**Learning About Play Therapy**

I would like to share a little bit about working with young children, starting at age 3, in the mental health capacity. Most people tend to be shocked that children so young could need help in this area, but there are many events in life that could result in a child struggling and having emotional challenges. Here are some common questions that can come up when considering therapy for a child:

*Why may Children need to see a therapist?*

There are a variety of reasons why a child could be having a hard time. At times, adults think that some certain experiences are not a big deal or that a child is too young to know what is going on. However, since most children learn to read their caregivers’ facial expressions and body language as infants, they tend to be clued in to what is happening around them. Some of the events that could lead to a referral include, but are not limited to, a new sibling, medical issues, moving to a new town, separation or divorce of caregivers, starting at a new school, the loss of a loved one (including pets), natural disasters, witnessing something violent on television, in the home or community, caregivers working longer hours, caregivers with illnesses, removal from the home and so forth.

*What behaviors could lead to a referral?*

Every child responds to feelings and events in different ways. Some children may become angry and aggressive while others are sad and withdrawn. There could be regression in milestones they have already mastered, such as eating, sleeping through the night and using the bathroom. Social interactions with other children might be difficult and they may show some anxiety in any given situation.

*What is Play Therapy?*

In play therapy, the therapist provides a safe space for the child to play out whatever is causing their emotional distress. Oftentimes, it is difficult for children of this age range to talk about what they are feeling or experiencing. Because children learn to play before they talk, play is considered the first language of a child, making it a comfortable environment even when limited in verbal communication.

*How does it work?*

Prior to meeting with a child individually, the therapist will meet with the child’s caregivers to gain a better understanding of the child, the family and the challenges they are having. They will set goals for the child and will ideally work towards them together. Sessions are usually once a week though can sometimes be increased or decreased, depending on the progress or if there is a crisis.

*What happens in a session?*

Typically, a therapist will follow the child’s lead in play and make observations about what the child is doing. The activities can vary from using a sand tray to play doh to doll play to art. Some therapists are more directive and will choose the activities themselves. Sometimes parents will also be included in the play therapy session. Therapists also use the time to model different ways to manage emotions and give children ideas on how to calm themselves.

*How long will it take?*

This depends on the child, the reason for the referral and the goals that were set with the child’s caregivers. Information from the caregiver about how their child is doing in different environments helps the therapist determine how much progress the child has made.

Children, especially young children, are just beginning to experience big feelings and do not know how to manage them in the way grown-ups do. This does not mean that there is something wrong with a child, but rather that they just need a little more support in learning some tools on how to control their emotions in a different way. Remember to keep in mind that we, as adults, can struggle when going through emotional distress, even with years of learning how to cope.

Prior to starting therapy for your child, I recommend reading A Child’s First Book About Play Therapy, written by Marc A. Nemiroff and Jane Annunziata. It is a wonderful book that simplifies what play therapy is all about and many caregivers have found to be helpful. If you have any questions about this article, or have concerns about your child, please feel free to email me.

Liza G. Brennan, LMFT is a child and family therapist for We Care Services for Children. She can be contacted at lgbrennan@wecarechildren.org.