

THRIVE: PRACTICAL INSIGHTS ON PEDIATRIC DEVELOPMENT

Play Therapy

Does your child struggle to manage big feelings? Do they get overwhelmed by their frustration or fear?

Emotional dysregulation can interfere with relationships at home or at school. Peer problems or academic difficulties can be signs that a child is struggling to regulate their feelings. When frustrations happen, kids need coping skills to help them manage.

PLAY THERAPY: HARNESSING THE HEALING POWER OF PLAY

WHY PLAY?

As children grow, they often use play as a natural way to learn about the world and how they relate to it. Play can be used by a child to explore complicated interactions in a way that is manageable for them. They experiment with different possibilities and discover new understandings about their own ability to solve problems. The act of playing can build a child's confidence and sense of responsibility and mastery. Play can also give a child space to sort through difficult feelings, whether something as ordinary as an argument with a sibling or as profound as the death of a parent.

WHAT IS PLAY THERAPY?

Play therapy is a type of counseling that is specially designed for the needs of young children. Through the use of specially chosen toys, play therapy gives children a safe space to communicate and understand their underlying emotional needs in a way that is meaningful to them.

WHAT DOES A PLAY THERAPIST DO?

A play therapist is a licensed mental health clinician who has received special training in counseling with young children. A play therapist supports emotional growth of young children through a therapeutic relationship, facilitated by the use of specially-chosen toys that invite the child to express themselves in lots of different ways. Over time, the play therapist comes to understand the child's emotional needs through their play.

BUT DOES IT WORK?

Many emotional difficulties of young children can improve through play therapy, often within a few months of weekly sessions. Over several years, peer-reviewed published meta-analyses have shown child-centered play therapy to be effective for treating emotional and behavioral issues of children ages 3 to 10 years old.

WHAT ABOUT PARENTS?

Parents are essential to the therapy process. It's important for parents to have regular communication with their child's therapist. In fact, having a therapist work with parents on how to manage difficult behaviors may be even more effective in helping children than play therapy alone. Ask your child's therapist if you are interested in parent coaching services.

WHAT DOES PLAY HAVE TO DO WITH SELF-CONTROL?

Play therapy is a type of treatment that uses an accepting and empathic relationship as the mechanism of change. Within the safe environment created by the play therapist, a child comes to feel truly understood. This "mega-dose" of empathy helps them feel better--and when children feel better, they tend to behave better.

Having a safe space with an attuned, trained therapist allows a child the freedom to experiment with making choices and taking responsibility. These experiences often lead to a deeper awareness of their own intentions and preferred outcomes. They learn that by controlling their impulses, they can express their emotional needs in self-enhancing and pro-social ways.