

Play Therapy in Schools

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What is Play Therapy?

Play Therapy is an effective therapy that helps children modify their behaviours, clarify their self-concept and build healthy relationships. In Play Therapy, children enter into a dynamic relationship with their therapist that enables them to express, explore and make sense of their difficult and painful experiences. Play therapy helps children find healthier ways of communicating, develop fulfilling relationships, increase resiliency and facilitate emotional literacy.

Children use play as a form of communication. So often children referred to Play Therapy do not have the words to describe their thoughts, feelings and perceptions of their internal and external world.

Since the 1920's, play has been used in psychotherapy to help children express themselves.

Why Play Therapy in Schools?

In Britain, an estimated one million children have some form of mental difficulty (Office of National Statistics, 1999). All of these children will have had contact with schools.

Schools are often attempting to cope with children with complex emotional and behavioural difficulties and teachers may be the first to identify concerns and worries for their pupils. Play Therapy not only help children to recover from difficult life experiences but also in doing so, helps children to be more receptive to learning and therefore enables their educational needs to be better met.

Play Therapy in Schools can also:

1. Help children to build healthy relationships with teaching staff and peers;
2. Reduce emotional, behavioural and social obstacles to learning;
3. Improve adaptation in the classroom;
4. Enhance communication skills and emotional literacy;
5. Address the needs of at-risk children;
6. Support and advise teaching staff.

Play Therapy in Schools is very appropriate in schools for the following reasons:

1. It is a familiar and safe environment for both children and their parents/carers;
2. It is accessible for all children;
3. It provides consistency and reliability;
4. School staff often have a unique perspective on children in their care and can identify difficulties and changes early on;
5. School staff interact closely with children in their care and therefore can help modify their development, learning and behaviour.

Provision of Play Therapy in Schools

In order to provide school based Play Therapy, schools will need the following:

1. A dedicated, private room that is accessible every week at the same period of time;
2. Regular time slots for relevant teaching staff to meet and discuss referrals, Play Therapy cases and other issues;
3. Regular liaison between Play Therapist and SENCO and teacher with responsibility for behaviour, or another member of the teaching staff to discuss child protection issues, parent/carer contact, teaching staff support etc;
4. An understanding of the Play Therapy rules and requirements.

School based Play Therapy is funded from various sources, including social services, LEA's, schools, charitable bodies etc.

It is important for school staff to be familiarised with the 5 essential "C's" of Play Therapy:

Confidentiality: That the Play Therapy has to be private to allow the child to feel safe enough to express and explore difficult and painful experiences.

Consistency: That the Play Therapy takes place at the same time, in the same space each week. It is important that no changes to attendance occur, even when the child is disruptive or difficult.

Commitment: That the Play Therapist, teaching staff and parents/carers are committed to helping the child. This requires, patience, trust and dedication to the Play Therapy process.

Consent: Before Play Therapy can start, the parent/carer (or the person holding legal responsibility for the child) must give written consent to Play Therapy. The child must also give verbal assent prior to starting.

Child Protection: Play Therapists adhere to the School's Child Protection Procedures, the Children's Act (1989) and local authority child protection procedures.

How Play Therapy Works in Schools

Play Therapy generally follows a standard procedure. This includes:

1. Referral;
2. Referral discussion and liaison;
3. Consultation with parent/carer;
4. Assessment of child;
5. Play Therapy;
6. Regular review sessions with child;
7. Regular review sessions with parent/carer;
8. Regular review sessions with teaching staff;
9. Endings;
10. Discussion and liaison with teaching staff.

Play Therapists need both teaching staff and parents/carers to be involved in the Play Therapy process. The Play Therapist will want to hold regular meetings with the teaching staff and parents/carers in order to review the Play therapy process and to collate information about the child's circumstances.

It is also important to note, that ending Play Therapy sensitively is crucial. Endings take several sessions – premature or unplanned endings are always detrimental to the child.

Common Questions

1. Why can't the Play Therapist tell me the details of Play Therapy sessions?

Confidentiality is central to the Play Therapy process and this means the Play Therapist must maintain a strict level of privacy (This is broken if the Play Therapist believes the child is at risk of harm). Without confidentiality, the child will not be able to trust the Play Therapist and this will cause the Play Therapy to be ineffective or even break down. The confidentiality rule can be difficult and frustrating, but it is essential for Play Therapy.

2. Why should the child be rewarded with Play Therapy when they are behaving badly?

Children often enjoy Play Therapy – it is a special and unique experience for many children. When children are disruptive or difficult, teaching staff may believe that Play Therapy is a reward for bad behaviour. However, children need to feel secure in the knowledge that their 'space' is there for them each week and is not contingent on behaviour. Indeed, when a child has been disruptive or difficult, it is often especially important that they attend Play Therapy so the Play Therapist can help the child to process their thoughts and feelings.

3. Why can't I interrupt a Play Therapy session?

Sometimes when Play Therapy is taking place in a shared space, teaching staff may want to interrupt to collect something from the room. The problem that this creates is that it shows the child that the Play Therapy can be intruded on without warning. Only a consistent 'secure' space, enables children to feel safe enough to express themselves. Even one interruption can break down the Play Therapy process.

4. How long does Play Therapy take to work?

It is difficult to give a precise figure, but often Play Therapy requires a minimum of 12-15 sessions. For children with complex needs, Play Therapy may take a lot longer. Unfortunately, there are no quick, easy solutions.

5. Why do Play Therapists accept some children for Play Therapy and not others?

Often, teaching staff will refer children who are in most need. But Play Therapists have many factors to consider before accepting a child for Play Therapy. Generally, Play Therapists have many factors to consider before accepting a child for Play Therapy. Generally, Play Therapists are not saying 'no' to accepting a child, but rather that it is either not the right time for Play Therapy or that the child needs a different type of intervention.

