

Theraplay: What Parents/Caregivers Need to Know

Theraplay is a type of therapy that focuses on strengthening the relationship between parents/caregivers and children. It's based on the natural patterns of playful interaction between parents and young children. This approach helps build trust, attachment, and communication within the family, which subsequently addresses your child's clinical concerns like anxiety, depression, ADHD, or other.

Ideally, both caregivers/parents are involved in treatment that uses Theraplay. This usually looks like the following: both caregivers/parents involved in the intake and assessment process and initial parent-feedback session. Then, clinician will work with the caregivers/parents to decide which caregiver/parent will be starting with the child in Theraplay sessions. Once this caregiver/parent has reached readiness to termination, the other caregiver/parent will engage in sessions with the child. When both caregivers/parents have had their opportunity to learn and lead, clinician may facilitate sessions that involve both caregivers/parents and child.

What is Theraplay?

- **Evidence-based:** Theraplay has been researched and shown to be effective.
- **Structured and directive:** The therapist guides the sessions with specific activities. Eventually, parents/caregivers lead sessions with the child.
- **Relationship-focused:** It prioritizes and strengthens the parent-child bond.
- **Parent involvement:** Parents/caregivers are actively involved in the treatment process.
- **Can be short-term or longer-term:** Typically 10-12 weeks or longer, depending on the needs of the child and family.
- **Based on healthy interactions:** Theraplay draws on observations of healthy parent-child relationships, especially those in infancy.
- **Variety of play:** Includes physical play, exciting play, and play that focuses on emotional connection and respect.
- **Age range:** Theraplay is primarily for children ages birth to 12, but can be adapted for adolescents.

What to Expect in Theraplay

The Theraplay process involves several stages to help the therapist understand your child's and family's unique needs:

1. **Initial meeting:** A clinical intake session with just the parents/caregivers.
2. **Marschak Interaction Method (MIM):** The therapist observes you and your child doing specific tasks together to assess your relationship's strengths and needs.
3. **Parent/caregiver feedback session:** The therapist discusses observations from the MIM, gathers more information, and begins to identify strengths and needs with parent/caregivers only.

4. **Treatment planning:** The therapist uses the assessment information to plan Theraplay activities.
5. **Parent/caregiver demonstration session:** The therapist teaches and demonstrates Theraplay activities to parents/caregivers without the child present.
6. **Theraplay sessions:** Sessions begin with the parent/caregiver observing the therapist and child engage in Theraplay sessions. Gradually, the parent/caregiver becomes a participant and then takes the lead in the activities.
7. **Parent/caregiver-only sessions:** These occur every 2-3 session and focus on reviewing video clips, helping parent/caregiver understand rationale for activities chosen, and further assessment of parent-child relationship.
8. **Treatment ending:** Treatment concludes when the parent/caregiver is leading most activities, both parent/caregiver and child enjoy sessions and have positive experiences outside of sessions, caregiver shows increased ability to attune and co-regulate with child (in and out of sessions), aspects of Theraplay have been integrated into family interactions in daily occurrences, decreased challenges at home, and caregiver has confidence in continuing applying what they have learned after termination

How Theraplay Helps Parents/Caregivers

- Increases confidence in setting limits and providing structure.
- Deepens the connection with your child.
- Improves your ability to understand and respond to your child's emotions.
- Provides a focused "mindfulness experience" with your child.
- Increases comfort with physical care and affection.
- Builds trust with your child.
- Increases enjoyment of your child.

How Theraplay Helps Children

- Learn that boundaries and adult leadership are positive and trustworthy.
- Has positive experiences with parents/caregivers, which support healthy relationships.
- Receives the message "you are lovable and wanted."
- Develops trust in others and believes they are worthy of good care.
- Learns about healthy touch and respect.
- Increases their sense of competence.
- Develops a sense of safety in exploring new things.
- Improves frustration tolerance.
- Learn to accept positive feedback.