Chapter 6

University/District Collaboration Play Therapy Clinics

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ABSTRACT

Many elementary schools must make due with a single school counselor, leaving many children in need of services. The authors of this chapter propose a unique partnership to create sustainable school-based play therapy clinics. The proposed clinics provide free services to children in schools and also allow for the collection of data by university professors hoping to examine and advocate for effectiveness of play therapy. The chapter will discuss how to select appropriate partners, how to build relationships with school professionals, how to establish research and clinics in the schools, training concerns, and ethical issues.

INTRODUCTION

The American Association of School Counseling Association (ASCA) recommends a ratio of one counselor to every 250 students (2017). However, a recent study of trends in student to counselor ratios indicates that in some states the ratio is as low as 200:1 and as high as 924:1 (ASCA, 2014). It is obvious that with ratios this high, a school counselor can only provide limited counseling to the highest need
children. The challenges that elementary schools deal with are legion, and the school counselor is often overwhelmed at the prospect of being the sole individual trained and responsible for the mental health concerns for all students in the school. Our hope is that by developing and operating a school based play therapy clinic in collaboration between a university and a local school district will not only aid in the school counselor stress but also better meet the social emotional needs of the children attending the school.

**Building Relationships**

For a collaborative clinic to exist, relationships must be forged. This relationship is often one of give and take, in which both the school and the clinic have to have mutual benefits. It is often the case that for this to be a reciprocal value both parties must have a foundation of trust. One of the eternal truths about public education is that time and space will always be sought after commodities.

**Establishing a Relationship With the Principal**

The principal of a school can be a great asset to a collaborative clinic. However, one must understand that the tasks that a principal has been entrusted with vary greatly from those that a therapist holds dear. Principals are entrusted with the efficient and successful administrations of public schools (Ruff & Shoho, 2016), and at the elementary level a principal is often tasked with not only the academic minutiae that may seem insignificant to the counselor, but also with handling problematic behaviors and discipline. This by no means indicates that the principal and the counselor must be natural enemies. Rather, it indicates that the counselor must approach the relationship in such a way to establish the collaboration clinic as a win-win situation. First and foremost, when the collaborator approaches a principal they must be able to identify how they can help the school. In our experience principals are initially hesitant to bring in outside projects to their campus. The authors have found that sharing how a play therapy clinic in their school would not only aid in providing additional support to the school counseling, but that there is indeed a wealth of research demonstrating the effectiveness of play therapy increasing academic achievement. By providing this evidence and demonstrating that a collaborative play therapy clinic will free up some of the school counselors time school administrators/principals have been more willing to establish such a project.

Being conversant in play therapy literature and the ways in which it may help the principal and their school will be an important part of the process. A key part of engaging with non-mental health professionals is being somewhat of a salesperson.
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