Solution-Focused Brief Therapy

**Key Figures:** Steve deShazer & Insoo Kim Berg

**Overview of Theory:**
- Emphasis on solutions, instead of problems
  - Focus on solutions in session, not on problem
  - Problems = Unsuccessful solutions
- Post-Modern Roots:
  - Collaborative therapeutic role
  - Emphasis on "languaging" and planting suggestions
  - Client self-determination and problem definition

**Principles about Problems and Change:**
- People are constrained by narrow, pessimistic attitudes about life and self
  - They get saturated by problems and can’t see solutions to them
  - Must open their minds to new possibilities
- Change is inevitable in life and in families, so small, meaningful changes are effective
  - Language: Focus on *how* people talk about problems
    - "Language creates reality." (DeShazer)

**Over-Arching Goal in Therapy:**
- Switching from "problem talk" to "solution talk"
  - Clients are encouraged to steer from "problem talk" to "solution talk"
    - "What would Mom see you doing to say it’s going better?"
  - Therapist helps clients reframe their issues via languaging them differently
    - "It sounds like cares about you a lot to be so concerned."

**Key Focus in Sessions:**
- Talk about potential solutions instead of about past problems and empowering clients to see solutions
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- **Specific Aspects of Goals in Session:**
  - Focus on presenting complaints
  - Brief therapy metaphor of “Mechanic Repairs”
  - Emphasis on helping clients **think or do** something differently
    - State goals in positive terms: “More . . .”
  - Goal clarification is a central activity and a dynamic, continual process during therapy
    - Not a one-time or static process

Application with Children:
**Goal Setting Assumptions**

- **SF Assumptions in Systems & Play**
  - Families/Children are Unique
  - Parents Play Important Role
  - Parents Want Child to be Well
  - Children are Amazingly Creative
  - Activities/Toys are Conversational Tools (rather than diagnostic)

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- **Goal Setting in Session:**
  - Help clients translate big goals into attainable objectives and determine how would they be measured
  - Help establish concrete measurable indicators of their progress
    - Often in terms of behavior or actions that reflect mood or thinking changes

- **Collaborative Goal Setting:**
  - Mom & D Build Together

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- **Steps in Therapy:**
  1) **Assess** client system’s **readiness** to change
  2) **Find exceptions to the Problem:**
    - Assess for possible solutions that may already be present. Examples:
      - “What is going on when it is different?”
      - “What are you doing or thinking when things are better?” “What would others notice about you?”
      - “What will change for more of this to happen?”

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- **Steps of Therapy:** (cont.)
  3) **Plant seeds** of change and hope via carefully-worded phrases or suggestions
    - Amplify exceptions to help clients feel like solutions are possible
  4) **Instill a Vision**:
    - Help clients imagine and discuss what their lives “will” be like “when” things were better
    - Be specific in behavioral or cognitive terms

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- **Aspects of Therapeutic Change Process:**
  1) Help clients shift from talking about *problems* to talking about *solutions*
  2) Help clients find and/or recognize *unseen solutions* to problems
    - Help the client recognize times they were already making the problem go away (i.e., *Wizard of Oz*)
  3) Then, get them to do more of these solving actions (will reinforce further changes)

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- **Examples of Validation Statements:**
  - "What have you done to make the problem less or go away?"
  - "How have you done as well as you have, given all that you’ve been through?"
  - "Wow, you must be a strong person . . ."
  - "Look at how much you've survived . . ."
  - "What things have you done well . . .?"

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- **Key Interventions/Techniques:**
  1. "So-if" questions
     - "So, when[that issue/problem] is better, will it solve your problems?"
  2. Scaling Questions
     - "On a 1 to 10 scale, how would you rate your sense of hope in life right now? When we’re done?"
  3. Reframing (same as other models)

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- **Interventions/Techniques:**
  4. The "Miracle Question"
     - "If you woke up tomorrow and a miracle happened, and your key problems were gone, what will be different about the way you act, feel and think?"
     - Be detailed in behavioral descriptions
     - Variations: "Magic wand" or "three wishes"
  5. Formula first session task
     - Ask clients to observe over the next week what things are going well (or they want to continue)

Application with Children: "Future Play" Interventions

- Preferred Futures
  - Importance of Role Play
  - Experiencing ‘Better’
  - Getting Details
- Shrinking Fear Ball
- Angry to Calm

Debunking Myths in SFBT

- **Problem Phobic or Solution Forced**
- **Clients need to be highly motivated**

SF is effective with difficult clients/cases
- Sexual Abuse (Yvonne Dolan)
- Child Welfare Family Services (Berg)
- Suicidality (Fiske)
- Substance Abuse (Pichot, Smock)(Berg, Miller)
- Is accepted as evidence-based practice
  - SAMHSA, NREPP, & OJJDP

What is Play Therapy?

- **Play Therapy:**
  - Originated in early 1900s
  - Incorporates toys/play materials to help children express thoughts & feelings, preferred futures
  - Toys are a conversational tool in SF
  - Draws on creative art, puppet/doll, psychodrama, games, and sandtray activities

Axline, 1947; Freud, 1946; Landreth, 2012; Selekman, 1997
Debunking Myths of Play Therapy

• Play Therapy (PT) is just "playing with toys"
• PT is a theoretical orientation
• PT is a "voodoo" approach without clear theories, interpretations or research
• PT is a new thing or a "therapeutic fad"
• Play-related techniques cannot be used in adult or family therapies
• PT set-up is too costly to be practical

Play Therapy and Families

• Perceptions About Play Therapy:
  - Play therapists often focus heavily on working with the child in therapy
  - Family therapists often focus on families in child-focused cases
  - Both groups have often maintained a perception that play therapy is mostly just for children
    • This attitude limits how play therapy can be used with families and in situations where adults or teens are present

Haslam & Harris, 2011

Family Play Therapy

• Family Play Therapy (FPT) balances:
  - The use of developmentally appropriate methods with children and a clinical focus on the family system
  - FPT gives the family therapist effective techniques for engaging children
  - FPT evokes the family's creativity & spontaneity

  "The integration of play with family therapy strengthens both therapeutic approaches"
  - Eliana Gil (1994)

Family Play Therapy

• Benefits of using FPT:
  - Engages all family members, giving children meaningful ways of being involved
  - Reveals the family’s dynamics in powerful ways
  - Utilizes healing properties of play and diffuses anxiety
  - Creates powerful symbols and meanings for families
  - Allows the family to share in the problem and its solution

Gil, 1994; Lund et al., 2002; Sori, 2006

Family Play Therapy

• Empirical support for PT and FPT
  - PT shown to be effective with diverse age range of children w/variety of clinical problems
  - Tx effects similar to non-play child tx
    • (e.g., CBT methods)
  - Most powerful effects found when parent is conjointly involved in child’s tx
  - FPT associated with
    • Greater child participation
    • Improved quality of child-therapist alliance
    • More positive emotional experiences

LeBlanc & Ritchie, 2001; Roy & Bratton, 2010;
Willis, Walters, & Crane (in press)

Solution-Focused Play Therapy: Bringing Miracles to Life

• Scaling Tools
  - Abicus, ladders
  - Checkers
  - Marbles, steps on the floor
• Video Examples
  - Counting to Calm
  - Hopscotch Scaling
  - 10 Footsteps/Race
  - Sandtray "War and Peace"
E.A.R.S.
A Solution-Focused Guideline and Tool for Practitioners

• Elicit – Ask about positive change.
• Amplify – Ask for details about positive change.
• Reinforce – Make sure the client notices and values positive change.
• Start Again – Go back to the beginning and focus on client-generated change.

Adapted from DeJong and Berg, 1998

Solution-Focused Play Therapy: What’s Better

• Second Session and Beyond
  - E.A.R.S.
  - What has gone well?
  - What is better, even a little bit?
  - Examples
    - Angry to Calm: Thinking
    - The Right Track
    - Earn a Chip: Play a Game
    - Self Esteem Chains

Solution-Focused Play Therapy: Additional Interventions

• Ending Treatment
  - Review how child made changes
  - Family Collage
    - Of the “new family” they’ve become
    - Accomplishments made over therapy
    - Positive things family wants to be doing in future
  - Graduation Celebration: Thank You Cards

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Suggested Readings/References


