

Play Therapy:

How It Helps Children Feel Better and Improve Behaviour

By Kathy Eugster, MA, RCC,CPT

As parents, we learn to understand our children by watching them and can usually tell when they are having problems by how they act. When things are not going well for them, children will often behave in ways that cause problems. They may “act out” by not doing what they are told. Or perhaps, they may seem overly anxious or become very withdrawn. There are many ways that children show with their behaviors that they are struggling and not coping well with things that have gone on in their lives.

When this happens, parents worry that their child’s behavior will get worse. They may also be faced with negative comments or complaints about their child from teachers, daycare workers, coaches, or other parents. This can be very upsetting for parents and can contribute to feelings of discouragement and uncertainty. No matter what the behavior looks like in a child, parents will usually become concerned and want to seek help for their child. One of the best ways to help children with behavioral and emotional problems is through an approach known as play therapy.

Play therapy is a psychotherapeutic treatment approach specifically developed to help children

between the ages of three to 12 years old. A trained mental health professional, called a play therapist, works with a child to explore and resolve problems through the therapeutic use of play. Child and therapist work together in a counselling space called a playroom, which is equipped with specially chosen toys that will encourage the safe expression of feelings and also support the development of healthier behaviors.

A typical playroom may contain a small sandbox with miniature items (people, animals, cars, fantasy figures, etc.), puppets, stuffed toys, dolls, a dollhouse with furniture, dress-up and make-believe clothing and props, art materials for drawing and painting, construction toys, and some indoor games such as ring toss or indoor basketball.

In the beginning, the therapist will usually invite the child to play in an open-ended manner. The child will be allowed to play in almost any way she would like as long as it doesn’t hurt anybody or anything. As treatment progresses, the therapist may become more directive by encouraging the child to play with specific items or participate in certain activities that would address the child’s current problems.

But, how is play therapeutic for children? How does play therapy work to help children feel better and

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improve their behavior? What are the benefits of play therapy? These questions can be answered by understanding that play therapy helps children in the following ways by:

- Facilitating Healing from Past Stressful or Traumatic Experiences
- Allowing the Expression of Feelings
- Encouraging Creative Thoughts and New Ideas
- Allowing the Development of Healthy Decision-Making Skills
- Enabling the Communication of Problems and Concerns to Others
- Supporting the Learning of New Ways of Thinking and Behaving

Facilitating Healing from Past Stressful or Traumatic Experiences

Sometimes children go through experiences that are stressful or traumatic for them. These difficult experiences that children go through may not enter their minds in a normal manner and can remain "stuck" or even out of awareness. The feelings associated with these experiences can also get

In play, children will use their imaginations and express themselves symbolically through the toys. This means that experiences that have impacted the child in some way will show up as play behaviors. For example, a child who has been in a car accident may play by crashing toy cars together. A child who has seen his parents fighting may use puppets to act out these conflicts seen at home. In play therapy then, children are allowed to express, using toys, all the things they have difficulty saying, or may even be unable to say at all, with words.

When children play with toys in ways that are similar to difficult situations or traumatic events that they have experienced in their lives, this symbolic expression using toys is therapeutic in itself and can bring about positive changes within the child. When a child is provided with a therapeutic environment by the play therapist and is given the chance to process a difficult experience through play, the child's natural developmental capabilities are activated and the "stuck" feelings and memories become "unstuck." Just as the body heals from physical injury, the child has an emotional system that can be self-healing as well if certain therapeutic conditions are present for the child. Therapeutic play allows the child's innate

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stuck and are frequently what cause emotional and behavioral problems that adults observe in children.

In order for children to feel better and improve their behavior, they need to make sense out of the stressful or traumatic experience and assimilate it into what they already know about the world. This is known as "processing" an experience and it usually involves expressing thoughts and feelings and coming to a new understanding about the experience, which then leads to behavior changes. This is similar to what an adult does in counselling by talking with a therapist.

For children things are different. Talking about problems using words is often difficult for children. We do know however that children express themselves much better by playing than by talking.

self-healing abilities to be activated, supporting the child's growth and development on an emotional and psychological level. In play therapy, children do not have to talk about their problems to feel better.

Allowing the Expression of Feelings

Play therapy offers children the opportunity to express feelings safely in ways that may be unacceptable in other settings. At school children may not have the opportunity to express their feelings and may act out with inappropriate behaviors. At home children may be reluctant to express themselves for fear of hurting or angering their parents.

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better. Expressing feelings leads to understanding feelings, which then leads to a decrease in the intensity of feelings. Feelings become less bothersome so children can then devote more of their mental energy to creative activities and problem-solving, which will result in mastery of tasks and an increase in self-confidence and self-esteem. Old behaviors that previously caused problems for children will change to more positive and adaptive behaviors. The end result is that the child's inner psychological world will change and grow in a positive manner through the expression of feelings during the process of play therapy.



Encouraging Creative Thoughts and New Ideas

During play, creative thoughts are encouraged, and all children use play to learn about their environment and to solve their day-to-day problems. In play therapy, children will do the same thing and play in ways that help them to make sense of their problems. They can get a better understanding of what is happening in their lives and therefore be in a better position to cope with or adjust to their situation.

A child may play out different endings to a particular make-believe story, finding one ending that feels good. For example, a child may pretend a toy gets hurt by being pushed down the stairs or out the window of a dollhouse by a powerful dangerous toy such as a monster or villain. Then, the child's play may change so that another toy comes to the rescue (superhero, police officer, doctor, fairy princess, etc.). When the child associates with the hurt toy, she can then begin to understand that getting hurt was not her fault. In addition, she can gain a sense of hopefulness and realize that help is available after a hurtful incident.

Alternately, the child may play out an ending where the hurt toy becomes very powerful and conquers the dangerous attacking toy. When the child associates with the hurt toy this time, he can begin to feel an inner sense of power, which can then lead to an improved self-concept. Even though the child may

have no power to change his real world outside of the playroom, in the playroom he does have this experience of being the powerful one, thus making positive changes to his inner psychological world.

In play therapy, children can also pretend to be different characters. This gives them an idea of what it feels like to be in another person's shoes. For example, a child can pretend to be a helpless victim, a dangerous attacker, a powerful rescuer, a mastermind strategist, or a nurturing caregiver. Again, this is like an adult talking with a therapist and getting a new understanding of a current problem by looking at things from various different perspectives. This ability to experience and understand different perspectives helps children enormously not only to understand themselves better but also by encouraging them to develop a sense of empathy towards others.

Allowing the Development of Healthy Decision-Making Skills

During play therapy, children are given the opportunity to make decisions and choices for themselves, thus enabling them to take control of the environment and to take responsibility for their actions. For a shy child, this is very beneficial. For example, if a child has trouble making decisions about what to play with in the playroom and seems to be unsure of what he should do, the therapist may allow him to come to some decision on his own

without directing him as to what he should do. The net result is that the child's self-confidence and self-reliance increases.

For a child who consistently breaks rules, the opportunity to make decisions and to take responsibility for her behavior is also very beneficial. During play therapy, the therapist may deal with a child's inappropriate behaviors by setting limits and enforcing consequences in such a way that it is up to the child to make the right behavioral choice to avoid the consequence. In this way, the child is encouraged to develop an internal sense of self-control.

Enabling the Communication of Problems and Concerns to Others

By expressing themselves symbolically through toys in play therapy, children are allowed to distance themselves from difficult feelings and memories, which are frequently too hard for them to talk about directly with others. This gives children the opportunity to communicate their fears, worries, problems, wishes, and desires to others, even if it is done symbolically through toys. Other adults in children's lives, such as play therapists and parents, can then get a better understanding of children's inner worlds, which allows these adults to understand what children need in order to provide the appropriate type of help and support.

Supporting the Learning of New Ways of Thinking and Behaving

Play therapists may introduce specific activities that would help children address their difficulties. These activities would be presented at age-appropriate levels. With younger children the activities would likely focus mostly on pretend play activities while for older children workbooks and written exercises could be used as well.

Play therapists may also identify self-critical and self-defeating thoughts children sometimes have. Any misunderstandings that children may have can then be corrected and information can be provided that will help them to develop more adaptive perspectives about a particular situation. For example, a child may erroneously believe that she has caused her uncle's death by getting angry at him. The play therapist can then help her to correct this faulty belief and help to eliminate her feelings of guilt by encouraging more positive thoughts. For example, the play therapist

could make a wise owl puppet tell the child that her uncle died because he was very sick and not because she got mad at him.

Children can also learn appropriate behaviors through modeling of these behaviors by the play therapist. For example, the therapist could enact a puppet show to demonstrate the difference between sharing and being selfish or between cooperation and fighting. In this way, children learn healthier ways of interacting with others and better ways of coping with difficult situations.

Play therapists may also teach children certain skills to help manage difficult feelings. Deep breathing, relaxation exercises, and mental imagery are some of the ways that play therapists can help children learn important self-soothing skills.

Conclusions

Play therapists have recently been evaluating the research conducted over the past fifty years on the effectiveness of play therapy. We have found that play therapy is an effective treatment for children experiencing a wide variety of social, emotional, and behavioral problems. It is also an excellent way to help children recover and heal from stressful or traumatic experiences.

Play therapy is different than regular play however, and to be effective does require the presence of a trained therapist. The play therapist is trained to create a safe environment for the child and to interact with the child in such a way that the therapeutic benefits of play are activated. It is within this unique and therapeutic environment that the child is able to gain relief from emotional difficulties and to develop more appropriate behaviors.

About the Author

Kathy Eugster, MA, RCC, CPT, is a Child and Family Therapist in private practice in Vancouver and also with Family Services of Greater Vancouver. Kathy works with children ages 3 to 12 years old with behavioral or emotional difficulties.

As well, Kathy works with the parents of these children to help strengthen parent-child relationships and to enhance parenting skills.