How Does Play Therapy Work?

Play Is Important

Play is a child's natural way of experimenting, learning, rehearsing, and mixing real with fantasy.

It is an integral part of childhood development across physical and cognitive domains, and is a vital part of all our lives whatever our age.

Using play as the medium to express themselves and what they are experiencing, makes sense to children.

Children can play what they struggle to say, children can play to explain their way. Through play children can discover and rehearse different ways of understanding and coping with difficult feelings, leading to a healthier and happier way of being.

Feelings Are Important

Recognising and understanding them is important too. Emotions give us information about what is happening to us, so that we can plan what action to take. The origin of the word emotion implies action, coming from 'motere', the Latin verb 'to move', plus the prefix 'e' to 'move away' (Goleman 1995, p6).

Understanding what they are feeling and why, means that a child can decide more consciously what they want to do, before they do it. This reduces the likelihood of acting impulsively or getting stuck in unhealthy patterns of behaviour.

Tuning into, recognising, and understanding thoughts and feelings is central to Play Therapy. In a child's session they can make sense of their emotions, and so choose what actions to take that will provide healthy growth and development. Rehearsing these skills in the safety of the therapy room support and bolster this growth, paving the way for the child to then put these new strategies into practice in their lives outside of their sessions.

The Therapeutic Relationship is Important

It has specific qualities to it, designed to support and sustain such self-discovery. Each Play Therapist has undertaken extensive academic and clinical training, with close clinical supervision and monitoring. Playing together in the therapy room with the full ToolKit of play and art materials creates the facilitative environment for the reflective discovery of therapeutic change. The therapeutic relationship means that crucially the child is not alone with their experiences. With the therapist holding the session via the predictable boundaries and materials and by creating a containing experience for the child's emotional experience. This means that the child feels supported, understood, safe and able to approach deep and strong feelings.

Emotions, thoughts and learning are physical, brain-shaping events. As synapse's fire, neural pathways are made and sustained, and a child's cerebral resources are formed.

Children's experiences and relationships affect their brain organisation, structure and development (Riggs 2006, Fishbein 2007). Research shows that when a child is helped to link words to feelings, cerebral pathways linking higher and lower brain structures are strengthened. This increases their ability to manage strong feelings and stress later in life, skills vital for socio-emotional success (Hariri 2000, Pennebaker 1993, Fossati 2003).

Play Therapy provides many opportunities for such learning to take place, developing and discussing experiences and feelings within the metaphor of the narrative. Play Therapy provides opportunities for children to explore parts of their identity within the safety of the therapeutic space, leading to make positive changes in their lives.

Being Aware of What We Are Feeling, When We Are Feeling it, is Important

High emotional arousal without self-awareness can overwhelm a child, leading them to either block out the feeling and so miss out on learning what it could mean – or developing unhealthy responses and becoming stuck in unhelpful patterns. Self-awareness is paying continual attention to one's internal states in the present moment, and is sometimes called "mindfulness" (Goleman 1995, Latieri 2008, Brantly 2007, Goleman 2003).

Self-awareness is the precursor to empathy, which creates the capacity to care. (Zinker 1977, Sunderland 2006).

Social and emotional learning is the ability to integrate thinking, feeling and behaving to achieve crucial life tasks. Such self-reflective capacities and empathic ability are the foundations of emotional intelligence. Children with these skills can 'put themselves in someone else's shoes' and can imagine different points of view to their own. Children with these skills can understand themselves and those around them better.

During their Play Therapy sessions our goal is for children to develop an understanding of their own feelings and where they come from, to practice healthy and appropriate actions to take in response to them.

The therapeutic space and therapeutic relationship in Play Therapy aims to create the environment for self-discovery and growth for children who attend.