

Play Therapy Activities



The feeling word game

Description:

A therapeutic technique that helps children express their emotions in a safe, game-based format. Children often struggle to verbalize feelings when directly questioned, either due to emotional guardedness or disconnection from threatening feelings. This game reduces their defenses through play, enabling more open emotional expression.

Materials needed:

- Eight 4x6-inch pieces of paper
- Marker
- Tin or container of poker chips
- Comfortable seating at the child's level

Procedure:

1. Begin by inviting the child to play "The Feeling Word Game" while sitting at their level. Ask them to share feelings that children their age might experience. As they name each feeling, write it on a separate piece of paper. For children who cannot read, include a simple drawing of a facial expression representing each emotion. If the child omits any feelings that are crucial to addressing their presenting problems, gently suggest these additional emotions.
2. Once all feelings are written down, arrange the papers in front of the child. Explain that you have a tin of "feelings" (poker chips) and that you'll demonstrate how to play by telling a story first.
3. Share a personal story that includes both positive and negative emotions, then model placing different numbers of chips on the relevant feeling words. This shows the child that people can experience multiple feelings at once and that emotions can vary in intensity.
4. Next, tell a non-threatening story about the child and invite them to distribute the chips according to how they might feel in that situation.
5. Take turns creating stories, with the child placing chips for your stories and you placing chips for theirs.
6. As trust builds, gradually introduce stories that relate to the child's presenting problems, allowing them to express their feelings about these situations through chip placement.
7. Continue this process until you've addressed the key therapeutic issues that brought them to treatment.

Pick-up sticks game

Description:

This therapeutic adaptation of the classic Pick-Up Sticks game creates a structured yet playful environment for children to express their feelings and connect them with real-life experiences. The game is particularly effective when children have already established familiarity with color-feeling associations, such as through the Color-Your-Life activity.

Materials needed:

- Standard pick-up sticks game set
- Color-feeling association chart
- Comfortable play space
- Optional recording sheet

Procedure:

1. Review color-feeling associations with the child through discussion or a quick Color-Your-Life activity to ensure they understand the emotional connections to each color.
2. While most children know Pick-Up Sticks, explain the basic rules: gather all sticks in a fist and drop them onto the table to create a random pile.
3. Players take turns carefully removing one stick at a time without moving any others in the pile. If another stick moves during the attempt, the player's turn ends.
4. For the therapeutic adaptation, add the rule that after successfully removing a stick, the player must share a personal experience connected to the feeling associated with that stick's color.
5. When it's the therapist's turn, provide responses that align with the child's therapeutic needs rather than sharing personal experiences.
6. Allow the child a limited number of "passes" to maintain their sense of control and emotional safety when certain feelings become too challenging to discuss.
7. Throughout gameplay, observe which colors the child tends to choose or avoid, as these choices often provide therapeutic insights into their emotional state.
8. Monitor the child's overall affect and behavior during play, using these observations to inform treatment direction.
9. Continue to play until all sticks are collected. While the player with the most sticks technically wins, emphasize that sharing feelings and experiences is more important than winning.

Party hats on monsters

Description:

A therapeutic drawing technique that helps children confront and process their fears gradually through artistic expression. This approach is particularly effective because children often find it easier to express fears through drawing rather than verbalization. By allowing children to modify scary elements in their artwork, they develop a sense of control and mastery over their anxieties.

Materials needed:

- Drawing paper
- Various drawing instruments (crayons, markers, paints, chalk)
- Comfortable art space
- Optional decorative materials

Procedure:

1. Begin by creating a safe environment and ask the child to draw something that makes them feel happy or secure, such as a favorite activity or comforting memory.
2. Engage in relaxed conversation about their positive drawing, building rapport and establishing comfort with the creative process.
3. Once the child feels at ease, invite them to draw something that scares them "just a little bit," introducing anxiety-producing content gradually.
4. Guide the child to modify their drawing of the feared object in ways that make it less frightening. Examples include:
 - Adding silly party hats
 - Shrinking the monster's size
 - Drawing a superhero who transforms the monster
 - Adding friendly or funny elements
5. While the child modifies their drawing, offer gentle observations like, "Many children notice that when they make the picture less scary on paper, the scary thoughts in their mind become less frightening too."
6. Over multiple sessions, create a gradual hierarchy of fears, starting with minor anxieties and progressively working toward more significant fears as the child's confidence grows.
7. Document changes in how the child represents and modifies their fears over time, using these observations to track therapeutic progress.

Magic key**Description:**

"The Magic Key" is a projective drawing and storytelling technique that helps children explore themes of loss, longing, and missing elements in their lives. Through guided imagery and creative expression, this activity allows children to safely express deep-seated desires and unfulfilled needs through metaphorical exploration of a magical castle.

Materials needed:

- Drawing paper
- Markers
- Pencil or colored pencils
- Crayons

Procedure:

1. Create a comfortable, quiet environment where the child can engage in imaginative thinking.
2. Begin by reading the following guided imagery script to the child: "Imagine that you have been given a magic key that opens one room in a huge castle. There are four floors in the castle, and since the castle is huge there are many rooms on each floor, but your magic key only opens one of the many, many rooms in the castle."
3. Continue the narrative, encouraging visualization: "Pretend you go from room to room and from floor to floor, trying your magic key in each door until you finally come to the door that your key opens. You turn the key, and the lock opens."
4. Present the core therapeutic question: "Because you have been given a magic key that only opens this door, what you see is the one thing that money can't buy that you always thought would make you happy."
5. Guide the child through reflection: "Pretend that you are looking into the room. What is it that you see? What is that one thing that has been missing that you think would make you happy?"
6. Once the child has a clear mental image, invite them to draw what they see in the room.
7. Allow the child to share their drawing and story at their own pace, using their narrative to gain therapeutic insights into their emotional needs and desires.

Balloons of anger

Description:

The Balloons of Anger activity is an experiential therapeutic technique that helps children understand and manage their anger through a concrete metaphor. This activity demonstrates how bottling up angry feelings can lead to emotional "explosions" and teaches healthy ways to release anger gradually.

Materials needed:

- Balloons (two per participant and therapist)
- Large sheet of paper
- Tape
- Marker
- Safety glasses

Procedure:

1. Begin by taping a large sheet of paper to the wall for recording coping strategies later.
2. Provide each participant with safety glasses and their first balloon, explaining the importance of eye protection.
3. Ask participants to silently recall a time they felt angry, emphasizing that they should only think about the situation without discussing it yet.
4. Guide participants to blow their angry feelings into the balloon, having them recall multiple anger-provoking situations as they continue inflating.
5. Allow the balloons to eventually explode, then facilitate a discussion using key questions:
 - "What happens when you hold onto angry feelings for too long?"
 - "How does it make you act?"
6. Distribute second balloons and repeat the anger-recall process, but this time:
 - Have participants stop before the balloon gets too full
 - Encourage them to talk about their angry feelings
 - Guide them to release air slowly while discussing their emotions
7. Lead a discussion about the difference between the two approaches, highlighting how controlled release prevents "explosions."
8. Brainstorm coping strategies with participants, writing them on the wallpaper. Suggest techniques if needed:
 - Talking about feelings
 - Counting backward from 10
 - Deep breathing exercises
 - Recalling happy memories
 - Visualizing a stop sign
9. Have participants:
 - Vote on their favorite coping strategy
 - Practice their chosen strategy during the session
 - Commit to using it at home

References:

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