

## AN INTRODUCTION TO PLAY THERAPY

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Play therapy, with its origins in the early 20th century, is a dynamic approach to psychotherapy which is specifically designed for children. There has been a steady growth in the appreciation of its benefits as our society has slowly begun to recognize and value the importance of children's needs. For most children, play therapy offers an open and attractive channel of communication both with themselves and their therapist. This approach to psychotherapy is based on the fact that a child's most natural form of self-expression is through play. Play therapists focus on "hearing" the messages found in a child's play and on facilitating the emergence and growth of a healthier child.

Although there are specific types of play therapy, such as sand play therapy, that are available to both children and adults, most are geared toward children. By offering young people a broad assortment of toys, games, dolls, puppets, miniatures, art supplies and an atmosphere conducive to play, children are presented with the opportunity to "play out" their conflicts, feelings, and problems. Children play out their concerns through symbolic communications which are often more available and less frightening than are words.

It is generally considered that a nondirective approach by the therapist is best at facilitating therapeutic play. This approach allows for the child's natural sense of pace and priority to develop and encourages a trusting and workable relationship with the therapist.

There are children and childhood problems that are uniquely suited for play therapy. Among them are:

- Children who are lonely or neglected;
- Children who experience severe physical or emotional trauma;
- Children who have experienced major life changes such as divorce, death, adoption, hospitalization or relocation;
- Children with limited verbal skills;
- Children with seemingly irrational fears or anxieties; &
- Groups of children with socialization or emotional bonding difficulties.

As the play therapy approach has benefits specific to children, so too does it benefit professionals who work with children. Play therapy is useful in identifying a child's needs and problems, and in suggesting methods that are available to address them. Mental health and school professionals, physicians, and parents associated with troubled children all benefit from a deeper understanding of children's self expressions and should consider play therapy as a valid and reliable means to that end. Play therapy is available through an increasing number of schools, hospitals, private therapists and counseling centers. A book entitled "Playtherapy" by Virginia M Axline offers a clear and rewarding look into nondirective play therapy with children.