

## Play Therapy: An Informational Handout for Parents

You may have been referred to a play therapist for your child because your son or daughter is having a difficult time managing his/her emotions and/or current circumstances, but you might not know exactly what play therapy is. This handout is to help you better understand what play therapy is, how it works, what to expect, and how to communicate with your child after sessions and in general regarding play therapy.

### **So what is play therapy?**

Play therapy is an evidence-based form of psychotherapy that is designed to help children ages 3-12 (developmentally) communicate and process emotions, stressors, and other difficulties through the use of toys. This therapeutic play occurs in a safe, nonjudgmental, comfortable space with minimal limitations and an empathic, reflective, safe person known as the therapist or counselor. This process of play also facilitates or enhances the child's development of self-control, empathy for others, use of appropriate communication, sense of responsibility, and abilities to make choices.

### **How does play therapy work?**

You may be thinking, "My child already plays at home...Why does he/she need to play in therapy?" Well, play therapy is quite different. It is a special kind of playtime that allows children to communicate what they are experiencing and problem solve through the use of toys that are specially selected for the play therapy room. Think of it like this...adults communicate with talking and words, but a child may need toys and play to communicate her/his inner world (conscious and unconscious) to the therapist. Simply stated, play is a child's own language.

In child-centered play therapy, the therapeutic process occurs heavily through a strong therapeutic relationship between the child and therapist where the therapist believes in the child, respects the child, accepts the child, hears the inner child, accepts the child's will, focuses on the child's needs, frees the child to choose his/her own direction, gives the child chance to make choices, respects the child's boundaries, and demonstrate patience with the child.

Through this process, the goals for the child are that he/she:

- enhances his/her self-concept,
- takes more responsibility for his/her actions,
- improves his/her ability to self-direct in a healthy way,
- accepts himself/herself,
- trusts his/her abilities more,
- makes better choices,
- feels a sense of control,
- trusts himself/herself,
- has greater self-awareness
- and increases coping skills.

In child-centered play therapy, the play therapist attempts to communicate the following four messages to your child in the playroom:

1. I am here. Nothing can distract me. I want to enter fully into your world.
2. I hear you. I will listen fully with my eyes and ears to everything you want to tell me, whether with words or play.
3. I understand. I want to know what you are communicating, feeling, experiencing, and playing.
4. I care. I hope this will allow me into your experience. Whatever change happens is from you!

See the table below for descriptions of the purposes of play.\*

Purpose of play	Explanation
Fun	Play in the playroom can give the child a chance to experience enjoyment independently or with the therapist. Fun is not a requirement for play, but could be part of a child's play. When a child does enjoy the playroom, it can enhance their willingness to engage in the therapeutic process and relationship and may give the child an opportunity to experience joy amidst chaos in their lives.
Symbolic Expression	The child may use toys to give the therapist a glimpse into their inner world. When a child is not restricted by rules of reality and can engage with their imagination and creativity, the child can express their feelings and enhance their ability to cope through pretend play.
Catharsis	This "special play time" may give the child a place to work through their biggest emotions and conflicts on their own terms because the child is allowed to choose the direction of effort.
Social Development	The therapeutic relationship can be nurtured through play between the therapist and the child which can indirectly help the child enhance their social skills and relationships outside of the playroom.

Mastery	By making the playroom a space where the child can play with minimal limitations set, the child gets to feel a sense of control over their environment. This is something that they may not get outside of the playroom due to being in structured OR chaotic environments.
Release of Energy	The child may need the playroom to release pent up energy that they've had to mask or restrain all day in other environments. When this energy gets released, it can set the child up to be ready to do directive therapeutic activities.

\*adapted from *Advanced Play Therapy* by Dee C. Ray, 2011

### **What to expect in the first full play therapy session?**

When I arrive at the waiting room to meet your child for play therapy, I will say something like, "We can head to the playroom now!" It would be beneficial if you avoid saying, "Goodbye," or any statement that implies you will be leaving. I would recommend saying something like, "Okay, I will wait here until you are done in the playroom". Avoid other instructions like, "Be good," or, "Don't misbehave". See below for further information on supporting your child if he/she is reluctant to enter the playroom.

### **What do I do if my child has a hard time leaving me?**

Many parents feel embarrassed or awkward about their child's resistance to entering the playroom. However, it is okay for the child to feel this way because he/she is trying to communicate that they are uncomfortable being asked to go to an unfamiliar place with an unfamiliar person for an unfamiliar activity.

As the counselor, I will strive to model a calm demeanor and validate your child's feelings. It is okay if your child needs a few minutes to feel ready. As the parent, I would ask that you please refrain from trying to persuade your child and allow me to do most of the talking. In this scenario, please avoid bribing or using, "If...then..." statements to persuade them. If your child is still reluctant after several minutes, I will say we can walk towards my room together and ask you to come to the doorway of the playroom. Then, I will make a decision on whether I think it will be beneficial for you to come into the room or not. If it is best for you to come into the room, I ask that you sit on the stool and observe. If your child is involving you in his/her play, then I ask that you allow me to respond for you. This might be pretty difficult but just do your best!

### **What to expect in follow-up sessions?**

Typically, your child will spend the first portion of the session (25-40 minutes) in the playroom with me. I will set a timer to help your child know when it is time to be done with the session. Depending on your circumstances (e.g., comfort level with child waiting in waiting room, child's ability to wait in waiting room), I may attempt to facilitate a parent-check-in at the end of the session to provide feedback and offer suggestions for home. If we do not get to meet weekly, then we will schedule parent consultations every 3-4 weeks. Occasionally, I will work with your child from a more directive approach (such as CBT, bibliotherapy/use of books, or coping/relaxation skills, Zones of Regulation Curriculum) and will inform you when I plan to do this.

### **What do I talk to my child about after play therapy?**

It is recommended that parents do not ask their child specific questions about their time in play therapy. I know this sounds strange and secretive, but one of the aspects of play therapy's effectiveness is that play therapy is a unique, personal time for your child and he/she should get to choose whether they share about their time in play therapy or not. If you do ask your child about play therapy, he/she might say to you, "I just played," just like you might respond to the same question about therapy with, "I just talked." Your child might not be aware of their own progress in the moment so, in his/her mind, it was just play. Since part of play therapy is that the child gets to express himself/herself with an objective figure (the counselor), asking your child specific questions can lead to inhibition in play. Thus, after the session, I encourage you to say to your child something like, "All right, it's time to go home now," instead of the instinctual questions like, "Was it fun?"

### **So what do I get to know about the play therapy session?**

Well, I protect your child's confidentiality in session just like I would protect your confidentiality so that means that most things will be kept confidential unless your child is at risk of hurting himself/herself or others, someone else is hurting them, or they are engaging in harmful behavior. I will still share with you general feedback on my understanding of your child and offer parental support and suggestions based on my interactions, but I will not typically tell parents every detail of the session.

### **How do I explain play therapy to my child?**

I would recommend saying something like this: "You will be going to see Ms. Marlee each week (or every other week) in her special playroom. She has lots of toys for you to play with. Since you have been having a hard time at home/school (or other general statement of the presenting problem), it can be helpful to have this special time just for you to have with a special person."

### **Other helpful things to note:**

Since I have paint and other messy activities in the playroom, it is recommended that you bring your child in clothes that could get messy even though I typically use washable paint. Please avoid criticizing your child for messiness that you see following the session as this is part of the therapeutic freedom and is within the limits that will be set. If your child has any sensitivities to certain materials, then please let me know so I can adjust.

Please take your child to the restroom or have their diaper changed prior to session as to avoid interruptions. If your child does need to use the restroom or have his/her diaper changed, then I will bring them to you in the waiting area.

You may hear some loud noises from the playroom, but don't be alarmed. This is expected as the playroom is a space that children sometimes let out big feelings and this is acceptable in the playroom as long as they are not hurting themselves or anyone else.

Please refrain from giving me information about your child in the waiting room. If you have important information to give me, then let's schedule a phone call for after the session or you can send me an email. I want to do my best to give your child as much of my attention as possible when they come to see me.

This handout was developed using the following resources:  
"Play Therapy: The Art of Relationship" (3rd edition) by Gary Landreth  
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapy-types/play-therapy>