

# Coping and Growing through Play



by Nia Tam

When teachers of nine-year-old Thomas told his parents he had emotional problems at school, they recommended he take courses to improve his “emotional intelligence”.

Thomas was easily frustrated and lost his temper when he was asked to deal with unfamiliar tasks or if he was beaten in games. He was also diagnosed with relatively slow language development which made it hard for him to understand others.

“Sometimes he just goes mad when he fails to understand what you mean,” says his mother Lee Fu Hang-fong.

Lee has tried different methods, like speech therapy and music therapy,

to help Thomas, but none of them seemed to work for him. It was then that a speech therapist suggested she should try play therapy.

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After just two months of play therapy sessions, Lee has already seen some improvements. “I am so happy to see him standing in front of the people and speaking with a microphone,” she says, explaining that Thomas is now more willing to speak in public.

Many children need support in emotional literacy and play therapy is one kind of psychotherapy that can help. Although it is relatively new in Hong Kong, it has been used for a long time in the West. Play therapists work with children and young adolescents, usually aged from three to 11, to help them express their feelings and experiences.

This can be done through playing with different kinds of toys and games. Stella Choy Wai-wan, the play therapist

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of Thomas, says that most parents tell her about the problems of their children--verbal problems or emotional problems for example-- and she then uses the appropriate types of toys to play with them according to their various needs.

“Actually, the concepts of play therapy are not to cure a particular problem, but to improve the children in a holistic way such as confidence-building and self control, etc.” says Choy.



Offensive weapons can be used to release tension.

no way to express his feelings, he may choose to scream or even hurt others to vent his emotions.”

According to Choy, many parents think that toy guns or tumblers are too dangerous and violent for children because they do not understand either the value or limits of using these toys.

“Being a play therapist, we need to give children freedom and time, as well as acceptance. We need to empathise with them,” Choy says. “Then they will feel more comfortable to tell us what they feel.”

**“Let them set their own rules of the game. I simply let them get rid of the traditions.”**

Another play therapist, Carol Chan Yu-lai, who has a Certificate on Play Therapy from the University of Hong Kong School of Professional and Continuing Education, agrees that play therapists must gain children’s trust before they will open up.

Chan usually gets information beforehand in order to have some understanding about the child. “It is much easier to start with the toys or games that they are interested in,” she says.

Apart from toys, Chan recommends role-playing games as a way to let children express their emotions, both verbally and non-verbally. She says that when she worked with children in hospitals, they tended to play the roles of doctors and nurses.

“They tried to show their pain and unhappiness with the medical treatments they had by pretending to



Carol Chan Yu-lai shows how role play helps her understand children.

inject some drugs into the arms of another kid,” explains Chan.

Samuel Poon Wai-chi is a play therapist and a lecturer on counselling. He says that if children are uncomfortable with the therapy, they can choose to play or not to play with the toys or games. “Let them set their own rules of the game. I simply let them get rid of the traditions.”

Poon recalled a six-year-old patient who was upset because he failed to throw a basketball into the basket.

After a few more tries, the boy decided to change the rules himself. They would count the scores according to where the ball hit the ground. Poon was deeply impressed by the boy’s idea because it had shown his creativity and ability to take care of himself.

“To be a play therapist, one of the most



important criteria is that you have to love children,” says Poon. “You should be capable of observing their potential and abilities. Besides, play therapy emphasises the children’s strengths and play therapists need to know how to show their appreciation towards children by either describing or repeating what are the good things they have done.”

Poon says that appreciation can be shown simply by using smiles when children show their ability to solve problems.

In addition, play therapy is not solely about the interaction between the therapists and the children but also the role of parents.

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“Even if the children play happily during the session, the results from play therapy will not be significant if the parents do not give the children support,” Poon explains. “Parents should try to avoid giving negative responses to the children or being too choosy.”

Poon says play therapy might not work for every child, as there are some cases where a child resists playing with either their peers or the therapist. But it does offer benefits to many children.

Despite this, it is still a little known field in Hong Kong. There is little professional support and there are no formal positions for play therapists within the government organisational structure. Most of the play therapists in Hong Kong have backgrounds in other

professional disciplines such as speech therapy and occupational therapy and went on to train in play therapy later.

Because of the lack of support, access to play therapy is mainly restricted to the private sector. Generally speaking, each session lasts between 45 minutes and an hour, and the price can vary from hundreds of dollars to thousands of dollars, making it inaccessible to lower income families.

Without a proper registration system and professional association for play therapists, career prospects in Hong Kong are somewhat limited. Those who are interested in play therapy can take relevant training courses provided by university departments of social work or psychology. There are also elective courses on play therapy included in the masters programme at The University of Hong Kong and the Continuing Professional Education programme at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Some workshops and short-term courses are also organised by groups like The Boys’ & Girls’ Clubs Association of Hong Kong. Another alternative is studying abroad, in Taiwan or the United States for instance, where professional training in the field is well-developed.


The lack of a registration and regulatory system in Hong Kong also means the quality and standards of play therapists here may vary a lot. People without a psychology or social work background can still call themselves play therapists after taking a training course.

As Thomas’s behaviour continues to improve, his play therapist Stella Choy Wai-wan says she believes play therapy will become more popular in the future due to the pursuit of a better quality of life.

Choy believes future development in her field will be more focused on parenting skills and family counselling. Parents need to be educated by



communicating with the play therapists so that they can understand their children more.

“The long-term goal is to enhance filial play therapy, which allows parents to experience the important elements of play therapy,” Choy explains. “They are acceptance, empathy and psychological security.” In the meantime, she is motivated to continue working in this field by what she calls the “magic” and “power” of play therapy to help children. 



One of the most essential criteria to be a play therapist is to love children.