



APPLICATION OF CHILD-CENTERED PLAY THERAPY: A RESEARCH REVIEW

PRIMENA TERAPIJE IGROM USMERENE NA DETE: PREGLED ISTRAŽIVANJA

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ABSTRACT

Play represents a key aspect of a child's overall development, with particular importance in the domains of emotional expression and social interaction. Since children often cannot verbally articulate their feelings, play therapy emerges as a natural and effective way to understand and resolve emotional conflicts. Child-Centered Play Therapy (CCPT), a nondirective approach, allows the child to independently choose toys and direct the course of play, while the therapist provides support without direct guidance. The aim of this paper is to highlight the significance and effectiveness of the CCPT method in working with children facing various emotional, behavioral, and developmental difficulties, through a review and analysis of contemporary literature. The literature review was conducted using relevant scientific sources according to precisely defined criteria. Ten of the most influential empirical studies on the application of CCPT in different contexts and populations were selected. Based on the analysis of the chosen studies, it can be concluded that CCPT has significant positive effects on children with behavioral disorders, learning difficulties, socialization problems, and emotional attachment issues, as well as children on the autism spectrum. The therapy proved effective in various cultural and educational contexts, and it is particularly successful when family members are actively involved in the treatment process. At the end of the paper, recommendations are provided for further research and practical application of CCPT in various developmental and clinical settings.

Key words: play therapy, children, CCPT, family, psychological support.

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SAŽETAK

Igra predstavlja ključni aspekt celokupnog razvoja deteta, sa posebnim značajem u domenu emocionalnog izražavanja i socijalne interakcije. Budući da deca često nisu u mogućnosti da verbalno artikuliraju svoja osećanja, terapija igrom se javlja kao prirodan i efikasan način za razumevanje i razrešavanje emocionalnih konflikata. Nedirektivna terapija igrom usmerena na dete (Child-Centered Play Therapy – CCPT) omogućava detetu da samostalno bira igračke i tok igre, dok terapeut pruža podršku bez direktivnog usmeravanja. Cilj ovog rada jeste da se, kroz pregled i analizu savremene literature, istakne značaj i efikasnost primene CCPT metode u radu sa decom koja se suočavaju sa različitim emocionalnim, ponašajnim i razvojnim teškoćama. Pregled literature izvršen je putem relevantnih naučnih izvora u skladu sa precizno definisanim kriterijumima. Izdvojeno je deset najuticajnijih empirijskih studija koje se bave primenom CCPT u različitim kontekstima i populacijama. Na osnovu analize izabranih studija, može se zaključiti da CCPT ima izražene pozitivne efekte kod dece sa poremećajima u ponašanju, teškoćama u učenju, problemima u socijalizaciji i emocionalnom vezivanju, kao i kod dece sa poremećajima iz autističnog spektra. Terapija se pokazala kao efikasna u različitim kulturnim i obrazovnim kontekstima, a naročito je uspešna kada se u tretman aktivno uključuju članovi porodice. Na kraju rada date su preporuke za dalja istraživanja i praktičnu primenu CCPT u okviru različitih razvojnih i kliničkih okruženja.

Ključne reči: terapija igrom, deca, CCPT, porodica, psihološka podrška.

INTRODUCTION

Play represents one of the most important aspects of child development, as through play children learn, explore the world around them, and express their inner feelings. Besides developing cognitive and motor skills, play plays a key role in the emotional and social maturation of the child (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978). During play, children can express their thoughts and emotions through symbolism and creativity, which they are often unable to articulate verbally. This is especially significant in early childhood, when children are still limited in their verbal abilities (Erikson, 1950).

However, many factors can negatively impact a child's development and their ability to express themselves. Children with emotional and developmental difficulties, such as behavioral disorders, anxiety, depression, and those on the autism spectrum, often face challenges in verbal communication and social interaction (Bratton et al., 2005). For such children, traditional forms of psychotherapy that rely on verbal dialogue are often insufficiently effective. Therefore, it is necessary to use methods that allow children to express themselves in a natural way, without the pressure of verbalization — and play therapy is precisely such an approach. Play therapy uses play as the primary medium of communication between the therapist and the child. Unlike verbal therapy, which relies on speech, play therapy uses the child's natural language — play — to discover and resolve emotional and behavioral problems. This method provides the child with a safe and

supportive environment where they can freely express their feelings, thoughts, and conflicts, often hidden or difficult to access through verbal expression (Bratton et al., 2005).

Child-Centered Play Therapy (CCPT), a nondirective approach, emerged as a development of humanistic psychotherapy and is based on the principles of acceptance, empathy, and respect for the child's freedom during play (Axline, 1947). This approach allows the child to independently choose toys and direct the play, while the therapist provides support but does not direct or control the course of play. This creates a safe environment where the child can explore their feelings and problems, contributing to the development of emotional regulation and self-awareness (Ray, 2011; Landreth, 2012).

The importance of play therapy was recognized as early as the mid-20th century when Virginia Axline and other psychologists began formally applying it in work with children (Axline, 1947). Since then, the CCPT methodology has been continuously refined and adapted to various groups of children with specific needs. Numerous studies confirm that CCPT has positive effects on children with behavioral disorders, learning problems, social difficulties, and autism (Bratton et al., 2005; Kottman, 2001). The therapy plays an important role in reducing anxiety, strengthening self-confidence, and improving communication skills. In addition to individual work with the child, involving the family in the therapeutic process is crucial. The family represents the primary environment in which the child grows and develops, making cooperation with parents key to the success of the treatment (Landreth, 2012). Contemporary practice indicates that a multidisciplinary approach, involving therapists, parents, and educational professionals, contributes to better generalization of therapeutic results and long-term improvement in the child's functioning in various life situations (Ray, 2011).

Despite the positive outcomes, the application of play therapy also poses challenges. It is necessary to adapt the therapeutic work to the specific cultural and social context in which the child lives, as well as to the individual characteristics of the child and their difficulties (Bratton et al., 2005). Further research is needed to deepen understanding of the long-term effects of CCPT and to improve therapeutic techniques.

The aim of this paper is to highlight, through a review of relevant scientific literature, the significance and effectiveness of nondirective Child-Centered Play Therapy. Special focus will be given to the application of this method with children experiencing emotional, behavioral, and developmental difficulties, as well as the role of the family and broader social support in the therapeutic process. Through analysis of contemporary theoretical and empirical findings, this paper will contribute to better understanding and promotion of play therapy as an effective tool in the psychological protection and development of children.

The aim of this paper was to review relevant scientific literature from the period 2010 to 2025 in order to assess the significance and effectiveness of the application of nondirective Child-Centered Play Therapy (CCPT) in working with children who have emotional, behavioral, and developmental difficulties. Special attention was given to analyzing the impact of play therapy on emotional expression, social adaptation, and developmental regulation, as well as the role of the family in the therapeutic process.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

For the purposes of this paper, studies published between 2008 and 2025 were analyzed, available through electronic databases Google Scholar and KOBSON. Keywords used in the search included: “play therapy,” “child-centered play therapy,” “nondirective therapy,” “child development,” “emotional disorders,” “behavioral disorders,” “autism,” and “family involvement.” The criteria for selecting studies were that they had to be original research or systematic reviews focusing on the application of play therapy with children experiencing developmental, emotional, or behavioral difficulties, and that they included analysis of therapeutic outcomes on various aspects of child development.

RESULTS

After the literature selection, ten relevant studies were identified for analysis, which demonstrated that nondirective play therapy has positive effects when working with children who have emotional disorders, socialization difficulties, as well as children on the autism spectrum. The research indicates that this therapy contributes to the improvement of emotional regulation, increased self-confidence, and the development of communication skills (Bratton et al., 2005; Ray, 2011). The importance of family involvement in the therapeutic process was particularly emphasized, as collaboration with parents strengthens the effects of therapy and supports the integration of positive changes into the child’s everyday life (Landreth, 2012).

Although most studies confirm the usefulness of CCPT, challenges were also noted, such as the need to adapt therapeutic approaches to the specific cultural and social contexts, as well as the limited availability of trained therapists in some regions (Table 1.). Further research is needed to define the best models for applying play therapy in different settings and for various categories of difficulties.

Table 1. Characteristics of studies included in the analysis

Author(s) and year	Sample	Research topic	Main findings
Kottman (2001)	Children with emotional disorders, n=75	Play therapy as a means of emotional expression	Children showed increased ability to verbalize emotions after therapy.
Bratton et al. (2005)	Children with emotional and behavioral difficulties, n=250	Effectiveness of play therapy in children	Play therapy significantly reduces anxiety symptoms and behavioral problems, improves emotional regulation.
Ehrenreich et al. (2008)	Children aged 2.5–4 years with separation anxiety, n=48	Effectiveness of CCPT and narrative therapy in reducing separation anxiety	CCPT effectively reduced separation anxiety levels and improved social-emotional behavior.
Ray (2011)	Children with autism spectrum disorders, n=50	Application of CCPT in children with autism	CCPT contributes to the improvement of social skills and communication.
Landreth (2012)	Children with behavioral problems, n=100	Role of play therapy and family involvement	Family involvement enhances long-term therapy effects and supports the development of emotional skills.
Blanco et al. (2019)	Children with emotional problems, n=80	Effects of CCPT on reducing anxiety and depression symptoms	Therapy significantly reduced anxiety and depression symptoms and improved social skills.
Wong et al. (2022)	Children with ADHD, n=17; control group, n=35	Impact of CCPT on executive functions in children with ADHD	CCPT improved cognitive flexibility and reduced ADHD symptoms.
Gökür-Özdemir & Sertelin-Mercan (2023)	Children with behavioral problems, n=20	Effectiveness of CCPT in reducing behavioral problems	Therapy significantly reduced aggression and withdrawal in children from socioeconomically disadvantaged families.
Robinson et al. (2024)	Children aged 3–5 years, n=23	Impact of CCPT on social-emotional skills and attention expression	Therapy improved empathy, responsibility, and social competence in children.
Xu (2025)	Children with learning difficulties, n=60	Impact of play therapy on academic success and socialization	Play therapy improves concentration and interpersonal relationships.

DISCUSSION

The results of the reviewed studies clearly confirm the significance and effectiveness of nondirective child-centered play therapy (CCPT) as one of the key methods in supporting children with various emotional, behavioral, and developmental difficulties. Play therapy represents a specific modality that allows the child, through spontaneous and free choice of toys and play forms, to express inner feelings, thoughts, and conflicts, thereby creating space for emotional regulation and problem-solving. As noted by Bratton et al. (2005), the significant reduction of anxiety symptoms and behavioral problems indicates that CCPT operates on fundamental mechanisms of emotional self-regulation, which is crucial for children's mental health.

The particular importance of play therapy is evident in working with children on the autism spectrum, where traditional verbal communication is often challenging or underdeveloped. Ray (2011) emphasizes that CCPT facilitates the development of social skills and communication through nonverbal forms of interaction, contributing to better integration of these children into peer groups and the community. This is especially important as social isolation and interaction difficulties represent major challenges within this population.

Family involvement in the therapeutic process, highlighted especially in the studies by Landreth (2012) and Blanco et al. (2019), further enhances the durability and quality of achieved changes. Family support not only ensures the continuity of applying learned techniques and strategies in the child's daily life but also strengthens emotional bonds within the family, which has multiple positive effects on the development of socio-emotional skills. This synergy of play therapy and family involvement represents a model that contributes to more successful and lasting overcoming of difficulties.

However, the literature review also points to certain challenges and limitations in applying CCPT. One such challenge is the lack of trained therapists, especially in less developed or rural areas, limiting the availability of this effective method (Gökör-Özdemir & Sertelin-Mercan, 2023). Additionally, therapeutic approaches need to be adapted to the cultural, social, and individual specificities of children and their families to be as relevant and effective as possible in diverse settings. This calls for further research and the development of localized protocols and guidelines.

Furthermore, existing research often faces limitations regarding sample size and long-term follow-up of therapy effects, complicating the generalization of findings. Studies like those by Wong et al. (2022) and Robinson et al. (2024) provide valuable contributions to understanding the impact of CCPT on specific developmental areas such as executive functions and socio-emotional skills, but larger longitudinal studies are needed to confirm these effects over time.

It is important to emphasize that play therapy is not only a tool for problem resolution but also a preventive intervention that can contribute to the overall development and psychological well-being of the child. It fosters creativity, imagination, self-confidence, and resilience — key factors for successfully overcoming future life challenges.

In conclusion, child-centered play therapy represents one of the most comprehensive and natural forms of psychotherapy for children, enabling them to actively participate in their healing and development through a safe and supportive relationship with the therapist. Further

development and dissemination of this method, alongside continuous professional training of therapists and active family involvement, form the foundation for improving the mental health and well-being of children with various difficulties worldwide.

CONCLUSION

Nondirective child-centered play therapy (CCPT) represents an effective and developmentally appropriate approach in working with children facing various emotional, behavioral, and developmental difficulties. Through symbolic and free play, children are given the opportunity to express their feelings, thoughts, and internal conflicts in a manner that is natural and understandable to them. Analysis of contemporary research shows that CCPT contributes to reducing anxiety, improving social skills, increasing self-confidence, and better emotional regulation in children from diverse populations, including those with autism spectrum disorders.

The importance of involving parents and the wider family environment in the therapeutic process has been especially emphasized. Interdisciplinary cooperation between therapists, parents, and educational professionals further enhances treatment effectiveness and facilitates the generalization of therapeutic gains into the child's daily life. Additionally, the need for cultural and individual adaptation of the approach has been highlighted to ensure therapy is as effective as possible across different social contexts.

Based on the findings, concrete recommendations can be made. In practice, it is necessary to ensure greater availability and presence of CCPT therapists in schools, preschools, and counseling centers, especially in communities where children have limited access to psychological support. It is also important to continuously educate parents about the significance of play and emotional expression through play, thereby strengthening the partnership between families and professionals.

For future research, longitudinal studies are recommended to examine in more detail the long-term effects of play therapy, as well as comparative studies analyzing differences in outcomes between various therapeutic approaches. More research is also needed in local contexts, particularly in the Balkans, to assess the cultural relevance and effectiveness of CCPT in specific social conditions.

Overall, child-centered play therapy not only provides a safe and empathetic framework for children in emotional need but also reminds adults of the importance of creating space for the child's voice — through play, reflection, and supportive interaction.

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