

# ADLERIAN

## Play Therapy

| TERRY KOTTMAN, PHD, LPC-S, RPT-S & JEFF ASHBY, PHD, ABPP, RPT-S

**D**eveloped by Terry Kottman in the early 1990s, Adlerian play therapy (AdPT) allows children to engage in a therapeutic process that values them as creative, resourceful, and whole. AdPT combines the underlying concepts of Alfred Adler's theory of individual psychology (Adler, 1931/1958; Carlson & Englar-Carlson, 2017) with the principles and practices of play therapy and allows play therapists to develop their own style in the playroom. In AdPT, the therapist conceptualizes clients from an Adlerian perspective while strategically and systematically drawing from a plethora of directive and nondirective skills and techniques to facilitate and encourage clients to change their cognitive, affective, behavioral, and relationship patterns (Kottman & Meany-Walen, 2016, 2018). This panoply of techniques allows therapists to develop their own unique style in a theoretically consistent way to meet the needs of a diverse range of clients.

### Basic Tenets

Fundamental assumptions underlying AdPT include: (a) people are socially embedded and have a need to belong; (b) children develop feelings of inferiority and strive to overcome these inferiority feelings their whole lives; (c) people are creative and self-determining; (d) all behavior has a purpose; and (e) reality is perceived subjectively (Kottman & Ashby, 2015). Adlerians believe that people are best understood in their social context. So, in AdPT, the therapist considers the ways clients find to belong and gain significance in all of their ecosystems. In AdPT, the therapist assesses clients' social interest and devises ways to support the development of community feeling and social skills in play therapy sessions and through consultation with parents and teachers.

According to Adler, one of the basic motivations for behavior is overcoming feelings of inferiority (Adler, 1958). Young children perceive they are "less than" others because they are not as competent as older, more well-developed people in their world. Adlerian play therapists work with clients to help them develop positive ways to strive toward being and feeling adequate.

Adlerians believe that people are self-determining and creative and have the freedom to make choices about their feelings, behavior, aspects of their personality, and attitudes (Carlson & Englar-Carlson, 2017). Therefore, one therapeutic goal is helping clients recognize that they have choices in how they perceive and react to situations and relationships. According to Adlerian therapy, all behavior is purposive. Due to Adlerian theory's phenomenological perspective, in which people filter their experiences through their subjective interpretation of events, Adlerian play therapists strive to understand clients' "take" on what has happened in their lives.

### Psychopathology and Client Dysfunction

Although Adlerians believe that the etiology of some psychopathology is biological in nature, Adlerians tend to view client maladjustment as discouragement (Corey, 2017). Discouraged clients are "acting as if" their self-defeating mistaken beliefs about themselves, others, and the world are true. Clients are stuck in their feelings of inferiority, either giving up and wallowing in discouragement or overcompensating by displaying a "lesser degree of social feeling and ability to cooperate" (Adler, 1958, p. 23).

### Treatment Description

When play therapists ask us, "What do I do when...?", the answer is almost always, "It depends," because there is not a universal answer. Progress unfolds through the four phases of Adlerian therapy, and Adlerian play therapists combine non-directive skills with directive strategies according to the phase of counseling and clients' specific needs (Kottman & Meany-Walen, 2016). In the first phase of play therapy, building the therapeutic relationship, Adlerians are mostly non-directive, though they may sometimes use directive techniques to deepen the connection with clients.

In the second phase, exploring the clients' lifestyles, Adlerians observe clients' behavior and discover clients' intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics using questioning strategies and strategically planned activities. In thinking about clients' lifestyles, Adlerians consider: clients' strengths; functioning at life tasks (e.g., work, love/family, friendship); family constellation (i.e., psychological birth order); goals of misbehavior

(e.g., attention, power, revenge, inadequacy); the Crucial Cs (i.e., courage, capable, connect, and count); and personality priorities (i.e., pleasing, comfort, superiority, and control; Kottman & Meany-Walen, 2016, 2018). Based on lifestyle information gathered during the first and second phases of therapy, the Adlerian play therapist develops a conceptualization and treatment plan that guides the rest of the process.

The third phase is designed to help clients gain insight into their patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving. In this phase, the counselor uses mostly directive techniques with a special emphasis on custom-designed stories and metacommunication to enhance clients' understanding of themselves and others.

The fourth phase, reorientation and reeducation, consists of a combination of therapist-directed activities intended to teach a variety of skills including problem solving, communication, anger and anxiety management, and metacommunication designed to teach and reinforce the client's constructive patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving. Consulting with parents (and teachers) is an essential element of AdPT that supports any changes children might make in the process, and it unfolds in parallel to the individual work with children.

## Therapy Goals and Progress Measurement

In general, the goals of Adlerian play therapy are for clients to (a) feel more connected to others and be able to interact with others in prosocial ways; (b) develop and practice more positive ways for belonging and gaining significance; (c) learn to cope with feelings of discouragement and inferiority in healthier ways; (d) recognize patterns of self-defeating beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors and shift them to more constructive patterns; and (e) notice when they are stuck in feeling inferior and develop coping strategies to address this (Kottman & Meany-Walen, 2016, 2018). Because Adlerian play therapists custom-design their treatment plans and interventions for specific clients, individual therapy goals are based on the presenting problem, the underlying dynamics of clients' interpersonal and intrapersonal struggles, and they focus on the client's strengths. Depending on the client's lifestyle assessment, therapists may choose interventions to help clients become aware of the choices they have in behavior (addressing goals of misbehavior), shift feelings of inferiority (e.g., by fostering the crucial Cs), or become aware of relational styles that undermine their social connectedness and practice new styles.

## Therapeutic Powers of Play

Depending on the client, the Adlerian play therapist may use any number of Schaefer and Drewes's (2014) therapeutic powers of play. Throughout the phases of therapy and through the intentional application of directive and non-directive techniques, the Adlerian play therapist may apply any and all of these powers. In AdPT, there is a special emphasis on: facilitating clients' *self-expression* by exploring the child's lifestyle; *accessing the unconscious* by helping children gain insight into their lifestyle; *creatively problem solving* through interventions designed to reorient and reeducate the child; and building *resilience*, *self-regulation*, and *self-esteem* through interventions that foster the Crucial Cs. By using *direct and indirect interventions* with clients, the Adlerian play therapist activates many of the therapeutic powers of play.

## Summary

AdPT is the application of Adlerian principles through directive and non-directive play interventions that facilitate positive change in clients in fun ways for play therapists and for clients. Because they get to be themselves in the playroom and have a theoretically consistent way of guiding the process, Adlerian play therapists have access to their own set of super powers: "Go confront the problem! Fight! Win! And call me when you get back, darling. I enjoy our visits" (Disney, n.d., "Edna Mode," *The Incredibles*).

## References

- Adler, A. (1958). *What life should mean to you*. New York, NY: Capricorn. (Original work published in 1931)
- Carlson, J., & Englars-Carlson, M. (2017). *Adlerian psychotherapy*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Corey, G. (2017). *Theory and practice of counseling and psychotherapy* (10th ed.). Boston, MA: Cengage.
- Disney. (n.d.). Words are useless... unless they come from Edna Mode. Retrieved from <https://ohmy.disney.com/movies/2013/08/25/words-are-useless-unless-they-come-from-Edna-Mode/>
- Kottman, T., & Ashby, J. (2015). Adlerian play therapy. In D. Crenshaw & A. Stewart (Eds.), *Play therapy: A comprehensive guide to theory and practice* (pp. 32-47). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Kottman, T., & Meany-Walen, K. (2016). *Partners in play: An Adlerian approach to play therapy* (3rd ed.). Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.
- Kottman, T., & Meany-Walen, K. (2018). *Doing play therapy: From building the relationship to facilitating change*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Schaefer, C. E., & Drewes, A. A. (Eds.). (2014). *The therapeutic powers of play: 20 core agents of change* (2nd ed.). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons. 

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**Terry Kottman**, PhD, LPC-S, NCC, RPT-S, LMHC, is the original author and developer of Adlerian Play Therapy and the founder of The Encouragement Zone, where she provides play therapy training and supervision. She is a recipient of numerous awards including the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Association for Play Therapy.

[tkottman@cfu.net](mailto:tkottman@cfu.net)



**Jeff Ashby**, PhD, ABPP, RPT-S, is a Professor in the Department of Counseling and Psychological Services at Georgia State University and the Co-Director of the Center for the Study of Stress, Trauma, and Resilience.

[jashby2@gsu.edu](mailto:jashby2@gsu.edu)