

The “Good Things” Ball Game

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Rationale: Many children come into therapy not knowing what to expect and some may even come to therapy with negative expectations. In the first session with a child, it is important to clearly communicate to the child (and the child’s parents) what therapy is all about.

The “Good Things” Ball Game is one of several activities that I use in the first session to lay the groundwork for therapy. This particular activity demonstrates that:

- 1) Therapy will take into account a child’s natural need for activity and movement.
- 2) The child will not be a passive recipient of advice/instruction, but rather an active partner in the therapeutic process.
- 3) Therapy will engage the “whole child,” using the child’s emotions, interests, assets and strengths to address the presenting problems.

Goals:

- To relieve anxiety by allowing the child to move around the play room and interact with the therapist in a fun and active manner.
- To demonstrate to the parents the benefit of using playful activities to engage their child in meaningful communication.
- To get a picture of the whole child (not just the problem areas) by giving the child an opportunity to talk about the “good things” in his or her life.
- To help the child form realistic and positive expectations about the therapeutic process.

Application: I routinely use this activity in the first session with the child. Prior to this, I have already had a session with the parent(s). I spend the entirety of this next session with the child and parent(s) together. This activity is one of several that I do during the first session, but it is the one that consistently brings a smile to the child’s face and a general change to the child’s overall demeanor --from somewhat (or very) cautious to engaged, interested and “on board.”

Materials needed:

- 1) A large number of soft balls and a container in which to store them. Foam balls and beach balls make good choices. (Avoid any balls might cause pain or do damage if thrown hard.) In the first part of this activity, I toss all of the balls to the child, one-by-one but quickly. During the second part of the activity, the child will select one ball at a time to use for a game of catch which ends with a brief description (six total) of some “good things” in the child’s life. When the activity is finished, there will still be lots of balls on the floor, representing many other potential good things that can be discussed in the future.
- 2) “The Good Things” worksheet.



Also needed: A playful spirit: I enjoy this activity as much as the child does!

Getting ready to play: The child is instructed to stand up and face me. I stand approximately 10 feet away from the child (or closer for younger children or those with poor coordination). I have the parents sit in a spot where they can see their child’s face. (Typically, the child begins to smile and becomes very engaged during this activity and I want the parents to observe this.)

I introduce the activity:

I don’t know about you, but I can’t sit still too long. The purpose of this activity is to move around, to have fun, and for me to find out some “good things” about you.

I am going to throw all of these balls to you--one at a time, but fast. I want you to catch each ball and then drop it, because I am going to be throwing another one right away. You don’t have to catch all the balls. This is not a competition. If a ball goes flying by you, don’t worry. Another ball will be coming your way! When we are done, the balls will be on the floor all around us.

Next, after all of the balls have been thrown and they are lying on the floor I say:

I want you to pick one ball to play catch with. Also, I want to you to pick a magic word or a magic phrase.

The child picks a magic word. If the child is hesitant, I ask if he would like some help. If he wants help, I offer a few suggestions: *Hocus Pocus* or *Johnny* (or whatever the child’s name is) *is a great kid!* (If he doesn’t choose, I select the magic word, and I always select “..... is a great kid!”)

I explain the rules for our game of catch:

We are going to toss the ball back and forth. When you hear me say your magic word, I want you to stop and hold on to the ball. While you are holding the ball, I am going to ask you to tell me a couple of good things about your life. I know there are 343 good things, but you just have to tell me two at a time.

I toss the ball back and forth and after a few times, I say the magic word. While the child holds the ball, I choose one item from the "Good Things" worksheet and question the child about it. For example:

Tell me two good things about yourself.

I thank the child for answering (saying something like, *I didn't know that about you, Thanks for telling me, That's an important thing for me to know about you*) and then I record the child's answer on the worksheet. Then I have the child return that ball to the crate and pick another ball from the floor.

Repeat: Then we repeat the process with the second ball, ending with a request for another two good things (which are also written on the Good Things worksheet). That ball is returned to the crate and the child chooses another ball.

Repeat two more rounds in order to complete the four "good things" sections on the worksheet.

Feelings: In the fifth round, I ask for two feelings the child had this week. This is an essential step, because it lets the child know what to expect from the therapeutic process. I have a feelings chart in my office and I invite the child to look at the feelings displayed on the chart. I tell the child that all feelings are important:

*Everyone likes to feel happy or excited or proud, but we all have upsetting feelings too. It's important to think about all of our feelings, even upsetting feelings. One thing that we do here is to help kids and parents understand upsetting feelings and figure out what to do about them. That way, those upsetting feelings don't take up **too** much time in their lives and they have more time for the those happier kinds of feelings.*

Tell me about two feelings that you had this week--you choose which feelings to tell me about.

I again thank the child for sharing such an important part of themselves. Whether they have shared happy feelings or upsetting feelings, I reiterate the message that what we will do here is to figure out what to do about the upsetting feelings and how to have more of the happy feelings

Three wishes: Finally, for the final round, I finish up with three wishes:

I've been asking you for two things, but this time I am going to ask you for three things. I want you to make believe that your own personal genie comes in the play room and grants you three wishes. Remember this is pretend, you can wish for anything you want. Wish big. You can have anything you want, you can go anywhere, you can be whoever you want to be, you can do anything and you can change anything in your life. What would you wish for?

I record the wishes on the worksheet and again thank the child (*Thank you for helping me learn all of these interesting things about you*). We have used six of the balls. I put the remaining balls away, inviting the child to help as I toss them into the crate, basket-ball style. I may comment that we could keep on going with the other balls and learn even more good things about him or her, but we'll have to save that for another day.

Discussion:

- In addition to the goals stated above, this is also an opportunity to observe eye-hand coordination, eye contact, comfort level, aggressiveness in play, etc.
- I also make observations about the parent-child relationship by watching the parent's reaction to this activity. Does the parent smile and laugh along with their child? Does the parent attempt to intervene and direct their child? How does the child react to their parent's response?
- Sometimes children say they can't think of any good things about themselves (or their school, etc). If this happens I ask if I can help or if their parents can help. Most children are willing to accept help, but if they want to do it themselves I wait patiently or suggest that we go on and come back to that one later in the activity.
- In future therapy sessions, I usually give children an opportunity for "free play" during the session. Many, many children ask to play "that ball game" again. It gives us a chance to again celebrate the "good things" in the child's life and to remember to build on these strengths as we continue to address problem areas.

The Good Things

Good things about me:

Good things about my family:

Good things about my school:

Good things about my friends:

Feelings I had this week:

My Wishes: