A Qualitative Examination of Play Therapy and Mindfulness Interventions with Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Laura Bui, M.A., Kim Vander Dussen, Psy.D (Dissertation Chair), and Erika Widera, Psy.D (Co-Chair)
The Chicago School of Professional Psychology at Irvine, CA

Abstract

This project contributes findings to the existing body of literature on play therapy and mindfulness interventions for children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Much of the literature has examined the beneficial effects of play therapy and mindfulness practices for children with ASD with researchers, teachers, or counselors. However, there is limited research conducted on mental health clinicians who provide these interventions for children in a therapeutic setting, such as Registered Play Therapists from the Association for Play Therapy (APT). Thus, the current study qualitatively examined the experiences of 7 clinicians who are Registered Play Therapists from APT. By interviewing clinicians from APT, it was hypothesized that improvements in youth social, emotional, and behavioral functioning will be observed when play and mindfulness interventions are utilized. Participating evaluators have been practicing as a Registered Play Therapist for at least 1.5 years treating youth with ASD, with a minimum of 10 children or adolescents with ASD, as a means to establish a baseline for expertise. The data collected through responses to 12 semi-structured interview questions and 6 follow-up questions were analyzed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Overall, the analysis revealed eight master themes that occurred across transcripts in varying frequencies. There were also subordinate specific themes that emerged from three of the master themes with varying frequencies. Furthermore, the analysis revealed nine universal specific themes, indicating that all seven protocols endorsed the underlying notion.

Literature Review

- **Symptoms and Prevalence of ASD**
  - Difficulties with social communication and social interaction, along with displaying restricted interests and behaviors.
  - More or less sensitive than others to sensory input

- **Common Treatment Modalities for ASD**
  - ABA, Pivotal Response Treatment (PRT), Early Start Denver Model (ESDM), Early Intensive Behavioral Intervention (EIBI), Treatment and Education of Autism and Related Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH), Parent-Child Interaction Therapy.
  - Do not address all of children’s social and emotional needs (e.g., social skills, play skills, emotional regulation, or relationship development).

- **Play Therapy with Youth with ASD**
  - Integrative play groups, Joint Attention Symbolic Play Engagement and Regulation (JASPER), Floortime, ArtPlay Therapy, Cognitive Behavioral Play Therapy (CBPT), Client-Centered Play Therapy (CCPT), Non-Directive Play Therapy, Structured Play, Facilitated Play
  - Improvements in pretend play, social interaction, attachment, self-regulation, emotional response, autonomy, and coping with social changes.

- **Mindfulness with Youth with ASD**
  - MYmind, Meditation on the Soles of the Feet, Mindfulness-Based Positive Behavior Support (MBPBS)
  - Helpful in managing self-injurious and aggressive behaviors
  - Improves executive functioning, reduces attention problems, improves social communication and interactions, increases ability to utilize coping skills

References


