



What is play therapy?

Play therapy is a form of therapy used primarily for children. That's because children may not be able to process their own emotions or articulate problems to parents or other adults.

While it may look like an ordinary playtime, play therapy is much more than that.

A trained therapist can use playtime to observe and gain insights into a child's problems. The therapist can then help the child explore emotions and deal with unresolved trauma. Through play, children can learn new coping mechanisms and how to redirect inappropriate behaviors.

How does play therapy work?

There's a bit of a communication gap between children and adults. Depending on age and stage of development, children simply don't have the language skills of adults. They may feel something, but in many cases, they either can't express it to an adult or don't have a trusted adult to express it to.

On the other end, adults can misinterpret or completely miss the child's verbal and nonverbal cues.

Children learn to understand the world and their place in it, through play. It's where they're free to act out their inner feelings and deepest emotions. Toys can act as symbols and take on greater meaning — if you know what to look for.

Since the child can't adequately express themselves in the adult world, the therapist joins the child in their world, on their level.

As they play, the child may become less guarded and more apt to share their feelings. But they aren't pressured. They're allowed to do so in their own time and with their own method of communication.

Play therapy will differ depending on the therapist and the particular needs of the child. To begin, the therapist may want to observe the child at play. They may also want to conduct separate interviews with the child, parents, or teachers.

After a thorough assessment, the therapist will set some therapeutic goals, decide on what limits may be necessary, and formulate a plan for how to proceed.

Play therapists pay close attention to how a child handles being separated from the parent, how they play alone, and how they react when the parent returns.

Much can be revealed in how a child interacts with different types of toys and how their behaviour changes from session to session. They may use play to act out fears and anxieties, as a soothing mechanism, or to heal and problem-solve.

Play therapists use these observations as a guide to the next steps. Each child is different, so therapy will be tailored to their individual needs. As therapy progresses, behaviors and goals can be reassessed.

At some point, the therapist may bring parents, siblings, or other family members into play therapy. This is known as filial therapy. It can help teach conflict resolution, promote healing, and improve family dynamics.

Play therapy techniques

Sessions typically last 30 minutes to an hour and are held once a week or so. How many sessions are needed depends on the child and how well they respond to this type of therapy. Therapy can take place individually or in groups.

Play therapy can be directive or nondirective. In the directive approach, the therapist will take the lead by specifying the toys or games that'll be used in the session. The therapist will guide the play with a specific goal in mind.

The nondirective approach is less structured. The child is able to choose toys and games as they see fit. They're free to play in their own way with few instructions or interruptions. The therapist will observe closely and participate as appropriate.

Sessions must take place in an environment where the child feels safe and where there are few limitations. The therapist may use techniques that involve:

- creative visualization
- storytelling
- role-playing
- toy phones
- puppets, stuffed animals, and masks
- dolls, action figures
- arts and crafts
- water and sand play
- blocks and construction toys
- dance and creative movement
- musical play

Benefits of play therapy

According to the professional organization [Play Therapy International](#), up to 71 percent of children referred to play therapy may experience positive change.

While some children might start off with some hesitation, trust in the therapist tends to grow. As they become more comfortable and their bond strengthens, the child may become more creative or more verbal in their play.

If your child has a diagnosed mental or physical illness, play therapy doesn't replace medications or any other necessary treatments. Play therapy can be used alone or alongside other therapies.

When play therapy is used

Although people of all ages can benefit from play therapy, it's typically used with children between the ages of 3 and 12. Play therapy may be helpful in a variety of circumstances, such as:

- facing medical procedures, chronic illness, or palliative care
- developmental delay or learning disabilities

- problem behaviors in school
- aggressive or angry behavior
- family issues, like divorce, separation, or death of a close family member
- natural disasters or traumatic events
- domestic violence, abuse, or neglect
- anxiety, depression, grief
- eating and toileting disorders
- attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- autism spectrum disorder (ASD)