

WHAT IS PLAY THERAPY?

“In play, our burdens feel lighter and we are opened to new possibilities. But play goes even deeper - it shapes our brains to make us smarter and more able to adapt to situations.”

~ National Institute for Play

Play is a key element in the development of children. Stuart Brown is a leading investigator as to the importance of play, and he has demonstrated statistical relationships between child play and later adult behavior. His research even strongly indicated that an absence of play in children was associated with later criminal behavior. He cited the UT Austin tower shooter, Charles Whitman as an example.

Play Therapists are educated to analyze the symbolic elements in the play of your child to uncover clues to what is troubling them. *Awareness* is the key to successful counseling whether the client is an adult or a child. While an adult uses verbal language to meet this goal, a child's best opportunity is with play. In play therapy, a child is able to have his or her feelings reflected back to them and once understood, increases their awareness which creates a pathway for change. This leads a child to build confidence and an understanding of their emotions, enabling them to change the problematic behavior.

“Symbolic play helps in the resolution of conflicts and also in the compensation of unsatisfied needs.” ~ Jean Piaget, notable researcher on Child Development

Play Therapy offers enormous possibilities because by its very nature is fun and pleasurable, and it rarely ever generates complaints from children. Play allows a child to communicate in a way they would not otherwise be able. They have the ability to understand concepts well before they are able to verbalize them. Although children may possess strong verbal skills, they may not be able to use language to explain what they are feeling and thinking. This is also true for a child who is misbehaving. A child often misbehaves as a way to communicate a need or feeling to a parent. Play is a way for them to 'open up' and let you know what is going on in their life.

Play Therapists do not simply play with children. We are trained to be with a child in a way that facilitates an openness of expression which allows for a better acceptance and understanding of their own feelings and emotions. This is done by allowing the child to experiment with making choices within the context of a pretend world. With this opportunity to practice taking self-responsibility, a child is liable to more fully develop a sense of self-control. A shift can then occur in the child to move from blaming others, to seeing themselves as in control and those responsible for an outcome.

For a child, a playroom is like the Webster's Dictionary. It contains a large variety of toys and the toys reflect meaningful metaphors representative in their lives. Within these metaphors is a wonderful opportunity for change in their lives. Using the drama of play, a child feels more confident in expressing what is going on in their inner world and in developing new problem-solving skills. In the comfort of the playroom, they are able to gain mastery over what brought them into therapy. This can be enormous in boosting a child's confidence to gain appropriate control over their world. In play, a child can emotionally distance themselves, using miniatures, puppets, drawings to represent roles or issues they are not able to talk about, yet are able to work through in play. They are able to communicate their fears, worries, problems wishes and desires to others so that change can occur.

Play Therapists are also a good resource to identify irrational beliefs that are frequently among the primary determinants or causes of your child's problematic behaviors or troublesome feelings. Once these false beliefs are unearthed, a parent can work with the child to correct these false perceptions and the child, with increased understanding, will let go of associated thoughts, feelings and behaviors.

Working with Parents

Confidentiality is an important part of play therapy. Creating confidentiality is somewhat different than it is for adults. Part of the confidentiality is created by working with the child in the play room while the parent waits in the waiting room. This is done to allow children to express themselves freely and without being concerned about parents' feelings or reactions. It is for this reason that I do share with parents any concerns and general play themes, yet I do not give a detailed account of what a child has done in the play room. Although it is quite typical and appropriate for a parent to ask a child what they do during their school day or with a play date, parents are encouraged to refrain from asking questions about their visit with a Play Therapist. Rather, if a child comments on their play session, it is preferred for a parent to remain neutral about their time here. For example, it is more appropriate for a parent to reflect neutrally about the feeling tone of how their child expresses their experience with the session. I allow for discussion time for parents to express concerns and together we problem-solve ways to help the child. If time allows, this will be done during the latter part of the session, or the parent will be invited back for a time for a fuller discussion of their child's progress.

"You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation."

~ Plato