

Supporting Vulnerable Children Through Play Therapy

Understanding the magic of open-ended play materials as a tool for developing children's emotional resilience

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The Therapeutic Benefits of Sensory-rich Play

Sensory play is predominantly seen as:

- Messy and fun.
- Superficial.
- ‘Activities rather than a ‘process’.
- ‘Just for young children’.

But...

- ‘Sensory play is the gateway to all learning’ (Gascoyne, 2012).
- Sensory-rich, open ended resources can be calming and restorative.
- Evidence from Play Therapy supports their therapeutic value.
- Children are able to work on their own issues sub-consciously, providing therapeutic benefits.





The Challenge

- 1 in 10 children and young people aged 5 - 16 suffer from a diagnosable mental health disorder - that is around 3 children in every class.
- Between 1 in 12 and 1 in 15 children and young people deliberately self-harm.
- More than half of all adults with mental health problems were diagnosed in childhood. Less than half of these were treated appropriately then.
- Nearly 80,000 children and young people suffer from severe depression.
- Over 8,000 children aged under 10 years old suffer from severe depression.
- 72% of children in care have behavioural or emotional problems - these are some of the most vulnerable people in our society.
- 850,000 children and young people in the UK have a mental health problem - and that's just the ones who have been diagnosed.



Who Can Benefit From Therapeutic Play?

Play Therapy can support children experiencing the following problems:

- Bereavement / Loss
- Separated/Divorced Parents
- Under Performing:
 - Academically
 - Socially
 - Culturally
 - Physically
- Behavioral Problems
- Communication Problems
- Autistic Spectrum Disorders
- Withdrawn
- Trauma
- Abuse
- Nightmares
- Delayed Development
- Unauthorised Absences
- Social Exclusion
- Bullies and Victims of Bullying



Examples of Conditions

Degree	Impact		Example
	Impairment of Well Being	Loss of Functioning	
Slight	Temporary	Minor	Hospitalisation
Mild	Some loss	On-going	Unable to form friendships
Moderate	Considerable	Considerable	Stress and trauma
Severe	Mental illness – at risk	Unable to function as a normal person	Repeated abuse

Source: PTUK



The Therapeutic Play Continuum



Source: PTUK



Benefits of Play

Play is essential for children to develop physically, emotionally and socially. It:

- Is the child's natural medium of self expression.
- Fosters imagination and creativity.
- Encourages confidence and concentration.
- Helps children make friends and learn about their ever expanding world.
- Allows children to learn from mistakes safely.
- Can be used to establish a relationship.
- Helps develop the brain as symbolic or fantasy play uses metaphors and more parts of the brain light up in response to metaphor than any other form of human communication (Levin, F 1997 and Modell , A.H 1997).



Play Therapy and The Brain

There are three key parts to the brain:

- Reptilian – This helps keeps us alive.
- Mammalian – This triggers emotions, helps control flight or fight.
- Rational – This thinking brain distinguishes us as humans and keeps the other parts in check.

If well-coordinated we function 'normally' as the three are perfectly balanced.

For some children:

- The Reptilian brain triggers defence and attack impulses.
- The Mammalian brain cuts off from feelings of love and need.
- The Rational brain rules and they are unable to form close relationships.

Play Therapy:

- Helps the child re-establish balance so that the Rational brain coordinates with the emotional systems of the Mammalian brain.
- Re-wires the brain and establishes new coping mechanisms.
- Provides a safe environment to test feelings, needs and actions.



What is Play Therapy?

- A play-based method of helping children with behavioural and emotional problems to help themselves.
- Sessions provide a safe place and opportunity to 'play out' their feelings and problems.
- It is play with a therapeutic objective and generally non-directive.
- Therapeutic play enables self exploration in a safe environment.
- It is child-led. The child explores their own feelings and has the undivided attention of the Therapist.
- It helps children develop Emotional Literacy i.e. recognising, understanding and appropriately expressing their emotions.
- The child is given support and a safe environment to work through issues themselves at their own speed without judgement, interpretation and always maintaining control.
- The aim is for every learner to achieve their best.



What Does Play Therapy Look Like In Practice?

- Resources are set up in the room by the Play Therapist.
- The 45 minute session takes place in the same room at the same time and on the same day each week.
- The child is reminded of the boundaries and rules, that they can do whatever they want in the room provided they do not hurt themselves, the resources or the Therapist.
- The child does whatever they choose to do, e.g. plays, talks, sits in silence.
- The Therapist gives the child a 5 minute countdown.
- The Therapist takes the child back to the classroom and then clears up and writes clinical notes.



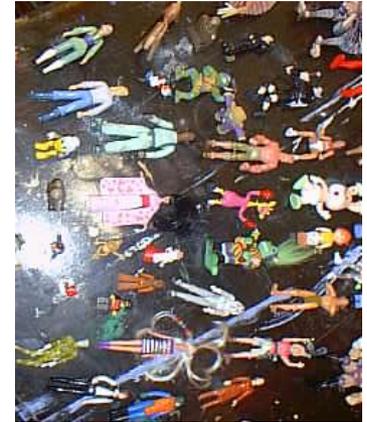
Axline's Principles

At the core of Play Therapy sessions is the importance of the Therapist adhering to the following key principles:

- Warm and friendly relationship.
- Accepts child as is.
- Establishes a feeling of permission.
- Reflecting back so that child gains an insight.
- Responsibility to make choices is the child's.
- The Child leads - Therapist follows.
- Does not hurry the therapy.
- Few limitations - anchor to reality - child aware of responsibilities.

The Play Therapy Toolkit

- Sand tray.
- Water supply.
- Collections of open ended resources such as miniature figures of people, animals, trees.
- Collections of natural treasures such as gems, shells and stones.
- A variety of puppets.
- Dressing up clothes and dolls house for imaginative play.
- Construction play resources.
- Musical instruments.
- Movement and dance resources.
- Art materials, paint, glue, clay etc.
- Books for storytelling.
- Messy play resources, e.g. Gellibaff.





Play Activities Chosen

	ACTIVITIES	% OF TOTAL	% OF SESSION TIME
Sand Tray	19518	23%	27.08%
Drawing & Painting	17765	21%	23.97%
Talking	9031	11%	9.32%
Drama, Role Play, Dressing Up	8366	10%	10.64%
Clay, Play Dough	7669	9%	8.35%
Games	6511	8%	8.46%
Music	5813	7%	3.98%
Puppets	4783	6%	1.47%
Movement, Dance	1768	2%	1.47%
Therapeutic Story telling	1389	2%	1.32%
Masks	822	1%	0.61%
Creative Visualisation	632	1%	0.68%
Total	84067	100%	07.36%

Source: Play Therapy UK. August, 2011



Activities and Gender

	Boys % of session	Girls % of session
Sand tray	32%	19%
Drawing, painting	20%	31%
Talking	8%	12%
Games	11%	4%
Drama, role play, dressing up	10%	12%

- Talking accounts for just 9% of total session time.
- Every child has different needs for different media at different times.
- Sand tray and art are most popular activities.
- Use of sand tray, art and clay and play dough remain fairly constant with age.
- Drama and dressing up significantly decreases with age.



The Therapeutic Play Toolkit

Creative visualisation	Understanding & thinking
Storytelling	Moral & spiritual development
Drama	Social relationships
Puppets & Masks	Caring for self
Art	Creativity & aesthetic experiences
Music	Communication
Dance & movement	Physical
Sandplay/sandworlds	Emotional



Why Does Play Therapy Work?

Between 70% and 88% of children referred to accredited Play Therapists show a positive change. Why?

- Play builds new neural pathways by releasing anti-anxiety chemicals, in the brain. These help children:
 - Stop feeling aggressive or anxious.
 - Feel calm and psychologically strong.
 - Have a feeling that everything is well in their world.
 - Have a deep sense of well-being.
 - Feel safe in the world.
 - Give their world meaning.
 - Help make their immune system work better.
 - Be better able to learn.
- Play Therapy acts as a 'brain sculptor', quietening the amygdala responsible for fight or flight responses.
- It gives children permission, space, time and freedom to simply be.



How can we maximise opportunities for children to access Play Therapy and calming, restorative and satisfying sensory-rich play?



Further Information

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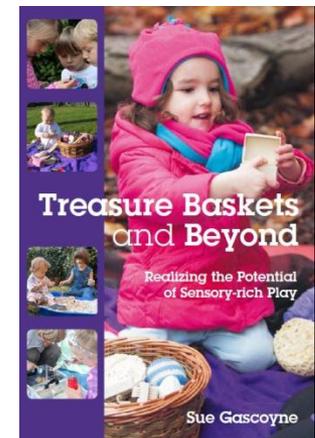
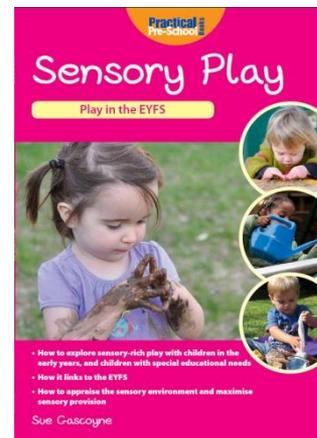
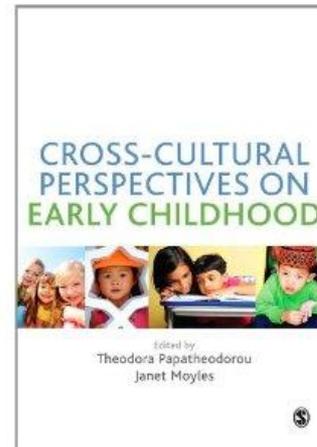


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- Sensory Play (Play in the EYFS), *Practical Pre-School Books* (2011 & 2012)
- Treasure Baskets & Beyond: Realizing the Potential of Sensory-rich Play, *Open University Press* (2012)



Visit our Sensory Play and Play Therapy resource shop at www.playtoz.co.uk