

Benefits of Play Therapy for Children

Put yourself into the position of a young child walking into a stranger's office for the first time being told you are beginning therapy. Imagine the fear, the questions, and the anxiety that may overcome you as you are introduced to your new therapist. The expectation is that you are to talk about your feelings and share something personal, traumatic, or perhaps you are asked to share feelings that you can't even explain. Then visualize toys. Envision a period of time when you begin feel comfortable being around someone new by simply just playing... and then without realizing it you are opening up.

Children are unable to express themselves with words in the ways which many adults are capable; although many times they are expected to possess this skill. Acting out at home or school and misbehaving are a couple of ways children resolve to cope with their emotions. However, the efforts to deal with their own feelings are generally found unsuccessful by both child and parent. Using play in a therapeutic environment with a trained professional will provide the child with a safe distance from the problem to allow expression of their emotions and insight to problem solving skills that are appropriate to their development. Play is considered to be the "child's language and toys are the words" (Lilly et al, 2014). Combining the child's natural ability to learn through play with goal-oriented therapy will guide the child towards increased "balance of mental health" (Mended Hearts, 2010).

Play Therapy can benefit children coping with grief and loss, divorce and family conflict, trauma, and also for modification of behavioral struggles, such as depression, anxiety, and ADHD (Lilly et al, 2014). This form of play aids the child in seeing their problems in a different way and providing them with the ability to manage the emotions that come along with their unique challenges. The American Association of Pediatrics reports that play during childhood promotes brain growth and behavioral development (Elkin, 2008). Utilizing this research and combining it with therapy has proven to aid in building self-esteem, learning and expressing empathy and respect, improving family life and relationships, developing new social and communication skills, improving educational goals, and reducing crime and substance abuse (Mended Hearts, 2010; Lilly et al, 2014). Through the ages of philosophers, like Plato, to Freud to current child therapist one focus has remained: to enrich the lives of children by promoting happiness and well-being. With overwhelming support for the research of play therapy, the answer to understanding and effectively communicating with our children can now be successfully stated simply as "Let's play!"

Elkin, D. (2008). Can We Play? As sited from American Association of Pediatrics. Retrieved from http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/can_we_play

Lilly, JP., O'Connor, K., Krull, T. (2014). Association for Play Therapy: Play Therapy Makes a Difference! Retrieved from <http://www.a4pt.org/ps.playtherapy.cfm?ID=1653>

Mended Hearts. 2010. Why Use Play Therapy? Retrieved from <http://mended-hearts.org/2010/12/playtherapy/>