



Reviving parent-child playfulness: Dyadic drama therapy with children with intellectual disability

Amitai Stern

Dyadic drama therapy with young children is grounded in the therapeutic value of play as Winnicott (1971) wrote, “Playing itself is a therapy” (p. 50). However, in the case of children with intellectual disabilities free play interactions are often abandoned by their parents in favor of ‘more important’ didactic and functional goals. The ‘Just Play’ dyadic drama therapy intervention aims to address this lack by reviving parent-child play for the sake of play itself, utilizing the unique characteristics of the creative arts therapies to promote playfulness, creativity, and spontaneity. The manualized intervention is based on the premise that mutual and joyful play interactions can serve as a catalyst to enhancing parent-child relationships over time and is the focus of an ongoing RCT study.

The presentation will address the meeting points between theory, clinical practice, and empirical research. First, I will explore the theoretical framework of play and playfulness and, in particular, the paradoxical nature of play- situated on the border of the real and the pretend. Second, I will present the intervention protocol, showcasing a unique hands-on approach to utilizing play and playfulness in situations where parents and children are stuck, transforming challenges and conflicts into new opportunities. Third, I will share initial empirical results from the large RCT study.

Drama therapy’s approach to appreciating the dyad’s journey to play, aligns with the spirit of Cavafy’s poem *Ithaka* which emphasizes the inherent value of the experience: “full of adventure, full of discovery... with what pleasure, what joy... hope your road is a long one... don’t hurry the journey at all.” The presentation aims to inspire clinicians to be playful and spontaneous in their dyadic practice, working with parents to recover lost parts of their playfulness, and reclaiming play in interactions with their child.



Biography

Amitai Stern is a Ph.D. candidate in drama therapy at the University of Haifa. He holds an MA in drama therapy and theatre, and practises individual and dyadic drama therapy with young children and their families. His primary research interests are the meeting points between drama therapy, children's play and dyadic therapy.

Recent Publications and Presentations

Amitai Stern (2025). **'Just Play'- playfulness focused dyadic intervention for children with intellectual disability and their mothers**, presentation at the European Federation of Dramatherapy bi-annual conference, Riga, Latvia, May 1st, 2025.

Stern, A., Feniger-Schaal, R., & Rabinowitch, T.C. (2024). **'Just Play': Developing a drama therapy dyadic play intervention for children with intellectual developmental disabilities and their parents**. *Drama Therapy Review*, 10(2) pp.163-171.

Feniger-Schaal, R., Stern, A., & Elizarov, E. (2023). **The effect of medical/therapeutic clowns on the playfulness of children with intellectual disabilities**. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 36(1), pp.186-195.