



What is Play Therapy and how can it help my child?

Play therapy has been used to help children for over sixty years. In that time, research has shown its effectiveness in being beneficial to children who attend, especially when parents or guardians are participating. Among therapists that specialize in treating children, it is a widely accepted standard of treatment.

Play therapy is a therapeutic way of connecting with a child at a developmentally appropriate age to help process and bring resolve to emotional issues. Children are not fully able to express their internal world with words and so while 'talk therapy' is helpful for adults who are capable of connecting with and processing their issues, children need the distance of expression created in play therapy. Play therapy allows children a safe psychological distance from their problems, safety needed for their identity development, and allows them to express their true thoughts and feelings in ways best suited for their developmental level.

"Play therapy is to children what talk therapy is to adults. Play is the child's way of communicating just as talking is the adult's natural way of communicating. In the playroom, toys are used like words and play is the child's language. Children are provided special toys in play therapy to enable them to say with the toys what they have difficulty saying with words... They can use the dolls, puppets, paints, or other toys to say what they think or how they feel." (Landreth, 2002). Another aspect to play therapy is the relationship built with the therapist as this is significant to healing. When we think of moments that have been helpful and healing to our souls, our thoughts usually drift to times of connection within a close relationship. This too happens in play therapy where the therapist and child build a relationship that provides the ground work necessary for change and growth.

Who is trained to provide play therapy?

Play therapy is different from watching a child play, and more than engaging with a child in play. It is a specialized approach that utilizes a child's play to help them sort through what is troubling them in an accepting and safe environment. A Play Therapist is a trained mental health professional who uses play with a child in such a way that the child can systematically address and resolve his/her problems.

How should a child be prepared for therapy?

This varies depending upon the child's age and the situation they are dealing with. Parents should not deceive their child about where they are going or why they are seeing a therapist. However, depending on the age of the child, they may not need a detailed explanation of why they are going. For young children, a simple explanation that they are "going to see a therapist who has a play room and who helps children with their feelings and behaviors" may be enough. Although parents often tell children they are going to "talk to" someone, it usually helps reduce the anxiety of children if it is made clear that they can also play, not just talk. Older children often are more enthusiastic about therapy if their parents emphasize more about the stress they feel the child has been under than about the parents' desire for their behavior to change. If the child expects the therapy to be like going to the principal's office because of something they do wrong, then they are likely to have more anxiety and resistance.

What should I tell the play therapist?

As the parent or guardian, you are the expert on your child. Ben will join with you to help in your child's growth. For this reason, it is important that you share with Ben the past and recent events in your child's life, especially those to which your child has had a strong reaction to. It is burdensome for a child to have the responsibility of reporting these events to the therapist especially recent ones. If you find that there is something significant for Ben to know, please call 24 hours before your child's session to leave a message or to talk with me. Upon arrival for session, this becomes the child's special time and place, not for the parent to share updating information. It will also be very important to have ongoing update sessions with Ben about your child's progress through therapy so that together we can help your child and family grow.

How will I know what my child does in therapy and how do I talk to my child directly after the session?

Parents play an important role in the Play Therapy process. They can do much to enhance the work their child does in Play Therapy sessions. The therapist will meet with the parents to learn what is and has occurred in the child's life, to share observations (general themes, helpful responses, and progress), and to share suggestions on how parents can be supportive with their child's therapy. While therapy does take place in a playroom, much of the hard work and change will be done in their daily life, which makes parental involvement essential. Specifics of a session may not be discussed for the child's confidence in the therapy and their ability to see this as a safe place to honestly share.

It is important to understand that even though therapy is through the medium of play, children work very hard in therapy. Please avoid requiring your child answer your questions about the session. Some children will be excited about the experience and will want to share, others maybe very quiet, and others may go about their lives as if nothing happened. At the end of the session, it may be appropriate to say things like, "You've been working hard, I bet you are tired." or "Hi, we can go home now.", even "I see you painted. I see you used blue and orange. We can go home now." Certainly as parents we want the best for our children and what we are trying to curtail is limiting the child's growth potential. They are eager to please and are so impacted by our responses that we do not want to bring their processing to a halt, but give them the opportunity to process what has occurred and move towards change. If you do have questions, please call me and we can discuss them over phone or in an individual session.

How often and for how long will my child need therapy?

Therapy is usually a gradual process of helping a child share their issues, gain new skills, and begin changing behaviors. I recommend that children attend sessions once weekly for 45 minutes. Having appointments spaced more than a week apart slows down the process of therapy substantially because children live more in the moment and will have difficulty connecting any progress or seeing continuity from one session to the next. It is important for the child to build trust and rapport with the therapist as they address what issues have brought them into counseling. Therapy will come to an end as those issues are seeing resolve and the child and family are comfortable with the change that has occurred. If the therapy needs to end prematurely due to financial issues, a move, or other circumstances, please notify me in advance so that if it is something we can address, we can do that, and also if therapy needs to come to an end that your child has the appropriate space to be aware of that and address that within therapy sessions, three sessions would be a minimal requirement. If you know this from the outset of therapy, certainly some therapy is better than none, let me know this and we can focus on the primary goals and we can discuss what other issues arise during therapy as separate goals to attend through other avenues.