



The Unexpected Purpose of Technology in the Playroom: Catharsis

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“Can I bring my laptop into the playroom today?” Many play therapists struggle with this question when asked by their clients. When children inquire if they can bring something into the playroom for their session, play therapists should pause for a moment of internal assessment, reflecting on the *purpose* of the child’s question, the *purpose* of the item in the child’s world, and the *purpose* of how the child will use or share the item in the playroom. Some children may wish to share a personally significant toy, a recently created piece of artwork, a trophy, a medal, or an award they have earned, or even a photograph. With each item, children present a piece of their past and

invite the play therapist into their world. Notwithstanding one’s personal inclination, can bringing technology into the playroom really offer the same significance for a child as another medium in play therapy?

For Zoe (pseudonym), a 9-year-old girl that the first author treated in play therapy for two years, the purpose for wanting her laptop in the playroom seemed to hold significance. Zoe’s desire to bring her laptop was specific for her, if not critical. Zoe needed her laptop in the playroom to access her virtual Minecraft™ world: the world where she began to process her recent diagnosis of a rare childhood cancer and ultimately her 4% survival rate. Although this request was initially met with mixed feelings

CLINICAL EDITOR'S COMMENTS:

The authors describe how using technology in play therapy assisted a 9-year-old girl process her cancer journey and beat her statistical odds.

by the first author, it became clear that Zoe's desire for technology in the playroom was different than others' might be. Minecraft™ offered Zoe a virtual safe space and world outside of herself where she could begin to process her cancer journey.

Children and Technology

The authors' reluctance to include technology in the playroom is a documented reaction among play therapists (Altvater, Singer, & Gil, 2017). Additionally, there is considerable concern growing among parents, teachers, and pediatricians about how much technology in a child's routine is appropriate (Palmer, 2016; Ward, 2013). The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP, 2016a, 2016b) suggests that parents set limits surrounding technology for their children based on their children's individual needs.

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At the same time, children are immersed in a technological world. Technology pervades their existence and is integrated into their daily lives in both subtle and obvious ways. In a Pew Research Center report, Anderson and Jiang (2018) shared that 95% of teens have access to a smartphone, and 45% are online “almost constantly” (p. 2). Even preschoolers have ample access to technology in the home (Marsh et al., 2015). It is important for adults to understand that children, as digital natives who have never known life without devices like laptops, tablets, and mobile phones, and who have always had easy access to the Internet, may view technology differently than they do.

Technology and Play

Authors of recent works agree that technology can claim a legitimate place in children's play, and, furthermore, that technology is rapidly and dynamically changing children's play. Some researchers suggest that

play through technology, or “digital play,” is just as valuable a mode of intervention as traditional modes of play (e.g., Edwards, 2013; Slutsky & DeShetler, 2016). Reid (2000) discussed varying opinions on the use of games in therapy. Kottman, Petersen, Kottman, and Lavenz (2018) detailed the use of video games in play therapy, providing therapists with vocabulary, questions, activities, and metaphors to use with consumers of more than 60 specific games.

Clinicians from some theoretical orientations believe a child's game behavior is a projection of his or her feelings and conflicts. Others value games for establishing comfort and for gathering information. Clinicians from still other theoretical orientations argue games are an interference to therapeutic work. With the addition of technology to the discussion, it is no wonder there is hesitation and confusion about the risks and benefits of digital play. Nevertheless, Reid (2000) argued that playing games is part of a child's world and can be used clinically for expressing catharsis, mastering anxiety, communicating, and promoting insight. With their virtual interfaces, technology-based games like Minecraft™ can provide a kind of mastery play that is similar to that found in a physical world (Marsh, Plowman, Yamada-Rice, Bishop, & Scott, 2016).

Technology as a Means of Catharsis in Play Therapy

For Zoe, technology offered an escape from her reality, which was helpful at times. During difficult medical procedures, engagement in a fantasy world through technological means distracted her from the severity of her pain. In the playroom, it was apparent that she used technology for the specific purposes of processing her difficulties and expressing catharsis. Catharsis, the expression and release of emotion followed by increased awareness and understanding (Nichols & Efran, 1985), has played a role throughout the history of psychotherapy.

Freud (1920) believed catharsis was a central component of play, because play allows children both emotional expression and resolution of unconscious anxiety. Drewes and Schaefer (2014) argued that play contributes to the process of catharsis through the psychological distance gained through symbolic play and the safe and supportive environment of the playroom. Additionally, the positive feelings associated with play offer balance to the negative emotions expressed, and they aid in the child's overall psychological wellbeing (Drewes & Schaefer, 2014). Through the safe space of the playroom, Zoe used the technology-based Minecraft™ game to process and to rectify the internal conflicts related to her cancer diagnosis.

When Zoe began to invite the first author deeper into her virtual world, Dr. McNary knew she needed to meet Zoe right where she was. These invitations challenge play therapists to learn about, research, and understand children's technological worlds, which ultimately provide visual opportunities to see their innermost thoughts, feelings, and relationships through the children's virtual characters. Zoe assigned names, ages, personalities, and roles to hers. Themes of death, dying, and loss were everywhere. Through Zoe's virtual world, the first author was able to see just how much Zoe was struggling with whether or not she was going to die. Her Minecraft™ world poignantly bore witness to her struggle with concepts of life after death, including heaven, spirits, and the afterworld.

The themes in Zoe's virtual world had not yet been revealed in her play, art, or sand trays, indicating that Minecraft™ was her initial space of safety and most comfortable medium. Over time and coupled with the deepening of the therapeutic relationship, Zoe began to externalize her inner virtual world to other mediums in the playroom. She moved from Minecraft™ to the sand tray (for which the first author purchased Minecraft™ figurines intentionally for her to use), to games, then to art, and then ultimately to talk. If children can eventually access other forms of therapeutic intervention, it begs the question, does technology have a rightful place in play therapy?

In the Playroom and at Home

As with any play therapy intervention, many variables must be considered when using digital play. Ethical considerations are paramount, and play therapists should receive training on using technology in the playroom. Altwater, Singer, and Gil (2018) posited that the use of technology in play therapy is likely to be ineffective if the therapist is neither competent nor comfortable with it. Furthermore, play therapists should seek training and consultation with other Registered Play Therapists/Supervisors (RPT/S) before incorporating technology into therapy. Families may seek advice from RPT/Ss about how to extend the benefits of play therapy at home through the use of technology.

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Technology has become a natural medium for children in which they engage and play, from which they learn, and through which they express themselves. Incorporating digital books that give voice and movement to characters into story time could enhance parent-child interactions and bonding (see Courtney & Nowakowski-Sims, this issue). Technology can be used to foster imagination, creativity, and mastery through digital art, blogging, and video creation. Families could create digital worlds and characters together through both gaming programs and art-based programs or they could create a family blog with entries highlighting outings, adventures, building projects, or cooking recipes.

Parents may request suggested apps, games, websites, devices, or other resources to encourage digital play. RPT/Ss should be cautious about making specific suggestions without clear knowledge of the advantages and disadvantages, while at the same time, helping parents understand that digital play is a recognized mode of play with potential benefits. In addition, RPT/Ss should highlight guidelines for developmentally appropriate technology use under parental supervision. Further, media play should be used in conjunction with, and not in place of, physical activity, physical play, parent-child screen-free time, and social interactions. The AAP Council on Communications and Media (2016a) advised that children 18 to 24 months of age should avoid digital media use (aside from video chatting) and that children 2 to 5 years of age be limited to one hour per day of educational and prosocial media content. For school-aged children and adolescents, they advised families to develop media plans that strive for balance with other health-promoting activities and that do not interfere with daily recommendations for physical activity (1 hour) and sleep (8-12 hours; AAP, 2016b).

Recommendations

Allowing Zoe the opportunity to bring her laptop into the playroom offered her an additional safe space for her processing and ultimately for her healing to happen. Zoe beat the statistics and won her fight against cancer. We think it is time that play therapists join the conversation about the unique opportunities that technology offers in the playroom. Here are some recommendations for getting started:

- Engage in training on incorporating technology into play therapy.
- Learn about what technology clients are using at home and at school.
- Consult with School-Based Registered Play Therapist (SB-RPT) counselors, psychologists, and social workers to see what play or technology-based counseling interventions are being used in school settings.
- Consult with other RPT/Ss who are trained in technology and who are incorporating technology into their practice.
- Invite clients who use digital play outside of the playroom to teach you about their favorite games or worlds (whether or not you choose to allow the digital media into the playroom).
- Add physical items to the playroom that represent figures in digital worlds/games.
- Discuss the availability and potential benefits of technology use in play sessions with clients' families.
- Closely monitor clients' progress when using technology in play therapy.
- Seek supervision from an RPT-S on incorporating technology into play therapy.

Resources

The following list of resources may be worthy of further exploration. Although the authors do not specifically endorse these, all of these sites have specific recommendations for families and professionals regarding technology use and children.

- American Academy of Pediatrics: <https://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/Pages/Media-and-Children.aspx>
- Common Sense Media: <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/parent-concerns>

- Entertainment Software Ratings Board: <http://www.esrb.org/>
- National Association for the Education of Young Children: <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/topics/technology-and-media>
- Tech and Play: <http://www.techandplay.org/>

Conclusion

As play therapists, it is imperative that we stay current in understanding the many aspects of children's worlds. Technology is one of these aspects, and it has become a staple in children's lives. We need to understand both the risks and the benefits of children's technology use, as well as the limitations and the growth it offers. Responsible and appropriate use of digital play can allow children the space and a medium to communicate in a way that feels safe and natural to them. By embracing our ever-shifting environment and current technological trend, play therapists can offer children the stability and support they need to venture out and explore alternative mediums of play. For Zoe, allowing her initial safety and distance through the use of her virtual world and media choice opened up a myriad of play possibilities, and ultimately therapeutic catharsis. Through her therapeutic journey, Zoe was able to access the healing power of play in the most unexpected places.

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