Estimates indicate that as many as 12 million school-age children and adolescents in the United States suffer from some form of mental health disorder (Kramer, 1976). Although it has been argued that many of these children do not receive needed services (Cummings, 1979), a vast amount of work has been done that deals with the identification and treatment of emotionally disturbed children since the first accounts of psychotherapy with children in the early 19th century. Since that time, multitudes of children with a wide variety of emotional disorders have been seen in numerous settings by scores of mental health professionals. Yet, despite this long history of mental health interventions with children (Shore and Mannino, 1976) the need for these services has not abated, nor has there been any indication of a reduction in the incidence of emotional disturbance in the adult population (Levitt, 1971). Because of this, the value and impact of psychotherapeutic interventions with disturbed children has been seriously questioned.

This chapter evaluates the effectiveness of psychotherapeutic treatments with mildly and moderately emotionally disturbed children by reviewing the research and methodology in this area. The bulk of this chapter focuses on individual and group psychotherapy with children. For the purpose of this review psychotherapy includes a number of diverse, nonbehavioral approaches (e.g., psychoanalysis, client-centered therapy, and play therapy) which rely on
factors intrinsic to the therapist-patient relationship to relieve children’s emo-
tional disturbance and improve their socialization (Stuart, 1970). As in other
discussions of this topic (e.g., Barrett, Hampe, and Miller, 1978), the research
base of this paper excludes case studies and reports that do not contain some
measure of psychotherapy outcome. In this review, only brief mention is made
of outcome studies involving behavior therapy and family therapy. Both these
topics are covered in other chapters of this book. Additionally, reviews of out-
come research in behavior therapy (Kadzin, 1979; Ross, 1978) and family ther-
apy (Gurman and Kniskern, 1978; Masten, 1979) have recently appeared in the
literature.

Finally, although most of this paper reviews effectiveness data as indicated
by studies of relatively brief clinical treatments, this chapter also summarizes a
number of important considerations in the evaluation of large scale treatment
programs for disturbed children. Given the already broad scope of the present
discussion and space limitations, other topics have been entirely excluded from
discussion. Among these topics are studies of treatment outcomes involving
residential placement, correctional placement, mental health consultation, and
primary prevention.

Any conclusions that can be drawn about the effectiveness of psychother-
apy with children will be dependent upon the methodological rigor of the
studies making up the reviewed data base. Although issues of reliability and
generalization may be less important in examining mental health programs of
clinics, schools, and other agencies than in examining evaluative research which
seeks to make cause-effect interpretations (Koocher and Broskowski, 1977),
there are a number of methodological issues that are unique to the area of inter-
vention evaluation and a number of methodological weaknesses which have
generally characterized previous studies. Thus, before examining this data base
it is important to consider those methodological problems which have histor-
ically made it difficult to evaluate psychotherapy in general and those problems
which have made it difficult to study specific applications of these procedures
with children.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN PSYCHOTHERAPY EVALUATION

Misconceptions of the Psychotherapy Process

The roots of contemporary research on childhood psychotherapy can be
directly traced back to the first program evaluation efforts of child guidance
clinics which were started in the United States in the early 1900s. Since the
purpose of such evaluations was to document the benefits of these clinics to
children (Witmer, 1935), the research question was most often posed simply as,