

Playing Games with Children in Therapy and Teletherapy

By Tasha Milligan, MA LPC

Play is the language of children. It is through play that they discover and process the world around them. Integrating games into therapy offers the therapist a mighty tool to assess the child from many different perspectives, to ask difficult questions in a nonconfrontational way, and to help children process trauma and loss. Games also help children learn to cope with difficulties, develop stronger social skills, and can help them become more responsive to others. While most therapeutic approaches focus on the client, games help the client observe the impact of their behavior on others as well. Research supports the use of games and play in therapy (Noda, Shirotaki & Nakao, 2019), resulting in significant improvement. Games provide a relaxed, fun environment that can lead to skill building, processing emotion, and improving communication.

Therapists can use games to integrate many different forms of therapy into the counseling session. “Some play therapy approaches that might incorporate board games include but are not limited to Adlerian Play Therapy, Cognitive Behavioral Play Therapy, Psychodynamic Play Therapy, Family Play Therapy, AutPlay Therapy, Integrative Play Therapy, and Prescriptive Play Therapy” (Grant, 2018). Therapists could also use Narrative Therapy to allow children to create a new story line for a life event. Psychoeducation is widely used with games to teach social skills, coping strategies, and to address other issues.

Board games are showing promising results in therapy (Noda, Shirotaki & Nakao, 2019). Shaefer & Drewes (2014) found twenty core change agents associated with play. All of these change agents lead to personal growth and development. Unfortunately, research related to the use of board games in therapy is rather lacking.

Many conventional games can be modified to be used in therapy, such as Candyland. Children can talk about various feelings they have experienced based on which color they land on. ([Free instructions here](#)). You can use the same concept with UNO, stating a time you felt happy with each yellow card played, green for anxious, blue for sad, and red for angry. Prompts can be changed based on the presenting problem. Chutes and Ladders lends itself well to working on impulse control and behavioral issues. Children can talk about how their choices lead to consequences each turn. There are many resources available on the Teachers Pay Teachers website, such as therapy questions to glue onto Jenga pieces. The Game of Life offers an innovative opportunity to discuss future goals and plans.

There are also many counseling games specific to different presenting problems. While some therapy games can be costly, there are also affordable resources available. Again, the Teachers Pay Teachers website offers many printable options, usually costing less than \$10 per game. Some of my favorite shops are [Mental Fills](#) and [Counselor Keri](#). On my [website](#), you will find games that address anxiety, adoption, grief, self-esteem, lying, nightmares, impulsive behavior, and games designed to teach cognitive behavioral skills. All of these games are \$10 or less to download, or there is an option to have a copy mailed to you.

The Covid-19 pandemic has created new difficulties for therapists, requiring the use of telehealth to continue services. While this has been quite challenging for many, it has brought about many out of the box thinkers to recreate therapy rooms digitally. I have converted many of my therapy games to a digital format via PowerPoint and Google Slides. This allows the therapist to pull up the game and share the screen so the client can see it as well. The therapist can then move the game pieces, spin the wheel, and transition from the game board to the

questions via links in the game. If the child is using a computer, the mouse can be shared to allow access to interact with the game.

There are many games available for telehealth. [Be Heard in Your Herd](#) is a family counseling game designed to improve communication and build on positive aspects of the relationship. [The Horrible Thing that Happened](#) helps to develop a trauma narrative and process emotions related to trauma. [The Spirit of the Tribe](#) is to help develop healthy relationships and to address social anxiety. [The Trail of Fears](#) and [Nightmare Ninja](#) are helpful with anxiety and phobias. There are also games available to teach cognitive behavioral skills. Most of my telehealth games are a \$10 download and can be found at <https://www.pathwaystopeacecounseling.com/telehealth-online-version>.

I have created a game called Feelings Candy World, which is a modified version of Candy Land to be played online. You can access it [here](#). Use the coupon code CandyWorld to get it for free.

In conclusion, incorporating games into therapy can engage clients and facilitate the processing of salient treatment issues. They can learn new skills, practice communication, and even develop a trauma narrative through the use of play. The challenges of practicing therapy via the internet has been troublesome for many, but has also provided an opportunity to learn new ways to integrate our favorite interventions in a digital format.

References

Grant, R. J. (2018), Using board games in play therapy, autplaytherapy.com.

Noda, S., Shirotaki, K. & Nakao, M. The effectiveness of intervention with board games: a systematic review. *BioPsychoSocial Med* **13**, 22 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13030-019-0164-1>

Schaefer, C.E. & Drewes, A.A. (2014). The therapeutic powers of play: 20 core agents of change. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley and Sons.

Stone, J. (2015), Board games in play therapy. *Handbook of Play Therapy*

Links to play Virtual Feelings Candy Land (also called Candy World)

Free download for Feelings Candy World game: [Feelings Candy Land](#)

Instructions to play Feelings Candy World:

<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/12gzd5FqoVi4qjOpgN03P8CfwT38WICHuuZvebREdHn8/copy>

Instructions on how to use Google Slides in Telehealth:

<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1-OVXhCyhu5cz3uHeVvA9nphTEQOv4h3C/copy>

About the Author

Tasha Milligan provides school-based therapy in Inola, OK to elementary-aged children. She started working in the mental health field in 2011 and received her master's degree from Liberty University in 2012. She began creating games in 2014 after facing resistance from children who did not want to answer direct questions. She quickly discovered that games facilitated developing healthy rapport, provided a way to teach therapeutic skills in a fun format, and allowed the discussion of difficult topics without being confrontational.

Tasha learned the art of desktop publishing in 2001-2004 while working for a large church. She was responsible for building the website, creating weekly bulletins as well as frequent publications created by the church. This blend of expertise has allowed her to use her creative skills and her knowledge from counseling experience to create games to address specific challenges. As she works with a child who has a specific need, she creates a game to meet that need. All the games available on her website are the result of needs in her own practice.

You can find all of the games, as well as blog posts and tutorials on her website: www.pathwaystopeacecounseling.com. You can also follow her on Facebook @PathwaysToPeaceCounseling or on Instagram @pathwaystopeacecounseling