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Therapy 101

“*Play is the highest form of research.” – Albert Einstein*

**How does therapy work?**

Children are often referred to therapy to help resolve problems, deal with trauma, process emotions and manage overwhelming situations. Therapy and the use of play and art therapy techniques allow trained mental health professionals to assess and understand the Child and help children to cope with overwhelming emotions and develop problem-solving skills (Moustakas, 1997; Reddy, Files-Hall & Schaefer, 2005). Therapy allows children to change the way they think, feel and resolve their issues (Kaugars & Russ, 2001). Even the most troubling problems can be confronted in therapy and lasting solutions can be discovered, practiced and adapted into lifelong learning. (Russ, 2004).

**How can therapy help my child?**

Therapy helps in many ways. Children receive emotional support and have the ability to connect 1:1 with a caring adult who is there solely for them. They have the ability to express themselves confidentially through play, art, or verbally. Sometimes in the course of sessions a child may re-enact difficult or traumatic experiences in order to process these events and more effectively cope with the emotions derived from these events. Therapy also provides skills to help manage conflict and difficult relationships in healthy ways.

Therapy is appropriate for children experiencing a variety of social, emotional, behavioral and learning problems both in the home and school setting. Common life stressors for children include: dealing with divorce, death, chronic illness and/or hospitalizations, physical and sexual abuse, domestic violence and natural disasters (Reddy, Files-Hall, & Shaefer, 2005). Common goals in therapy include:

* Developing successful strategies to manage problematic behaviors
* New and creative problem-solving techniques
* Improving self-esteem and self-concept
* Identifying emotions in self and others
* Modeling and role-playing social skills in a variety of settings
* Improving communication skills to decrease familial and peer conflict

**Therapeutic Play and Expressive Techniques**

When working with children and adolescents, play and expressive therapy techniques are incredibly effective. Benefits of play therapy include expanding self-expression, creating self-awareness and actualization, and improving self-efficacy. Play can relieve feelings of stress and boredom, connect a child to people in a positive way, stimulate creative thinking, and help to regulate emotions (Landreth, 2002). In addition, play can allow a child to practice skills and roles needed in daily life and foster learning and development (Russ, 2004).

Therapeutic play is effective in helping children to identify and express difficult and confusing feelings, often surrounding upsetting or traumatic events. Children can use play to communicate at their own level and pace. In therapy, play techniques are equivalent to the child’s language or expression. Using therapeutic play, therapy can help children to learn more adaptive behaviors in dealing with emotions or social skills deficits. The use of play and art activities build on the natural way children learn about themselves and the world around them (Axline, 1947; Carmichael, 2006; Landreth, 2002). Play and art activities provide a safe psychological distance from a child’s problems and allows expression of thoughts and feelings appropriate to a child’s development.

**Therapeutic Relationship & Confidentiality**

The positive relationship that develops between a therapist and child during sessions provides a corrective emotional experience that is vital for healing (Moustakas, 1997). A child must feel comfortable, safe and understood, and therapy provides this trusting environment. Information shared in session by both children and their families is kept confidential unless the family has authorized disclosure. In rare circumstances and surrounding issues of safety, a therapist may be mandated to report certain information to the State of Michigan. Details of these exceptions are explained in detail at the 1st intake session.

A lot of what helps and heals in therapy, for both children and adults, is the therapeutic relationship itself. Because children don’t naturally spend a lot of time talking about their problems, playing and having fun together helps build a trusting relationship between child and therapist. Activities in therapy also give children something to do with their hands so that talking during therapy is less intimidating or uncomfortable.

**Structure of therapy sessions**

Individual therapy sessions can last anywhere from 45 minutes to an hour. Initially, I recommend weekly sessions to build the therapeutic relationship. Over time, as an individual makes progress, sessions can be stretched out to bi-weekly or monthly. Depending on a child’s insurance coverage, the frequency of sessions can vary due to the allotted number of approved visits.

Children vary in their response to meeting with a therapy for the 1st time. Some children are very comfortable and have no problem separating from their parents; others need the security of their parent(s) joining them in session for part or all of the 1st couple of sessions. Regardless, I aim to involve parents as much as possible in the therapeutic process. I typically spend a brief period of time with parents during each session to touch base and address any specific concerns parent(s) may have. From time to time, it is effective to attend a large portion of your child’s session and be an active participant.

I employ a variety of approaches in therapy depending on an individual’s age, needs, temperament, and life situation. I utilize directive play therapy as well as a variety of toys, games, dolls, and art and expressive activities that provide a client with opportunities to express feelings, describe or allude to various important life situations and relationships. Specific toys, games, projects, and workbooks are often utilized to help a child build skills and learn to manage feelings, thoughts and behaviors. In addition, I assist clients and their families in identifying their goals and help them work towards achieving those goals with intentional evidence-based techniques including dialectical and cognitive behavioral (DBT & CBT) techniques. I also integrate mindfulness techniques.

**Family involvement, support, and communication during therapy**

Families play a crucial role in the therapeutic process. As noted above, I want to involve parents and key family members as much as possible in the therapy relationship. I will communicate regularly with a child’s caretaker to develop a treatment plan and monitor progress. This communication can occur before, during, and after scheduled sessions and through email or phone when necessary. Family or sibling sessions are an option when the situation warrants family or sibling involvement. Parent-only session can also be effective to help get a more in-depth parental perspective and empower parents and families with tools to help manage a child’s problematic behaviors in the home or school setting.

I schedule sessions Tuesday through Thursday 9am to 7:30 pm. I appreciate emails, phone calls, and texts from clients and family related to coordination of care. I am available to respond Monday through Thursday in between sessions and during non-client hours 9am-5pm, except in case of emergency. To ensure confidentiality, I only utilize text and email to schedule, cancel, and confirm appointments as I cannot guarantee that it not be violated by unauthorized third parties.

If you email or call me anytime after 5pm on Thursday or Friday through Sunday, your message or call will be replied/returned the following week, except in case of emergency. Client related emergencies include active suicidal ideation (inability to keep self safe), self-harm that requires medical treatment, active homicidal or violent behavior, domestic violence, and any behaviors that warrants police and/or mobile Crisis involvement.  In the event of an emergency, I should not be your 1st contact.  Instead, please go to your nearest emergency room, call 911, or dial 269-381-HELP to reach the Gryphon Place 24 hour crisis-help line.

As a parent discussing going to therapy with your child, what you tell your child will vary depending on their age or maturity level. I recommend being honest and upfront about coming to see a therapist, and prepping your child for what to expect (see structure of therapy sessions). It is helpful to be positive and supportive and to note than anyone and everyone can benefit from the therapeutic process. Therapy should never be presented as a punishment or shaming due to some problematic behavior or mistake. I encourage you and your child to view therapy as a way to talk, learn, have fun, and feel better on a variety of levels.

*Specific tips to help support the therapeutic process:*

* *Be consistent and encouraging about attending sessions regularly*
* *Resist the urge to ask your child what they did; they will share if and when they are ready to do so.*
* *Don’t ask your child to be “good” or check with the therapist to see if they have been “good.” Therapy is not about being good or bad and your child must feel free to express any feelings in an uncensored way.*
* *Don’t insist that your child talk about certain things in a certain session. Feel free to express your concerns to me on a separate occasion. A child must feel like therapy is their time and they will express themselves at their pace.*
* *Ask questions and address any concern you may have. I welcome any and all parental involvement.*
* *From time to time, I may send home resources, information, or “therapy homework” for you and/or your child to review. Please review it to keep yourself in the loop regarding your child’s sessions.*

*\*\*\*Adapted from “What to Expect When Your Child Comes to Therapy?” – Compass Wellness Center*