Play Therapy Helps the Whole Family
By ALLISON LINVILLE

It was shortly after September 11, 2001 when April Schottelkorb, Ph.D., LCPC, NCC, and Registered Play Therapist-Supervisor, realized she wanted to specialize in play therapy. She was a graduate intern at an elementary school, where she was working with a young boy who was distraught about losing a beloved pet. After she talked with him for a while, the boy started playing with some toys in her office. Schottelkorb watched as he picked up small metal planes and went around the room, flying the planes into furniture and walls, and suddenly it struck her.

"He was communicating," she said. "He had seen the horrific events of September 11th on TV, and was still trying to process them, so he was playing it out—that was just his form of communication, because he was so young." Schottelkorb said, "I immediately knew I wanted to be a play therapist and help kids like him work through things in the way they know how, by playing it out."

Schottelkorb recently returned to her hometown of Kalispell to work with North Valley Behavioral Health as the only credentialed play therapist in the Flathead Valley, and one of only six Registered Play Therapist-Supervisors in the state. She practices Child-Centered Play Therapy (CCPT), which acknowledges that for children, play is the most natural means to facilitate learning and expression since abstract thinking has not yet been developed. Dr. Schottelkorb related the practice to the Planter’s philosophy of patient-centered care that North Valley Hospital provides. "I knew this type of therapy would be a perfect fit in combination with the philosophy of the hospital. It’s child-directed, and is only effective when the child experiences a safe and accepting relationship with the therapist."

In traditional adult therapy, adults talk about their struggles with a therapist, but in play therapy, children play out their concerns. "It’s the same idea of communication and processing, just expressed differently," says Schottelkorb. Her office is set up with a variety of toys that allow for creative expression and communication, such as a sand box, an easel, arts and crafts materials, a doll house, blocks, and puppets.

To explain how play therapy works, Schottelkorb simplifies an intricate process. "I’m like a mirror. I reflect back to the child what they are doing, feeling, and saying. Through this reflection, children gain greater awareness of themselves and learn the words to use to express themselves to others." Also, she mentions that it’s essential to create a place where kids feel safe, accepted, and have permission to be themselves. Without this safe relationship, no positive change can occur.

Often, parents bring children to play therapy because they are having behavioral problems at home or at school. Young children communicate their struggles through their behaviors as they do not have the words yet to adequately express themselves verbally.

Child-centered play therapy has been found to be effective for children ages 3-12 with a variety of presenting problems, including ADHD, anxiety, aggressive behaviors, trauma, speech delays, academic achievement delays, parent/child relationship difficulties, and behavioral problems. Schottelkorb says, "Beyond helping the children work through their struggles in the playroom, I also team up with the parents and other adults in their life to help discover together what strategies can be implemented at home or at school to give the child the support they need to be more successful."

“Sometimes adults don’t understand how using play in therapy is helpful, but it’s important to remember that kids communicate and problems solve through their play,” says Schottelkorb. “Kids are so smart, but we don’t always recognize that they have a different way of communicating than adults do. I am constantly amazed by the creativity and problem solving skills children have, which is just one of the reasons I love working as a play therapist.”

April Schottelkorb, Ph.D., is a Licensed Clinically Professional Counselor, National Certified Counselor and Registered Play Therapist-Supervisor. She earned her doctorate in counseling from the University of North Texas and master’s in counseling from the University of Montana. Dr. Schottelkorb worked as a counseling professor at Boise State University for eight years and as a school counselor for three years in northwest Montana, prior to joining North Valley Hospital Behavioral Health in Whitefish.