

## What is Play Therapy?

[Parts of this section are adapted from VanFleet, 1998, A Parent's Guide to Filial Therapy. Printed in VandeCreek, Knapp, & Jackson (Eds.), Innovations in Clinical Practice: A Source Book (vol. 16). Sarasota, FL: Professional Resource Press, PO Box 15560, Sarasota, FL 34277.]

You may have heard about play therapy in several different ways. So what is it anyway?

Play therapy is a type of mental health, educational, or developmental intervention that is designed to help children grow up as happy and well-adjusted as possible. It involves the use of play to communicate with children and to help children learn to solve problems and change their negative behaviors. Sometimes it involves the entire family.

At first, you might wonder why anyone would suggest play as a way to overcome children's problems. Here's why play therapy is often recommended for children: Play is the primary way that children...

- learn about the world
- understand how different things work
- express their thoughts and feelings
- develop their physical skills
- develop their mental skills
- develop effective social skills and bonds.



As children grow, their use of language becomes more sophisticated, but throughout childhood, they usually express much more of themselves in their play. We can understand our children better if we understand their play. By watching children play we often learn more about their thoughts, feelings, motivations, and struggles than by talking with them! Play has been called the "language of childhood," so if we re-learn that language, it can help us build even stronger relationships with our children. Play is not something trivial; on the contrary, it is one of the most critical elements of healthy child development!

Perhaps you've seen some of the nature programs on television that show animal babies playing with each other or with their mothers as they develop their hunting and survival skills. Scientists generally agree that play fosters healthy development of young and adult animals alike. A long-term study of animal play in the wild reported in National Geographic (December 1994) suggests that play is a "rehearsal for the challenges and ambiguities of life." This leads to greater strength, increased physical and mental skills, improved judgment, greater security, and stronger social bonds, characteristics that contribute to success as the animal grows.

The same is true for human children and adults. Playfulness and humor are closely related to mental health, intellectual development, creativity and problem-solving, and

even productivity on the job! Although we sometimes think of play as trivial, in actuality it is one of the strongest supports for coping, learning, good adjustment, and productive activity! I have spent some of my work life in manufacturing companies where the work is hard and the physical environment (& sometimes the overall climate) is very unpleasant. I have always been impressed with the way that people use humor and playfulness to cope with some of the most difficult and oppressive situations. I've seen the same thing in medical environments where people are coping with serious illness or in traumatic situations where people have lost all their possessions. Humor and play help us get through tough times.

### **How is play therapeutic?**

Play therapy creates a safe atmosphere where children can express themselves, try new things, learn more about how the world works, learn about social rules and restrictions, and work through their problems. Play therapy gives children an opportunity to explore and open up more than usual.

When we, as adults, encounter a tough problem, we often think about it for a while, look at it from different angles, determine our options, and sometimes talk about it with someone we trust. When things go wrong for us, we might mentally review what happened and think about how we might handle the situation in the future. During play therapy, children do these same things using their imaginations. Play therapy provides the tools (toys and activities) and the atmosphere to help children express themselves, work on their problems, "try on" different solutions, and learn more effective coping methods.

### **What happens in play therapy?**

Actually there are many different types of play therapy, so what happens in a session can be quite varied. The common aspects are that the therapist holding the session will know how to systematically use play or playful activities to communicate with the child. The specific activities will differ. Here are some of the things that might happen.

Sometimes therapists take children into a playroom that has a wide range of carefully selected toys. The toys are chosen because they help children express a variety of feelings and problems. The therapist allows the child to select the toys and the ways that they want to play with them. The therapist pays extremely close attention to the child's actions and feelings, sometimes engages in imaginary play with the child, and sets limits if the child's behavior gets "out of line." In this type of play therapy, called child-centered play therapy, the child's problems or issues usually come out naturally in their play. For example, a girl whose mom had kidney failure and needed a transplant eventually made a small kidney out of modeling clay and performed an imaginary "transplant" on a stuffed animal in a play session. Over the course of several sessions it became clear that the girl was quite worried about her mom, wanted to help her mom get better, and was playing in a way so that she (the child) wouldn't feel so helpless. Shortly after these sessions, she began to talk more openly with her mom about the upcoming surgery and her fears. Part of the therapist's training involves knowing how to interpret the meaning of children's play. This can help the therapist discuss the "root

causes" of the problems with the parents and come up with possible strategies that are more likely to work.

Other times in play therapy, the therapist might decide to do a specific type of activity with a child because it will teach the child a skill they need to learn or will help the child understand things better. For example, if a child has trouble getting along with other children, the therapist might use group play therapy (with the parents' permission) to help the child learn better social skills. The therapist might have the group play a game together while helping the children learn about sharing, taking turns, winning and losing gracefully, showing interest in others, keeping focused on a task, and so on. Using the game holds the children's interest more than something more serious would and actually helps them practice and develop these different social skills more readily.

Other types of play therapy involve the entire family. This involvement can take different forms. Other articles within these Parents' Pages include information on types of family play therapy.