

Introduction: What is Play therapy?

Welcome to this concise information guide on play therapy, an evidence-based, age-appropriate therapeutic approach for children and young people. This guide, prepared by the British Association of Play Therapists (BAPT), and adapted by Ella Manning (BAPT Registered Play Therapist®), aims to provide school staff with a clear understanding of what play therapy is and how it can benefit children and young people dealing with emotional and behavioural challenges.

Play therapy is a specialised, effective and developmentally appropriate form of therapeutic intervention that allows children and young people to express themselves, process emotions, and work through challenges using play and creative activities in a safe environment.

Conventional talking therapies may be inappropriate for children and young people, especially if they struggle to put their feelings into words. Play is the language of children, and it is through play that they make sense of their world and emotions.

Children tell us about their inner world whilst playing long before they can link words to their experiences using language. In play, children and young people can safely experiment, process and master different skills and experiences. They form a sense of who they are, whilst learning to understand that other people can be different to them. Relationship skills, such as being able to trust, respect, empathise, share and co-operate with people, can be developed through play. They can reenact challenging experiences, process trauma, release emotional burdens and develop healthier coping strategies.

The benefits of play therapy

A play therapy intervention offers numerous benefits to children and young people:

Emotional Expression: Play therapy provides a safe outlet for children and young people to express difficult emotions which they may find challenging to put into words.

Trauma Processing: Play therapy allows children and young people to process traumatic experiences at their own pace and in a developmentally appropriate manner.

Behaviour Change: By engaging in play therapy, children and young people can explore alternative behaviours and coping strategies, leading to positive changes in behaviour.

Enhanced Communication: Children and young people who struggle with verbal expression can communicate their thoughts and feelings effectively through play therapy.

Self-esteem and Empowerment: Play therapy fosters a sense of mastery and empowerment, enabling children and young people to build self-confidence and resilience.



Play Therapy Referral

A brief information guide for school staff

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Play therapy recognises the profound impact of play on children and young people's emotional well-being and uses it as a tool for healing and growth. Rather than children and young people having to explain what is troubling them, as adult therapy usually expects, they can use play to communicate at their own level, pace, without feeling threatened or overwhelmed.

The indications for referral to play therapy

Play therapy is an effective intervention for children and young people with a variety of presentations including:

- Those who have experienced abuse, neglect or trauma.
- Those who have witnessed violence or substance misuse.
- Those who have experienced loss through bereavement, divorce, family breakdown, relocation, or separation from culture of origin.
- Those who are ill, disabled or who cope with carers or siblings with disabilities.
- Those who have social, emotional, mental health or behavioural difficulties (e.g. depression, aggression and/or defiance)
- Those who lack confidence in their abilities or themselves.
- Those who appear unable to play, presenting as withdrawn and disconnected or anxious and worried.
- Those who have attachment issues.
- Those struggling to make or maintain friendships or who have experienced bullying or use bullying behaviours.

Play therapy can offer such children and young people a safe and confidential space in which the feelings, these experiences generate can be expressed and addressed. It can promote resilience to enable them to discover a more hopeful view of the world. Play therapy is appropriate for young people of all ages, although it is most often used for children aged between three and twelve years.

Play therapists typically work with individuals, and many also offer joint work involving parents/carers or siblings and groups. Some play therapists use additional methods such as Theraplay®, Filial Therapy or Child-Parent Relationship Therapy, which are particularly useful interventions when there are attachment difficulties. Children and young people from different cultures, genders, with varying abilities or children and young people who are neurodivergent can all be helped by play therapy.

What happens in play therapy?

At the referral stage, the play therapist will begin by engaging with others concerned with the welfare of the child or young person and will establish a contract for the work where a holistic assessment of concerns, difficulties and strengths will be completed for the child or young person. Before play therapy can begin, the parent/carer/legal guardian must give written consent to it, as well as other key professionals, where appropriate. The child or young person must also give appropriate assent before starting. Good mutual communication is essential if the intervention is to be supported and meaningful.

During play therapy sessions, the child or young person is given a safe and non-judgemental space to explore their feelings, experiences and challenges through play. The play therapist provides toys, art materials, sand, and other creative resources to encourage emotional expression and exploration. The play therapist is attuned to the child or young person's emotional cues, creates a warm and accepting environment and establishes a strong therapeutic alliance as they observe and interact with them, providing empathic support and guidance as needed. The play therapist uses their expertise about the therapeutic process, child development and play to facilitate the child or young person's expression, problem-solving and growth. Through the metaphors of their play, the therapist gains valuable insights into the child or young person's inner world, helping them better understand their struggles and strengths. Occasionally, such insights may be shared with other professionals to aid in decision-making and case planning, so long as confidentiality is not compromised.

Consistency and predictability are important, so play therapy sessions usually take place once a week, at the same time. This may be at the child or young person's home, school or a clinic, but it is crucial that these sessions happen in the same designated space every week. It is essential that this space is private and welcoming to allow the child or young person to feel safe enough to express and explore difficult, fearful or painful experiences. Play therapy may be a short-term intervention or a process that extends over a longer period, according to each child or young person's needs.