

## **What is child-centered play therapy, and how does it work?**

While growing up, most children have trouble adjusting at some time. Some children may need more help than others and less help in certain areas. Developmentally, children have difficulty sitting in a big chair and talking about what bothers them. They don't know the words to describe what they are feeling inside or thinking, so sometimes they act out or show how they feel. In play therapy, we provide toys for children to use to say with the toys what they have difficulty saying with words. In the play therapy experience, toys are like the child's words, and play is the child's language. When children can communicate or express their feelings to someone who understands, they feel better because the emotions have been released. They can use dolls, puppets, paints, or other toys to say what they think or how they feel. Therefore, how children play or what they do in the playroom is very important. In play therapy, children learn how to constructively express their thoughts and feelings, control their behavior, make decisions, and accept responsibility.

## **The Role of the Child-Centered Play Therapist**

A play therapist meets the child where they are emotionally and developmentally. Your child's therapist will take a non-directive approach. This helps your child to feel more comfortable and to build rapport. Their therapist will play alongside them and observe how they interact with the materials. Again, the toys act as words your child may be unable to share. Their therapist will observe, track your child's actions, and note feelings being played out in the session. This approach will help your child become less guarded and more comfortable sharing thoughts and feelings. Your child will use the toys to express themselves, process, and problem-solving. Then after getting an idea of what's going on and causing your child distress, their therapist will use their observations to formulate a treatment plan and offer parenting strategies.

## **Does my child need play therapy?**

Deciding whether to take your child to a play therapist for child or family therapy is a personal choice. Research suggests Play Therapy is an effective mental health approach, regardless of age, gender, or the nature of the problem, and works best when a parent, family member, or caretaker is actively involved in the treatment process. Children are seen in therapy for an array of reasons, such as behavioral issues (caused by bullying, grief and loss, divorce and abandonment, physical and sexual abuse, and crisis and trauma) and mental health disorders (i.e., anxiety, depression, attention-deficit/hyperactivity or ADHD, autism spectrum disorders, academic and social impairment, physical and learning disabilities, and conduct disorders).



### **Preparing for separation from the waiting area to the playroom:**

When children come here for the first time, they are sometimes reluctant to go with their clinician to the playroom because this is a strange place, and they have never seen the therapist before. Most children, though, are pretty eager to see the playroom. When the therapist introduces herself to the waiting room, she will say, "We can go to the playroom now." It would be helpful if you would say, "I will wait here, and I'll be here when you're finished in the playroom." (Parents should refrain from saying "bye," because that may result in the child feeling he is going to be gone for a long time or perhaps even forever! Always remember how things may seem to the child). No other instructions are needed.

If your child is still reluctant to go to the playroom, the clinician will be patient with his reluctance and will reflect on his feelings. He may need a minute or two to decide if he is willing to go to the playroom. The therapist is comfortable with a child's reluctance to go to the playroom and believes they will get there. During this time, you do not have to worry about doing anything; she will work with him. If, after several minutes, he is still reluctant to go to the playroom, the therapist may ask you to walk down to the hall to the playroom with them. When you get to the playroom door, she will let you know if she thinks you need to go inside with them. If she should ask you to go into the playroom, go right in, sit in the chair she points to, and watch. If your child wants to show you toys or interact with you during the session, the therapist will respond for you.



### **Is there parent involvement?**

Your child's therapist will schedule a separate time for you to get feedback and discuss parent strategies and behaviors at home and school. Your child's clinician will most commonly want to speak with you after the fourth to the sixth session of play therapy. This is an excellent time to ask specific questions and address any concerns you may have. If you would like to meet sooner, please let your child's therapist know ahead of time so a separate appointment can be scheduled. Unfortunately, parents are not allowed to observe their children's play therapy sessions so that the child can feel free to express thoughts, feelings, and actions fully.

### **Telling your child about play therapy:**

You may tell your child he will be coming to be with Ms. (therapist's name) in her special playroom every week, where there are lots of toys to play with within the room. If your child wants to know why he is going to the playroom, you can tell him something general like, "Things don't seem to be going very well for you at home (or other general statement related to the identified problem), and sometimes it helps to have a special time just for yourself to share with a special person."

### **Suggestions for responses after sessions:**

The time in the playroom is a special, private time for children. They should not feel they have to report what happened or was said to anyone, even their parents. Play therapy sessions with children are confidential, just like counseling sessions with adults. We want to respect your child as much as we respect you as an adult. Therefore, your therapist will be happy to share her general impressions and offer suggestions, but she is not free to tell the specifics of what your child says or does in the playroom. She will share general information she thinks you should know; however, their time together is confidential. When your child and the therapist come out of the playroom, it would be best if you didn't ask, "How did things go?" or, "Did you have fun?" Just say, "Hi. We can go home now."

Additionally, your child may take a painting or drawing home. If you praise the picture, he may feel he should make other paintings for you. It would be best to comment on what you see in the image. For example, "You used lots of colors, and there's some blue and green and a lot of red across the bottom of the picture."

## **Importance of a Termination Session**

“Termination” is a phrase used to describe the final phase of therapy—where the therapist and client prepare to end therapy services. Like personal relationships, termination offers the client and therapist an opportunity for healthy closure of the therapeutic process and relationship. A final session allows children to experience a positive end to a relationship that has been important to them. Additionally, suppose a child recently shared something personal with the therapist or demonstrated a significant behavior, and the child does not get to come back to the playroom. In that case, the client may internalize the experience as punishment. Thus, attending a final session can be critical for the child, whether you or your therapist initiate termination or discontinuation of treatment.