

A PLAY THERAPY GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND CARERS

What is Play Therapy

Play therapy is a child-focused therapy that uses play to help children express themselves, understand what's going on in their lives, and build coping skills in a safe, supportive setting. It's used for children who are facing a range of difficulties and need extra support and is delivered by a specially trained therapist.

This is a different approach to therapeutic play, which is when adults use play activities to help a child feel more comfortable, express themselves, or cope with a particular situation, without it being formal therapy.

What happens in Play Therapy Sessions?

In Play Therapy sessions, the therapist provides a range of toys and materials for the child to choose from. The child is given the freedom to decide what they would like to do in the play space. The therapist does not direct or lead the child's play, but stays alongside them, paying close attention to what they are doing and how they are feeling.

This can feel a little unusual for children at first. Some children settle into the play very quickly, while others need more time to feel comfortable and familiar with the therapist and the space. There is no right or wrong way to play.

Sessions will usually take place on the same day and at the same time each week. The room will also be set up in a consistent way. This helps the child know what to expect and provides a safe, predictable environment.

The therapist follows the child's lead and responds to what happens in their play. They may describe what the child is doing, reflect feelings or emotions they notice, or respond when the child invites them into the play. Some children may want to talk with the therapist, while others may communicate mostly through their play. There is no expectation that a child has to talk about their feelings or explain what their play means.

Sessions last for 50 minutes. The therapist will let the child know when there are 10 minutes left and will give another reminder shortly before the session ends. This helps the child prepare for the session to finish and supports a predictable ending.

How do children communicate through play?

Play is a child's natural form of communication. Through play, children can express feelings, experiences and ideas, sometimes in ways that they may not yet have the words to explain. Children will often show us how they are feeling through their play before they are able to talk about it.

There are no fixed meanings attached to particular toys, games or actions. For example, a particular toy or type of play does not automatically mean that a child is feeling a certain way. Instead, the therapist pays attention to the individual child and to the themes and patterns that emerge in their play over time.

The therapist will notice how the child plays, the feelings and relationships that appear in their play, and whether particular themes return across sessions. By getting to know the child and seeing how their play develops over time, the therapist can begin to understand the child's experiences from their perspective.

What might parents/carers expect and how are they involved?

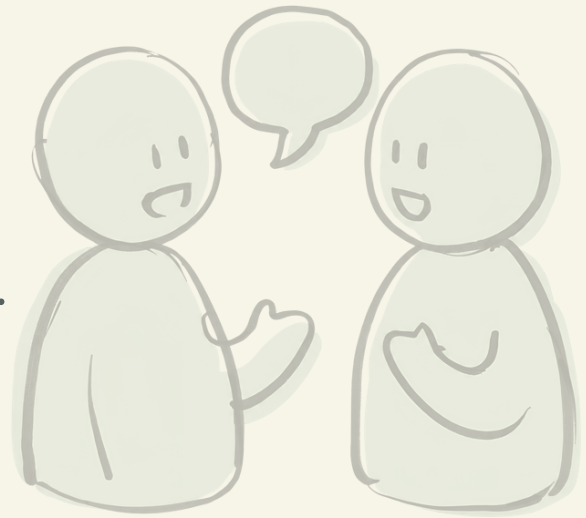
Before therapy begins, the therapist will meet with the parent/carer to understand more about the child, what may be happening for them, and what the hopes are for therapy. Parental consent is needed before Play Therapy can begin.

The parent/carer will usually be asked to complete a questionnaire, such as the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), at the beginning and end of the therapy. This helps to understand how the child is doing and whether there have been any changes over the course of the therapy.

As therapy progresses, the therapist and parent/carer will plan review meetings. These provide an opportunity to talk about how things are going and for the therapist to share general feedback about the child's progress and some of the themes that may be emerging in their play.

Play Therapy sessions are confidential, which means that the therapist will respect the child's privacy and will not share everything that happens in the playroom. However, the therapist may talk with the parent/carer about general themes that are emerging, such as self-esteem, relationships or identity.

There are some circumstances where information may need to be shared to help keep a child or someone else safe. These limits to confidentiality will be explained before therapy begins.



The parent/carer can also share any changes they have noticed in their child, or anything significant happening in the child's life that may be affecting them. It can be helpful to share this information before the session, for example by email or voice message, so that the therapist is aware of any important changes.

The therapist will also let the parent/carer know if something significant has happened in a session where the child may need some additional care or support. This might include a particularly challenging session or something that suggests the child may need extra attention outside of the therapy space.

Parents and carers have an important role in supporting the therapy process. Children are more likely to benefit from therapy when the important adults around them are able to support and make space for the process.

This does not mean that parents/carers need to have all the answers or always know what to do. The therapist may offer suggestions about ways of responding to emotions or behaviours that have been helpful in the sessions, and these can sometimes be used at home.

It is important to allow the child to have some privacy around their Play Therapy sessions. Parents/carers do not need to ask the child to explain what they played with or what happened in the session. Children may choose to talk about their sessions, but there is no expectation that they do so.

If, as therapy progresses, it becomes clear that **Play Therapy is not the most appropriate support** for the child, the therapist will discuss this with the parent/carer and may suggest other forms of support that could be more suitable.

How long does Play Therapy last?

Every child is different, so there is no set number of Play Therapy sessions. How long therapy continues will depend on the child, what they are experiencing, how long they have been experiencing difficulties, and how things change over time.

Therapy is not usually a quick process. For some children, particularly those who have experienced difficulties or significant changes in their lives over a long period of time, it can take time to build a trusting relationship and for therapeutic change to develop. The aim is to give each child the time and space they need, rather than working to a fixed number of sessions.

We will regularly review how therapy is progressing and talk together about when it may be appropriate for therapy to come to an end. Ending therapy does not mean that a child will never need therapeutic support again.

Children continue to grow and experience new things, and sometimes they may return to therapy at a later stage to work through new experiences or difficulties.

This does not mean that the earlier therapy was unsuccessful; it can be a sign that the child is being supported at a different point in their development or life.

What happens next?

Referrals often begin with an **initial enquiry** by email or phone. This is an opportunity to talk briefly about the child's needs, explore whether Play Therapy may be appropriate, and check whether the therapist has availability. Following this conversation, a **referral** may be made or, if another type of support would be more suitable, you may be signposted to an alternative service.

Sometimes a school or other professional will make the referral. In this situation, the therapist will make contact with the parent/carer to arrange a time to talk, gather further information and complete an **assessment**.

Once **consent** has been received and the assessment is complete, the therapist will discuss the next steps with you. If Play Therapy is considered appropriate, a regular day and time for the sessions will be agreed and a **review** date will be arranged. There will also be an opportunity before therapy begins to discuss any questions or information that may be important for the therapist to know.

Where appropriate, the therapist may also liaise with other professionals involved in the child's life. This will be discussed with you as part of the assessment and therapy process.



Have more questions?

This guide has aimed to answer some of the common questions about Play Therapy.

If you have any further questions, or would like to discuss whether Play Therapy might be appropriate for your child, please get in touch.

This guide has been prepared to provide information about Play Therapy and the therapeutic process within Play Therapy North East. It can be used alongside the information and professional standards provided by BAPT:

<https://www.bapt.info/play-therapy/>



<https://www.playtherapynortheast.com>