

Playing is for real: A Parent's Guide to Understanding Play Therapy

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But will just playing really help my child?

Yes! Whether you realize it or not, children are continually working through their feelings and concerns through play. So the act of playing is in itself healing. But to play in the presence of someone who is totally attentive to our stories--who witnesses our pain and concerns and sometimes verbally reflects our feelings and fears--is especially healing. Playing is for real.

What will my child do in the play room?

The play room is carefully stocked with toys such as: a doll house, puppets, an easel with paints, crayons, and pencils, balls, telephones, guns, a Bobo to punch, and a sand tray with minatures where children can create their world.

There are also a few therapeutic board games and books. Sometimes a non-directive play therapy approach is used where the child chooses all play materials and the therapist reflects the feelings and themes present in their play. At other times, a more direct approach is taken where the therapist chooses games, activities, and projects that she believes will be helpful. Often a combination of these two models is used.

Will I know what goes on in the play room?

That depends. Generally speaking, the younger the child, the more you may know. Children 7 or 8 years are generally less concerned about confidentiality and are even eager for their parents to know about their sessions. Usually however, only general themes and comments are shared with parents unless the child's permission is granted to share specific information. There is much in their world that children cannot control. The play room is a safe place where they can be in charge.

Will I ever be involved in play sessions?

Generally, the therapist will meet with the parent or parents for an initial intake interview. During this session, the child's family, developmental, birth, educational, and health histories are gathered; parents are asked to express their concerns about and for the child; the child's strengths are assessed and a tentative therapy plan is developed. Occasionally, parents or siblings are invited to be involved in a play session. Sometimes the therapist will meet with the parents alone to provide education about child development, parenting skills, or individual therapy.

What should my child wear to play sessions?

Because paints, crayons, markers, sand, water, clay and other art materials are sometimes used in play sessions, please dress your child in clothing appropriate for messy activities. If they are coming straight from school, please feel free to bring a change of clothes to the office. It is also helpful for you to take your child to the bathroom before the session begins.

Should I ask my child about the play sessions?

Although this can be very difficult, I strongly suggest that you resist the urge to ask kids about their play sessions. Children have very few places of privacy. Furthermore, questioning can push the child to analyze a primarily spontaneous process. Some children also feel pressured to give the answer they think you want to hear. You might want to greet your child with "It's nice to see you," or "Let's go home and eat--I'm hungry!"

Will my child have to clean up the play room?

That depends. Therapists make decisions about this issue based on what they feel will be the most therapeutic for a child after each session. Sometimes children do not want their sand tray creations or other play enactments taken apart before their eyes. At other times, the therapist may feel that a child needs to clean up their toys as a way of bracketing their intense feelings as they prepare to re-enter the ordinary world.

When will I know my child is done with therapy?

In the best of all worlds, parent, therapist, and even the child will agree that it is time to stop coming. Depending on the presenting problem, parents will see several things such as improved self-esteem, elevated mood, decreased anger and sadness, better school performance, age-appropriate behavior, and better social skills. The therapist will see similar signs as well as healthier themes in the child's play. It is most important that you discuss with the therapist any urge to terminate treatment. This allows the therapist to give input about the child's progress and plan for appropriate closure to the relationship.