

# Play Therapy is *Serious Fun!*

By Karen Poynor

Play Therapy (PT) consists of a large number of therapeutic interventions, all of which make use of the benefits of play. PT is based on the belief that children are unable or unlikely to understand and express their experiences in the same way as adults. Play is the most natural way for children to express themselves and even teenagers and some adults find that they express themselves most honestly and openly when they use non-verbal methods of communicating, such as creative play and art. By confronting their problems in the safe environment of the PT room, children are better able to cope with difficult emotions, which can help lead to healing change and problem resolution.

Many parents and even some professionals misunderstand or prematurely reject PT as a valid therapeutic intervention. Nonetheless, numerous studies have demonstrated the positive effectiveness of PT. There are countless books and multiple professional journals that are devoted to the discussion of PT, explain the philosophy behind it and present the latest PT research. Licensed clinicians who practice PT require highly specialized training, experience and supervision and may earn their Registered Play Therapist (RPT) designation.

PT differs from regular play in that the play therapist helps children systematically address and resolve their own problems. Many therapists occasionally incorporate board games or art materials into their therapy sessions. While this is often a very appropriate way of establishing initial therapeutic rapport or encouraging greater client participation, it differs from an actual PT session. In the PT room, the child initiates the play and takes the lead of the session. The therapist's role is to be sensitive and aware of the feelings and thoughts the child is expressing in his or her play. The therapist reflects them back to the child in order to help the child understand his or her own experiences and emotions more fully. As the therapist accepts the child without judgment, the child becomes more trusting and accepting of self.