



WELL PLAYED

Georgia State's play therapy program offers training to students and the community.

BY SUSAN FISHMAN | PHOTOS BY CAROLYN RICHARDSON

50+

External community partners working with CEHD faculty, including the Atlanta Film Festival, DeKalb County School District and Children's Healthcare of Atlanta.

100

Students trained in play therapy each academic year.

2,600

Students enrolled by After-School All-Stars Atlanta at its 23 sites every school day and more than 1,600 children in eight all-day summer programs.

Tiffany McNary has always known she wanted to work with children.

In high school, she was considering a career in pediatrics, but the time she spent shadowing a pediatrician for two consecutive summers led her to find a different way to reach kids.

"I watched the pediatrician unfold an abuse case right before my eyes. The little girl in front of me had a body covered in bruises, new and old," said McNary, a clinical assistant professor in the Department of Counseling & Psychological Services. "That was it for me. That was the moment my interest in helping kids shifted from physical health to mental health."

After years of specializing in trauma work, along with play, McNary is now in high demand for her play therapy training at Georgia State, which helps children process difficult experiences through play and expressive arts.

Along with professor Jeff Ashby, McNary is carrying on the work professor emeritus JoAnna White began in 1991, teaching the college's play therapy courses and specialized supervision classes. Under her guidance, students focusing on mental health, counseling and rehabilitation learn how to integrate trauma training and play therapy.

According to McNary, play is a developmentally appropriate way of working with children. It allows them to describe, process and play out difficult or traumatic experiences using toys, sand, puppets and art without having to articulate what they're going through in words. Play therapists are trained to analyze children's creative expression and understand the stories they share through play.

"Unfortunately, therapists often try to make their work with kids fit an adult treatment model," McNary said.

Georgia State is home to one of only three centers in Georgia approved by the Association of Play Therapy. It's the

only university in Georgia to offer play therapy courses taught by registered play therapist supervisors.

The program trains graduate students in the craft of play therapy and gives students the opportunity and course hours to become registered play therapists, a designation that gives students a competitive advantage in the workforce, according to Robert Rice, coordinator of the college's school counseling program.

"Students who have taken one of Dr. McNary's play therapy courses have a better chance to get results as a school counselor in an elementary or middle school," he said. "Data show that when counselors use play therapy, children begin to open up more, become more trusting and express themselves more freely."

Each year, Georgia State offers five play therapy courses, which train about 100 graduate students. Students and members of the mental health community can also participate in the department's annual Play Therapy Training Institute, which McNary directs. The department is an approved provider of continuing education, and the institute offers trainings, workshops and networking throughout the year.

McNary also sees the benefits in the relationships she's helped establish with play therapy practicum and internship sites. Students work with organizations such as the Atlanta Mission, Safe Path and the Clinic for Education, Treatment and Prevention of Addiction, which provide play therapy services to children who are homeless or have experienced high levels of trauma.

"These places recognize that our students who are trained in play therapy are far better equipped to work with the complex needs of kids than students who don't have this skill set," McNary said.