

Psychodrama with children and adolescents—Introduction

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“There is nothing more wonderful and incomprehensible and nothing that becomes stranger to us and is more thoroughly lost than the soul of the child at play”. (H. Hesse)

The importance of play and its forms as a naturally occurring activity has been recognised by many modalities in psychotherapy and in the field of developmental psychology (LaForett and Mendez 2016; Siviý 2016). Rousseau emphasized the importance of play in early years and child education (Rousseau 1914). Johan Huizinga, in his fundamental work “*Homo Ludens: A study of the play-element in culture*” (1938), also recognised that “every play means something”, because children are ingenious constructors of their reality. In self-chosen roles, often rather strong ones, they playfully find solutions to any problems they may encounter. In the recent past, neurobiologists have recognised the importance of play in specific areas of the pre-frontal cortex in simple mammals, and poor levels of social competence in animals deprived of the experience of playing (Pellis and Pellis 2009; Hüther and Quarch 2016). Wang and Aamodt (2012) described how play activates the brain’s reward circuitry but not negative stress responses.

Psychodramatists for children and youth have a real trump card in their hands. Jakob L. Moreno, the founder of psychodrama, created and developed the therapeutic theories of creativity and spontaneity in observing and playing with children in Viennese parks. He called himself “the children’s friend, their constant companion”

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(Moreno 1923, cited in Hutter and Schwehm 2009, pp. 52–53). In many other therapeutic approaches, the method and the techniques were adapted laboriously to the treatment of children. In psychodrama, the central techniques were developed for adults, but their strong roots lie in children's play.

Although the play has been recognised as of vital importance for the child's development, in the overall social context and practices, its role seems rather underestimated. Educators in kindergartens and schools rarely use play in their daily routine. Even parents in their practices are mostly focused on educational issues. Still, there is a lot to learn about how to support children in their play.

Children are known to use different forms of communication than adults. Play is the medium in which they predominantly express themselves and stage their inner reality. In play, the "royal road" to children, the appropriation and shaping of reality happens in a symbolic way that children enjoy. Through the free creation and experience in play, the child regains self-confidence and the ability to control what happens, which has a great influence on their mental health. Moreno saw the crucial effect of the natural human ability to play in the regaining of perspective to be creatively active towards life. Therefore, symbolic play and actions are of great importance in psychodrama therapy with children and youth as an affective-cognitive free space and field of learning.

The following journal highlights 17 interesting and inspiring articles with examples of successful therapeutical practices and research designs in the field.

Alfons Aichinger points out how looking at the basic needs from a disorder-specific perspective can initiate integration of the parts of the self that cannot be dealt with. He uses examples of different disorders and settings (counselling, family play therapy, individual and group therapy), and underlines how the orientation towards the satisfaction of basic psychological needs prevents child psychodramatists from simply playing along with the re-enactment game, and opens up room for the repressed parts.

Rebecca Walters underlines the difference between sociodramatic and psychodramatic Empty Chair work with children's groups and addresses why, when and ways to use Sociodramatic Empty Chair in warm-ups, action and sharing phases of a psychodrama or sociodrama group session. She provides details of several ways to use the Single Sociodramatic Empty Chair and the Two Sociodramatic Empty Chairs that can be used in counselling/therapy groups, the classroom and community settings.

Milena Mutafchieva, Stefan Flegelskamp, and Reijo Kauppila describe two innovative products for the stabilisation of traumatised children among refugee, asylum seeking, and immigrant families. The EBTS-Programme is a psychodrama-based short trauma stabilisation process for parents and children that connects traumatised children to their parents and thus to their most important resource for resilience—attachment. In the EBTS-Training, professionals learn to conduct the EBTS-Programme in groups of refugee families through methods based on psychodrama and sociometry.

Angela Sordano presents the intersubjective, Jungian perspective, according to which the group is an archetypically connoted, transitional space. She pays special attention to the fact that the group is the main protagonist although the single individuals do not disappear, but focus is set on how partial Selves interact while

sharing a common drama. She explores the function of *embodiment*, the *leader's special role* in the group process, and *non-participant observation as a tool* for clinical outcome evaluation.

Kristina Gotseva-Balgaranova describes a study that aims to explore the relation between the basic need of self-efficacy in children and its reflection on children's social-emotional competence. She provides as examples two cases of a 7-year-old boy (J.) and an 8-year-old girl (M.), both of whom displayed problematic behaviour due to specific issues with self-efficacy. She discusses possible therapeutic interventions aimed at reinforcing the feeling of being self-efficient and thereby increasing children's social-emotional competence.

Fabian Blobel focuses on the concept of “psychodramatic sociometry”, which combines action-sociometry, as a tool to do criteria-related constellations in the group room, with the psychodrama techniques of stage, role, role-reversal, double, mirror and sharing. He developed this technique while working for many years in a variety of therapeutic and pedagogic groups of adolescents aged 13 years and older. He provides some examples that highlight its practical use in the group.

Csilla Németh and Blanka Mihály describe a method they developed in the past twenty years for 14- to 18-year-old adolescents. The technique for adolescents contains elements of both psychodrama for children and for adults. The concept contains four pillars: (1) co-created and co-played imaginary stories with “distant keeping techniques” (2) leaders in “double roles” (3) emphasis on warm-ups (4) modified age-specific basic psychodrama techniques. Examples are provided for illustration.

Karl-Ernst Heidegger emphasises the necessity of developing new family processes that will help the child to apply newly gained knowledge and skills from psychodrama in its daily life. He underlines the need of inclusion of parents in order to increase the effectiveness of the therapeutic children's group. He places a special focus on the personal auxiliary roles, the satisfaction of the needs of both parents and children as well as the striving for encounter between the group and the family.

Catarina Garcia Ribeiro, Tiago Pereira, and João Teixeira de Sousa present a research study carried out within a Morenian psychodrama group for adolescents. The group was started due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the research was intended to characterize spontaneity and the clinical status before therapy began and its evolution along nine months of intervention. They used structured questionnaires and a non-structured individual interview to measure the participants' subjective perception of therapy impact in both the face-to-face and the online modality. The results showed improvements in spontaneity, subjective well-being, symptomatology, life function and risk/harm.

Dagmar Mingers and Andrea Valdivia describe a tool for risk-assessment of the well-being of pre-schoolers and primary schoolers. They used Moreno's role theory and Alfons Aichinger's work with inner parts as a basis to make it easier for children to describe the harmful and good parts of their caregivers' roles. The symbolic level of the play gives the opportunity to discover which attachment experiences, loyalties, relationship patterns, stresses and fears, and unfulfilled needs a child is dealing with.

Beáta H. Pozsár and Andrea Nemes emphasise their efforts to find a method that can deal with the challenges of the whole range of complex problems children face: behavioural difficulties, dysfunction in basic skills, social difficulties, learning

ability problems, physical symptoms, etc. They have combined Hanna Kende's psychodrama with children and Jean Ayres' Sensory Integration Therapy (SIT). They cite examples to illustrate how these methods can help and complete each other in order to deal with complex situations and problems.

Larisa Mogunova and Julia Savelyeva propose a possible classification of the reasons children choose destructive roles associated with various aspects of group dynamics, the needs of children, role conflicts and characteristics of their development. The authors explore the cases when: 1) the ability to express anger in the game transforms into sadistic impulses; 2) this is "constructive" for the improvement of the child's Ego, and 3) it is destructive for the formation of its personality.

Petya Pandurova presents the case of a 9-year old boy who was recommended treatment because of his fears. Psychotherapeutic interventions, combination between CBT and psychodrama, were focused on 3 basic areas: symptom work (fear); work focused on the satisfying of basic needs that aims at enhancing the resilience, adaptability and Ego development; consultations with parents. She listed key moments on both—content and process level.

*Csilla Kubovics-Juhász, Fruzsina Gellért, Dalma Hosszú, and Anikó Papp-Huszá*r describe their professional experiences as psychologists and grief counsellors and the contribution to a complex bereavement programme called "Soulbird Camp" organized by Bátor Tábor Foundation (Hungary). They cover practical and important aspects of group leading when working with clients with these conditions, and share thoughts on how traumatic loss has a special impact on group dynamics.

Nikolay Koev presents the two-year journey of a 6-year-old aggressive boy in a psychodrama with children group. The author finds the similarities of the therapeutic process of the child and Andersen's tale "The tinder box". The group dynamics, the leaders' interventions and feedback to the parents and the feedback from boy's teachers as reported by his parents are included in the progress report.

Virág Szikora demonstrates the mask-making technique in child's psychodrama groups in their practice in Hungary. She described a case of an adopted young girl and her readiness of elaborating her traumatic experiences by creating her mask. She focuses on how the creation of the mask and the character behind it accelerated her inner work.

Hannes Krall describes psychodramatic work with social-emotionally burdened children aged 6–12 years. Changes in the children's social interactions and their role developments in the course of psychodrama work are discussed and examined as part of an accompanying practical research project. A case study is used to explain the psychodramatic process and the subsequent analysis.

Many of the colleagues that contributed articles to the journal are members of FEPTO. The Federation of European Psychodrama Training Organisations gathers psychodrama institutes from 27 European and Mediterranean countries and the Network Group for Psychodrama with Children and Youth provides space for scientific and social exchanges between psychodramatists working with children and youth. Participants in the annual meetings have discussed collaborative ideas and attitudes, have developed research designs, and, very importantly, created psychodrama training standards for child and youth therapists.

Playing together with children in psychodrama therapy requires courage, empathy, and a high level of self-reflection of the therapist. If the process of the play is successful, children and therapists experience healing encounters during a treatment that is enjoyable in a setting that is either group or individual. In the training as a child and youth psychodrama therapist, years of learning and practice must also mean years of play. Those who have a profound experience of playing their own selves as children are able to build a trustful relationship with the child during the therapeutic process.

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We believe that the reader will find many inspiring ideas and practices and due to the articles included in this journal, we will have better skills and ideas of how to play with children and youth and how to include it in their treatment.

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