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## OPPORTUNITIES FOR INITIAL TRAINING OF PLAY THERAPY PROFESSIONALS IN BULGARIA<sup>7</sup>

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***Abstract:** The paper reviews the formal and non-formal parameters of initial training of play therapy specialists in Bulgaria. Special attention was paid to the structure and content of the courses available within the university curriculum programs and outside the formal education.*

***Keywords:** Play therapy, Initial training, Formal and non-formal education.*

### INTRODUCTION

Play is determined as central for child development. In different types of play children recreate real life events, resolve conflicts, express what they are experiencing. Children's play allows adults to understand how children adapt, understand and learn about the surrounding world. The curative powers inherent in play can be used in many ways including giving support to children with social or emotional disabilities or children who have suffered or witnessed stressful events in their lives. Play therapy as a structured, theoretically based approach to therapy, builds on the normal communicative and learning processes of children. Specialists in play therapy need initial and ongoing training in terms of the acquisition and the upgrading of certain knowledge skills and competences.

The aim of the report is to present an overview of the possible paths through which play therapy specialists can be trained.

### EXPOSITION

As a result of content analysis of formal and non-formal education courses programmes of play therapy, it can be concluded that training of play therapy professionals in Bulgaria is delivered outside the formal education structure. “Play therapy” can be registered only as a discipline, included in some bachelor and master's degree programmes in Bulgaria.

#### **University courses**

- BEd “Social Pedagogy”, “Angel Kanchev”, University of Ruse – elective discipline “*Play and occupational therapy*”. The aim of the training is for the students to become familiar with the theoretical foundations of psychotherapy and expand their knowledge in the field of scientific and applied psychology [4].

#### **Course content:**

Occupational therapy or the Occupational Therapy model is presented as a single, focused on the task a conceptual basis that includes in itself a learning process, a healing effect and modeling the individual's compensatory mechanisms, performing or substituting impaired/lost functions. Of particular importance in the social integration of disadvantaged children. Play therapy has a position as the closest and most natural manifestation of activity in childhood.

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Students are introduced to the theoretical foundations of the course material supported by clinical cases and examples from social practice, tailored to their specialty. To illustrate the lectures they use modeled situations, training games [5].

- BEd “Social pedagogy”, “Neofit Rilski”, Southwest University – elective discipline “*Play and occupational therapy*”. The practicum is oriented towards building students' professional skills and competences in relation to the two target groups – children and adults in need of special therapeutic care and educational impact.

Course content: The practical application of professional competences for the development and implementation of active work and play techniques and methods for working with children and persons in need of care, support and educational impact. The thematic selection offers a reflection of significance of play communication to realize the wide-ranging potential of the game in child-adult, child-child relationships and implementation of delicate, indirect help and correction for specific behavioral problems. In play interaction, students are invited to realize the indispensable role of play in achievement problem counteraction effect. The training format stimulates the assimilation of basic practical skills for play communication in-group and individual plan for achieving a therapeutic effect [8];

- BEd “Special Pedagogy”, “Paisii Hilendarski”, University of Plovdiv – compulsory discipline “*Play techniques for children/pupils with special educational needs*” [3];

- MEd “Family Therapy and Counselling Persons With Disabilities”, “Sv. Kliment Ohridski”, University of Sofia – elective discipline “*Play Family Psychotherapy*” [7];

- MEd “Special Pedagogy”, “Sv. Kliment Ohridski”, University of Sofia – elective discipline “*Play therapy for children with SEN*” [6].

### **Non-formal training**

In the non-formal education, play therapy training is commonly included as part of psychotherapy courses. Training courses of play therapy are provided in institutes and associations such as:

- The Institute of Positive Psychotherapy:

1. Weekly trainings in *Child Therapy* (30 hours theory and 10 hours internship in an institution). This is applied training suitable for professionals working with children. It is an introduction to the basics of non-directive and directive play therapy. Empirical models for therapeutic interaction with the child are offered;

2. Daily seminars:

- a. *Play psychotherapy for parental separation and divorce*

Content: The workshop discusses ways of adapting parents and children to change, opportunities to express emotions and to include the child in a therapeutic context. Techniques are examined that assist in the psychological resolution of the separation crisis, taking into account the basic needs of the child.

Intended for: Psychologists, psychotherapists, social workers, students in humanities, parents

- b. *Play psychotherapy for overcoming anger and aggression*

Content: The seminar examines the manifestations of child aggression, the causes, effective ways to deal with different situations, as well as techniques for controlling aggression in different age periods. The emphasis is on parenting styles and opportunities to increase the child's self-esteem through non-aggressive behavior.

Intended for: Psychologists, psychotherapists, social workers, students in humanities, parents.

- c. *Play psychotherapy for hyperactive children*

Content: The workshop examines the main manifestations of hyperactive behavior, but the emphasis is on therapeutic strategies that could be used at home, at school and in individual therapeutic work with the child.

Intended for: Psychologists, psychotherapists, social workers, students in humanities, parents.

- d. *Play psychotherapy for children with physical disabilities*

Content: The seminar examines the possibilities of play psychotherapy for children with physical limitations. It works with techniques for the development of sensory, motor skills and compensatory coping with physical problems.

Intended for: Psychologists, psychotherapists, social workers, students in humanities, parents.

*e. Play family psychotherapy - working with parents*

Content: The seminar examines the possibilities for individual and joint psychological counseling between children and parents. The specific work with the parents before, during and after the session, defining the main problem and the possibilities of involving the parent as a co-therapist. Practical psychological counseling techniques are used.

Intended for: Psychologists, psychotherapists, social workers, students in humanities, parents [2].

- Gestalt Play Therapy Bulgaria: The training program in *Gestalt Play Therapy* - The Oaklander Model lasts 18 months and includes mandatory, elective modules, supervision and monthly meetings. Learners can use an online and physical library of Gestalt Play Therapy materials.

Compulsory modules:

- Training in the Oaklander Model (parts 1, 2 and 3)
- Working with adolescents
- Child development and working with young children
- Working with groups
- Use of photographs and projection maps
- Working with clay
- Music, sound and silence
- Therapeutic stories
- Therapeutic work with the body

Optional modules are offered and are continuously updated and are suitable both for those studying in the program and for those who have already completed their training and are practicing specialists.

Supervision - Group supervision in a group of up to 8 people – 4 hours.

Individual supervision - Minimum 6 hours

Monthly meetings - Gestalt Play Therapy Bulgaria holds monthly meetings where specific techniques and cases are presented, as well as interesting events in Bulgaria and around the world. The monthly meetings of Gestalt Play Therapy Bulgaria are also a place where established foreign therapists share their experience.

The monthly meetings are free and open to anyone working with children, regardless of the modality in which they work.

The program thus developed is in accordance with the requirements of the Violet Solomon Oaklander Foundation for certification in the Oaklander model, namely:

- 70+ hours of training;
- 10+ hours of supervision;
- Written exam provided by the Violet Solomon Oaklander Foundation;
- Description of a case on which therapeutic work is carried out according to the model of Violet Oaklander [1].

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be summarized that the initial training of play therapy specialists is organized in the sphere of non-formal education. Given the need for specialists, applying play therapy in working with children with social and emotional needs, the idea of formalizing the courses for primary education is in perspective.

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