Interpretation of Children’s Play: Perspectives from Analytical Child Psychotherapy

JP Lilly LCSW

Workshop Overview

The workshop will present a theoretical model of Jungian Analytical Play Therapy to lay the foundation for the effective interpretation of children’s play in a clinical setting. Concepts from Analytical psychology will be presented to assist attendees in the practical application of interpreting children’s play.

Workshop Objectives

* Understand the Jungian Analytical theoretical position regarding the psyche of children.
* Understand the dynamic relationship between a child’s symptoms and the child's reality.
* Understand how to view symbolic play in the context of the child’s reality, and how to formulate specific hypotheses regarding the dynamic nature of the child’s play to the specific issues with which the child is struggling.
* Understand how to respond to the child with a fuller understanding of the purpose of the child’s play, and the representation of his/her inner struggle.
Jungian Analytical Play Therapy

*The Jungian therapist believes that most children know where they need to go emotionally to heal themselves and builds a warm, non-evaluative therapeutic relationship.

*JAPT differs from pure nondirective therapy in that it permits a therapist the freedom to incorporate directive activities to isolate specific disordered behaviors associated with abuse and resolve inherent difficulties associated with reactive symptoms.

Jungian play continued...

*Empirical-informed analytical techniques demonstrated to reduce anxiety and cognitive preoccupation with and intrusive memories of difficult emotional/social experiences may include coloring of mandalas (Henderson, Rosen, & Mascaro, 2007), employment of sandplay (De Domenico, 1994; Lu, 2010), and utilizing fairy tales/narrative therapy with guided imagery to decrease hyperarousal (Reddy, Files-Hall, & Schaefer, 2005)
Theoretical Underpinnings

- Archetypes: innate mechanisms of perceiving and responding. Archetypes are manifested through symbols in dreams and fantasies and are evidenced through universal experiences (such as birth, life, death, marriage, fatherhood, isolation).
- Individuation: characterizes a progress from psychic fragmentation towards wholeness—the acknowledgement and reconciliation of opposites.
- Collective Unconscious: consists of universal images that transcend an individual’s personal experience.
- Inflation: means by which children inflate ego in order to engage complex issues.
The Ego-Self axis represents the connection between the child’s unconscious and conscious states.

Typical psychological development in a child occurs when the child’s ego can mitigate emotional anguish and happiness appropriately. For example, when a child feels sad, she may cry; when a child feels angry—verbalize feelings, reaching to parents or teachers for help, deriving pleasure from love, humor, and affection.

Damage to Ego-Self axis leads to feelings of alienation, aggression, isolation, dependency, dependent and clinging behaviors, self-defeating beliefs, and depressive symptomotologies.

Ego-Self Axis

Play and Toy Selection Dynamics: An Illustration of Ego Integration and De-integration

Conscious

Unconscious

Shadow/ Self Complex

Complex
Role of the Jungian Child Play Therapist

* Provides safety and warmth in the therapeutic container.
* Joins with and unconditionally accepts the child as a unique individual - Temanos.
* Because the child is still in the process of ego development, he/she is much closer to the unconscious that directs the process of play and of healing.
* Utilize analytical attitude (by meeting the child where she or he is) to assist in self-healing [RAGE].

Self-Healing Archetype

* The self-healing archetype is activated through the encouragement of creativity and acceptance of the inexplicable mystery and psychic energy associated with the unconscious symbol (Allen, 1992).
* That is, the unconscious symbol points to the area of the unconscious that is most neglected. The therapist unconditionally accepts that position, and supports the child.
Activating the Self-Healing Archetype in Children

The child’s self-healing archetype is activated throughout the clinical play therapy process. This activation is accomplished by bringing the unconscious to the conscious and by connecting the inner world of the child to the outer world through the intersubjective process of cultural and.

Analysis and Interpretation in Jungian Play

The aim of child analysis is to provide a facilitative environment where psychological disturbances, which comprise the underpinnings of complex defenses (such as the shadow as illustrated below), may be reached (coming to terms with the unconscious). Transcendent function.

The purpose of interpretation is to bring unconscious contents into awareness and to help the child mediate anxiety. The technique of interpretation gives the child information about his therapist’s capacity to (a) hear him, (b) see him, (c) understand him, and (d) ultimately accept him.

Interpretation continued....

It is a key inductive technique in Jungian play therapy as it (a) provides the child the abilities to resolve interpersonal deficiencies constellated in the transference and (b) relies on the use of symbols and the theory of archetypes to facilitate children’s understanding of their fears and fantasies.

Through interpretation, Jungian play therapists link symbolic play with personal observations and relevant experiences in the child’s external world as it relates to cultural and collective images & themes.
Interpretation and Mythopoetic Language

*One of the basic functions of myth is to help each individual through the journey of life, providing a travel guide to reach fulfillment — a map to discover "bliss." In interpretation, we verbally facilitate children and adolescent’s psychological maturation by applying larger themes of world mythology and identification with archetypal imagery to support transformation.

* Jungian play therapists rely upon verbal interventions that bridge connections between a child’s unconscious (or inner landscape) with ancient symbols and modern art, mental illness or struggle and the hero’s journey, thereby revealing the way myth helps identify one’s heroic path.

The child’s psyche’s mythopoetic modes of reconstruction do not simply re-create ancient themes from fairytale but rather destructively pull them apart and create new narratives on archetypal dynamics.

This subversive process turns collective myths upside down and allows psyche to remember what is long forgotten or censored and disfigured.

Alchemists referred to this as “true imagination.”

Amplification as Interpretation

Links embryonic forms of meaning as expressed in affect and symbolism to a specific life context rendering it intelligible within a context beyond the personal unconscious.

Once amplification occurs, the meaning of the symbol translates into the language of daytime consciousness and creates new affinities of meaning within the personal and collective.
*Amplification continued....

Amplification as interpretation grounds children’s images in mythologems, fairytales, folklore, traditions, and customs. Interpretation amplifies the field of an image from the obscurely personal to the universal. It is numinous in that it reveals a child’s personal connections between images and the archetypal or universal.

Interpretation and Psychological Types

The interpretation verbalizes an unconscious conjunctio between the play therapist’s understanding of the child’s ego/personality/psychological type and its’ need to symbolize and thus communicate the interior.

Two Attitudes

Introvert
- Draws back
- Inward towards psyche

Extrovert
- Reaches out
- Outward towards the world
Thinker

- Life determined by rational conclusions (rules)
- Based on objective data (facts)
- Morality determined by strict set of rules
- Extroverted Thinkers: Rule Makers, Authorities
- Introverted Thinkers: oriented towards ideas; absent-minded professors

Feeler

- Psychological process in us that evaluates
- What the information is worth
- Can deal with the “fuzziness” of life
- Extroverted Feelers: “people persons”; with sometimes poor boundaries
- Introverted Feelers: “still water runs deep”; difficulty articulating their inner feelings

Sensation

- Collects data from the world using the five senses
- Active reaching out of the brain to interact with the world
- Accept and adjust to the world as it is
- Extroverted Sensitive: bridge the sensible and the sensual
- Introverted Sensitive: “highly sensitized photographic plate” (Emma Jung); detail oriented, no “big picture” mentality.
Intuition

- Interest not in the "thing", but in future possibilities
- Nose for the future; can see new trends before they emerge
- Most people see differences; Intuitives see similarities
- Intuitives deal poorly with the realities of life
- Extroverted Intuitive: trendy, riding the waves of intellectual fashions, always at the crest
- Introverted Intuitive: future possibilities of the "inner world": Old Testament prophets

We begin helping children realign with their path by starting at the center

"This centre is not felt or thought of as the ego but, ... As the self. Although the centre is represented by an innermost point, it is surrounded by a periphery containing everything that belongs to the self..."

*C.G. Jung, from Concerning Mandala Symbolism

Jungian Play Activity:

"Color Your Mandala" (Green)

This semi-directive experiential activity encourages the child to externalize unconscious psychic material through coloring a mandala and the accompanying narrative. By amplifying symbols in dreams and unconscious fantasies through mandalas, the child may engage in self-awareness and self-acceptance within the therapeutic relationship.

Process: With eyes closed in a relaxed position, therapists lead children through a guided imagery technique or progressive muscle relaxation exercise to release any anxieties. Once children are more relaxed, they choose a pre-sorted mandala to color (or they can create one from scratch). The child is then asked to depict, draw, or create anything in the mandala. Once the scene is finished, the therapist permits the child to "sit" with the image or absorb its meaning. The child writes the narrative of the mandala on the back of the paper and maybe creates a map-key of colors. The therapist then processes the mandala with the child through a
“To the extent that I managed to translate the emotions into images, I was inwardly calmed and reassured. Had I left those images hidden in the emotions, I might have been torn to pieces by them.”

--Jung


Lu, C., Petersen, F., Lacroix, L., & Rousseau, C. (2010). Stimulating creative play in children with Autism through sandplay. The Arts in...
Glossary of Jungian Terms

**Adaptation**- Relating to, coming to terms with, and balancing internal and external factors.

**Amplification**- Use of play in order to clarify and make ample the metaphorical content of the complex. The “psychological tissue” in which the image is embedded.

**Archetype**- A hypothetical entity irrepresentable in itself and evident only through its’ manifestation. Originally called “primordial images”.

**Circumambulation**- Circular movement that marks a sacred precinct around a central point. The various themes of play around a complex.

**Collective**- Belonging to any particular group. The opposite of individual.

**Compensation**- The unconscious energy that balances the one-sidedness of consciousness.

**Complimentary**- The demonstrative expression of events consistent with the complex or experience.

**Complex**- Collection of images and ideas, clustered round a core derived from one or more archetypes and laden with intense emotion.

**Consciousness**- The relation of psychic contents to the ego, as perceived by the ego.

**Countertransference**- Held by the therapeutic relationship, it is the activation of communication between the client and therapist on both conscious and unconscious levels. This dynamic activates both the client’s material, and the therapist’s material.

**Deintegration**- The breaking down of the ego state, usually accompanied by the activation of defense mechanisms (symptoms). This is a natural stage in development.

**Differentiation**- To distinguish parts from the whole. To separate what was joined unconsciously and resolve.

**Ego**- The center of consciousness, and the core of personality.

**Ego-Self Axis**- The relationship of the ego to the Self. It is the ego that allows for the expression of the Self- the Self is the mover, the ego is the moved.

**Fantasy**- The operation of archetypal structures.

**Image**- The container or carrier, and amplifier of the symbolic material in which the complex is embedded.

**Inflation**- A regression of consciousness into unconsciousness. The archetypal content seizes hold of the psyche with a kind of primeval force and compels it to transgress the bounds of humanity.

**Integration**- An awareness and resolution of the tension of opposites.

**Introjection**- The opposite of projection. It is the attempt to internalize experience. An example would be the process of empathy- taking someone else’s experience inward.

**Mandala**- Sanskrit word for “magic circle”. It is an expression of the psyche, and more specifically, of the Self. Usually represents wholeness.

**Persona**- The mask or face a person puts on to confront the world.
**Projection**- Difficult emotions and unacceptable parts of the personality may be located in a person or object external to the subject. Normal defense against anxiety.

**Self**- An archetypal image of man’s fullest potential and the unity of the personality as a whole. The central organizing archetype of the unconscious.

**Shadow**- The thing a person has no wish to be. The negative side to personality.

**Symbol**- Captivating pictorial statements that are indistinct, metaphoric and enigmatic portrayals of psychic reality. Differing from signs that do more than denote the properties of something. Symbols are laden with meaning from a different, alternative perspective within the psyche.

**Temenos**- Greek word to define a sacred precinct within which a god’s presence can be felt (temple). Not the inner chamber of enlightenment, but the opportunity to go there.

**Transcendent Function**- Finding the balance between the tension of the opposites, and therefore bridging the gulf between consciousness and unconscious.

**Transformation**- A psychic transition involving regression and temporary loss of “ego-hood” in order to bring to consciousness and fulfil a psychological need hitherto unrecognized.

**Unconscious**- A place within the psyche where mental contents are inaccessible to the ego and a psychic place with its own character, laws, and functions. Divided by Jung into personal and collective.
Short Reading List for More on Jungian Psychology


