

# **Children and Therapy**

## **What is Play Therapy**

Since children are different than adults, therapy with children is in many ways quite different than adult talk therapy. Although many children can and do talk about what is troubling them, play is their natural mode of expression in the world. Thus, when children walk into the playroom for the first time, their eyes often light up with surprise and delight. They immediately notice the toys, art materials and puppets spread out on the shelves. They quickly realize this is a place specially designed to meet their needs.

Children need to play, and that is how therapists need to work with them. They express themselves through play on a much deeper level than they can with words. Play therapy provides children with the unique opportunity to act out symbolically their problems and issues in a therapeutic environment with an accepting adult who has been specially trained in understanding development and the complexities of children's emotional lives. This type of therapy provides them with the most effective manner of coping with the difficulties they are experiencing. It is unrealistic (and potentially damaging) to expect most children to walk into a therapist's office and immediately begin to tell the therapist verbally about their problems. Even if they realize that they're depressed that their parents are getting a divorce or that they have low self-esteem because they have learning difficulties that make their schoolwork difficult, they are rarely able to articulate this through words. Children seldom talk the same way adults do: they express themselves symbolically through their play and their artwork.

## **How does it work?**

Play and art therapy allow a child to work out (in often highly symbolic ways) what they are struggling with emotionally. The therapist's office provides a safe place where he or she can appropriately express a variety of sometimes intense emotions and experiences without worrying about scaring or hurting someone. Through acting out something in the sand, or with dolls, soldiers, puppets or even trucks, the child begins to develop a sense of mastery over the frightening, confusing, or painful elements of his or her life. They start to gain a feeling of control and are better able to cope with the problems in their lives. The unique relationship they develop with their therapist helps them feel more accepted, supported and validated, which allows them to acknowledge and express their emotions more deeply. This process facilitates psychological healing and growth.

## **Who benefits from Play Therapy?**

Many children can benefit from play therapy. Play therapists help children deal with a

wide variety of life issues. The most well known examples are those children experiencing a major loss in their lives, such as their parents' divorce, or the death of a loved one. Play therapy also assists children during times of transition, such as a move from one home to another, changing schools, or new members entering the family through the birth of a sibling or a parent remarrying and two families blending into one. Children living with learning difficulties, ADD or other problems also benefit from the supportive, nurturing environment of play therapy. The coping skills of children growing up in violent or substance abusing homes are greatly enhanced through play therapy.

Play therapists work with children of all ages and ethnicities. Many children are referred because of behavior problems or school performance difficulties. Sometimes a parent is unable to pinpoint any major event or problem in their child's life, but they just know something isn't quite right with their child. For example, symptoms of depression in children may appear very different than they do in adults. Depressed or anxious children may seem withdrawn or tired, or they may act out in irritable, defiant or even aggressive ways. They may seem angry or hostile, or lose interest in school or their friends. Play therapy can be very helpful in determining what is actually going on with a child, and many therapists work with parents to figure out how to help their child return to their usual behavior.

### **Confidentiality**

Effective treatment is dependent on the child's ability to form and maintain a confidential relationship with the therapist. Therefore, it is important that your child not feel obliged to give an accounting of their therapy session. This time should be viewed as their own private time with their therapist. Please refrain from asking your child questions about their sessions.

Under most circumstances, I will not inform parents about the specifics of the sessions. Revealing any information will be based solely on my discretion, except as mandated by the law. This disclosure will be determined by what is deemed necessary to promote or protect the welfare of your child.

I am not willing to testify in court or be involved in any litigation related to your child's psychological functioning. If you desire an evaluation of your child's psychological condition or custodial arrangements, a different professional will need to be consulted.

### **Consistency of treatment**

Because the relationship that develops between therapist and child is of the utmost importance in the success of treatment, it is very important that your child can count on the predictability and consistency of their sessions. Please make every effort to get your child to their sessions every week and on time. By being late to sessions, or missing them, you give

your child the message that therapy is not important, and this will interfere in their treatment. Please give me as much notice as possible of any disruptions to treatment so we can make efforts to find other times.

### **Parent conferences**

It is important that parents maintain contact with me and communicate any concerns that arise. Please feel free to phone at any time or set up an appointment to speak at length. I find regular conferences helpful in establishing a regular flow of information about how your child is doing at home and school, as well as how the treatment is progressing. Children's treatment is facilitated by parents engaging in their own therapy, so I do encourage you to seek your own therapist. Please feel free to ask for possible referrals.