Abstract/Literature Background

The ability to play is a foundational skill for children affecting social and cognitive development, as well as future academic success (Bredekamp, 2005; Coolahan, Fantuzzo, Mendez, & McDermott, 2000; Long, Bergeron, Doyle & Gordon, 2005; McAloney and Stagnitti, 2009; Stagnitti, Unsworth and Rodger, 2000). Current literature suggests that children experiencing homelessness are at risk for deficits in play (Memmott & Young, 1993; Grant, 1991). Play therapy benefits homeless children by providing a therapeutic environment in which to re-enact and resolve traumatic experiences, develop skills, and build self confidence (Baggerly, 2003). As play is one of a child’s major occupations, occupational therapists are uniquely skilled to assist in the acquisition of these skills (Couch, Deitz, & Kanny, 1998; O’Brien et al, 2000). The purpose of this study is to add to the body of knowledge about the effects of homelessness on the play of preschool children, and to determine the efficacy of occupational therapy play groups in promoting play and playfulness among preschool children living in homeless shelters. The results provide preliminary evidence that four weeks of occupational therapy play groups aimed at providing opportunities for imaginative and pretend play can improve playfulness in children experiencing homelessness.

Methodology

In this quantitative investigation, occupational therapy graduate students facilitated 45-minute playgroups with participants twice a week for four weeks at the San Jose Family Shelter. Playgroups addressed developmentally appropriate play skills such as imaginative play and social interaction. Three female children between the ages of three and five participated in this study. They were living at the San Jose Family Shelter and were enrolled in the Voyager Daycare on site. Researchers conducted a pretest and posttest using the Test of Playfulness before and after intervention. Average scores were generated for each child in order to compare the change in playfulness scores overall and the degree of change in relevant subcategories. Since pretend play tends to be a deficit for homeless children, special attention was given to this category in data analysis.

Results

From pretest to posttest, children’s overall scores increased on the Test of Playfulness. The children averaged a 16.5% improvement in their overall score. Child A, B, and C showed a 28.6%, 10.2%, and 10.8% increase respectively. In pretend play, which the intervention specifically targeted, ToP scores suggest an improvement in all three participant’s skill level of pretend play. More specifically, child A, B, and C demonstrated a 20%, 50%, and 60% increase respectively. In pretend play extent, child A and B improved 40% and 50%, whereas child C’s score remained the same at posttest. Other aspects of play improved in all three children including intensity of engagement (28.9% average) and initiation skills (38.9% average).

Discussion

Some children experienced a decrease in scores from the pretest to the posttest in the areas of unconventional use of objects and social play skills. This may be due to a variety of issues, including events directly preceding the post assessment, environment of the daycare, and peers present during post assessment. The complexity of homelessness, including family circumstances, housing instability, and other stressors, may also impact the child’s playfulness.

These improvements cannot be definitively attributed to the intervention due to the lack of a control group, but many factors in the intervention may have facilitated these positive results. For example, the unique emphasis on pretend play allowed participants to explore and practice play behaviors. In addition, the social environment created in the play groups inspired playfulness that participants could not access independently. This was done via scaffolding and support by facilitators to provide ideas and creative suggestions when needed. Also, the groups emphasized creativity and freedom in play, allowing the participants to direct play whenever possible.
References


