

# **Parent Handbook**

## **Children's Playgroup Therapy**

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## **Group Description and Procedure**

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### **Philosophy and Purpose**

A child's success in the early years sets the stage for further successes later in life. How a child interacts with peers can powerfully influence how they feel about themselves and their ability to negotiate their needs, problem solve, and often determines how they choose to extend themselves to peers in the future. Children with developmental challenges, behavioral difficulties, or who are less socially adept and have not yet mastered the emotional or developmental milestones needed for positive social interaction often need to be taught the nuances of social skills. Intervening early to teach social skills will maximize the opportunity for your child to build success early. Evidence shows that early intervention is best as children are most responsive to interventions to change behaviors prior to age 7. Although parents are often encouraged to "wait and they'll grow out of it", the reality is that the longer behavior occurs, the more entrenched it becomes and the more difficult it becomes to turn around. The focus of the social skills playgroup is to facilitate the development of harmonious relationships by helping children recognize boundaries, communicate effectively, and get their needs met without using disruptive behavior.

During the group, we will observe how children attempt to negotiate the demands of sharing adult attention, toys and materials, and how they use communication (verbal and nonverbal) to meet their needs in a group environment. We will also have an opportunity to see how children value their attributes, whether they are able to establish friendly, positive contact with adults and other children, and whether their verbal communication skills are appropriate for their age. Assisting children in a naturalistic, but small-group setting will provide the best opportunity for generalization of acquired skills.

The group is designed to provide structure and consistency for children as well as education and guidance for parents (via observation). The group may also be utilized for trainees and/or teachers who are participating to learn advanced skills.

Each child will be helped to: adjust to changes and make transitions; interact with peers productively; react positively to externally imposed structure; regulate attention and behavior; and initiate, organize and maintain communication with others.

Parents are the expert observers of their child's behaviors. Ongoing, open communication between the staff and parents/caregivers is considered to be vital to the success of the group. We welcome and encourage the expression of insights and requests for information and are available by phone, email, and scheduled appointments. It is too difficult to have extended conversations in the observation or waiting room, so please call for an appointment to discuss issues you would prefer to discuss privately or issues of depth. Working together as a team, we can make a difference in your child and family's life.

### **Preparation**

Preparation of parents and children is a very important part of the process of entering the groups. The following components are utilized as an introduction to the program and provide a foundation for success.

**Initial Intake and Developmental History:** A meeting to discuss a child's complete medical, social, and developmental history is necessary and is an important component of group participation. Insights into a child's developmental history help to determine contributing factors to the current difficulties or delays a child may be experiencing. Parents are asked to reconstruct their child's prenatal and birth history; medical history; achievement of development milestones; overall family/marital circumstances past and present; unusual family events (major illnesses, deaths, extended separations);

prior experience in day care or preschool; prior evaluations. Parents are provided with a child history form to assist them in recalling this information prior to the initial meeting with Dr. Forrester. Additionally, any previous reports from other professionals are requested so that a comprehensive understanding of each child's development is obtained. All information is held confidential.

### **The Group**

**Arrival:** Timely arrival is essential for your child. Children are often very sensitive to their environment and those who arrive late become anxious and it takes extra time to assure them and integrate them into the group. Parents are responsible for children before and after sessions. For safety reasons, children need to hold their parent's hand when entering and leaving the waiting room.

**Greeting:** The group facilitator will come out to greet children and parents and welcome children into the playroom. The transition from the waiting room to structured group time will be continued at the table with a hello song (children may/may not engage in a fine motor activity). The purpose of the song is to greet each child by name and welcome him/her to the group. Additionally, it serves as an opportunity for children to practice impulse control and acknowledge the presence of their peers prior to playtime.

**Playtime:** This is a time for children to explore the room, develop modes of play with materials, and interact with the other children and staff. Initially, this is also a valuable time for children to begin to build social/play skills in an interactive manner. The play will be child-focused, with the adults available for facilitation, but not directive (unless deemed therapeutically necessary) in the process. Individual goals are made for each child and treatment is tailored according to each child's unique needs. Children will have different needs at different times. Prior to transition periods such as clean-up, a verbal notice will be provided to children (e.g., "Five more minutes to play"). This is a useful tool for parents to use at home as well.

**Clean-up:** This is a group process and is considered to be a valuable activity. This task provides an opportunity to develop the ability to focus on a task, comply with appropriate adult demands, and learn to delay gratification. Children often need help to accomplish this task and the staff is prepared to provide structured help and encouragement to children to permit successful acceptance of responsibility. If need be, the staff will start the process slowly and have the child pick up only a few items and will increase demands gradually. It is preferable that the child's achievement is acknowledged in a positive and calm way, directing praise to a specific task (i.e. "You picked up both of the red cars") rather than over-praising and the use of "good boy/girl." Moving from unstructured play to snack enables the child to develop strategies to delay gratification and assist with modulating their excitement.

**Snack/Story:** The purpose of this activity is to promote appropriate socialization, increased capacity for delaying gratification, increased impulse control, enhanced language development, and increased participation in a group process. Particular goals may be more salient for some children than others. During the story, or when a child is sharing "news," all children are asked to look at the storybook or at the child who is speaking. In the beginning, books are used to create discussion opportunities. After a while, the children begin to have more discussions among themselves about salient events in their lives (school experience, sibling conflict, parental trips, visitors such as grandparents, pets, etc.). At the conclusion of snack, children are required to throw away their trash. The goal is to develop self-help skills and to foster a sense of autonomy.

**Good-bye:** It is very important to say a clear and distinct "good-bye." This is sometimes a difficult transition time. Children are sometimes reluctant to leave when they have enjoyed themselves and leaving may mean that they will have to separate from parents (mom or dad return to work, child returns to school, etc.). Protests and crying are acceptable, and the staff will work with parents to

decide how best to respond to each child's behaviors. Reasonable expectations and how to facilitate the various transitions, including good-bye, will be discussed in the group. Group sessions end with a predictable and structured routine as this often eases difficult transitions. In addition, when it is determined that a child is ready to terminate group therapy, a great deal of time is spent preparing them for a 'big' good-bye.

### **Additional Pointers**

Parents are asked to take their children to the restroom before group and at other times as needed. To minimize group disruption, please arrive with enough time to stop by the restroom prior to the beginning of group. Children should be encouraged to be as independent as they can be when using the toilet and washing hands (however, please clean up as needed and do not leave a mess in the restroom as it is a public restroom for the building). If parents have to leave briefly during group (bathroom, phone call, etc.) please be sure to return promptly in case your child needs to use the restroom or otherwise needs you. To increase comfort, children are assisted in anticipating activities and transitions in the group. This strategy provides them with a sense of order and predictability regarding their experiences here. Objects from home or school are allowed. You do not have to engage in a struggle with your child about bringing things from home. The staff will manage this issue with children in the group. It is important that children come to group in comfortable clothing and shoes. Please dress children in clothes that can be easily laundered. Some activities and materials are messy (all are non-toxic and washable) and you may wish to bring an extra change of clothes.

### **Other Information**

**Parent Involvement:** Overall, teaching social skills will be a team effort. The efficacy of the program depends not only on what occurs in the groups, but also on the willingness of parents to participate in learning new skills to practice at home and elsewhere in the community. Parents are the experts on

their child and parental input is vital in order to best serve each child. You are encouraged to contact the group facilitator prior to group (via email, phone call and/or leaving a message is fine) with any information that may be helpful to know prior to group (i.e. mom or dad out of town, relatives visiting, problems at school, or other salient issues in your child's life).

**Attendance:** Please make every effort to bring your child to each session. Each session is valuable and builds on the previous sessions and consistency of attendance will allow your child the maximum opportunity to benefit. Unforeseen circumstances such as illnesses and emergencies do occur. Please inform the staff of any expected or unexpected absences as soon as possible. The group facilitator may talk with the group about a child's absence and prepare the other children for his/her return. All absences (illness or otherwise) will be charged the full session fee. Commitment to the group is required and if a child misses frequently, he/she loses the additive benefit of group and also prevents another child from enrollment. If for any reason you are dissatisfied or have concerns, please contact Dr. Forrester immediately so these issues can be discussed. A decision can be made about continuation/termination and your child can be prepared if they are leaving the group prematurely. It is very disconcerting for a child to leave group abruptly and equally upsetting for the other children in the group to not have a chance to say good-bye.

**SET Time:** Supporting the healthy emotional development of each child is the core of all children's development. You will learn a technique to use at home with your child called "**SET Time**" which will enhance your relationship greatly. The staff will explain SET Time to parents.

**Observation Policy:** In most group sessions, parent observation/participation is mandatory (other caregivers such as grandparents and nannies may participate with parental consent). If parent observation is not a part of your child's group, the therapist will periodically contact parents to provide information about what/how their child is doing in the group and to gain information from parents.

Additionally, professionals involved with your child's care (e.g., teacher, speech therapists, occupations therapists, etc.) are welcome to observe the group in order that we may share (with your permission) knowledge and ideas about how best to assist your child.

**Therapeutic Hold:** We are all here because we want your child to interact effectively with others and to feel successful. We recognize and expect that children will display behaviors that are problematic for them. Our first approach in handling difficult behaviors is to use language to try to help the child manage his/her feelings or to comply with the structure of the group. If language is not effective, however, it may be necessary to ask parents to come in and/or assist a child physically to stop destructive behaviors. A child will be physically held ONLY to keep her or him from hurting him/her self or others, or from destroying property/materials. A "therapeutic hold" is used to help contain a child until language can be used to address the behavior and underlying feelings. A therapeutic hold is not used as punishment. Children who are "out of control" do not feel safe. Children who attempt to "take control" to alleviate their anxiety do not feel safe. A therapeutic hold offers children a sense of containment and assurance that adults will protect them and ensure their safety. **This is rarely necessary**, though occasionally may be required if safety is compromised for the group. If it does occur, feelings are processed for all the children to help alleviate any anxiety it may create. It is vital that any concerns regarding this, or any other method used to help your child manage behaviors and impulses, be addressed with the group facilitator. Please contact Dr. Forrester or another group facilitator if you have any questions or concerns immediately.

**Payment:** Payment is expected as outlined on the Playgroup Registration form. Cash or checks are acceptable forms of payment. Statements will be provided at the end of your session (unless monthly statements have been requested). Statements will be sent via secure email unless otherwise requested.



Please note that missed sessions are charged the full rate. Note: missed session fees are not reimbursable by insurance.

**Health Guidelines:**

Allergies: Please inform us of any allergies or other health concerns. This is crucial if your child has food allergies as we provide snack (Goldfish crackers and Vanilla Wafer cookies) and we need to know if your child cannot have these items. If this is the case, we ask that you provide an alternative snack for your child each week that they can consume.

Colds/Fevers: Please do not bring a child to group with a fever or contagious disease.

Communicable Diseases: Please inform the staff immediately if your child has any communicable disease such as flu, chicken pox, measles, lice, etc.

Injuries: If a child is significantly injured while in the building, he/she should be examined in a hospital emergency room or taken to his/her pediatrician at the parent's discretion

