

Healing Through Play Therapy

By Kimberly Eldridge, LCSW

As Spring has arrived, it has brought the warmth of the sun and of children's play outdoors again. The power of play can be witnessed and felt by all participants and passersby. As this wonderment emerges, I take a fresh look not just at Spring but the journey children take through the process of play therapy.

The play observed in therapy is not just typical child's play; it's so much more. The Association for Play Therapy defines play therapy as "the systematic use of a theoretical model to establish an interpersonal process wherein trained play therapists use the therapeutic powers of play to help clients prevent or resolve psychosocial difficulties and achieve optimal growth and development." (APT, 2015) As a child and family therapist I truly want parents to feel supported and to understand the power of play and of play therapy.

When a young client enters the playroom, they enter into all the dynamics that make therapy so effective for young and old alike. They will experience a safe, attentive, caring person and environment that allows them to feel heard, feel seen, feel understood, and feel supported. Instead of using just words, children are offered toys and expressive play materials through which their inner worlds and words can be manipulated in ways that are more developmentally appropriate and natural to them. In play therapy, toys are like the child's words, and play is the child's language (Landreth, 2002).

The benefits of play are many. Play helps children develop fine and gross motor skills. It fosters social, emotional, and moral development. Play helps children hone in on emotional expression, awareness, problem solving abilities, and mastery of skills. Play helps children find a safe distance to explore their trauma, hurts, struggles, and insecurities. Play can help children develop resilience, self-esteem, strengths, bravery, sense of self, and a way to attach to others. From practicing social skills and story telling with puppets to crashing hot wheels and dinosaurs, play fosters a way for children to make meaning of their experiences and interpretations of themselves and others. Children enter into the metaphor and world of play to journey through their feelings and worries, and they emerge with new problem solving skills, conquering their fears, finding their voice, and that they are stronger and more valuable than they once believed.

Play therapists get the privilege to join a child through this journey and use their language of play for their benefit therapeutically. A play therapist uses strategic

techniques and theories from play therapy training to narrate and reflect what is being observed through play. The child's play and actions speak volumes and offer a glimpse into the meaning of their behavior. A play therapist will help children learn ways to make sense of the big feelings that are allowed to emerge as well as ways to regulate and manage those feelings and behaviors. Children are shown coping and interpersonal skills through activities that are developmentally appropriate. Through this play therapy process, children can take down the defenses and behavior that they have used to cope with their world the best way they knew how and play out new ways to be, interact, and solve problems and worries.

Clinical research has shown that play therapy culminates in positive effects for children with many different mental and behavioral health concerns. According to Karyn Purvis, "scientists have recently determined that it takes approximately 400 repetitions to create a new synapse in the brain-unless it is done with PLAY, in which case, it takes between 10-20 repetitions." If you are interested in learning more about play therapy I would encourage you to explore the Association for Play Therapy's website at www.a4pt.org or talk to a therapist who has extensive training in play therapy.

Association of Play Therapy (2015). <https://www.a4pt.org/page/Research>

Landreth, Gary (2002). *The Art of the Relationship*.

Purvis & Cross (1999-2012) *Trust-Based Relational Intervention®* resources

**Kimberly sees clients out of the St. Charles office.*