

## **The Power of the Play Therapy Room**

### **By Karen Poynor**

In her groundbreaking book, Play Therapy (1947), pioneer in the field, Virginia Axline, includes a child's description of his first visit to the Play Therapy Room: "This is all so different and so strange. In here you say I can do what I want to do. You don't tell me what to do. I can mess up a picture if I want to. I can make a clay model of my art teacher and let the crocodile eat her...I can do anything, I can be me." This child's experience almost 60 years ago is not unlike that of many children today. As they enter the Play Therapy Room, their eyes often widen as their shoulders relax. A child soon realizes that in here she is the most important person. There is no competition or struggle with adult authorities or peer rivals. This haven provides the child with the safety to face his deepest fears and biggest concerns.

In the Play Therapy Room toys and materials are *selected* rather than *collected*. The toys act as the child's words and each item can be used to represent or express an aspect of the child's world. For example, playing with plastic dishes and food may depict the child's experience or lack of nurturing. Interaction with baby dolls and doll houses often remind the child of life with his birth family: the good, the bad and the ugly. Also important are the toys which allow the child to release her energy and aggression in a satisfying yet harmless manner, such as pounding away at a punching bag or swinging a foam sword. Paint, markers and play dough provide a creative outlet for all types of emotions. The sand tray provides the child with a unique method of representing her world. The child does this by selecting from a myriad of miniature figures, objects and symbols which he deliberately places, buries or maneuvers within the parameters of a wooden tray covered with about 2" of sand. The scene the child creates often mirrors the child's inner self, enabling the child to "see" his thoughts.

These are but a few of the countless ways in which the Play Therapy Room provides the child with the power and possibility for healing.