UNT Center for Play Therapy offers unique training

A participant in Play Therapy training peers through a two-way mirror as a counselor observes a child playing as part of therapy.

In a dark hallway divided by heavy black-out curtains, counselors and therapists from across the country peer through two-way mirrors as their fellow professionals work with young children in toy-filled rooms on the other side of the glass.

Through one window, two sisters play in a sandbox, filling buckets as a counselor utilizes therapeutic responses to convey empathy, understanding and support. The sisters are part of an intensive training session that caps off a two-week conference hosted by the University of North Texas Center for Play Therapy.

The focus of these unique practice experiences isn’t the children but training the most qualified play therapists worldwide, according to Dee Ray, professor in the College of Education’s Department of Counseling and Higher Education and director of the Center for Play Therapy. The 12 participants from around the world took part in the Intensive Supervision program that followed the Center for Play Therapy 2018 Summer Institute, in which they received training and direct supervision from prominent play therapy supervisors.

“Intensive supervision is a unique and invaluable experience,” Ray said. “The Center for Play Therapy is the only play therapy facility in the world that offers play therapists an opportunity to learn, develop, and implement play therapy skills within a five-day span.”

The Center for Play Therapy was established in 1987, with their first international play therapy conference in 1973. Today The Center for Play Therapy provides the largest play therapy training program in the world, attracting
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graduate students and professionals from all around the world. Participants from Canada, India, and Hong Kong attended this summer’s conference.

Olive Kwan is a family and marriage therapist from Hong Kong who traveled to UNT to learn more about Play Therapy in order to bring those techniques back home.

“I really wanted to learn what this is about from the original; not from second-hand,” Kwan said. “If children change, the family will change.”

According to Psychology Today, play therapy is a psychotherapeutic approach primarily used to help children ages 3 to 12 explore their lives and freely express thoughts and emotions through play. Play therapy occurs in a purposefully designed playroom, where children are able to freely express themselves through the developmentally appropriate modality of play within the therapeutic relationship. Play therapy may help children learn to express themselves in healthy ways, increase their empathy and understanding of others, limit their problematic behaviors, and increase their self-confidence.

Participants in the intensive supervision program were broken into small groups, and worked with experienced counselors in a group supervision format for three intensive days. During that time, they were able to practice play in therapy directly with children of all ages.

Amber Ensign is a therapist from Waxahachie, Texas. She works with law enforcement and child protective services with victims of physical and sexual abuse.

“This provides me with another method of working with children,” Ensign said. “A 3-year-old might not be able to verbalize their experiences, but they can express it through play.”

Shannon Lerach, a child psychologist from San Diego, said she appreciated the quality and caliber of the UNT facilities.

“This just isn't available anywhere else,” Lerach said. “The facilities are just amazing.”

Eliza Schindler is a clinical social worker and therapist from Austin who works with children in schools.

“Play therapy allows children to show their experiences rather than have you put the emphasis on them.”

The Center for Play Therapy at UNT will host CCPT 101: Basics in Child-Centered Play Therapy, a two-day foundational training, on Sept. 28-29, 2018. CCPT is an evidence-based intervention for young children and this workshop serves as the introduction to CCPT certification.

Participants of CCPT 101 will earn continuing education credits and complete the first educational component toward CCPT certification. Completion of this workshop allows the participant to have a greater understanding of CCPT and begin to practice basic CCPT skills.