concept into this agency and having to defend it to multiple stakeholders led me to think about the rationale for Theraplay groups in a more formal way. The remainder of this article is adapted from a presentation I gave to the National Head Start in 2003, originally titled "Why I Do What I Do".

Despite the current federal Administration's emphasis on cognitive gains in Head Start children, Head Start itself is actually defined by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration on Children, Youth and Families in its Regulations and Program Guidance as having "the overall goal of increasing the social competence of young children in low-income families." Furthermore, the concept of social competence is described as "the interrelatedness of social, emotional, cognitive and physical development."* However, the incidence of opportunity to promote social competence in Head Start children cannot be assumed. Rather, social, physical and emotional activities must be available in a planned and organized manner. The use of cooperative and nurturing games and activities within an adult-directed, structured play group, such as Theraplay, facilitates the development of the social and emotional skills necessary for children to be effective in dealing with their present environment as well as their later responsibilities in school and life.

Piaget described preschool children as being in the pre-operational stage of cognitive development. They are highly concrete, egocentric, have a short attention span, and remember and respond to only what is immediately and emotionally meaningful to them. They are not able to use cause-effect thinking independently and reliably to solve problems. Additional research indicates that they primarily learn social-emotional skills in the context of an adult/child attachment relationship. Therefore, any attempt to intervene and teach young children social skills must occur in a safe environment with a caring adult, use a medium that is emotionally meaningful such as play, and provide immediate, concrete feedback.

Current research indicates that social-emotional development and academic learning are far more closely intertwined in the early years than has been previously understood, and that a child's social and behavioral competence is more predictive of academic success than their cognitive skills or family background. A significant body of research also highlights the important role that teachers and care-givers play in the development of social and emotional skills in young children. Yet, Head Start preschool teachers and child care providers report that disruptive behavior is the single greatest challenge that they face. At the same time, they are under increasing pressure to ensure that the children in their care, in accordance with a national goal, "enter school ready to learn."

The use of a Theraplay group within the early childhood classroom is an aggressive, universal means of intervention and prevention that effectively addresses the emotional and developmental needs of preschool children that underlie many of the destructive social patterns that negatively impact their ability to be successful in school. The groups offer a proactive means of promoting greater social skills in the classroom by simultaneously meeting the developmental needs of individual children while facilitating a positive learning climate. Specifically the Theraplay groups within Head Start classrooms at Two Rivers Head Start in Batavia, Illinois, were noted to:

- Improve the quality of the early childhood classroom environment
- Provide teachers with resources to maintain an emotionally positive and cognitively enriched classroom
- Create a classroom-based strategy to promote social and emotional competence that combined child-focused strategies with strategies targeted to support teachers and other care-givers
- Allow an intervention that simultaneously addressed the child's cognitive, social and emotional issues

In addition, the Theraplay group addressed the following developmental domains:

- Physical development
- Relational and social development
- Cognitive development
- Language and communication
- Expressive development, including play and fantasy
- Regulation of affect and behavior
- Sense of self, self-organization and relation to reality

Teachers were encouraged to use Theraplay groups in their classroom to provide cooperative and nurturing activities that:

- Help children develop social skills, problem solving skills and encourage following directions
- Enhance self-esteem and increase trust in others through concrete, personal and positive experiences
- Build positive relationships among group members
- Encourage children to learn and practice self-control and the internalization of rules and structure

Implementing Theraplay groups within a Head Start program can be challenging and often times down right discouraging. However, the process of offering nurture, challenge, structure, and engagement in a group context such as a classroom where children and adults spend significant time together can mean the difference between having children who develop a group identity and sense of belonging and having children who spend their day experiencing themselves as isolate and disconnected. Also, in this process, the teachers often come to realize that their goals in the classroom, such as helping children feel secure, teaching them to share and work cooperatively, working through frustration, helping children to focus and learn self-control, which are in fact the cornerstones of social and emotional competence in young children, are effectively addressed in a Theraplay group in a fun and developmentally appropriate way.

*U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Administration for Children and Families. Administration on Children, Youth, and Families. Head Start Bureau (1996). Head Start Program Performance Standards and Other Regulations: 45 CFR Parts 1301, 1302, 1303, 1304 and 1305, 1306, and 1308 and Guidance. pp.1.

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