creating connection

Understanding Play Therapy: A Guide for Caregivers

How Play Becomes Progress

Honouring the Natural Language of Childhood

What is Play Therapy?

Play therapy is an evidence-based, specialized counseling method where trained therapists use play—which is a child's natural language—to help them (typically ages 3-II) express feelings, process trauma, solve problems, and build skills to manage those feelings. It's important to note that this type of therapy can be used with older children and teens, as well as adults, if they can open their imagination to the content and process.

The Language of Play

Instead of relying on talking, children use toys, art, and sand to "play out" inner struggles in a safe space. Play serves as a major outlet that children use to demonstrate what they're thinking and feeling, regardless of whether they have the words to describe it. This has led to the development of a therapeutic approach that identifies a child's needs by observing their play and helping them solve problems through this creative outlet. Specialists want parents and caregivers to know that play therapy is real therapy conducted in the language of play.

What Happens During a Session?

🏠 Play therapy is delivered in a comfortable playroom where very few rules imposed, allowing for free and spontaneous expression.

🧸 Therapists incorporate several toys meant to help the child express and act out their emotions.

🔍 Therapists pay special attention to the child's choice of play objects, the style of engagement, and repetitive play patterns to identify developmental needs.

🤝 This process builds a trusting relationship where the therapist helps the child and caregiver work on co-regulating big emotions together, creating a sense of safety.

🌱 Children learn to express their thoughts in appropriate ways, understand the feelings of others, control their behaviour, and solve problems.

✨ The space provides tools to help calm, regulate, and allow the child to communicate their needs and the events that triggered their feelings.

Applications, Approaches, and Expectations

When is Play Therapy Used?

Play is a critical window into a child's inner world allowing them to discover ways of thinking and behaving that help them flourish. It is highly effective for children in distress, those showing behavioural problems, or those who have experienced trauma—such as the loss of a loved one or pet, or parental separation. It provides a safe, confidential space for children who are persistently sad, anxious, or angry, and helps those struggling to adjust to major life changes. While primarily for children, play-based techniques are also adapted for adult therapies like cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT).

Clinical Approaches

Therapists use various evidence-based models to tailor therapy to each child's unique needs. Common approaches include:

Child-Centered Play Therapy

Non-directive; the child leads to build innate growth capacity.

Adlerian Play Therapy

Goal-oriented; helps children understand their role in family & community.

Gestalt Play Therapy

Experiential & present-focused; emphasizes the "here and now."

Cognitive Behavioural Play Therapy

Directive; uses play to identify & change negative thoughts.

Experiential Play Therapy

Process-oriented; therapist helps the child process difficult events.

Synergetic Play Therapy

Nervous system-focused; uses co-regulation to support attachment.

What to Expect: The Process

🗂️ **Intake:** A meeting with the caregiver(s) to identify goals and gather history. This process may be repeated as needed.

🔍 **Assessment:** The therapist observes the child playing, independently or with caregiver(s), to build rapport and understand the child's attachment and needs.

💡 **Planning:** The therapist shares findings with caregiver(s) to collaboratively determine a tailored treatment plan.

⏱️ **Duration:** The play portion of the session typically last 30-45 minutes, with an average of 20 sessions.

🔄 **Flexibility:** Scheduling is adapted to family needs and can be spaced out over 2 or 3 weeks as progress continues.

📊 **Tracking:** Therapists monitor shifts in play patterns over time, as repetitive play can signal areas needing further discovery.

How It Works, Benefits, and Caregiver Guidance

How It Works

There are very few rules regarding toy choice or how objects are used. Items like trucks, art supplies, dolls, puppets, and playdough are offered based entirely on the child's interests, offering clues about their developmental level, relationships, and life challenges. For example, therapists may use puppets to explore family stories or a "magic wand" to examine wishes.

Play therapy can also be directive. A therapist may use role-play, like a stressful day at school, to help children express worries and learn to face them safely. Therapists also design activities to heal emotional injuries and build social skills.

When to Seek Play Therapy

- Sudden or dramatic shifts in behaviour.
- Prolonged saddness, anxiety, or worry.
- Difficulty adjusting to major life changes.
- Regression in development or habits.
- Frequent challenges at school or home.
- Intense emotional outbursts or frequent tantrums.

Play therapy is entirely child-led. As children mirror real-life challenges through play, therapists help them voice their inner experiences. Therapists blend both directive and non-directive approaches.

Important Points for Caregivers

As you navigate this journey together, keep a few things in mind:

Expect an Adjustment Period
Starting therapy can feel a bit intimidating at first. You can help by preparing your child with reassurance and gently explaining what to expect. Keep in mind that building trust takes time, and initial sessions focus primarily on the therapist getting to know your child.

Play Is the Work
Play therapy looks very different from adult talk therapy. It's designed to be fun, and therapists use specialized play techniques to create a positive, safe experience.

You Are Part of the Team
Caregivers play a key role in applying new skills at home and sharing valuable feedback with the therapist to track progress.