

Introduction

Schools play a crucial role in a child and young person's development and well-being. They provide academic education, but they can also be a nurturing environment for children and young people's social and emotional growth. However, some children and young people face emotional, behavioural or social challenges that can impact their academic performance and overall functioning. A recent NHS Report revealed that the proportion of children who are experiencing mental health difficulties has remained at 1 in 6. All of these children will have had contact with schools, and teaching staff are often the first to spot these difficulties. Thus, by offering play therapy in schools, we may be able to respond more effectively to support these children and young people and promote their mental health by addressing the challenges that can impact a child's and young person's ability to learn and thrive. Play therapy may be funded from various sources, including social services, LEAs, schools and charitable bodies, etc.

Collaboration between play therapists and educators is key to harnessing the full potential of play therapy within the educational setting, so we can empower young minds to reach their full potential in the school community and beyond. This leaflet explores the significance of this collaboration and its benefits for the children and young people involved.

The six essential 'C's of play therapy in schools

Consent: Before play therapy can start, written consent must be gained from the parent, carer or legal guardian, as well as from relevant school staff. Additionally, the child or young person must give appropriate assent before starting therapy.

Confidentiality: The play therapy must be private to allow the child or young person to feel safe enough to express and explore difficult, fearful or painful experiences. Maintaining confidentiality and privacy in the school setting ensures that children and young people feel able to play freely without fear of judgment or disclosure.

Consistency: The play therapy takes place at the same time and place each week. It is important that no unavoidable changes to attendance occur, even when the child or young person is disruptive or difficult. It should never be used as a reward or punishment.

Commitment: The play therapist, teaching staff and parents/carers need to be committed to helping the child or young person. This requires patience, trust and dedication to the play therapy process and awareness of the impact on the child or young person before, during and after sessions as well as the ongoing cumulative impact.

Collaboration: Collaboration between therapists, parents/carers, and other school staff is crucial to ensure a holistic approach to supporting the child or young person's emotional well-being during their therapeutic journey.

Child Protection: Play therapists adhere to the School's and Local Authority Child Protection procedures and relevant legislation.



Play Therapy in Schools A brief information guide

For more information about play therapy, please email ella@futuresinmind.org

For more information about BAPT, visit www.bapt.info or email info@bapt.uk.com

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What is play therapy?

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 from them. Relationship skills, such as being able to trust, respect, empathise, share and co-operate with people, can be developed through play. In their play, children and young people can reenact challenging experiences, process trauma, release emotional burdens and develop healthier coping strategies. 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 use play to communicate at their own level, pace, without feeling threatened or overwhelmed.

Play therapy has been proven to be effective in addressing a range of difficulties, including those related to: abuse, adoption and fostering, anxiety, attachment issues, bereavement, bullying, emotional and behavioural regulation difficulties, family breakdown, friendship difficulties, illness, low self-esteem, nightmares, physical regulation difficulties, e.g. sleeping, eating and toileting, social withdrawal, trauma, failure to meet academic potential, poor concentration.

How does play therapy in schools work?

Play therapy can be integrated into pupils' daily routines within a school context to address a wide range of issues that may be impacting their academic performance and overall well-being, including those listed above. Play therapists not only help children and young people to explore difficult life experiences, but the specialist support also equips them with valuable coping skills, self-regulation techniques and problem-solving strategies that can be applied both in and outside of the classroom, therefore helping children and young people to be more receptive to learning and enabling their educational needs to be better met.

In a school setting, play therapy sessions may take place once a week for about 50 minutes in a designated playroom or a private, welcoming space where the child or young person feels comfortable. The play therapist provides toys, art materials, sand and other creative resources to encourage emotional expression and exploration.

The benefits of play therapy in schools

Improved Emotional Regulation: play therapy helps students learn to identify and manage their emotions effectively, leading to better self-regulation and reduced disruptive behaviours.

Enhanced Social Skills: Through play, children and young people can practice social interactions, improve communication and build essential social skills that foster positive relationships with peers and teachers.

Academic Performance: By addressing emotional and behavioural challenges, play therapy can positively impact a student's ability to focus, concentrate and engage in the learning process.

Reduced Stress and Anxiety: Play therapy provides a safe space for students to release stress and anxiety, promoting a calmer and more focused learning environment.

Conflict Resolution: Play therapy helps students develop problem-solving skills, conflict-resolution strategies and healthier ways to express themselves.

Play therapy in schools is effective because...

The school is a familiar and safe environment for both children, young people and their parents/carers. School provides consistency, predictability and reliability. School staff often have a unique perspective on children and young people in their care and interact with them closely. They can identify difficulties and changes early on and can help modify children and young people's development, learning and behaviour.