

## Filial Play Therapy Handout for Parents

### What is Filial Play Therapy?

It is a therapeutic intervention that involves you learning a specific way of playing with your child. In this type of play, your attention is undivided and as focused as possible on your child. The child leads the play while you follow along with your words (“tracking”) and body language. You will learn to empathically reflect feelings back to your child, encourage your child’s efforts, and help your child take responsibility for their actions.

There are minimal rules and limits and you will try to avoid asking questions or making suggestions for their play. This is different from the rest of their world where they are expected to follow many necessary and important rules as well as expected to think of what others want to do in their play.

While you will learn a set of skills, the most important thing to remember is that it is your presence and attention that is most important. By being present during this time the hope is for you to communicate the following four messages to your child:

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!

\*\*Adapted from CPRT Handbook by Gary Landreth

Lawrence Cohen says, “Play is the long-sought bridge back to that deep emotional bond between parent and child. Play, with all its exuberance and delighted togetherness, can ease the stress of parenting. Playful Parenting is a way to enter a child’s world, on the child’s terms, in order to foster closeness, confidence, and connection” (*Playful Parenting*).

### How does play help my child with their challenges?

Through play, children are given the opportunity to express their emotions and experiences using toys just like an adult would use words. Then, as the parent, you are able to reflect back what you hear or see them communicating in a way that helps them feel understood, develops their emotional language, and strengthens the parent-child relationship.

When children feel *safe, accepted, understood, and valued* during “special playtime” with a parent, they tend to feel an increased sense of self-worth, confidence, and competence.

These increased positive feelings can lead them to enhance their self-control, take responsibility for their actions, and learn to get their needs met in healthy ways.

\*\*Adapted from CPRT Handbook by Gary Landreth

Play also provides children opportunities to:

- grow in confidence and mastery as they “take on adult roles and skills” like playing house,
- repair relationship when there is a rupture (as seen in chimps when they have a conflict and proceed to play with each others’ hands after),
- get their connection cup filled,
- and heal from the stressors and emotional wounds they have.
- For example, your child gets a shot at the doctor’s office causing her to feel powerless. She proceeds to play doctor and give you a shot when you get home. In this way, she gets to recover from this feeling of helplessness and gets to be the powerful one through role reversal. Lawrence Cohen explains, “The play shot might be pretend, but the need for emotional recovery is real”.

\*\*Adapted from *Playful Parenting*, Lawrence Cohen.

### **Why is parent involvement in play important?**

“While adult therapy tends to cast parents as the villains, I started to see what a powerful positive force they can be in their children’s lives. And the single most important skill parents could acquire, it seemed to me, was playing.”

-Lawrence Cohen, *Playful Parenting*

*Research has shown that play therapy is more impactful when we involve parents in the work.* Guerney and Ryan conclude, “the extent of research conducted on group and individual filial therapy over 40 years by many researchers in numerous settings shows that this method is a valuable tool for bringing about desired changes in parents and children. It appears valid, reliable, and most outstandingly robust” (*Group Filial Therapy*, 2013, page 29).

Parents are part of the day in and day out of their children’s lives giving them ample opportunities to bring healing and regulation to their children. “Special play time” provides opportunities for parents to:

- enhance the parent child attachment relationship,
- lay groundwork for parents to be emotionally safe for their children,
- be perceived by their children in a more positive light,
- And for children to know the parent is “for them”/on their side.

\*\*Adapted from *Group Filial Therapy*, Guerney and Ryan, 2013).

### **Summary:**

- Filial Play Therapy teaches parents a specific way to play with their child, focusing on undivided attention and child-led play.

- Parents learn to reflect feelings, encourage efforts, and help children take responsibility for their actions during play.
- The key is the parent's presence and attention, communicating "I am here," "I hear you," "I understand," and "I care."
- Play allows children to express emotions and experiences, which parents can reflect back to strengthen the parent-child relationship.
- Feeling safe, accepted, and understood during play increases a child's self-worth, confidence, and self-control.
- Play helps children grow in confidence, repair relationships, fill their "connection cup," and heal from stress.
- Parent involvement in play therapy enhances its impact, as research shows.
- "Special playtime" enhances the parent-child attachment, creates a safe emotional space, and strengthens the bond.

