

Book review for Garry L. Landreth (2010). *Play therapy: The art of the relationship* (3rd Ed.) New York: Routledge 2010

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Sharon Duthie, *Private Practice, Victoria, Australia*

Birds fly, fish swim, and children play.

Garry Landreth

The inner world of the child is vastly different to that of an adult's; children perceive, construct and interact with the world around them in a different way. The child's world is filled with colour, creativity, play, symbols and imagination and so, in order to understand their inner world the therapist needs to meet the child in that realm. Dr Garry Landreth in *Play therapy: The art of relationship* not only honours the child's unique way of being in the world, he also writes compellingly about the inner workings of the child, child-centred play therapy and the complexity of the therapeutic relationship.

Drawing on his years of experience and expertise, as well as on other professionals and their research, Landreth's third edition of this important text is comprehensive and user friendly. The original text was written over 20 years ago and is still used in university courses throughout the world, and in some circles even considered "The Bible" of child-centred play therapy. Yet, in this third edition Landreth reveals his fear that the written word may not suffice to convey the dynamic inner structure of the child's world and the processes of play therapy. "How does one describe children's wonder, excitement in experiencing life, the fresh newness with which they approach living, and their incredible resiliency?" (p. 2) He should fear not. Landreth's analysis clearly reveals the inner worlds of children and eloquently explains the dynamic processes of child-centred play therapy with clear, concise and insightful language.

Central to the fundamental principles of the child-centred play therapy approach is that children are self-directing, forward moving, creative and capable of self-healing. So, by providing a space filled with the appropriate materials, children will naturally strive for growth, independence and self-acceptance themselves. As opposed to adults, children cannot be relied upon to use words to express themselves. Children better communicate

through the use of toys, puppets, symbols and art materials in the therapeutic space. However, much more is needed than a well-equipped play room. Landreth stresses that the relationship between the therapist and the child is the key transformative ingredient.

The book includes chapters entirely dedicated to exploring the role of this relationship but throughout the entire text its importance is constantly revisited. Landreth begins the book with a personal account of why he values children and this approach to working with them. He provides a chapter on the meaning of play including a useful section on play of adjusted and maladjusted children. The author then goes on to describe the history and development of play therapy drawing on psychoanalytic theories, release play therapy and relationship play therapy. He offers an in-depth analysis on child-centred play therapy, and details the work of other prominent specialists and their involvement in the formation of today's child-centred play therapy model such as Anna Freud, Melanie Klein, David Levy, Clark Moustakas, Carl Rogers and Virginia Axline.

Other important issues Landreth discusses are the role of the play therapist; the logistics of the play room and the materials needed; troubleshooting in the play room; case studies and transcripts of children therapy. He also offers practical advice and strategies to employ in the play room and there is a thought-provoking chapter on parents as partners in play therapy which also considers ethical and legal issues. The final chapter, entirely new to this edition, presents a dedicated and thorough compilation of research from 1995 – 2010 on controlled outcome research using child-centred play therapy. The third edition has expanded explanations of procedures and provides new material including a multi-cultural approach of child-centred play therapy, a description of how children view the play therapy experience, and guidelines for determining therapeutic progress, as well as termination procedures.

Landreth writes passionately about how children should be perceived and understood through the eyes of the child, not the eyes of an adult. Specifically, “[t]he child’s behaviour must always be understood by looking through the child’s eyes” (p. 403). Therapists who do not subscribe to Rogerian person-centred therapies may struggle with some of Landreth’s concepts in the child-centred model. It is a purist model which takes the standpoint that the therapist’s role is to release what already “exists in the child” and not to “identify” or try to “fix” any problems with the child’s behaviour. Rather, in the child-centred play therapy model the therapist must allow the child to lead the direction of the therapeutic experience.

As an arts therapist and child counsellor, I find it difficult to embrace an entirely pure play therapy model. It seems counter intuitive not to use some directive approaches combining creative arts therapy interventions within the play room space. Is it detrimental to use *some* direction with children? How does it hinder the therapeutic relationship? Is it possible to use directive components and still embrace all the most valuable qualities of the child centred play therapist? Unsatisfactorily, for me at least, Landreth does not address this compromise.

Despite my personal dissonance with Landreth's lack of negotiation in incorporating directive elements into the play therapy model, I am immensely pleased that there is such a clearly laid out explanation of the purist approach. A purist model gives a defined and ideal paradigm to work within. It evokes passion and awareness. And the work we do with children needs that. Children need to be heard, understood and affirmed. They need to be met in their world. The core message from this book is that working as a child-centred play therapist is a *way of being*. And, as a play therapist you must embrace this way of being, not only in the play therapy room, but as part of the very ethos of how you exist in the world. And that cannot be such a bad thing. For me, Landreth's pioneering text does much more than outline an important development in the way we approach therapy with children—instead, reading it felt like listening to a cherished story told by a beloved grandparent. This book has that kind of feel. It emanates ease, warmth and comfortableness—the way we might hope to interact with our precious young clients.

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