

Evaluation of Preschool Creative Play Program: Assessing Virtual Adaptation

 Meredith H. T. Reese,
Rachel Deng,
and Alyssa S. Meuwissen

BACKGROUND

Creative Play is a theater arts program which uses trauma-informed practices to promote social-emotional language and regulation skills in young children. The current evaluation focuses on the virtual adaptation of the Creative Play program by the Children's Theatre Company (CTC) in the Spring of 2021, where Teaching Artists (TAs) delivered the program via Zoom or pre-recorded videos to classrooms of preschool-aged children.

COMPONENTS OF A CREATIVE PLAY SESSION

- The program uses a story as the basis from which to explore specific contrasting emotions.
- Children act out how the emotions may look through movement, practicing expressing dysregulating and then re-regulating emotions (e.g., nervous and proud, excited and calm).
- Children's experiences and ideas are validated.
- Children are given opportunities for choice and agency.
- TAs utilize mindfulness and movement activities throughout to help children return to a regulated state, or release energy as needed.

METHODS

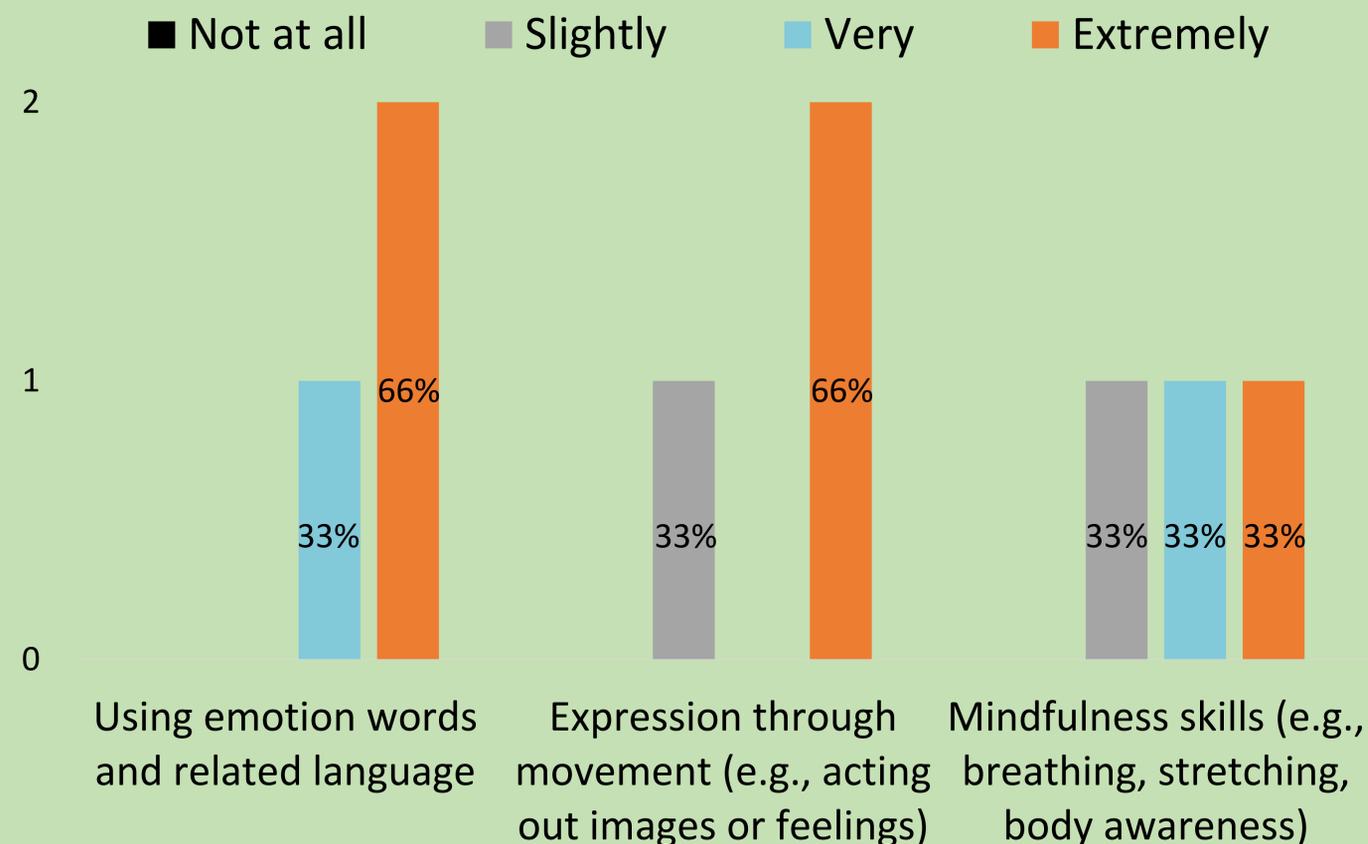
1. Between 4 and 14 30-minute sessions were offered in each classroom throughout the year, Mean = 10 sessions.
2. Classrooms consisted of children between the ages of 0-3, 3-4, and 4-5 years old.
3. All three TAs who led sessions were interviewed. Out of the four sites that participated in recurring Creative Play sessions, three staff members completed a survey sharing their perception of the effectiveness of Creative Play's virtual delivery.

RESULTS

- Overall, children appear to have engaged in emotional literacy, imaginative play, and mindfulness activities to a fairly high degree in virtual Creative Play sessions.
- Site staff rated children's engagement in emotional literacy the highest.
- TAs found mindfulness to be the component that was easiest to engage children in this year.

Reacting and adapting promoted preschoolers' engagement in virtual theater arts program

Site Staff's Ratings of Children's Engagement in Aspects of Creative Play



Out of the three classroom staff members who completed the survey.

TEACHING ARTISTS' PERSPECTIVE

- TAs felt that the Creative Play program could be effectively delivered virtually, it just required getting more creative regarding how to connect with and engage children, as well as being more intentional about communication with site staff in the classrooms.
- TAs observed increased engagement as children attended multiple sessions and learned what to expect and how they could interact with the TA in the virtual program.
- TAs found it useful to use concepts that children were familiar with and interested in as a foundation from which to add more creative, imaginative elements. To "provide pieces that grounded children in reality, while exploring [the imaginative elements of the story]" without being in the same physical space as the children, TAs used phrases like

'point to something in the classroom you're in. Now imagine you're a lion that's that color'

or

'In this story, the fish hides behind the kelp. Can well all hide behind a chair?'

LESSONS LEARNED

- Incorporating visual and sensory elements (e.g., music, bubbles, throwing cotton balls at the computer screen) helped increase children's engagement.
- The virtual format was less effective with a classroom of children below the age of two, as they did not understand the interactive nature of the virtual technology.
- Re-engaging or redirecting children was more difficult in the virtual format and required more involvement from in-person staff in classrooms. More intentional teamwork between TAs and staff is needed to clarify and coordinate roles and responsibilities during virtual sessions than was needed when delivered in-person.



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