

Play Therapy  
**PLAYING TO GET BACK ON  
TRACK**

**Anne Brennan**

MA MIACP

Member PlayBody Ireland: The National  
Association for Play Therapy

# What is Play Therapy

Play therapy is an approach in which a trained play therapist uses the therapeutic powers of play to assist a child who is experiencing persistent difficulty

*“A play experience is therapeutic because it provides a secure relationship between the child and the adult.” (V. Axline)*

# Who is play therapy for?

Play therapy is for

- Children in the normative range who are experiencing persistent difficulties
- Children who need additional support with a learning difficulty or special need

# What age range do play therapists work with?

It is for children of all ages

- Play therapists work with children of different age ranges in different ways
- For very young children, the work might include the parents or carers
- For children between 4 and 10-12 years the play therapist uses a play space
- For pre-teens and teenagers play therapists also use creative therapy processes like art or clay

# What does Play Therapy Do?

Play Therapy helps children in a variety of ways.  
It helps children to:

- Develop capacity to manage life issues - resiliency
- Get on track to achieve their full potential
- Deepen their experience of their world
- Develop confidence
- Build self-esteem
- Recover developmentally from issues
- Deal with muddled feelings, upsetting events and sort out their feelings about difficult events
- Communicate in their own way, at their own pace and at their own level

# How does it help?

The play therapist forms a positive, supportive professional relationship with the child through which the child:

- Gains confidence & self esteem
- Experiences a reduction of anxiety and fear
- Receives emotional support in learning to understand their own feelings, thoughts and behaviours
- Can play in a way which helps them to re-examine difficult or traumatic life experiences and move forward
- Learn strategies for managing feelings and behaviours in a more positive way
- Get support in managing life with a learning difficulty or special need
- Gains new understanding of how the world works and incorporate this into their view of the world

## **If I were a fly on the wall of a play therapy session, what would I see the child doing?**

Play is a child's natural expression so in a child centred session you will see the child playing

- In the playroom the rule is that the child can play **almost** any way they want (as long as it is safe)
- There will be a wide selection of toys and creative materials available to the child to use as they wish
- These allow the child to express her/himself without necessarily using verbal expression

# **If I were a fly on the wall of a play therapy session, what would I see the play therapist do?**

The play therapist will draw on their extensive training and knowledge (e.g. Therapeutic theory and process, Normative child development) to:

- 'Read' the play and draw the child's attention to their choices, decisions and actions
- Note difficulties and stuck places and support any changes the child makes in play relating to these places
- Communicate emotional support by giving aware attention
- Communicate understanding of the child's thoughts, feelings and behaviours
- Support the child to using their symbolic world to show the issue or difficulty, develop and practice changes for bringing into their outside world

# How is the parent/carer involved?

Parents/carers are a very important part of the process.

The Play Therapist will:

- Meet the parents/carers initially for intake interview/s which give the play therapist a picture of what is happening for the child
- Meet parents/carers at regular intervals for reviews and to ask about any further information that is required
- Meet parents/carers for a final review prior to ending the intervention
- Be available to parents/carers for supportive work during the intervention period
- May engage parents in supportive work at home with the child

# Is it confidential?

## **Confidentiality works in the following ways for play therapy:**

- Information which is shared about the child and family will usually be confidential
- The actual play in the playroom is confidential
- The play therapist will give general reviews of themes in the play, changes in behaviours, other issues which are important to the child
- The play therapist will have told the child they are going to do this

## **A play therapist will share information with:**

- Parents/carers or other necessary agencies/professionals if the child is being hurt, harmed or abused in any way
- Their clinical supervisor
- Other professionals engaged with the child/family as appropriate, and with the knowledge of the parents/carers

# When might play therapy be a choice for parents/carers

**When there are difficulties which bring about new life situations or which are going to become on-going life situations:**

- After a traumatic experience
- Separation/divorce
- Loss – death/suicide/loss of mobility or loss of mobility of a parent
- When being bullied/when bullying
- Illness/post illness involving the child, a parent or close relative
- Coping with a special need or organic difficulty
- Needing support for dealing with a developmental delay
- Dealing with emotional or behavioural issues

# Assessing the need for play therapy

**The following may be helpful in deciding to choose play therapy as an intervention:**

1. A difficulty is persistent
2. The child shows lack of self-esteem, loss of confidence
3. The child is observed to be struggling with something for a long time, or failing to recover from an issue/event
4. The child appears 'stuck' in some way – perhaps cycles of behaviour problems
5. Relationship/s are in difficulty
6. The child has become withdrawn/unusually quiet/is acting out aggressively or is displaying unusual or persistent changes of behaviour which appear unhelpful/problematic
7. Reports from school/other groups indicate problems
8. A child has been assessed as having a difficulty and play therapy is recommended
9. A parent wished to promote their child's holistic development

**EVERY CHILD CAN BENEFIT FROM PLAY THERAPY– NOT JUST CHILDREN WITH PROBLEMS!**

# 10 Ways Parents/Carers Can Help

1. ENOURAGE the child to come
2. BE CONSISTENT in attending appointment
3. RESIST the urge to ask the child about the sessions
4. LISTEN to what they do say about them
5. DO NOT insist the child 'tell' everything – it is not necessary
6. TALK TO the therapist about your concerns
7. DRESS the child in clothes which are ok for messy play – this minimises the child's anxiety and facilitates free play
8. BRING a change of clothing in case play gets too messy or wet
9. BE OPEN to considering suggestion from the play therapist that might support the child (e.g. doing a session in the playroom with the therapist and/or child) or information about the way the process works (e.g. behaviour temporarily getting worse)
10. ACCEPT 'homework' only if you know you can find time to do the small amount of play involved in a time that suits you. You can discuss this with the play therapist

# Finding and choosing a Play Therapist

The following are some useful hints:

- Check with one of the professional organisations for names of therapists in your local area who work with children
- Ask the therapist if they have specific training in play therapy
- Ask if they are members of a professional organisation and which one
- Ask if the play therapist is receiving clinical supervision
- Ask the play therapist **any** questions you need to ask that will inform and support your decision

# Who can train as a play therapist?

Training is open to anyone who:

- Has a strong interest in the field
- Is willing to undertake all elements of the training process – including personal therapy
- Has extensive experience in working with children in different capacities
- Has suitable previous qualifications in childcare and/or related fields (psychology, counselling, therapy, teaching, social care, social studies)
- Meets the interview criteria of the specific course
- Meets the criteria for commencing clinical practice (Garda Check/Clearance etc)

# Training in Ireland

There are two possible routes:

1. Complete a combined core training in play therapy and psychotherapy that meets the professional standards set by relevant play therapy and psychotherapy professional bodies
2. Complete training as a psychotherapist or psychologist and then undertake specific play therapy training

Graduates from either of the above can then follow the accreditation route set by the relevant professional organisation – ‘PlayBody Ireland: The National Association for Play Therapy’ to become an accredited Play Therapist

# Contacts

## **For therapists or information contact:**

PlayBody Ireland: The National Association for Play Therapy at [playbodyireland@eircom.net](mailto:playbodyireland@eircom.net)

For Training:

The Children's Therapy Centre at  
[www.childrenstherapycentre.ie](http://www.childrenstherapycentre.ie)  
[eileen@childrenstherapycentre.ie](mailto:eileen@childrenstherapycentre.ie)

If I can be of assistance contact:

Anne Brennan [ables@eircom.net](mailto:ables@eircom.net) or 087-2210211