Play Therapy Techniques in Early Childhood Settings
Supporting Social-Emotional Learning and Self-Regulation

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“You don’t need to be a therapist to be therapeutic.”
Neal Horen, MD
Georgetown University Hospital

The play therapy skills presented today, when used with consistency, can help a child:
• develop a secure relationship with adults
• develop emotional regulation skills
• express thoughts and feelings in developmentally appropriate ways
• develop internal locus of control
• attain developmentally appropriate self-help skills
• Become more confident and empowered
Overview

The impact of early adversity on young children.

Play Therapy techniques for teachers to use in the early childhood classroom.

The basics of brain development

Executive Function
“What can I learn from this?”

Emotional Regulation
“Am I loved?”

Fight, flight, freeze
“Am I safe?”

The Child’s Developing Brain

“Bottom-Up / Inside-Out”

ADULT

BIRTH

INSIDE

OUT

UP

BOTTOM
By age 4, 80% of the brain’s structures responsible for future emotional, behavioral, social, and physiological functioning, are developed.

Bruce Perry, MD
www.childtrauma.org

Trauma and Children

One in four children witness or experience a traumatic event before the age of 4, and more than two-thirds by age 16.

www.acf.hhs.gov
Domestic Violence

Domestic Violence
Play in Preschool Children: What to Look For

Symbolic Play
Goal-direction
Enjoyable
Frustration tolerance

POLL
The parallels between Play Therapy and Early Childhood

“You don’t need to be a therapist to be therapeutic.”

Building Resilience using Play Therapy Skills

https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/resilience/

Using play to support children’s emotional development

The Environment

“You don’t need to be a therapist to be therapeutic.”
Play Therapy Room

Early Childhood Classroom

Using play to support children’s emotional development

The Relationship

“You don’t need to be a therapist to be therapeutic.”
The Principles of Child-Centered Play Therapy

1. The therapist accepts the child exactly as her or she is.

2. The therapist must develop a warm, friendly relationship with the child, in which good rapport is established as soon as possible.


Play Skill Number One: Build a Relationship

Body Language

Down on the child’s level
Open, relaxed posture
Maintain arm’s length
Play Skill Number One:
Build a Relationship

Body Language: Benefits

• Helps build a rapport and supports attachment
• Actively addresses boundaries

The Principles of Child-Centered Play Therapy

3. The therapist does not attempt to direct the child’s actions or conversation. The child leads, the therapist follows.


Play Skill Number Two:
Allow the Child to Lead While Describing Play

Allow the child to self-initiate the play.

Describe the child’s play while avoiding asking questions.
Play Skill Number Two: Allow the Child to Lead and Describe Play

Allow the Child to Lead: Benefits
• Supports developmentally appropriate expression of thoughts and feelings

Describe the Child’s Play: Benefits
• “Attunement”
• Speech, language, and vocabulary modeling

Video 2
Allow the Child to Lead and Describe Play (Sea Animals)

Seeking the Child’s Direction (Pretend Eating)
The Principles of Child-Centered Play Therapy

4. The therapist is alert to recognize the feelings the child is expressing and reflects those feelings back to him in such a manner that he gains insight into his behavior.


Play Skill Number Three: Name the Child’s Feelings

While playing with the child, name the feelings the child expresses verbally and non-verbally.

Play Skill Number Three: Name the Child’s Feelings

Name the Child’s Feelings: Benefits

- Child learns feelings vocabulary
- Child learns that feelings are experienced in the body
- Child learns to recognize feelings in self and others
- Co-regulation
The Principles of Child-Centered Play Therapy

5. The child is given the responsibility to make choices.


Play Skill Number Four: Frame the Child’s Play as a Choice or Decision

When the child selects an activity, or an item or action within an activity, acknowledge their choices.
Play Skill Number Four:
Frame the Child’s Play as a Choice or Decision

Benefits
• Supports internal locus of control
• Facilitates free expression of thoughts and feelings
• Supports limit setting

The Principles of Child-Centered Play Therapy

6. The therapist establishes limitations to make the child aware of their responsibility in the relationship.


Play Skill Number Five:
Limit Setting

When the child engages in a prohibited behavior, set a limit utilizing choice giving and a natural consequence.
Play Skill Number Five: Limit Setting

Benefits
• Limits provide safety and emotional security
• Supports internal locus of control
• Reduces power struggles
• Supports problem solving
• Supports self-regulation

Procedure
• Acknowledge the child’s motivation or feeling
• State the limit
• Provide an alternative (if necessary)
• State the consequence
• Praise the child’s choice to self-correct, or enforce the limit

Play Skill Number Five: Limit Setting

Tips
- Modulate voice and maintain proximity
- Allow the child to self-correct
- Avoid "we" and "ok?"
- Consequence should involve loss of toy being used or current activity
- Follow through!

Limit Setting Tip: Be preventative!
Establish expectations and reinforce often through specific praise.

POLL
The Principles of Child-Centered Play Therapy

7. The therapist maintains a deep respect for the child’s ability to solve their own problems if given the opportunity to do so.


Play Skill Number Six: Support Independence and Self-Regulation through Challenging Tasks

When the child is presented with a challenging task:
• Name the child’s feeling (co-regulation)
• Return responsibility
• Acknowledge effort
• Help just enough
• Praise perseverance

Benefits
• Builds frustration tolerance
• Lengthens attention span
• Supports problem solving
• Co-regulation
• Supports developmentally appropriate autonomy
• Empowering
Support Independence and Self-Regulation through Challenging Tasks
(Markers, Shoes, Tying)