

## Embodied Play Therapy: Healing and Building Identity with Children

As a therapist working with children and families for over 20 years, I have come to understand that healing is first and foremost about relationship. True healing does not come from insight but rather with play, movement, emotional expression, sensory experience, and a felt sense of being met by another nervous system capable of attunement and presence. The adventurous task of fostering an environment to support this experience is left to the therapist's creativity, capacity, and attunement.

Family therapist and author Neal Brodsky illustrates how he creates this relational presence through body-centered play in his new book *Embodied Play Therapy: Healing and Building Identity with Children*. Brodsky teaches the techniques and tools of *Embodied Play Therapy* that he uses with children and parents, and offers specific, guided suggestions and recommendations on when and how to engage in his structured approach. The generosity of this book offers a window into Brodsky's work with his clients; his narrative weaves play, dialogue, and embodiment practices, which he explores through practical application with his own clients as he follows the course of their treatment.

Brodsky's *Embodied Play Therapy* emerges as a body-oriented, relational, sensory, and movement approach to working with children. The theoretical lineage comes from D.W. Winnicott, Erik Erikson, and Wilhelm Reich, as well as body-therapy pioneers Alexander Lowen (Bioenergetics) and John Pierrakos (Core Energetics). The practice that makes this model successful with children is Brodsky's integration of containment and relational attunement, drawing on Structural Family Systems Therapy, Dynamic Play Therapy (McCarthy), and contemporary neuroscience theories by Stephen W. Porges, Deb Dana, and Janine Fischer.

As with any effective theoretical orientation, Brodsky provides a framework for his model, calling it the Four Pillars: Movement, Breathing, Feeling, and Playing. This framework gives clinicians a focus, moving from the abstract, and provides guidelines that orient the reader to what he considers the most valuable categories of experience in the Embodied Play Therapy process.

The book's theme underscores the need for children to have space and embodied movement for healthy psychic development. Brodsky highlights the reality of our culture of isolation, which he refers to as an "epidemic of emptiness," as our children face increasing expectations for behavior and performance. The nervous system adapts and develops strategies to shut down and override the demands of our disembodied culture. Brodsky frames this therapy approach for children in today's culture, and cites

current examples of lockdown drills, fear of school shootings, and the increasing availability of viewing uncensored violence through technology, as part of the issue that creates a disembodied culture, especially for children. Brodsky opines that, to nurture healing, clinicians and therapists must focus on reintegrating a sense of embodiment in their clients.

Brodsky's *Embodied Play Therapy* is fundamentally a bottom-up understanding of somatic practice and an intuitive acknowledgment of child development. He suggests starting with the "somatic awareness of the body... where we begin as beings and where growth can best be grounded for longer-term health into adolescence." Brodsky gives very clear instructions with techniques, strategies, and tools for application. The chapter-by-chapter attention to detail in the *Embodied Play Therapy* model provides clear guidelines that support the integrity of the therapeutic process.

Children's experiences are organized through the body physically before they are processed cognitively. Experiences of distress present in the child's body through impulsive and aggressive behaviors, or withdrawal and shutdown. This is indicative of dysregulation in the nervous system. By including this foundation, Brodsky bridges the core components of healing and the renegotiation of energy necessary for the process to unfold. The distinct medium presented here to negotiate this is play, and as he reiterates, often with some big energy.

Play in this approach is not merely entertainment or a technique; it embodies symbolic communication, supporting a process that allows for participation using all of the senses. Brodsky illustrates his play therapy techniques and outlines a step-by-step process for helping children discharge their energy. By using bats and boxing gloves to hit foam cubes or a rubber mallet to hit a block of clay, a child may feel the power and full expression of releasing their feelings. Draping over a big yoga ball supports a child's ability to relax as they allow their bodies to be suspended, and to regulate their breath. This emphasis on movement, breath, and bodily awareness reflects Brodsky's view that our senses are the doorway to the present moment.

As a Somatic Experiencing Practitioner, I contemplated whether energetic discharge leads directly to meaningful integration. Focusing on the discharge of this aggressive energy alone may not initiate healing. In fact, without the appropriate container in a supportive environment, discharge can sometimes even reinforce aggression.

*Embodied Play Therapy* supports the idea that while a release of energy can be cathartic, the process of healing relies on the integration of imaginative play, the involvement of the family system, and the therapist's attunement to support the child's reintegration of the energy. I see *Embodied Play Therapy* as a bridge from aggressive

activation to assertive energy by creating a sphere of imagination and space to renegotiate narratives, which I believe facilitates nervous system flexibility and identity formation.

Brodsky gives strong attention throughout the book to the idea of the “Family Energy Field.” He asserts the importance of involving parents in the co-regulation between the therapist and the child, and that the child cannot be fully understood outside the family's larger relational and energetic field. Brodsky outlines ways in which the therapist's own authenticity and attunement can serve as the container for the family's repair.

As a Dynamic Play therapist, I found this book valuable for its illustrative, detailed approach to working with children in play. Therapists will appreciate how Brodsky guides his readers through case examples from his own clients, which not only demonstrate his techniques and strategies but also invite reflection on our professional practices and on how to apply this approach with our own clients. He reinforces that a healthy witness, safe containment of the symbolic narrative, and an attuned relationship are instrumental in the effectiveness of this method.

Brodsky's writing style is straightforward and accessible, and he does not get caught up in professional jargon, nor does he heavily cite theoretical underpinnings. For this reason, I believe this book would be helpful for parents and guardians in better understanding his techniques and why they are effective. I can easily shift my perspective from being a therapist to reading this book as a parent and imagine that the parents in my practice would appreciate gaining insight into the therapy process. Brodsky goes so far as to explain his intake process, including the language he uses on his intake forms, which outline for parents and guardians the tenets of his Embodied Play Therapy approach. Highlighting the value of including parents in the therapy process not only supports changes for the child but also for the family system itself. In fact, with guidance, I imagine this book would be a supportive addendum to strategies for use at home during moments of emotional dysregulation and intensity.

Brodsky's *Embodied Play Therapy: Healing and Building Identity with Children* is less of a manual and more of a way of being in the therapeutic relationship. Healing is a lived, embodied experience. *Embodied Play Therapy* is beneficial not only for providing techniques and guidance for both new and seasoned therapists, but also for parents and guardians, reminding us that merely gaining insight and changing behavior does not lead to healing. Rather, healing occurs through lived embodied experience shared safely with another.

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Tim Rodier is a psychotherapist and Licensed Clinical Social Worker in private practice in Kingston, NY. For over two decades, he has provided therapy for children, adolescents, adults, and couples, utilizing his training and study in Depth Psychology, Psychodynamic Psychotherapy, Dynamic Play Therapy, and holds certification as a Relational Life Therapist and Somatic Experience Practitioner. Additionally, Tim is a Jungian Spiritual Director. His bio-psycho-spiritual lens supports clients in their work toward healing their emotions, behaviors, and relationships.