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## **The Opportunity Project preschool adds a space dedicated to play therapy**

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Angela Watson has lots of toys -- a sand table, baby dolls, art supplies, dress-up clothes, a plastic house with little play people. But right now, she's using a simple tube of lotion to get kids talking and smooth over their hurts.

"Do you have any owies?" said Watson, a play therapist who visits weekly with youngsters at the Opportunity Project Learning Centers in Wichita.

She smiled and squeezed a dollop of lotion into a 5-year-old girl's palm and helped the girl rub it onto her hands.

"We don't want any owies in here," Watson said.

"No owies!" the girl repeated, smiling.

The simple activity goes further than skin deep, Watson explained. Using lotion to "wash away" ouches -- physical or emotional, real or imagined -- is one way therapists help children conquer anxieties or process feelings through play.

A new play-therapy room at the Opportunity Project preschool in northeast Wichita -- part of an expansion being unveiled to the public next week -- means more children will meet regularly with a licensed play therapist.

The program is a partnership between TOP Early Learning Centers and the Mental Health Association of South Central Kansas. It is funded through a grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

"The idea is that children get the help they need to be successful in school," said Janice Smith, executive director of the Opportunity Project schools.

"If they have issues that make it hard for them to be in a classroom, or maybe they've experienced some trauma in their lives, we want to give them the chance to work through that."

In play therapy, children use toys or activities to address feelings of aggression, anger or fear. Sometimes they learn how to play with others -- taking turns, sharing and using words to express emotions.

"People think I just play all day. In a way that's true," said Watson, the therapist.

"But if you work with young children, you can't say, 'How are you feeling? Come sit down and talk to me for 20 minutes.' That's not the way it works.... They process everything through play."

The Opportunity Project has used play therapy for the past year at its center in Oaklawn. If a parent OKs therapy, the child meets one-on-one with a play therapist once a week, usually for about 20 minutes.

Sue Poore, president of the Kansas Association for Play Therapy, said therapists sometimes direct an activity. For example, she may cut a heart out of paper and ask a child to fill it in with colors matched to emotions -- blue for sad, yellow for happy, and so on.

"Non-directive" play involves watching a child play and making comments that spur discussion. For instance: "You are playing a lot with the dolls today," or "I can see that really upset you."

Poore said play therapy has become more prevalent and popular over the past five years. The Kansas group has more than 100 members --counselors and social workers as well as therapists. And Wichita State

University recently began offering a post-master's certificate program in play therapy.

"I just love the way it's slowly working its way to the top," said Poore, a counselor at Heatherstone Elementary School in Olathe. "There's so much research to support the idea of working with kids through play.

"I can sit on the floor with a child, and that child may not want to talk at all. It's too uncomfortable for them," she said.

"But they will sit at a sand tray and take my little miniature toys and create a picture, almost like a little snapshot of what is happening in their world."

As the Opportunity Project seeks to turn at-risk kids into confident, prepared kindergartners, play therapy is an effective tool, said Rose Mary Mohr, president and chief executive of the Mental Health Association.

She pointed to a study released in 2005 which found that pre-K students are expelled at a rate more than three times that of children in kindergarten through 12th grade.

The report, by the Foundation for Child Development, noted that a child's likelihood of being expelled decreased significantly with access to mental health services, such as play therapy.

"We know that what children experience early on impacts them later in terms of mental health," Mohr said. "Getting them help at an earlier age could make all the difference in what they're able to accomplish."

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