



NEW Play Therapy

Program Helps Families Connect with Children's Feelings

From the time a baby is born through adolescence, the child goes through various stages of development to communicate its needs, feelings and emotions to its family and the world. And sometimes, this is naturally more difficult for some children than others.

Luckily, there is a new resource now available in Sycamore to help families with young children work through emotional and behavioral concerns through the process of play therapy. Wellspring Center for Counseling, located on Edward Street across from Kindred Hospital, recently opened in November 2019 and offers individual, family and couples therapy. It has expanded to now offer play therapy for its youngest clients. Founded by Halie Howells, a licensed marriage and family therapist, Wellspring's play therapy component was created to fill a need for children ages 3-12 who are dealing with emotional, social and behavior issues.

"We have offered play therapy services at our original Wellspring location in Elgin, and felt there was a gap in resources for families located further west from Chicago," says Halie. "Sycamore was an obvious choice for us to open a location and offer our services



Wellspring Center for Counseling founder Halie Howells with her husband Joel

because it is a special place for our family. It is my husband's hometown, and we both had an interest in wanting to serve this community that means so much to us."

Based on the concept that every child's first language is play, play therapy has been researched and practiced for approximately 70 years. Using a unique approach that includes working with a child through arts and crafts, music, Play-Doh, drawings, pictures and imaginative play with real-life scenarios and toys, a therapist is able to help children re-enact events that have happened or express themselves in a constructive way. In Wellspring's office, play therapy clients benefit from a space designed and set up like a play

room that provides comfort and familiarity, and allows children to fully explore and immerse themselves in self-directed play.

"As a marriage and family therapist, I often see the implications of how parents' relationships can affect the children in a family," says Halie. "But parents don't even need to be in therapy to suggest that their children could benefit from a professional. We are seeing a cultural shift where people are becoming more accepting of therapy, and we want to provide a place for them to turn to when their children begin presenting any type of issue."

In fact, there are myriad reasons Halie lists for why a child may benefit from play



therapy, aside from divorce or separation in a family. They can range from exposure to a major illness or hospitalization to a difficult sibling dynamic, bullying, issues with social cues or even difficulties handling what they hear about on the news. These events can spur anxiety, anger issues and difficulties with impulse control.

"We take a 'systems approach' when working with any client, young or old, in which we look at the whole family unit and not just the individual," Halie says. "If a child is the presenting client, there will also be sessions with parents or guardians to discuss how their child is expressing emotions and how they can connect and help their child in moments of distress. We really want to help empower parents to look at the big picture."

Wellspring offers two play therapists —Anna Thomas, ALMFT, and Tyler Martawibawa, ALMFT — so children can have a choice of working with a male or female.

"As a former nanny, I've always believed that one of the most intimate places you can be invited into is a family's home and dynamic," says Anna. "I love the process of play therapy — the honesty, rawness, improvisation — and creating a story with a family to show them what change can look like. Playing is fun, and it's exciting to see the possibilities when things are going well and even when they aren't going well. But it's hard work, and I have an immense sense of pride for the work my clients do."

For Tyler, play therapy was an extension of why he got into the field of marriage and family therapy.

"I became a marriage and family therapist to help children and their families," he says. "When kids are developing mentally at a young age, they don't do well with talk therapy, so play therapy is a perfect starting point to help a child feel genuinely seen and understood by his or her parents. It's exciting to see progress and growth with my clients, when the whole family has a

breakthrough where parents are seeing something at home and understand why their child is acting out in a certain way."

Wellspring offers consultations with parents interested in play therapy in which they can discuss their child's needs and what issues should be addressed. Then, the parents will work with the therapist to create a customized "road map" and goals for the child. From there, the child will have his or her first session one on one with the therapist in Wellspring's



dedicated play therapy space. Wellspring also offers parent support groups and group sessions for children.

"There is no one-size-fits-all approach in play therapy, but when parents walk in the door, we want them to know they already have support for the work that needs to be done," Anna says. "Your issue is not everyone else's issue, but you're not the only one going through this."

While Wellspring is not the first center in the area to offer a play therapy program, it is the first to provide a designated space set up for child-led play and a program that will see children starting as young as 3.

Building relationships with the education system and community organizations is one goal that Wellspring is building upon as it launches its play therapy program. One organization, Basics DeKalb County,

is a resource Halie commends for its Kindergarten Readiness Collaborative. Through play-based observation, Basics is helping families ensure that children entering kindergarten are not only equipped with their school supplies, but also with the relational components needed to be ready in the classroom.

"When we see kindergartners coming in and they don't have the social or emotional skills and don't know how to regulate those feelings, they need people who

will come in and do more play with them," says Halie. "There is a shift happening in how the school system is assessing children, and it has proven much more effective to put children in these directed play environments, rather than having them sit directly with a counselor or therapist and try to talk about issues."

Halie would like to expand her relationships with the DeKalb and Sycamore school districts, as well as local churches or other gathering places, to serve as a mental health first responder when large-scale adverse events happen. "While we are at the beginning stages of launching our play therapy program, we hope to expand and provide education to teachers and youth leaders in the community, while providing families with accessible services," she says. "When we can get kids on the right track, it can impact the rest of their lives. It is so powerful." ■