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## The Playful Professional School Counselor: A Formalized Measure to Support School Counselor Trainees' Competencies Development

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### Abstract

The *Assessment of School Counseling Play Therapy Competencies* (ASCPTC) is a developmental measure to support formalized and comprehensive evaluations of play therapy skills among practicum and internship-level school counselors-in-training, as well as novice in-service school counselors. We developed the ASCPTC through aligning competencies with professional standards set forth by the American School Counselor Association, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, and the Association for Play Therapy. Using the ASCPTC, supervisors may evaluate school counseling trainees' developing play therapy and school counseling competencies across four developmental domains: (a) *Integration of Play Therapy within a Comprehensive School Counseling Program*, (b) *Demonstration of Basic Play Therapy and Child Counseling Skills*, (c) *Stakeholder Collaboration and Consultation*, and (d) *Professional Dispositions and Behaviors*. In this article, we provide a thorough review of school counseling and play therapy developmental supervision, and a description of the ASCPTC measure and instrument development process. We discuss recommendations and implications for school counselors, counselor supervisors, and future researchers.

*Keywords:* School counseling, play therapy, counseling competence, assessment

Counseling researchers and scholars note the need for formalized assessment practices to promote the development of ethical, effective, and professional school counselors-in-training (SCITs; Burgess et al., 2023; Lambie & Stickl Haugen, 2021; Mullen et al., 2025). Counseling competencies include the critical skills, behaviors, and professional dispositions associated with

high-quality professional school counseling practice (DePue & Lambie, 2014; Lambie et al., 2018; Parham, 2002). School counseling trainees with specialized play therapy training and supervised clinical experience may begin working toward becoming School-Based Registered Play Therapists™, a play therapy credential reserved for school-based mental health professionals. In addition to the critical competencies for all school counseling trainees (e.g., Lambie & Stickl Haugen, 2021), SCITs who are implementing play therapy practices within fieldwork experiences must demonstrate growth and development within play-specific competencies (Association for Play Therapy, 2023; Turner et al., 2020).

While existing measures support the formalized and standards-based assessment of the developing clinical play therapy competencies for counselors in training (Frawley et al., 2024), no measures support the evaluation of play therapy practices specific to SCITs and novice school counselors. We developed the *Assessment of School Counseling Play Therapy Competencies* (ASCPTC) in recognition of both the overlapping and distinctive competencies necessary for ethical and effective school-based play therapy practice. One existing measure aligned with both professional counseling and play therapy standards, the *Assessment of Play Therapy and Child Counseling Competencies* (APTCCC; Frawley et al., 2024), may be utilized for comprehensive evaluation of play therapy competencies with a large focus on areas tailored to clinical mental health fieldwork placements, such as: comprehensive intake procedures, diagnosis, biopsychosocial report, psychological assessment, treatment planning, and parent collaborations during treatment planning and progress monitoring. Notably, the ASCPTC and APTCCC measure overlapping competency areas necessary across counseling specialties, including play therapy microskills (e.g., reflecting content, tracking, limit setting, reflecting feelings) and non-site-specific professional dispositions (e.g., openness to feedback, motivation to learn, emotional stability).

While the APTCCC could be applied to school counselors when appropriate, the ASCPTC was developed with intentional integration of the unique professional duties, ethical responsibilities, and systemic expectations of school counselors implementing play therapy within their educational communities. The ASCPTC reflects competencies related to the intentional integration of play therapy within a comprehensive school counseling program, school-based advocacy, stakeholder collaboration and consultation, data-informed decision making, and ensuring the accessibility and implementation of evidenced-based interventions, such as play-based counseling, to support comprehensive school counseling programs. Thus, the ASCPTC is a specialty-specific assessment tool designed to support the evaluation of play therapy competency development among school counseling trainees.

Play therapy in schools has been linked to students' academic achievement, well-being, and positive social and emotional effects such as increasing students' self-efficacy, improving depressive symptoms, reducing impulsive behaviors, and decreasing behavioral concerns (Blanco et al., 2018; Burgin & Ray, 2022; Ray et al., 2015). Effective implementation of play therapy can improve the academic outcomes of students and decrease disruptive behaviors (Perryman, 2016). For example, in a quasi-experimental study, Blanco and Ray (2011) found that students' academic achievement improved following eight weeks of 30-minute child-centered play therapy sessions with first grade students. In a meta-analysis of 23 school-based play therapy outcome studies, Ray and colleagues (2015) demonstrated the efficacy of child-centered play therapy for improving students' academic outcomes ( $d = 0.36$ ), self-efficacy ( $d = .29$ ) externalizing behavior problems ( $d = .34$ ), and total behavior problems ( $d = .34$ ). Despite evidence supporting the implementation of play therapy within comprehensive school counseling programs, barriers to implementation have been noted (e.g., Ebrahim et al., 2012; Ray, 2010).

ASCA (2019b) put forth the *School Counselor Professional Standards and Competencies*, describing necessary mindsets and behaviors needed for effective and high-quality school counseling practices. These ASCA standards and competencies highlight the skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed to become effective school counselors, and provide important benchmarks for SCITs and novice school counselors as they enter the profession. The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2024) set forth the standards for counselor training programs to assess SCITs' necessary counseling competencies (Section 4, *Professional Practice & Section 5-H, Entry-Level Specialized Practice Areas, School Counseling*). Additionally, the Association for Play Therapy (APT) provided the *Play Therapy Best Practices* (2022) and the *Play Therapy Competencies* (2023), which counselors should also consider when evaluating school counselor trainees' play therapy competencies.

School counselor educators (SCEs) are tasked with ensuring that SCITs who integrate play therapy within their practicum and internship experiences are developing core counseling competencies (Lambie et al., 2018; Lambie & Stickl Haugen, 2021). Because trainees are applying their skills within school settings for the first time, it is necessary for SCEs to ensure that their formal assessments of competencies are developmentally responsive. Despite the value of play therapy as a developmentally appropriate and evidenced-based intervention in schools, no formalized assessment instruments exist that support the development of play therapy competencies within the context of a school counseling program. These play therapy and child counseling competencies encompass the skills, dispositions, and behaviors that are critical for providing ethical and effective counseling to children (Frawley et al., 2024; Lambie et al., 2018). To align play-based counseling with evidence-based outcomes, school counselors must engage in play therapy with fidelity and possess the core competencies necessary to engage in therapeutic play.

Since assessment and evaluation are key components of evidenced-based, data driven school counseling (Zyromski & Mariani, 2016), an evaluation tool that supports school counselors' development of play therapy skills is needed. Our article introduces the *Assessment of School Counseling Play Therapy Competencies* (ASCPTC) as a tool to support formalized and comprehensive evaluations of play therapy skills among SCITs. Grounded in instrument development best practices (American Educational Research Association [AERA] et al., 2014; DeVellis, 2017), the ASCPTC evaluation tool aids SCITs and novice school counselors with developing the skills, behaviors, and dispositions necessary to integrate play therapy effectively into a comprehensive evidence-based school counseling program.

### **School Counselors as Educators and Counselors**

Integrating play therapy into a school counseling program is a complex task as school counselors must navigate their role as both an educator and counselor (Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, 2021). Historically, the identity of professional school counselors has changed over time, leading to inconsistencies and role ambiguity (Lambie et al, 2019; Lambie & Williamson, 2004). Since school counselors are tasked with supporting students' academic, college and career, and social-emotional development, they engage in a variety of tasks to meet the needs of all students as part of a comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA, 2019a). As a result, a school counselor must be able to embrace their dual role of both an educational leader and counselor (DeKruyf et al., 2013; Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, 2021), which is unique to the school counseling specialty. As an educator-counselor, school counselors are tasked with supporting students' academic and college/career readiness through activities such as collaboration, advisement, teaching, and engaging in leadership and advocacy (ASCA, 2019a). Simultaneously, school counselors play a crucial role as a mental health provider as they may be the only trained professional in some school settings to support students' mental health needs (Lambie et al., 2019).

Integrating a professional identity as both an educator and a counselor is a complex task that requires skill and intentionality. School counselors must be able to integrate developmentally appropriate and evidence-based counseling theories and techniques, such as play therapy, to support student development (ASCA, 2019b). However, it is critical that school counselors understand how to do so within the unique context of the school setting. As Levy and Lemberger-Truelove (2021) noted, all school counselors are permanently situated in an educational environment, which requires an intentional integration of their work with the mission and vision of the school, as well as foundational support of students' academic success. Therefore, as both a counselor and an educator, school counselors not only need to understand the skills and competencies necessary to engage in play therapy, but they must be able to do so within the framework of a comprehensive school counseling program and the unique context of an educational environment.

### **Play Therapy in School Settings**

Roughly one in six youth experience a mental health disorder every year (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2023), which negatively impacts students in the school setting. Therefore, school counselors play a critical role in supporting students' mental health concerns as they are sometimes the only professionals with the necessary training to meet these needs (Lambie et al., 2019). As such, school counselors must implement effective interventions to support students' social and emotional development. Play therapy is one evidenced-based intervention school counselors can employ that is developmentally appropriate for children and supports positive student outcomes (Ray et al., 2015).

APT (n.d.) defined play therapy as “the systematic use of a theoretical model to establish an interpersonal process wherein trained play therapists use the therapeutic powers of play to help clients prevent or resolve psychosocial difficulties and achieve optimal growth and development” (para. 3). Play therapy is a developmentally appropriate approach for school settings, with a well-established body of research supporting its effectiveness in student outcomes. Blanco and colleagues

(2018) found that children who received school-based play therapy services experienced significant gains in academic achievement (i.e., writing, reading, achievement composite scores), as compared with the waitlist control group. The impacts of play therapy within school settings extend beyond academic gains. In a randomized control trial examining the impacts of child-centered play therapy on children struggling with depression, Burgin and Ray (2022) found that children who received twice-weekly play therapy demonstrated significant decreases in depressive symptoms and behavior-related problems. Therefore, play therapy can be a valuable component of a comprehensive school counseling program, particularly within the framework of an evidenced-based school counseling program that emphasizes intentional, targeted, and effective interventions aimed at creating positive change (Zyromski & Dimmitt, 2019; Zyromski & Mariani, 2016). Despite the benefits and research supporting the integration of play therapy in schools, few tools exist to support SCITs with developing the necessary skills and competencies to integrate play therapy in comprehensive school counseling programs.

It is critical that SCITs and novice school counselors who implement play-based approaches develop competencies related to the integration of play therapy within a comprehensive school counseling program (Fye & Rainey, 2021; Perryman, 2016; Trice-Black et al., 2013). Play-based interventions should support the comprehensive school counseling program and reflect the needs of students' academic, social/emotional, and career development (ASCA, 2019a; Trice-Black et al., 2013). Play-based interventions may include specific individual and group play therapy interventions (e.g., Child-Centered, Adlerian, Cognitive Behavioral, or Solution Focused Play Therapy), as well as large classroom lessons that provide students with the opportunity to engage with and communicate through creative and expressive activities (e.g., puppets, expressive arts, games; Curry & Fazio-Griffith, 2013). Novice school counselors can create and provide accessible play materials to be utilized within the school community through the creation of dedicated spaces (e.g., playroom for

individual and small group interventions) or the development of portable play kits that include materials with direct therapeutic purpose (Jayne & Ray, 2016). SCITs and novice school counselors can also collect data to inform and evaluate play-based interventions within the comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA, 2019a; Perryman & Doran, 2010). Providing data-driven rationales for play therapy and play-based interventions, and sharing outcome data with stakeholders (e.g., caregivers, teachers, administrators) is yet another way for trainees to demonstrate competencies.

### **Developmental Supervision**

Considering the complexity of school counselors' role and their unique professional identity, it is imperative that SCITs obtain intentional guidance during their graduate program to support their growth and development. Clinical supervision is a key aspect of SCITs' training, particularly during their practicum and internship experiences. The ASCA School Counselor Preparation Program Standards (2022) and CACREP Standards (2024) highlight the importance of supervision for SCITs by requiring that students obtain supervised and practical experience in K-12 schools to prepare them for the profession. These experiences allow students to immerse themselves in the profession, translate content knowledge into practice, and engage in professional practice opportunities that foster their development and professional identity, while obtaining supervision (ASCA, 2022). Since many school counselors lack access to high quality clinical supervision once they enter the field (Bledsoe et al., 2019; Wambu & Meyers, 2019), supervision during SCITs' fieldwork experience is critical to fostering their growth and skill development. Clinical supervision is individualized to meet the needs of the supervisee and is effective in facilitating the development of SCITs' competence (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019).

Since school counseling supervision is still in the early stages, compared to other counseling specialties where supervision has been well-defined, there is a need for structured guidance and

developmental models to support school counseling supervision (Bledsoe et al., 2019).

Developmental considerations among supervisees provide a useful framework in understanding the growth of SCITs as they progress in their skills over time. In the early stages of school counselor development, supervisees may demonstrate more concrete, rigid, and categorical thinking. Novice SCITs can lack confidence and may have limited awareness of their strengths and areas in need of growth (Borders & Brown, 2022). As such, SCITs are often more dependent on the supervisor for direction and require guidance on specific school counseling behaviors (Young et al., 2011).

Beginning SCITs typically start at this stage as they are learning the profession and begin practicing their helping skills. As supervisees transition to the middle stages of development, they begin to enhance their confidence yet still waver between reliance on their supervisor and autonomy (Stoltenberg & McNeill, 2010). Most SCITs are likely in this middle stage upon completion of their graduate level training when they enter the field (Borders & Brown, 2022). Finally, in later stages of development, SCITs begin to blend their personal and professional identity, while demonstrating an ability to engage in complex thinking and a willingness to tolerate uncertainties in their counseling practice (Borders & Brown, 2022; Young et al., 2011). From a developmental perspective, many SCITs may progress from the early to middle stages of development during their graduate program as they transition from practicum to internship, to graduation. As such, SCITs typically require concrete, supportive feedback from their supervisor (Lambie & Stickl Haugen, 2021).

A key component of supervision that is necessary to foster SCITs' skill development across developmental levels is evaluation. Given supervisors' important role as a gatekeeper for the profession and their ethical responsibility to assess supervisees' skills and competencies, "evaluation truly lies at the heart of counseling supervision" (Borders & Brown, 2022, p. 86). During SCITs' practicum and internship experiences, university faculty and site supervisors play a crucial role in evaluating and supporting them, and scholars recommend that supervisors use measures with

evidence of validity to facilitate evaluative feedback that match their developmental needs (Young et al., 2011). For example, supervisees in the early stages of development would benefit from feedback and evaluation methods that are concrete and highlight tangible steps for growth. As a result, there is a need for effective and quality evaluation tools that align with SCITs' level of development to assess their competencies before they enter the profession (Lambie & Stickl Haugen, 2021).

### **Assessing School Counseling Play Therapy Competencies: Development of the ASCPTC**

We developed the ASCPTC as a developmental measure to support supervisors in their formalized and comprehensive evaluation of SCITs' developing competencies in a manner consistent with professional school counseling and play therapy standards. We followed instrument development best practices (e.g., AERA et al., 2014; DeVellis, 2017; Lambie et al., 2017) and utilized the following steps to guide the initial instrument development processes: (a) identified competencies and developed operational definitions; (b) selected structural framework and assessment standards; (c) created an initial item pool consistent with identified competencies and corresponding operational definitions; (d) created measurements and behavioral indicators; and (e) distributed items to an expert review panel, gathered feedback, and made revisions.

We created a structural framework through extensive reviews of existing literature and professional school counseling and play therapy standards, including the ASCA *School Counselor Professional Standards and Competencies (2019)*, CACREP *Standards (2024)*, APT *Play Therapy Best Practices (2022)*, and the APT *Play Therapy Competencies (2023)*. The initial ASCPTC item pool included 33 items across four developmental domains: (a) *Integration of Play Therapy within a Comprehensive School Counseling Program*, (b) *Demonstration of Basic Play Therapy and Child Counseling Skills*, (c) *Stakeholder Collaboration and Consultation*, and (d) *Professional Dispositions and Behaviors*. The *Integration of Play Therapy within a Comprehensive School Counseling Program* domain included competencies related to incorporating play therapy within a school counseling program, such as integrating developmentally responsive

interventions, supporting access to play materials within the school setting, collecting data to evaluate student outcomes, and advocacy and communication with stakeholders. The *Demonstration of Basic Play Therapy and Child Counseling Skills* domain included items related to supervisees' demonstration of play therapy microskills, such as tracking, limit-setting, reflecting content and feelings, and goal setting based on student standards. The *Stakeholder Collaboration and Consultation* domain included competencies related to the students' collaboration skills with key stakeholders, such as teachers, parents/caregivers, and administrators. The *Professional Dispositions and Behaviors* domain included items assessing professionalism, such as adhering to ethical guidelines, maintaining boundaries within school setting, school policy knowledge, and record-keeping practices.

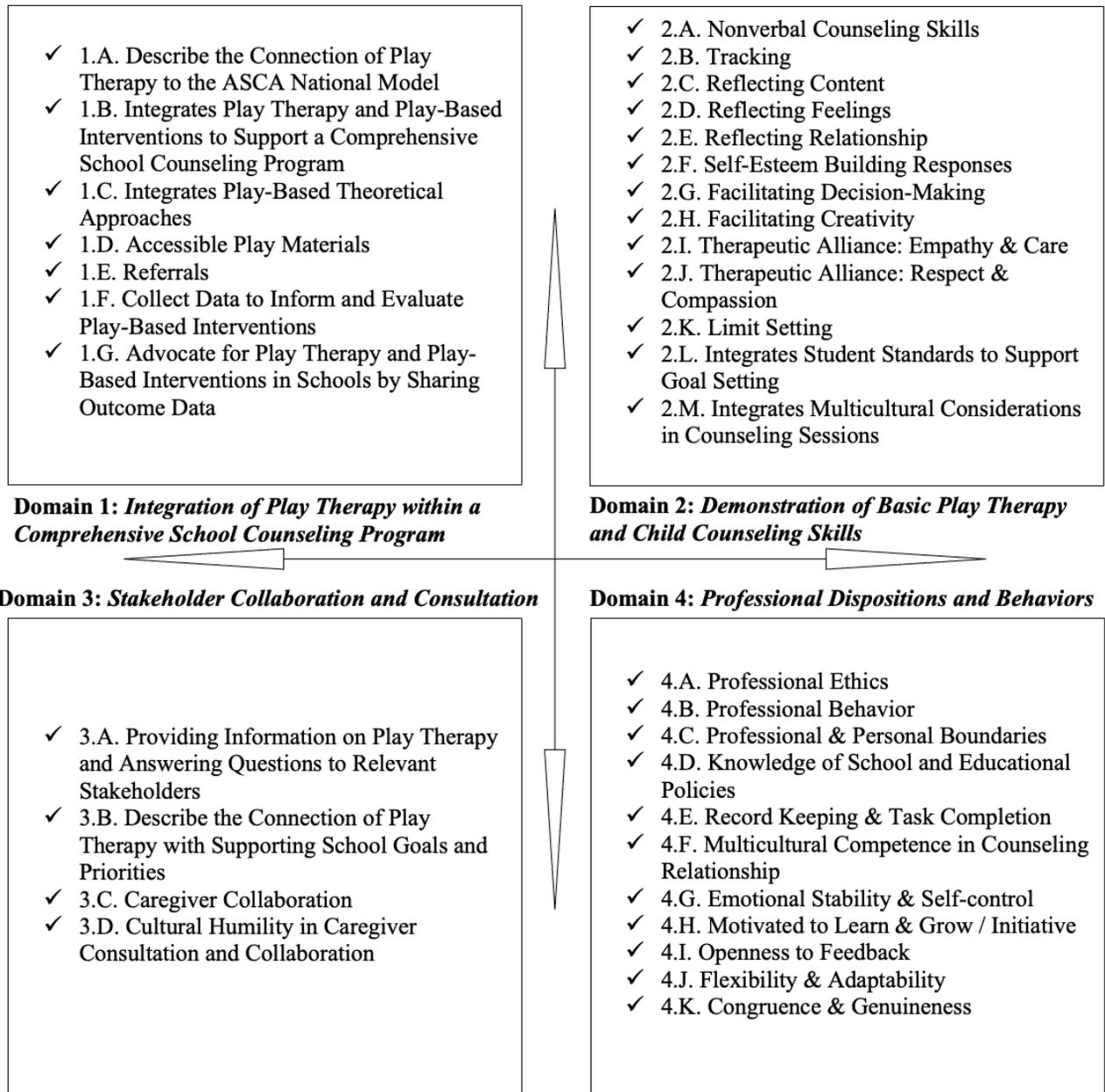
While developing the ASCPTC, we adopted a five-category response rubric that included the following scores: (a) *Harmful* (0 points), (b) *Below Expectations / Unacceptable* (1 point), (c) *Near Expectations / Developing Towards Competencies* (2 points), (d) *Meets Expectations / Demonstrates Competencies* (3 points), and (e) *Exceeds Expectations / Demonstrates Competencies* (4 points). Each competency item includes a specific competency descriptor (i.e., operational definition of what skills, behavior, or disposition should be evaluated). Additionally, each score includes concrete behavioral markers to increase objectivity of responses/scoring practices. To increase scoring consistency, we also developed the ASCPTC Training Manual to support supervisors in utilizing this assessment for practicum and internship students within the school setting. See Table 1 for sample ASCPTC items and corresponding scoring rubrics.

We invited a panel of experts to review the measurement and provide critical feedback to establish initial content validity (DeVellis, 2017; Kalkbrenner, 2021; Lambie et al., 2017). Experts included professionals with extensive knowledge in the areas of school counseling, play therapy, CACREP and ASCA standards, and instrument development ( $n = 13$ ). We sent the initial ASCPTC items via email and requested that experts review the items and share feedback using the track

changes feature in Microsoft Word. Specifically, we requested feedback regarding item clarity and suggested edits, relevance of the items to the outlined theoretical domains, and suggestions for additional items to represent the given domains more thoroughly. After receiving the panel members' feedback on ASCPTC items, we compiled all responses, discussed the proposed changes as a team, and reached consensus for final revisions. The revisions included rewording items, adding two new competency areas (e.g., making appropriate outside referrals to support students, advocacy through data sharing), adding further clarifications on behavioral indicators (e.g., settings for skill demonstration, contexts for evaluating the criteria within various school counselor roles), and directly citing ASCA competencies relating to relevant ASCPTC items. The final ASCPTC consisted of 35 items across four developmental assessment domains: (a) *Integration of Play Therapy within a Comprehensive School Counseling Program* (seven items), (b) *Demonstration of Basic Play Therapy and Child Counseling Skills* (13 items), (c) *Stakeholder Collaboration and Consultation* (four items), and (d) *Professional Dispositions and Behaviors* (11 items; see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*ASCPTC Domains and Competency Areas*



**Table 1**  
*Sample ASCPTC Items*

Primary Competency and Domain	Competency Description	Exceeds Expectations/ Demonstrates Competency (4)	Meets Expectations/ Demonstrates Competency (3)	Near Expectations/ Developing towards Competency (2)	Below Expectation/ Unacceptable (1)	Not Observed or Harmful (0)
<p><b>Describe the Connection of Play Therapy to the ASCA National Model</b></p> <p>(Domain: <i>Integration of Play Therapy within a Comprehensive School Counseling Program</i>)</p>	The counselor is able to explain how play therapy and play-based interventions can be integrated into the ASCA National Model and supports the implementation of a comprehensive school counseling program.	The counselor demonstrates <b>strong</b> knowledge by <b>accurately</b> explaining how play therapy and play-based interventions can be integrated into the ASCA National Model.	The counselor is able to explain basic information on how play therapy and play-based interventions can be integrated into the ASCA National Model.	The counselor demonstrates a lack of confidence in describing how play therapy and play-based interventions can be integrated into the ASCA National Model.	The counselor is unable to explain how play therapy and play-based interventions can be integrated into the ASCA National Model.	
<p><b>Reflecting Content</b></p> <p>(Domain: <i>Demonstration of Basic Play Therapy and Child Counseling Skills</i>)</p>	Appropriate use of reflections of content, paraphrasing the child’s verbal communication (avoiding drawn-out paraphrases; roughly ten or fewer words)	<b>Consistently</b> demonstrates appropriate use of reflections of content (e.g., 80% or more of the time).	Demonstrates appropriate use of reflections of content (majority of counseling sessions; e.g., around 70% of the time).	Demonstrates reflections of content <b>inconsistently &amp; inaccurately</b> (e.g., around 50% of the time).	Demonstrates <b>limited</b> proficiency in reflections of content or is often inaccurate.	Demonstrates <b>poor</b> reflections of content or skills are not observed at this point.
<p><b>Providing Information on Play Therapy and Answering Questions to Relevant Stakeholders</b></p> <p>(Domain: <i>Stakeholder Collaboration and Consultation</i>)</p>	The counselor is able to explain the nature, goals, and benefits of play therapy to relevant stakeholders (e.g., teachers, administrators, caregivers). The counselor demonstrates knowledge by explaining the play therapy process and answers questions appropriately.	The counselor <b>consistently</b> explains the nature, goals, and benefits of play therapy. The counselor demonstrates <b>strong</b> knowledge by accurately describing play therapy and answers questions appropriately.	The counselor explains the nature, goals, and benefits of play therapy. The counselor demonstrates <b>basic</b> knowledge by describing play therapy and answers questions appropriately.	The counselor <b>inconsistently</b> explains the nature of play therapy, and demonstrates a lack of confidence in answering questions about the play therapy process.	The counselor does not explain the play therapy process to relevant stakeholders and does not provide information to keep stakeholders informed.	
<p><b>Record Keeping &amp; Task Completion</b></p> <p>(Domain: <i>Professional Dispositions &amp; Behaviors</i>)</p>	Completes all required record keeping & tasks correctly and promptly (e.g., record keeping in a school setting, supervisory report, hours logs, 504 documentation).	Completes <b>all</b> required record keeping, documentation, and assigned tasks in a <b>comprehensive &amp; timely</b> fashion.	Completes <b>all</b> required record keeping, documentation, and tasks in a <b>competent &amp; timely</b> fashion.	Completes <b>all</b> required record keeping, documentation, and tasks, but in an <b>inconsistent, late &amp;/or questionable</b> fashion.	Completes required record keeping, documentation, and tasks <b>inconsistently &amp; in a poor</b> fashion.	<b>Failure</b> to complete paperwork &/or tasks by specified deadline.

## **Adopting and Utilizing the ASCPTC**

The ASCPTC is the first formalized competency assessment tool for evaluating play therapy and counseling competencies within the context of the role of professional SCITs. Specifically, we aimed to provide counselor educators and supervisors with an evaluation tool that allows for the assessment of practicum and internship-level SCITs working within school settings utilizing play therapy. Supervisors utilizing the ASCPTC should engage in both formative and summative assessments, providing students with comprehensive feedback regarding their competency development throughout the fieldwork experience. Additionally, ethical and educational guidelines require consistent and ongoing assessment of SCITs' progress during these fieldwork experiences (ACA, 2014; CACREP, 2024).

Supervisors can utilize the ASCPTC to support SCITs' understandings of their personal strengths and weaknesses, and areas for continued practice/improvement. SCITs can also utilize the ASCPTC as a self-assessment tool, which can increase their self-awareness. Through utilizing comprehensive assessment tools aligned with professional standards, CITs gain more accurate understandings of their personal strengths and areas of necessary growth (Mullen et al., 2025). Future research is needed to examine how utilization of the ASCPTC may impact SCITs' understandings of their supervisors' expectations and the meaning behind various scores in the domains.

In recognizing multicultural competence and cultural humility as foundational competency areas (Ratts et al., 2016), it is necessary to assess the extent to which school counseling trainees are engaging in culturally responsive play therapy practices within their school communities. The APT (2023) *Play Therapy Competencies* emphasized competence related to play therapists' demonstration of strong multicultural orientations, through areas such as cultural self-awareness, culturally inclusive playrooms, culturally appropriate play therapy processes, and knowledge and skills related to cultural

diversity within play therapy. The ASCPTC includes competency items focused on multicultural competencies across the domains. For example, one item evaluates the extent to which the trainee integrates multicultural factors into play therapy sessions, including the intentional selection of culturally responsive play therapy toys and materials and demonstration of sensitivity to students' cultural backgrounds. Within Domain 3 of the ASCPTC, cultural humility is assessed through supervisees' demonstration of respect for students and families' cultural identities and culturally specific parenting practices into consultation processes. The ASCPTC also evaluates professional dispositions related to respect for intersectional cultural identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, spirituality, sexual orientation, disability, social class) within interactions with all students.

From a developmental perspective, the ASCPTC allows supervisors to assess SCITs' growth across practicum and internship experiences. Because practicum and internship-level supervisees are at different developmental levels, the ASCPTC is designed to allow supervisors to score SCITs' skills and behaviors in a developmental manner. At the end of their first practicum experience, SCITs should score at or above "near expectations/developing toward competencies." By the end of the SCITs' final internship experience, their scores should be within the "meets expectation/demonstrates competencies" on each item in the ASCPTC to demonstrate competencies and readiness to begin school-based play therapy work.

A critical aspect of the counseling supervisor's evaluative role is the gatekeeping responsibility (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019). As gatekeepers for the profession, counselor educators must ensure the quality of new school counseling professionals entering the field and working with students. In a qualitative study exploring supervisors' experiences using the Counseling Competencies Scale (CCS), supervisors expressed that utilizing the structured tool enhanced their ability to effectively balance their dual roles as both supporters and evaluators during gatekeeping procedures (Lambie & Ascher, 2016). One recommendation is for supervisors to consistently

complete the ASCPTC during remediation processes, as it offers supervisees structured and objective feedback on their play therapy competency development and areas requiring improvement.

### **Implications for School Counselors and Educators**

Considering the value of play therapy as a developmentally appropriate and evidenced-based intervention, the ASCPTC is an assessment tool that addresses a gap in the literature and highlights the competencies needed to integrate play therapy within the unique context of a comprehensive school counseling program. The ASCPTC is a developmental standards-based assessment that can be used by supervisors, SCITs, and counselor preparation programs to support SCITs' growth and skill development in play therapy. Considering the developmental needs of SCITs, the ASCPTC includes operational definitions to support supervisors in the complex task of evaluating SCITs' competencies across various domains. Furthermore, the ASCPTC can support the implementation of evidence-based play therapy interventions into school settings to support successful student outcomes and further counseling outcome research related to play therapy in schools.

Although the ASCPTC was designed for SCITs, practicing school counselors can also use the scale to evaluate their own skills related to play therapy. Since play therapy requires the implementation of unique and intentional skills, school counselors can use the ASCPTC as a self-evaluation tool to identify specific strengths and areas for growth when incorporating play therapy into their school counseling program.

### **Implications for Future Research**

There is a need for ongoing research to examine and support evidence for the validity and reliability of ASCPTC scores. To establish initial content-oriented validity, we aligned the ASCPTC with professional standards (i.e., APT, 2022; APT, 2023, ASCA, 2019; CACREP, 2024) and utilized feedback from an expert review panel that included school counselors, counselor educators, play therapists, and scale developers. Nevertheless, there remains a need for further examination of the

validity and reliability of the ASCPTC scores with diverse samples. First, we identify a need for researchers to examine the factor structure of the ASCPTC, as well as a confirmatory study with an additional developmental sample of school counseling trainees (Brown, 2015; Dimitrov, 2012). Predictive validity may be examined through evaluating how ASCPTC scores predict school counselors' credentialing after graduation (AERA et al., 2014), such as obtaining the School-Based Registered Play Therapist credential (APT, 2025). Interrater reliability may be examined by analyzing the consistency of scores across raters, such as site supervisors and university supervisors (DeVellis, 2017; Dimitrov, 2012).

The ASCPTC is a developmentally informed instrument to support supervisors' evaluations of SCITs' counseling competencies within the contexts of school counseling and play therapy. Practicum and internship are critical periods of counselor competency development, and the ASCPTC provides supervisors with a formalized and comprehensive way to assess this development. Through engaging in comprehensive and standards-based play therapy competencies assessments, counselor educators and supervisors can ensure that SCITs are developing toward becoming ethical and effective school counselors.

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