

Play Therapy

Although sometimes used with adults, [play therapy](#) is a psychotherapeutic approach primarily used to help children ages 3 to 12 explore their lives and freely express repressed thoughts and emotions through play. Therapeutic play normally takes place in a safe, comfortable playroom, where very few rules or limits are imposed on the child, encouraging free expression and allowing the therapist to observe the child's choices, decisions, and play style. The goal is to help children learn to express themselves in healthier ways, become more respectful and empathetic, and discover new and more positive ways to solve problems.

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When It's Used

Therapeutic play helps children with social or emotional deficits learn to communicate better, change their behavior, develop problem-solving skills, and relate to others in positive ways. It is appropriate for children undergoing or witnessing [stressful](#) events in their lives, such as a serious illness or hospitalization, [domestic violence](#), abuse, [trauma](#), a family crisis, or an upsetting change in their environment. Play therapy can help children with academic and social problems, [learning disabilities](#), behavioral disorders, [anxiety](#), [depression](#), [grief](#), or [anger](#), as well as those with [attention deficit](#) disorders or who are on the [autism](#) spectrum.

[Child's Play: How Play Therapy Works](#)

[What Happens in Play Therapy?](#)

What to Expect

The parent or [caregiver](#) plays an important role in play therapy for children. After conducting an initial intake interview with the parent, when the therapist collects information about the child, and, often, a separate interview with the child, the therapist can make an assessment prior to beginning treatment. An assessment allows the therapist to decide the best treatment approach for the child. In the playroom, the child is encouraged to play with very specific types of toys that encourage self-expression and facilitate the learning of positive behaviors. Arts and crafts, music, dancing, storytelling, and other tools may also be incorporated into play therapy. Play therapy usually occurs in weekly sessions for an average of 20 sessions lasting 30 to 45 minutes each.

How It Works

Play therapy responds to the unique developmental needs of young children, who often express themselves better through play activities than through verbal communication. The therapist uses play and other creative activities to communicate with the child and observe how the child uses these activities to express thoughts and feelings that are not expressed in words. There are two approaches to play therapy:

1. Nondirective play therapy is based on the principle that children can resolve their own issues given the right conditions and the freedom to play with limited instruction and supervision.
2. Directive play therapy uses more input from the therapist to help speed up results. Play therapists use both approaches, depending on the circumstances.

What to Look for in a Play Therapist

Play therapists are well-trained in [child development](#), [attachment](#), and the use of play as a way to communicate with children. The play therapist should also be trained in a recognized therapeutic approach, such as child-centered, [cognitive-behavioral](#), [Adlerian](#), or [Gestalt therapy](#). In addition to finding someone with the appropriate educational background and relevant experience, look for a therapist with whom you feel comfortable working on personal and family issues.

References

- [Association for Play Therapy website](#)
- Play Therapy International
- Evidence-Based Practice Statement: Play Therapy. 2016. Association for Play Therapy U.S.
- Bratton, S.C., Ray, D., Rhine, T., Jones, L. The efficacy of play therapy with children: A meta-analytic review of treatment outcomes. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*. 2005;36(4):376–90.

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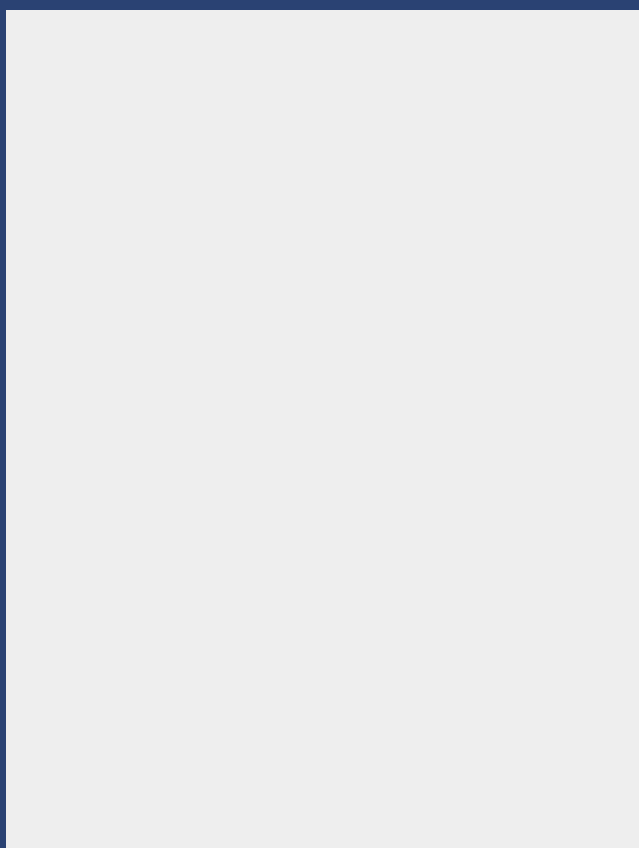
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