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**VIOLET SOLOMON OAKLANDER AND**

**HER INFLUENCES ON GESTALT PLAY THERAPY**

**Research Paper**

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**Introduction**

Gestalt Therapy is developed by Fritz Perls, Laura Perls and Paul Goodman in the 1940s and 50’s. Gestalt therapy as being a client centered approach and focusing on ‘here and now’ was emerged to an alternative to conventional psychoanalyses [1]. Gestalt therapy is an existential form of psychotherapy and it emphasizes personal responsibility and focuses on not to the past but individual’s experience in the present moment [2]. According to Goodman, ‘life is to be lived and understood only in the present, but a kind of ongoing present’ [3]

Gestalt Therapy is the humanistic form of psychotherapy and there are creative and experimental methods to create self awareness, freedom and self-direction in clients [1]. In humanistic approach the clients are seen as active and powerful rather than being passive. According to humanistic psychology people are essentially good or at least neutral beings [4]. Both in gestalt therapy and humanistic therapy the important thing is to enable the client to take responsibility to become more fully and creatively alive. Thus, the more the clients become free from their unfinished businesses the more fulfillment, growth and satisfaction may happen [2].

**A Short Historical Background of Play Therapy**

The history of play therapy stands back to the very early times of humankind. “You can discover more about a human being in an hour of play than a year of conversation” Plato (429- 347 B.C.). Sigmund Freud is considered the first child play therapist because he worked with Little Hans and his case of anxiety. Freud prescribed ‘allow him to play’ to the father of this child [5].

Around 1928 Anna Freud (Freud’s daughter) realized therapists need a different approach when they are working with the children. Because she realized that the traditional adult therapy is not the way the to a children’s inner world. Besides, she used play therapy to replace free association (talk therapy) [5].

Around the 1940’s Carl Rogers’ ‘person centered psychotherapy’ become the basis for child therapy and the importance was on the relationship between the child and the therapist. According to Rogers, this relationship was one of the catalysts for healing [6]. For the play therapists, children are not miniature adults [6], they have their own personalities and different ways of thinking and responding to their environment.

Virginia M. Axline, doctorial student of Carl Rogers and the author of Play Therapy and Dibs in Search of Self (1947) was one of the researchers who brought play therapy to the attention of the general public [7]. She also believed in more hands-off approach which puts on the emphasis on the child [8]. In 1988, contemporary play therapist Gary Landreth established the National Center for Play Therapy at the University of North Texas. He also believed that play is a way of resolving conflicts and a way of expressing feelings. It helps the children to develop a more positive self concept and more self acceptance [8]

**Gestalt Play Therapy**

Through play, children develop mentally, physically and socially. Play is the child’s form of self-therapy. In gestalt play therapy children can try out their own new ways of being because play is a safe place for them. According to the gestalt play therapy, play also serves as a language for the child. The child experiences more than he can express with his words. Play helps the child to understand what he experiences in life [10].

Gestalt play therapy focuses on giving the children the opportunity to express their feelings verbally or non-verbally. It is believed that the child’s problems will be played out and they will be able to find space for channeling his or her own emotions more effectively [9]. Having children’s awareness in the present is important and Oaklander mentioned in one of her speeches, children are generally tend to stay in the present moment but sometimes they need to figure out their emotions.

From what Lampert mentioned, one of the most important thing in gestalt play therapy is accepting the children as they are. Especially working with the children who have suffered severe trauma (physical or sexual abuse), this approach goes ‘straight to the heart of their needs’ [12]. As Lampert mentioned, gestalt play therapy is respectful and non-intrusive. The goal is not to fix or change the child, but to facilitate self-healing. There are no expectations of performance or behavior to meet the needs of other [12].

**Violet Solomon Oaklander**

Oaklander (b.1927) is a child and adolescent therapist known for integrating Gestalt theory and practice with play therapy techniques, to create Gestalt Play Therapy. She published the book Windows to Our Children (1978) and is still in print and has been translated into at 13 languages. She traveled all around the world to lecture, teach and give workshops on her Gestalt Play Therapy method for mental health professionals.

In 2003 Violet Solomon Oaklander Foundation was established [13] as a non-profit organization [14]. Her second book which brings even more definition to the Oaklander Model is called Hidden Treasure: A Map to the Child's Inner Self.

Oaklander created a collective approach. According to this approach the attention is on ‘the healthy integrated functioning of the total mechanism’. Total mechanism implies senses, body, emotions and the intellect [14]. In gestalt play therapy aim is to regain children healthy use of modalities which they had when they were infants. Once the child find what was available for him or her, the growth will happen [11]. Oaklander’s brand of Gestalt therapy is dynamic, present-centered, humanistic, and process-oriented [14].

Gestalt Play Therapy observes: awareness, phenomenology, contact, I-thou relationship, and organismic regulation. Awareness is described as being in contact with one’s internal and external self-processes. As the therapeutic process goes on the children can contact with who they are and how they relate with the environment. As Oaklander claimed, in order to understand their own behaviors, thoughts and attitudes, the children first become more aware of what they need and expect [14].

For the phenomenology, therapists explore ‘what’ is the child is experiencing, not ‘why’. Child’s psychological growth can occur with contact and Oaklander claimed that when children experience trauma, this affects their capacity for contact. And when the child or adolescent comes into contact with their emotions, they can make better behavioral choices [14].

For the I-though relationship the most eye catching part is to be able to realize the rhythm of the child and being part of it. As a therapist Oaklander always respected the child and warn the therapists not to patronize the child-client. There is a thin line in the child therapy sessions because therapists often look like parental figures but as Oaklander said they should always remember they are not the children’s parents. It is highly important for the therapists to ‘maintain their integrity as separate people from their clients’ [14].

As Piaget mentioned mental growth is inseparable from physical (organic) growth [15]. Organismic self-regulation means to Oaklander that children are constantly looking for homeostasis which is described as they seek to be healthy all the time and are trying to satisfy all of their needs [14].

As a result, Violet Solomon Oaklander is an outstanding figure for Gestalt Child Therapy. She played a major role for therapists to understand and learn how and why the Gestalt Approach worked with children and adolescents. She used a respectful and non-intrusive model. She positively touched many lives, both the children and their families throughout her career. It should be mentioned that her aim was never to fix or change something but to help and facilitate self-healing.

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