

Play

A Foundation of the Parent-Child Relationship

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Virginia Axline, a pioneer of play therapy during the 1960's said, "Enter into children's play and you will find the place where their minds, hearts, and souls meet".

Play is the world and language of a child. Children lack the verbal skills to describe their thoughts, feelings and experiences. But in play, their acts can convey these aspects of their lives more fluently.

As a Play Therapist, I have examined the meaning of play for children and how play can be a very valuable medium for communicating with and understanding children. In addition, I have recognized the significant role of play in fortifying the bond between parents and their children. Many of my colleagues and myself agree, based on professional experience and clinical research, that play is crucial for optimal development and well-being. Albert Einstein understood the significance of play, as reflected in his statement that "imagination is more important than knowledge".

Within the play forum, parents can learn to use specific skills in facilitating play times to better understand and promote development with their children. Plato said "You can discover more about a person in one hour of play than in one year of conversation." Using the tips discussed in this article may provide for some of the following outcomes:

- Enhance the parent-child relationship
- Develop better understanding your child's perception of their world, the events happening in their life, and their feelings and concerns
- Facilitate an opportunity for your children to learn problem solving and coping skills
- Increase your child's feelings of self-worth, confidence & self esteem

- Increase your child's repertoire of emotional language & concepts
- Channel your child's negative emotions in a safe & secure environment
- Reduce maladaptive and/or problematic behaviors of your child
- Teach your children limits

The skills are aspects of Filial Therapy. I typically utilize the filial approach with the parents of my clients to extend the benefit of therapy to the home environment. Filial, as defined by the American Heritage Dictionary, means "of relating to, or befitting a son or daughter." Louise and Bernard Guerney founded Filial Therapy in the 1960's. In Filial Therapy, *the parents are employed as therapeutic agents, using specific skills during a unique playtime between the parent and child.* It is ideal for children between the ages of 3 and 11, but can be adapted for adolescents as well. Here are the basic steps and skills:

1. Creating 'Special Play Sessions'

The first step of filial play is to create *special play sessions* with your child. These play sessions are to be distinguished from routine and usual playtime between parents and children. The play sessions are between one parent and one child at a time, but ideally each child would have a turn and parents rotate turns as well. These sessions should be a consistent day and time each week, usually once a week and for 30 minutes each time. The other parent may entertain other children in the household or other arrangements made to ensure that there are no interruptions during the sessions.

2. Structuring the Sessions

Structure the session by explaining to your child: "this is a special type of play time in which you can choose what we play for the next 30 minutes." Let the child make the choice of what to do during this time and the choice of how to include or not include you in their play scenario. It is very important to stick with the 30-minute time limit and not succumb to your child's request to extend the session. In addition, always give a 5-minute warning toward the end of the session to give the child time to wrap up their activity. At the

conclusion, it is suggested to move to a different room of the house and engage in a distinctly different type of activity, such as making dinner etc.

3. Tracking

As the session ensues, the parent lets the child lead throughout, which means that the parent does not direct (other than limit setting described below), ask questions or interpret the play behavior during this time. The parent follows the child's play by observation. This is called *tracking*. The essence of tracking is communicating what the child is doing and saying, *without interpretation and in a nonjudgmental manner*. Tracking by the parent is consistent throughout the special playtime, however specific comments by the parent are not constant. The idea is to summarize the jest of what the child is doing and saying. Essentially, the parent becomes a large mirror in which the child has reflected back to her or him, their actions and verbalizations during the play session.

4. Empathy

The parent also provides *empathy*. Empathy is conveyed in the parent's statements, which acknowledge the feelings involved in the themes of the child's play. An example of such may be "oh, that dinosaur is sad" as the child portrays the dinosaur in his or her play scenario. Another example, as the child holds up drawing, smiles and says, "Look at my drawing. Isn't it great?" The parent may respond to this question with empathy by saying something like, "You're really proud of your drawing". This type statement is also more empowering to the child as opposed to using praise or agreement, which tend to create dependency in the child.

5. Limit Setting

Another task in facilitating the filial session is *limit setting*. There is a specific way of setting limits for children during these special sessions that is respectful, clear and firm. Choices are an important part of limit setting. An example of such is when the child is intentionally destroying a toy. Give the child a

choice of reframing from a particular behavior and continuing to use the toy or choosing to continue the misbehavior and thus choosing a consequence such as removal of the toy from the child's use during that particular session. Limit setting should be kept to a minimum and is used primarily to avoid potentially dangerous, physically harmful or intentionally destructive behavior. The primary intent of the limits is *ensuring a safe environment*. The parent should remain firm yet emotionally neutral in rendering limits.

As you use these skills and engage in play with your child, you inevitably become aware of how they integrate their experiences of everyday life into their play scenarios. Jean Piaget, who described the various stages of cognitive development of children, said "We can be sure that all happenings, pleasant or unpleasant, in the child's life, will have repercussions on her dolls"! Play provides an opportunity for children to process their experiences, reconcile conflict feelings and explore solutions to the challenges they encounter in life. As Ashley Montagu said "In play we can find the roots of our adult capacities to think creatively and flexibly, to innovate, adapt, change."

Children who have specific behavioral or emotional problems may require professional intervention beyond the skills outlined in this article. Also, their parents may need more guidance with the Filial techniques to address these issues. In these cases, a counselor with expertise in play therapy can provide supervision & role-play of the skills with the parent and perhaps more individual therapy with the child.

Lastly, I recommend that parents model the value of play for their children by ensuring that they engage in their own pleasure and play oriented activities, such as with hobbies and sports. For let's all heed the wisdom of William Shakespeare who advised "Frame your mind to mirth and merriment, which bars a thousand harms and lengthens life".