

Overview of Play Therapy

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The potential benefits of play therapy for children are vast, and include the promotion of secure attachments, problem-solving skills, and self-awareness; the formation of a more positive self-image; increased communication skills; and an increased ability to express emotions.

Before beginning play therapy sessions, the play therapist will often set ground rules or boundaries for therapy, which are mostly intended to help keep the child and secure while in the therapy office (or "play room"). One important rule that many play therapists promote is consistency. The play therapist will remind both child and parents that it is important that the child know when his or her therapy appointment is and that the family attends therapy consistently. Along with this rule is the therapist's promise to also be present at that time. This rule alone helps promote a stable attachment between therapist and child.

The play therapist should also treat the child with unconditional positive regard. This allows the child to learn that, while unacceptable behavior—such as hurting the therapist, hurting himself or herself, or destroying toys in the office—will not be tolerated, the child is always accepted as he or she is. That is, the play therapist

promotes a child's self-expression, without judging or critiquing the child. The formation of a strong, secure attachment between child and therapist is the number one predictor of success in therapy. The play therapist consistently maintains interest in the child—in the child's interests, hobbies, fears, joys, idiosyncrasies, and so on. This interest, combined with unconditional positive regard, must be maintained even after difficult sessions. The therapist may gently and subtly signal to the child when he or she is misbehaving in session, but the therapist nonetheless respects and appreciates the child.

In play therapy, the child may also learn problem-solving skills and the expression of emotion. Problems tackled and resolved in play therapy may be general (for example, how to communicate effectively with others) or specific (how to get along with a brother or sister). Modeling is an important tool that play therapists use to teach active listening, empathy, and positive communication skills. With consistency, children will develop these skills. The therapist will also model taking turns, sharing, and appropriate self-disclosure. Play therapy can be used to help children confront psychosocial stressors, such as arguments with brothers and sisters.

The use of therapy toys allows children to externalize their emotions, making them easier to confront. In play therapy, children are allowed to act out anger, fights, abuse, or any psychosocial they are experiencing. Play therapists encourage this expression of emotion by validating both positive and negative emotions. Therapists encourage children to act out any topic that they consider important. In therapy, no topic should be off-limits. In many cases, children will not be able to use language to articulate their emotions, so the use of therapy tools allows them to effectively explore and communicate their feelings.

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