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## Ball Play

### BALL TOSS PLAY

#### **Introduction**

Ball toss play is one of the earliest and most enduring forms of human play. Prehistoric man played throwing games with sticks, bones, and stones (Reid, 1993). Such activities, which improved the speed and accuracy of throwing an object, were beneficial to survival by primitive people who hunted their food. As early as 2050 B.C.E. playing ball was depicted on Egyptian hieroglyphics. All kinds of balls have been created for this activity, including baseballs, footballs, koosh balls, and beach balls. Since the physical act of throwing and catching a ball gives one kinesthetic, tactile, and visual pleasure, we are hardwired to enjoy it. The goal of playing catch is to have fun while cooperatively keeping a ball going back and forth between two or more participants. In his book *The Ball: Discovering the Object of the Game*, Fox (2012) explains why throwing, catching, bouncing, and hitting a ball has, from our earliest days, been such an integral part of the fun that makes us human. He notes that there are few activities that feel as enjoyable and as deeply satisfying as a good game of catch.

#### **Rationale**

The therapeutic benefits of playing catch are numerous. Since it takes into account the child's natural need for activity and movement, it quickly elevates one's mood and strengthens a sense of competence. It can relieve pent-up frustrations and internalized stress. An inherently social activity, it is a way to connect with others through a reciprocal, cooperative action. Early in therapy, ball playing with a child can be used to establish a relaxed, enjoyable atmosphere to develop rapport with

a child and facilitate the child's expression of feelings. Ball playing engages the "whole child," including the child's emotions, attention, interests, and strengths.

## Description

### Ages

Four years and up.

### Materials

A number of colorful, soft balls (e.g., foam, Nerf, Koosh, or beach balls). Avoid all balls that could cause pain or damage if thrown hard.

### Techniques

#### *Ice-Breaker*

Soft ball play can be an effective way to promote positive social interactions among participants in group play therapy. The group therapist begins the activity by stating, "Raise your hand if you would like to play a game of catch. OK, in this game when you catch this ball you say something you like before throwing the ball on to someone else with his/her hand up. Here we go: 'I like chocolates, how about you?'" (The therapist throws the ball to a group member.)

#### *Cooperative Ball Play*

As an ice-breaker in a small play therapy group, the therapist tells the group members to try to keep two or more balls (or balloons) in motion together and see how long they can keep the two balls in the air without touching the ground. The therapist times the interaction with a stopwatch. An alternate activity is to give the group a number of "sock balls" to throw into a wastepaper basket. You can make it more challenging by putting the basket on a chair or moving it around the room.

#### *Catch That Feeling*

In group therapy, the children are asked to throw a ball back and forth to each other. Each time a ball is caught, the child is directed to express a feeling about an agreed-upon topic, such as what makes him/her happy. For example:

X: I'm happy we're moving because I like our new house. (*Throws the ball.*)

Y: You're happy because you like your new house. I'm happy because. . . .

The physical act of throwing a ball back and forth keeps the children focused and the playful atmosphere eases inhibitions about expressing feelings.

### *Question Ball*

This technique involves the use of a beach ball with questions marked on each panel for the “catcher” to answer, such as “Say a nice thing about the person who threw you the ball.”

## **Empirical Findings**

Salmon, Ball, Hume, Booth, and Crawford (2008) found that vigorous physical activity, such as ball play, prevented excess weight gain in 10-year-old children.

## **Applications**

Since ball playing is such a familiar and enjoyable activity for children it can be widely used to establish rapport in individual therapy and promote cohesion in child group therapy.

## **STRESS BALLS**

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### **Introduction**

A stress ball is a soft ball that fits in the palm of your hand. It is usually 1–3 inches in diameter and made of foam or soft gel. A stress ball could also be made of play dough or modeling clay. The earliest stress balls were Chinese stress balls, which date back to the Sung Dynasty (960–1279 C.E.). Adults would rotate a pair of balls in their hand to help relieve stress and improve hand coordination. Today, Chinese stress balls are made of materials ranging from steel to jade.

### **Rationale**

Therapeutic benefits of stress balls include:

- *Release of physical tension.* Whenever you make a fist, regardless of whether you have something in your hand, you create muscle tension. When you release your grip, your muscles relax. This process can help relax chronically tense muscles and relieve feelings of stress. Thus, providing a child with a stress ball to play with during your intake interview can help relieve the child’s tension and anxiety.

- *Mood enhancement.* Squeezing soft stress balls results in pleasurable tactile, kinesthetic, and visual sensations that can boost one’s mood.

- *Increased focus.* A hand fidget object such as a stress ball can help children to be less distracted and more focused on classroom instruction. Fidgety children are able to release excess energy in a positive, relaxing way. Children can squeeze the balls under their desks or in their pockets. This activity can help children with attention-deficit disorder (ADD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and children who are bored or restless focus better.

## Description

### Ages

Two years and up.

### Techniques

#### *Counter to Specific Stressors*

Children facing stressful situations, such as a painful medical or dental procedure, can be given a stress ball to help distract and comfort them. Children becoming agitated and upset can also be given a stress ball to calm themselves.

#### *Progressive Muscle Relaxation—for Tweens, Teens, and Adults*

Instruction: While slowly and rhythmically squeezing and releasing the stress ball, focus on the physical sensation of muscle tension and relaxation. After a 3-minute workout, switch to your other hand and repeat the exercise. Then tense and relax the other muscle groups in your body, including your facial, shoulder, stomach, thigh, and feet muscles.

#### *Mr. Ugly (Schmidt, 1997)*

This technique involves the use of a rubber squeeze toy (i.e., the “Martian Popping Thing”) whose eyes, ears, and nose pop out when he is squeezed hard. This is a concrete metaphor for how one’s brain feels when it is stressed and overwhelmed. The release of muscle tension from playing with this toy helps reduce one’s stress level. The silliness of Mr. Ugly’s expression when squeezed enhances the effect.

The child is given the toy and told to squeeze hard, release, and squeeze again a number of times. While the child squeezes the toy, the therapist explains that ugly thoughts or feelings that are located in the child’s mind will be squeezed out of the mind and down the neck, across the shoulders, and into the belly of Mr. Ugly. After squeezing to a count of 10, the child is instructed to stop, relax, and take a deep breath. The Mr. Ugly popping toy is useful in group and individual therapy for latency-age children who are under various forms of stress.

### *Laughing Stress Ball*

This stress ball features an added dimension: hysterical laughter when squeezed! It is available from [www.officeplayground.com](http://www.officeplayground.com).

## **Empirical Findings**

1. Kimport and Robbins (2012) found that squeezing a stress ball for 5 minutes reduced the negative mood of college students. When they were given the instruction to “Hold and squeeze the ball in one hand and then toss it to the other hand, and then repeat this play” for the 5 minutes, the reduction in their negative mood was greater than if they were given no instruction on how to use the stress ball (free play).

2. Studies in the *Journal of Psychosocial Nursing* (2006) reported that using therapeutic touch exercises such as stress balls helped decrease adult anxiety and tension, and assisted in the healing process of wounds.

3. A study by Waller, Kent, and Johnson (2007) found that when a teacher prompted a 14-year-old boy with a fingernail-biting habit to use a stress ball as a replacement for fingernail biting his biting habit decreased significantly.

4. An investigation by Stalvey and Brasell (2006) found that when sixth-grade students were allowed to use stress balls during direct instruction and independent practice the frequency of their distraction incidents decreased. Kinesthetic learners used the stress balls more consistently and their attention spans increased more compared with other learners. However, all types of learners reported that their attitude, attention, writing abilities, and peer interactions improved due to stress ball use.

## **Applications**

Stress balls are commonly used to relieve physical tension and psychological stress in children and adolescents presenting with symptoms of anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and trichotillomania; to reduce fidgetiness and distractibility in children with ADD and ADHD; and to lighten children’s negative mood.

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