

Play Therapy

Play therapy, very simply, is therapy with children using play, which is the natural language of children. Play is a universal behavior of children. It is estimated that by 6 years of age, children are likely to have engaged in more than 15,000 hours of play. Play is the natural way in which children learn about their world, themselves, and others. Children's play represents their attempt to organize their experiences and allows them to feel in control of their lives and thus more secure. The benefits of play for healthy cognitive development, language development, social competence, and physical development have been well established. Children often lack the words to solve their problems or express feelings but through play they are able to express much about their inner world and can be active problem solvers through their play. Play has the power not only to aid in normal child development but also to help alleviate emotional and behavioral difficulties.

For over six decades, play therapy has been recognized as the oldest and most popular form of child therapy in clinical practice. The Association for Play Therapy 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."

Of major importance in the therapeutic process is the relationship that develops between the therapist and the child. Before the child can fully begin to make use of the therapeutic experience, a safe, trusting relationship needs to develop. The therapist understands the natural language of the child's feelings about, for example, school fears, arguing parents, and growing up. This interpersonal relationship provides much of the therapeutic value, providing a sense of being understood and accepted.

Parental participation is very important in play therapy. Before beginning treatment, the parents are generally interviewed. The parent's worries and concerns, perceptions of their child's difficulties, and the history of the child's development help the therapist understand their child, and are of crucial importance to the therapeutic process. During the course of treatment, close contact between the parents and therapist is essential.

Parents usually try to solve their child's problems within the family – as well they should. However, it is often not clear why a child behaves the way he or she does, and in spite of the parent's best efforts, the problem persists, and therapy may be advised. Seeking therapy for one's child, of course, in no way reflects on the parents' competence or ability to cope. Instead, the very act of seeking therapy is a sign of good coping skills and can be very therapeutic in and of itself – actively expressing to the child the parents' concerns.

Adapted from Play Therapy by Steven Lander and Empirically Based Play Interventions for Children Edited by Linda Reddy, Tara Files-Hall, and Charles Schaeffer.