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EXPLORING THE ROLE OF OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY IN PROMOTING RISKY PLAY FOR AT-RISK YOUTH

Gerald Deocariza Jr., OTS; Karen Park, OTD, OTR/L, BCP

BACKGROUND

Risky play is known as thrilling and exciting forms of play that bring a risk of harm and danger (Sandseter et al., 2007). The inherent risk-taking that comes with play enables children to develop essential skills, such as (Brussoni et al., 2012):

- Physical and mental strength
- Cognitive and spiritual awareness
- Social and emotional intelligence
- Confidence and self-esteem
- Decision-making and risk-management

However, as many as two thirds of adults in the U.S. have reported to come across at least one ACE in their childhood (CDC, 2021b). ACEs are defined as potentially traumatic events, such as neglect, violence, or abuse, that occur in childhood but can have negative and long-term effects (CDC, 2021a). The exposures have been linked to various negative outcomes:

- Poor self-regulation (Bethell et al., 2014)
- Poor coping strategies (AOTA, 2015)
- Poor mental health such as aggression or suicidal ideation (Golshiri et al., 2018)
- Maladaptive behaviors and lifestyles such as gang involvement or alcohol abuse (Kalmakis & Chandler, 2014).



RESOURCE MANUAL



REFERENCES

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PROBLEM

Children with ACEs engage in risky play less frequently due to their caregiver's limited understanding, low tolerance, and personal fears of child safety. These societal attitudes may hinder at-risk youth from opportunities to gain essential skills and independence to improve their health, development, and wellbeing now and later in adulthood.

PURPOSE

To explore OT's potential role and impact in community-based youth programs and to determine ways to encourage at-risk youth to engage in risky play experiences.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Literature review

- Defining risky play, including the benefits, challenges, and societal attitudes
- Occupational impact of ACEs on youth
- Role and impact of occupational therapy

Mentored setting experience (12 weeks)

- adaptation of AOTA Occupational Profile
- Ethnographical observations
- Semi-structured interviews

Online caregiver survey (N=11)

- adaptation of TRiPS
- Recollection of childhood memories
- Knowledge and tolerance with risky play
- Environmental barriers and opportunities

Youth reflection journal (N=12)

- adaptation of DESSA
- Previous childhood risky play activities
- Current risky play activities & alternatives
- Learning outcomes from engagement and disengagement in risky play activities

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

PLAYING IN THE HEAT OF THE MOMENT is an educational resource manual for youth development service providers that seeks to promote growth, build trust, and foster community for at-risk youth through risky play experiences.

General Manual Objectives:

1. Increase caregiver understanding and tolerance with children's risky play experiences
2. Address strengths, challenges, barriers, and opportunities to risky play experiences
3. Promote engagement in risky play experiences to improve child health and development
4. Facilitate opportunities to build trust and foster connection between caregivers and at-risk youth

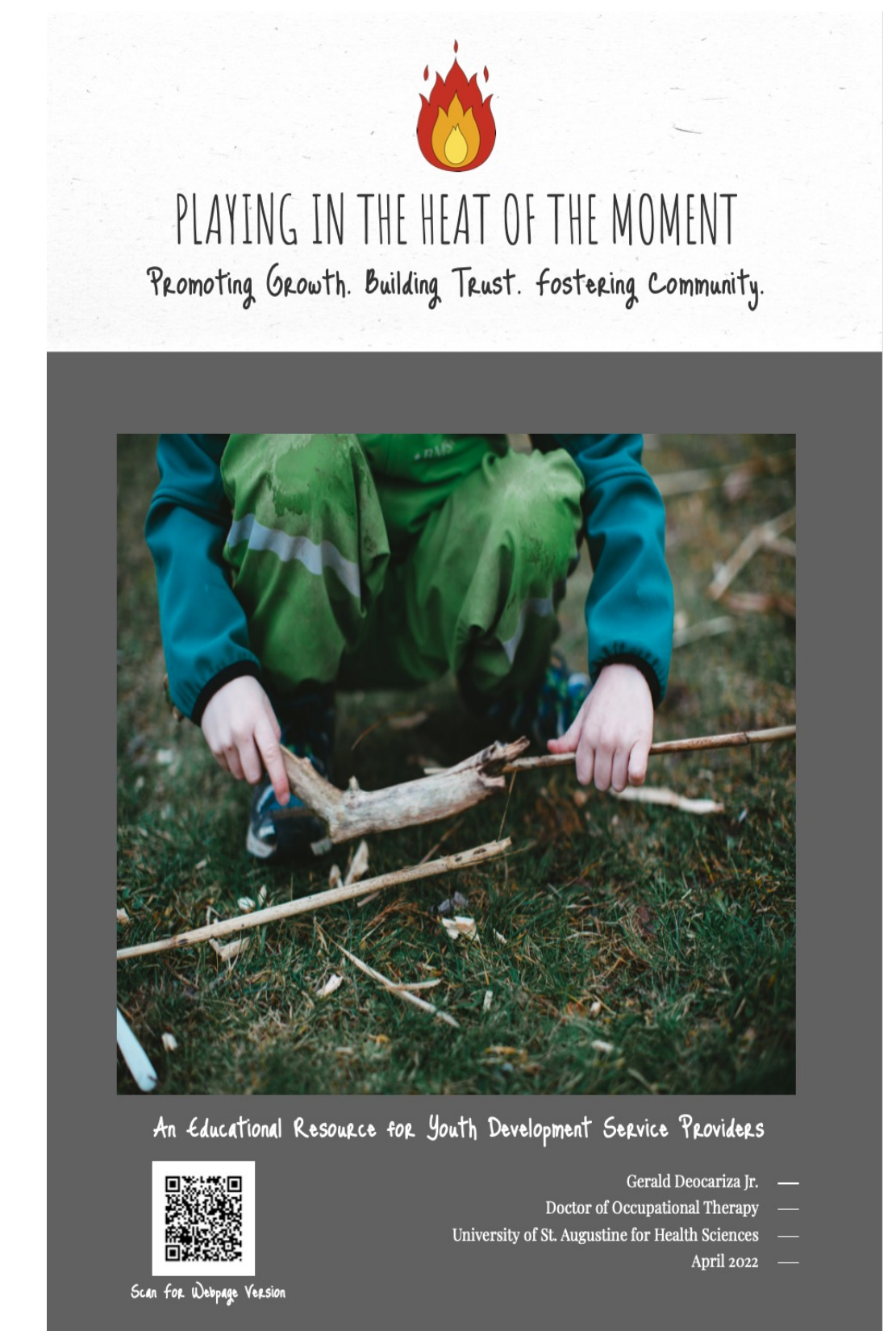
Theoretical Frameworks:

1. Person-Environment-Occupation-Performance (PEOP) Model
2. Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)
3. Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

RESULTS

Manual Outcomes:

- **Themes** addressed: strengths, weaknesses, barriers, and opportunities to risky play; strategies to improve adult tolerance and increase confidence with risky play; environmental triggers; and common youth behaviors, such as entitlement, meltdowns, and resistance.
- Interview & journal responses from **12 youth**: Addressed themes to participating in risky play including lack of trust/support from adults; potential injuries; high screen time; personal anxieties; and external influences such as time, weather, school, peers, family dysfunction, and community influence (gangs, drugs, alcohol).
- Interviews & survey responses from **11 adult caregivers**: Addressed themes to encouraging risky play including adult fears and safety concerns; legislation and administration policies; lack of space, time, and/or physical resources; and limited availability to caregiver trainings, resources, and experiential learning opportunities.



DISCUSSION

OTs can provide education, resources, and additional support to further aid professionals of community programs working with at-risk youth. OTs can also integrate risky play experiences within their individual sessions with youth, which offers opportunities for youth to develop beneficial skills as well as provides education to their parents and caregivers. By encouraging risky play, adults help facilitate beneficial learning opportunities for at-risk youth to grow.