

Costumes are Essential in Play Therapy

By: Mary Tarbell, LPC, RPTS

As a child, did you ever spend a rainy afternoon trying on old dresses and costume jewelry, grandmother's high heels, outgrown suit jackets and ties? In play therapy, dress-up can be lighthearted (fun for the fun of it!), or it can take on a whole new meaning. The playroom at JFS is filled with a wide variety of toys and activities - a sandbox with miniature items (people, animals, cars, fantasy figures, etc.), puppets, stuffed toys, dolls, a dollhouse, art materials, costumes, and construction toys. Play is a child's language for emotional expression, and toys are the words, the sentences. For example, if a child creates a scenario with army figures at war, the therapist might guess that the child is grappling with some form of conflict (within herself or between the people in her life). Many children use the costumes in the playroom, sometimes in combination with other toys (for example, putting on a hat and carrying a purse to go "shopping," with the cash register, or wearing a doctor's white coat while giving a "check-up" with the medical kit). Donning a superhero cape can allow a traumatized child to pretend he has amazing powers which he can employ, within the safe walls of the playroom, contrasted with the lack of control he feels in real life. As a therapist, I have been instructed by a young client to put on a head scarf and wear a shawl, and then gaze into my crystal ball. Together my client and I can envision happier days or a resolution to a vexing problem. The use of costumes in play therapy can communicate issues of identity, self-image, the burden of external expectations for our looks and actions, and the desire to try on not only clothing but new roles and behaviors.

It is problematic to find costumes that "work" for the play therapy room. Ready-made costumes have all sorts of buttons and fasteners, are time-consuming to put on, are precisely fitted for S-M-L sizes, and they can be expensive! The best costumes for play therapy are those that can be slipped on and off easily, over the child's regular clothing. The costumes must be unisex and "unisex," able to be worn by children as young as four, up through twelve years old. A quick Velcro closure is a great advantage, and of course they must be machine-washable.

Would you like to contribute to the MyndWorks play therapy dress-up wardrobe? We are in need of these types of costumes: princess dress, tutu, bridal gown, military/camouflage outfit, magician cape, king/queen cape, crowns, pirate outfits, and cultural dress (such as traditional Chinese, African, Native American, Russian, Indian, or Japanese outfits).

If you have items such these, or if you sew and would be willing to create a costume or two, please call Mary Tarbell at JFS (717-233-1681). Your contributions would be put to wonderful use, helping children discover themselves through the healing power of play!