

PLAY THERAPY: HOW DOES THAT WORK ANYWAY? A RESOURCE HANDOUT FOR PARENTS.

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Abstract

The time when a parent has to bring their child into therapy can be emotionally charged and intimidating for parents. This article is intended to be an information resource that play therapists can give to parents to take with them and help to answer the questions they might not think of at the time or may be too afraid to ask at all. The process of play therapy is briefly outlined, discussion about therapist training and suggestions for parents are discussed. A supplement is also included for children who come to play therapy from a classroom setting.

For parents, the initiation of therapy for their child can be a time of great anxiety, confusion, and fear. Though therapists can try to help ease the discomfort of this process, many parents benefit from being provided with something to take home and read through at their leisure. This article is intended to be a resource for therapists to give parents so they can gain a better understanding of what goes on in play therapy. A supplemental section is included for teachers when children are going to the playroom from the classroom.

How does it work?

Any parent or teacher can tell you how important play is for children and how serious they often are about what they play. Play has been viewed for hundreds of years as the language children use to understand their world until they gain a greater mastery of spoken language. Children are able to show through their play what they are thinking about and how they feel about people. Children often times are confused about the realities of life, having emotions, and being effected by adult relationships. The result of these confusions is that some children become stressed. The difficulty for children is their inexperience with feelings, their lack of words to express their feelings, and their underdeveloped strategies for coping with that stress. Adults throughout their lives work to develop the skills necessary to work out their relational and emotional concerns often with the aid of a friend, pastor, or psychologist. Adults have the language capacities to better express how they feel and often experience a sense of relief by talking out and thinking through their problems. The same principle holds true for children, but it helps if someone can speak their language and understand the way young children think.

A trained play therapist is able to help the child "play out" his or her concerns by identifying specific themes that are typically seen by children with worries or problems. An example would be a child who has parents that are separated and in the process of getting a divorce. The child using the thinking patterns of a young child will often feel that the reason that Daddy does not come around anymore is because she spilled the milk or Daddy just does not love her anymore. The result is that the child becomes confused and stressed but has not developed the ability to cope with that stress. The unresolved stress then causes behavior changes which vary according to the child, from sadness to anger to hyperactivity. The therapist can help the child identify the confusing feelings and offer alternative ways of thinking about and behaving in response to the stress, all using the child's natural language, play.

Who are these therapists?

Therapists are typically people who have undergone clinical training at some advanced school and learned the process of play therapy as part of their training or under the supervision of a Registered Play Therapist Supervisor. In some settings, such as Head Start, play therapy is conducted by advanced students in a Masters or Doctoral training program. All these therapists have clinical experience, but many are in the process of learning this specific type of therapy. All the play therapists in training are supervised by someone skilled and experiencing in conducting play therapy. There are very specific ways in which play therapists are trained to respond to children as they play. Since many therapists are students, occasionally sessions are videotaped with permission from parents, so that the student and supervisors can advance the learning of the clinical skills.

What happens in therapy?

Play therapy is conducted, usually at the same time and day each week, outside the classroom in a special place, usually called the playroom, designed specifically for safe exploration of the therapy toys. This room becomes very important to children because they are allowed to explore their ideas and feelings in a safe, private, and quiet environment with an adult therapist's full attention. The sense of privacy the playroom affords is very important for children so that they feel safe enough to express and work on feelings that most of the time they work hard to hold back. This room is also important to protect the confidentiality of information that comes out through the therapy process. Most of what occurs will only be discussed between the therapist, the child, and the parent. In school settings, it may be appropriate to also involve the Mental Health Staff, Disabilities Coordinator, or School Counselor. Play therapy most often is done with just the child and the therapist in the playroom. Play therapy can also be conducted with a parent or guardian playing along with the child and their therapist, if it seems that would be beneficial to the process. Play therapy toys are often similar to those found in the classroom like dolls, baby toys, cars, puppets, and play food. Other toys, like families of similar puppets or animals and wooden knock down figures are often seen by the children for the first time. The play is most often directed by the child and revolves around specific issues, ideas, and feelings about which they are confused or ambivalent. The child expresses these difficulties by having the characters play out different part, emotions, or actions. The therapist's training includes knowledge about how children with certain worries play out different play themes and how to respond using play. Therapists also talk with the child to help them begin to put words to their feelings. The therapist does this by communicating that all types of feelings are okay, labeling different types of feelings, and working on better ways to express feelings.

Many parents (and teachers) find some aspects of play therapy worrisome. For example they wonder how letting a child play with baby bottles and act like a baby could help the child. They also worry that the child will want the bottle at home or forever. The main reason behind this type of play is that some children have worries and fears which stem from the time they were a baby. By "being a baby" the child can show the therapist what they are worried about. Once the child has shared their feelings and "worked out" the fears or worries, he or she will no longer want the bottle. Similarly, children in play therapy often do things, especially in angry play, that they are not allowed to do in the classroom or at home. This is because children have strong feelings about things in their world that they don't quite understand or for which they lack identifying labels. For example, many children hit and disobey when actually they are afraid. Also, they often don't know appropriate ways to express their feelings. By using the gun or throwing soft toys, children can learn about their angry and scared feelings. The therapist is then able to help the child to feel less angry or afraid and learn how to express those feelings in safe ways. Remember, even young children can understand that the playroom is a special place with special rules where they can do things that are not okay other places. When they have done their "therapy work" these behaviors end and the child is better able to be appropriate outside the playroom.

Despite what some parents believe, play therapist do not have a magic wand that they pass over the children to make all the problems and challenging behaviors go away. The therapist does have some factors that make the relationship between them and the child different from all others. First, the therapists are somewhat removed from traditional role expectations. Children know what to expect from a teacher or a parent, but the therapeutic relationship is different. The therapist also has the luxury of being the one adult who does not have a responsibility to discipline the child on a regular basis. Second, the playroom has different rules from other settings. These rules are designed to facilitate the child in feeling safe and open about their concerns. Even very young children gain an understanding about the role of the playroom and how the rules are different in that environment. Third, it is seldom that a child can have an adult's full attention along with the freedom to direct what they both play, which is something that a parent or teacher usually can not offer. Fourth, the therapist has the advantage of being a unique experience each week. They are seen for only one hour and this gives the child something to look forward to each week. Fifth, though children are often highly serious about their play it is still a fun and enjoyable process allowing them the relief from stress that they need. The relief from stress and worries is very powerful for children and leaves them with warm feelings and memories of their therapist and the process. These warm feelings are often so strong that your child might say or act as if he/she liked the therapist more than you. This can be tough on you as a parent, but remember no one could ever be as important as you are to your child! As your child's worries diminish, the fascination with the therapist will decline and your relationship with your son or daughter will have the opportunity to be enhanced.