

Riding the SEESAW of Values and Ethics:

A Guide to Best Practice



| KIMBERLEY K. W. WARNECKE, BA; BONNIE M. DAVEY, BA; ELLEN M. MCNEILL, BA;
JENNIFER PENNINGTON, EDS, LCMHCS, NCC, RPT; & TONY C. LAI, MA, LPC, RPT-S,

Mikey (pseudonym and case compilation) had been in foster care for most of his life. He finally found a foster-adoptive family that was able to meet his needs and built a strong, loving attachment. Once Mikey's biological parents' rights were terminated, the case worker reminded the family that a search still needed to be completed for other biological family members. Though Mikey and his foster family hoped he would be adopted by them, Mikey ended up being adopted by an uncle from another state despite the advocacy I (BD) employed with the caseworker. My advocacy in this situation stemmed from professional obligations and strong feelings about Mikey and his foster family.

There are many instances where strong feelings arise for play therapists. Consider differing parenting philosophies, a teen deciding to remain in a negative relationship, or a guardian prematurely terminating therapy. Ethical codes and best practices are clear when it comes to respecting clients' values and considering their wellbeing.

However, how should play therapists' strong feelings, beliefs, and values be navigated in light of clear professional and ethical mandates? Do existing mental health and play therapy ethical guidelines offer sufficient direction when navigating these difficult spaces?

Ethical Guidelines

Clear themes emerge regarding this topic throughout the Association for Play Therapy's (APT; 2020) *Play Therapy Best Practices* and ethical guidelines from leading mental health associations in the US (e.g., American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy [AAMFT], 2015; American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014; American Psychological Association [APA], 2017; National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2018).

The aforementioned organizations agree that therapists must not discriminate or deny services to clients based on race, sexual orientation, gender identity, political belief, religion, ethnicity, or other factors

CLINICAL EDITOR'S COMMENTS:

SEESAW provides a playful method for considering the ups and downs of play therapy ethical dilemmas.

(AAMFT, 2015, Standard 1.1; ACA, 2014, Section C.5; APA, 2017, Section 3.01; APT, 2020, section A.2; NASW, 2017, Standard 4.02). Furthermore, the mandate to seek supervision, consultation, personal therapy, training, or additional education when a therapist is at risk of imposing personal values on clients is consistent throughout these guidelines, as well—especially when these values or beliefs are discriminatory in nature (AAMFT, 2015, Preamble; ACA, 2014, Section I.1.b; APA, 2017, Introduction; APT, 2020, Section A.5; NASW, 2017, Purpose). For example, a politically conservative therapist may experience difficulty remaining fully neutral and maintaining unconditional positive regard for a client who is outspoken about their more liberal political beliefs. Similarly, working with an adolescent who is questioning their gender identity or sexual orientation could challenge a therapist whose religion may not be fully accepting of this. In these spaces, ethical codes urge play therapists to take additional steps to ensure their personal values do not hinder effective therapeutic work.

Furthermore, play therapists must first and foremost avoid harming clients in any way (ACA, 2014, Section A.4.a; APA, 2017, Section 3.04; APT, 2019, Section D.2). This entails protecting the therapeutic relationship and not abusing one's position of power within it (AAMFT, 2015, Standard 1.7; ACA, 2014, Preamble). Ethical Codes across various disciplines are clear that clients have a right to autonomy—to make their own decisions and control the direction of their lives, regardless of whether they conflict with the play therapist's own opinions or beliefs (AAMFT, 2015, Standard 1.8; ACA, 2014, Preamble; APA, 2017, Principle E; NASW, 2017, Standard 1.02). However, when working with children, this can become tricky, because children are unable to autonomously exercise their legal rights and instead must depend on the adults in their lives to advocate for them, as in Mikey's case. Therefore, as play therapists who often work with caregivers or legal guardians, sometimes it may be more about being aware of how our personal values conflict with these systems than the child client themselves. In the end, play therapists hold the ethical responsibility to place clients' needs before their own and consistently make decisions that promote client growth and well-being (ACA, 2014, Purpose; APT, 2019, Section A.5; NASW, 2017, Standard 1.06).

Both APT and ACA recognize play therapists will likely encounter ethical dilemmas that do not feel as black and white as guidelines suggest. In these circumstances, they suggested utilizing a carefully considered ethical decision-making model or process (ACA, 2014, Section I.1.b; APT, 2019, Section D.2). With this in mind, the present authors suggest the SEESAW method described below as a useful tool when weighing personal values with ethical guidelines. This helpful mnemonic device and its accompanying ethical decision-making considerations is designed to help play therapists:

- **See** and identify the problem;
- **Explore** ethical principles;
- **Evaluate** for personal biases;
- **Seek** assistance and guidance;
- **Assess** and evaluate all courses of action; and
- **Work** a plan that prioritizes the client.

The SEESAW Method

A child's seesaw is an image that clearly and playfully represents the equilibrium play therapists strive to obtain in committing to ethical practice. To operate a seesaw, two sides must be balanced to ensure that both partners may successfully exit the apparatus while avoiding injury. Most importantly, the partner who carries the most weight (i.e., the play therapist) must ensure that the other partner (i.e., the child or family) does not get hurt in the process. Using commonalities between three established ethical decision-making models (e.g., Carnes-Holt et al., 2016; Kocet & Herlihy, 2014; Thacker & Blueford, 2018), the present authors created this acronym to enable therapists to apply these general ethical principles in their work with clients.

See and Identify the Problem

When a play therapist encounters a situation with a client that conflicts with their own personal belief system, it is important to first identify the conflict. This allows the play therapist to further explore and self-reflect on why the situation creates a problem for them and from where it arises. What are the bangs, bumps, and scares that may happen on a rough seesaw ride? How are you feeling about this ride? Just like learning to ride a seesaw with a new partner, starting and progressing through the therapeutic process may have its ups and downs.

Learning to identify the "strong feelings" discussed earlier and being sensitive to warning signals is essential:

- Are you experiencing physiological responses to something your client is saying, such as increased heart rate or tense muscles?
- Are you having difficulty remaining objective and providing unconditional acceptance of the client?

These may be signals to assess one's reactions and identify potential problems or value conflicts that are arising.

Explore Ethical Principles

After clearly identifying the problem and all its contributing factors, the next step of SEESAW is to turn to the ethical guidelines for one's specific helping profession. It is critical to remain objective and view situations within the context of the code of ethics by which one is

governed. The ethical principles and themes outlined earlier serve as a guide for self-reflection when faced with a values conflict. Our client's natural "playground" may have a broken seesaw or no seesaw at all. We can help the child and their parents learn how to use a seesaw on their own. What are the rules of the playground or the park where it is located, and how might these rules help facilitate a smoother ride?

Exploring ethical principles may lead the play therapist to consider anti-discrimination mandates or the power dynamics at play in the relationship. If privilege is present in any form, the play therapist will need to carefully consider ways to acknowledge it and seek to make a decision that promotes equity, avoids discrimination, and is truly in the client's best interest. Diligently referencing ethical guidelines reminds play therapists of important ethical principles during decision making, providing clients with the best and most equitable care possible.

Evaluate for Personal Biases

Next, having framed one's decision-making process with the ethical guidelines of their profession, the play therapist can continue by evaluating for personal biases that prevent provision of ethical care to the client. Increasing self-awareness through self-reflection is a critical part of being an ethically attuned play therapist. Why aren't you having a good time on the seesaw? What about this ride makes it feel unsafe?

Play therapists may need to humbly consider their own previous experiences, past traumas, and family of origin issues to identify how these have contributed to the values conflict they are facing:

- Is your personal background leading to countertransference?
- Would you be responding differently if the client were of a different religion, race, gender identity, culture, or sexual orientation?

Although play therapists are not being asked to compromise who they are or always agree with clients, they do need to refrain from imposing personal beliefs and biases on clients or discriminating against those whose values differ from their own (Linde, 2016).

Seek Assistance and Guidance

Though independent reflection is an important step in the decision-making process, it is also crucial to gain a wider therapeutic perspective through accessing professional play therapy resources. Who are the helpers around you who can help operate the seesaw safely?

Counseling is not an island, and it is necessary to seek guidance and assistance when a situation arises that is overwhelming or conflicting:

- Does the client trigger something for you that you have not yet considered and/or worked through, yourself?
- How might your "unfinished business" manifest in your relationship with the client or through the therapeutic process?

When a play therapist encounters a situation that conflicts with their personal beliefs so deeply they cannot maintain objectivity, it is paramount to seek assistance from colleagues and other professionals in the field to receive support and check for blind spots. Play therapists can use other available resources, such as searching play therapy websites or research databases, seeking relevant education, training, supervision, or consultation opportunities, reaching out to state play therapy chapters, consulting other decision-making models, or finding additional readings.

Assess and Evaluate All Courses of Action

After a play therapist has identified a problem, reviewed best practices, evaluated for personal biases, and sought assistance and supervision, it is time to put all the proverbial cards on the table. This stage offers the opportunity for the play therapist to look at the options available and evaluate the best course of action. What needs to change to establish a more enjoyable rhythm?

This includes weighing the advantages and disadvantages for the client in each scenario, as well as how to proceed.

- Which part(s) of the plan should be prioritized?
- Are any other professionals or client support systems needed to move forward?

Remember, play therapists always have an ethical responsibility to make decisions that promote the client's growth and overall well-being.

Work a Plan That Prioritizes the Client

After assessing and evaluating the options, the last step in the SEESAW decision-making process is to work the plan and make the adjustments

necessary to find a better balance on the seesaw. It is the play therapist's responsibility to adjust their rhythm with the client or successfully exit their seesaw by choosing the plan that is in the client's best interest and helps them reach their goals.

Conclusion

Play therapists care about their clients and want what is best for them. At times, encountering strong personal values may be unavoidable. In situations such as Mikey's, play therapists consider what they might want for the child, what the child and family wants, and what the system wants or does. Factoring in all these elements can confute our strong feelings with professional and ethical obligations. However, play therapy is ultimately about the client, not the play therapist. Ethical guidelines reiterate that the client must always be prioritized first and foremost. Although encountering personal value conflicts can sometimes be scary or confusing, play therapists must learn to lean on their ethical codes and best practices to guide clinical decision-making. Understanding a decision-making process like SEESAW provides play therapists with reassurance that they are aligning with ethical guidelines and prioritizing the safety, well-being, and growth of their clients in the midst of the ups and downs of the therapeutic process.

References

- American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. (2015). *Code of ethics*. https://www.aamft.org/Legal_Ethics/Code_of_Ethics.aspx
- American Counseling Association (ACA) (2014). *2014 ACA code of ethics*. <https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2014-code-of-ethics-finaladdress.pdf>
- American Psychological Association. (2017). *Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct* (2002, amended effective June 1, 2010, and January 1, 2017). <https://www.apa.org/ethics/code/>
- Association for Play Therapy (2019). *Play therapy best practices: Clinical, professional, & ethical issues*. https://www.a4pt.org/resource/resmgr/publications/best_practices_-_sept_2019.pdf
- Carnes-Holt, K., Maddox, R. P. II, Warren, J., Morgan, M., & Zakaria, N. S. (2016). Using bookmarks: An approach to support ethical decision making in play therapy. *International Journal of Play Therapy*, 25(4), 176–185. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pla0040380>
- Kocet, M., & Herlihy, B. (2014). Addressing value based conflicts within the counseling relationship: A decision making model. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 92(2), 180–186. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.2014.00146.x>
- Linde, L. E. (2016). The ACA Code of Ethics: Clarifying values and referrals in counseling. *Counseling Today*, 59(4) 20-21. https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/ethics/ethics-columns/ethics_october-2016-values-and-referral.pdf?sfvrsn=d222522c_4
- National Association of Social Workers. (2017). *Read the code of ethics*. <https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English>
- Thacker, N., & Blueford, J. (2018). Resolving value conflicts with physician-assisted death: A systemic application of the counselor values-based conflict model. *The Professional Counselor*, 8(3), 249–261. <https://doi.org/10.15241/net.8.3.249> 🗣️

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Kimberley K. W. Warnecke, BA, is a graduate student in Marriage, Couple, and Family Counseling at George Fox University. Originally from Hawaii, Kimberley is passionate about working with multicultural populations through a trauma-informed lens. As a former teacher, she plans to incorporate play therapy in her continued work with children and adolescents. kwarnecke18@georgefox.edu



Bonnie M. Davey, BA, is a graduate student in the Clinical Counseling program at George Fox University. She is an intern at Yamhill County in McMinnville, OR and a graduate assistant for the Northwest Center for Play Therapy Studies. Bonnie is passionate about utilizing and promoting the healing power of play. bdavey16@georgefox.edu



Ellen M. McNeill, BA, is completing her master's degree in Counseling at UNC Charlotte. She is an intern therapist at a private practice in Gastonia, NC and uses her background in child-centered education and developmentally appropriate practice to inform her work with clients, specializing in ages birth to five years. ellen.mcneill@delgamo.com



Jennifer Pennington, EdS, LCMHCS, NCC, RPT co-owns and is a play therapist at Art of Therapy Center in Gastonia, NC. She offers licensing supervision and counseling for adolescents and families. Her mission is to provide a place for children and families to learn skills to move from surviving to thriving. Jennifer.Pennington.LPC@gmail.com



Tony C. Lai, MA, LPC, RPT-S, works as a play therapist and clinical supervisor for Yamhill County Family and Youth Programs. He has a private practice that offers licensing and play therapy supervision in McMinnville, OR. Tony's mission is to inspire, connect, and learn to foster hope through counseling and supervision. reflectioncc@gmail.com