

Play Therapy

“You can discover more about a person in an hour of play, than in a year of conversation” -Plato

For more than a hundred years, play has been recognized as having therapeutic value. While children generally engage in play behaviour for fun and pleasure, play activity is actually a serious business. Play contributes to a child’s physical, socioemotional, personal and intellectual growth. Rather than viewing play as aimless and frivolous behaviour, researchers recognize that play is a potent source of productive growth for children (Yawkey & Pellegrini, 1984, p. 1X).

Sigmund Freud, (1856-1939), Austrian founder of psychoanalysis, is generally acknowledged as the first therapist to consider play as an expression of unresolved feelings and unconscious thought. Freud believed that child’s play was influenced by the desire for resolution of anxious feelings, conflicts and wishes.

Children, in general, do not have a well-developed ability to communicate their thoughts and feelings through speech. It is unrealistic and extremely restricting to expect children to participate in adult forms of therapy. Play is the child’s natural form of self-expression and communication. Through the medium of play a child can relive and gradually assimilate a stressful event, thereby reducing both physiological and psychological tension.

In play therapy the therapist creates a safe and permissive playful environment where the child feels respected, accepted and understood. Within this safety zone, the child has the freedom to play out his or her innermost feelings. Once the child realizes that the therapist will not judge, suggest, criticize, praise or disapprove, he or she will begin to externalize deeply held feelings and inner conflicts.

Children are always communicating their experiences symbolically through the use of toys and play activities and it is the job of the therapist to understand the metaphors in children’s play.

F. Amster listed the following six uses of play in the therapy setting (as cited in Landreth, 1985):

1. Play can be used for diagnostic understanding of the child.
2. Play can be used to establish a working relationship.
3. Play can be used to break through a child’s way of playing in his daily life and his defenses against anxiety.
4. Play can be used to help a child verbalize certain conscious material and associated feelings.
5. Play can be used to help a child act out unconscious material and to relieve the accompanying tension.
6. Play can be used to develop a child’s play interests which he can carry over into his daily life and which will strengthen him for his future.



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Each child who enters play therapy brings with him or her a variety of complex variables related to the trauma that they have experienced. Many people are unaware of the intensity of emotions that some young children feel and hold within. Children are capable of feeling intense hatreds, fears, and sadness. In therapy children express feelings of loneliness, anger, failure, abandonment, worthlessness and insecurity.

There is generally widespread agreement among therapists as to the selection of toys that are most appropriate in play therapy. The toys and play materials that are recommended have characteristics and features that enable children to express symbolically some of their fears and feelings about the trauma they have experienced. Toys that are consistently recommended for play therapy include: doll houses and furniture, bendable dolls (parents, children, grandparents). Puppets of all varieties (kittens, lambs, rabbits, alligators, bears, wolves, snakes, family puppets, witches, monsters), cookware sets, tea party sets, telephones, cameras, flashlights, medical kits, masks, boats, cars, trucks, fire engines, ambulances, play dough, foam bricks, foam hammers, foam bats and balls, sand tables, farm animals, stuffed toys, baby dolls, baby bottles, baby blankets, drawing, painting, and sculpting materials.

Play therapy is a powerful therapeutic intervention for children. Given the freedom to explore and express themselves in a safe, accepting environment, children have the chance to heal and experience themselves anew.



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