



What is Theraplay®?

Theraplay® is a child and family therapy for building and enhancing attachment, self-esteem, trust in others, and joyful engagement. It is based on the natural patterns of playful, healthy interaction between parent and child and is personal, physical, and fun. Theraplay® interactions focus on four essential qualities found in parent-child relationships: Structure, Engagement, Nurture, and Challenge. Theraplay® sessions create an active, emotional connection between the child and parent or caregiver, resulting in a changed view of the self as worthy and lovable and of relationships as positive and rewarding.

How Does Theraplay® Work?

Theraplay® is a special type of play therapy that can improve your child's behavior in unique ways. Using the therapeutic benefits of joyful play and sensitive caregiving, Theraplay® focuses on strengthening your relationship with your child, enhancing your sense of connection and mutual understanding so that your child no longer needs to resort to problem behaviors. As the most important people in a child's life, caregivers are actively involved in sessions. With the help of the therapist who is skilled at changing what may seem to you a permanent negative dynamic between you, you and your child will experience delight and enjoyment in each other, and your child will become more responsive to you.

The Four Dimensions of Theraplay®

Parents are involved in the therapeutic play room during every session. Theraplay® is a structured approach that utilizes four thoughtful approaches during sessions: structure, engagement, nurture and challenge. The therapist helps teach the parent about the four dimensions of therapy and helps the parent to recognize the emotional and relational benefit of each activity utilized during the sessions.

Structure

Often children who are referred for Theraplay® sessions crave an experience that helps contain their internal chaos or disruptive behavior. Structure is brought to the sessions in an effort to create safety and containment. The child learns quickly that the adults in the room are in control in a loving and nurturing fashion, which often reduces the internal disruption rather quickly.



Engagement

Thoughtful activities are planned to help initiate emotional engagement between the parent and child. Parents are taught how to recognize what the child needs emotionally, as this is often different from what they may be expected to need developmentally. In a fast-paced world of advanced technology and scheduled activities and events, the quality of engagement between family members is dwindling. The parent and therapist utilize purposeful activities to help strengthen the engagement between parent and child.

Nurture

Nurturing play is a must in the therapeutic environment. Nurturing play is akin to an adult taking a steam or receiving a massage after a challenging race or exercise class and helps the child heal from emotionally taxing activities and directives. The basis of nurturing play is to refill the bucket and deepen the healing process.

Challenge

A structured challenge is introduced to help the parent and child work together to achieve a desired outcome. Often a challenge will require a small risk and when accomplished together, help the family members feel more confident and competent as individuals and as a team. Challenges help dissolve insecurities and competitiveness alike as they utilize the power of the team that the parent/s and child can begin to develop and strengthen.

Who Can Benefit from Theraplay®?

At any age, children who are withdrawn, passive, or depressed, children who are overactive or aggressive, children impacted by divorce, children on the autism spectrum, and those who are afraid of relating or attaching because of adoption, losses, or trauma can be helped by Theraplay®. Theraplay® is an especially effective treatment for young children -- even for those under three years of age - - because it is play-based rather than language-based. It is equally effective with adolescents, adults, couples and families. The active playfulness of Theraplay® often engages children and adults who have not responded to more traditional therapy approaches or who are oppositional. Theraplay®'s appealing activities help these children "buy into" the therapeutic process and brings about change without the need for the child to talk about or express problems.



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Theraplay® is appropriate for children of all ages, including babies, and when combined with other techniques, it is a great therapy for teenagers too. With Theraplay®, family interaction patterns have improved, and school professionals and pediatricians have reported positive changes in children's behavior, self-esteem, and connections with others. Theraplay® can help children who have experienced trauma begin to heal, can help children with developmental disorders feel more comfortable with social interaction, and can help families to experience happiness and connection.

We specialize in helping children with:

- Family relationships impacted by separation, divorce and/or other issues
- Shy, withdrawn, or clingy behavior
- Acting-out, angry, or disruptive behavior
- Defiant, oppositional or controlling behavior
- Behavioral problems at school or with peers
- Attention Deficit Disorder or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
- Developmental disorders such as Asperger's Syndrome and Autism Spectrum Disorders
- A history of trauma, abuse, or neglect
- Attachment disorder due to adoption or multiple changes in living arrangements
- A history of social deprivation due to living in an institution
- Psychological trauma due to medical care or serious illness



Is Theraplay® an Evidence-Based Treatment?

Theraplay® was developed over 50 years ago. The book used to train clinicians to do Theraplay® is in its third edition and has been translated into six languages. Theraplay® is used all over the world. There is formal [research](#) documenting Theraplay®'s effectiveness and Theraplay® is listed on the National Registry for Evidence-Based Programs and Practices. Studies have shown that Theraplay® works with shy and withdrawn children, improves relating in children on the autism spectrum, improves parent-child interaction and the emotional availability of parents to their children, and can even increase self-esteem in adults.

In addition to having research behind it, Theraplay® involves qualities and types of interactions that are well-known and well-researched to be crucial in building self-esteem, a healthy body image, emotional regulation (being able to manage the ups and downs of emotions without going too “up” or too “down”), emotional connection with others, and trust in parents or caregivers. When these capacities are nurtured and developed, behavioral problems often significantly diminish and can also disappear.

What Will I Learn in Theraplay®?

To understand your child's feelings and behaviors—why he is behaving the way he is.

To respond to troublesome behaviors in ways that will support self-esteem while, at the same time, decrease your child's need for the behaviors.

How to sometimes circumvent and other times address head-on your child's difficult behaviors in ways that further the parent-child bond and build your child's self-control, feeling of competence, and sense of continued connection with you. We want your child to see you – and for you to see yourself - as a strong, dependable, and caring parent who can manage your child's struggles and challenges.

How to reconnect with your child (repair) after the inevitable disappointments your child presents to you, and bring him quickly back to a place of well-being with you.



To create pleasurable moments of connection and fun with your child that will bring you shared joy and strengthen your relationship.

You will learn these things by doing them in the Theraplay® sessions with your child with the continual support of your therapist. In Theraplay®, we don't just talk about being different with your child, we actually do things differently with your child in the session. This will give you a hands-on, totally supported experience of improving interactions with your child.

What Will My Child Learn in Theraplay®?

Your child will learn to see you as strong, wise, and skillful in helping her out of distressful moments and into better behaviors.

Your child will feel closer to you and your influence will grow.

In response to your new skills, your child will feel more competent and confident.

She will feel calmer, less anxious, angry, frightened, or timid.

Your child will get along better with other authority figures and with peers and siblings.

She will not have to resort to problematic behaviors to get his needs met.

Children who have suffered separation, loss, abuse or neglect will learn:

- He can trust you to take care of him.
- He can rely on you to meet his needs for nurturing and comfort.
- To accept appropriate structure, limits, rules.
- Your child will increasingly enjoy engaging with you.
- He will feel worthy of care, counteracting his negative experiences.
- That interacting with others is fun and pleasurable.
- How to read social cues and others' feelings.
- The rhythm and give-and-take of social relationships.



Typical Treatment Protocol

We understand that committing to therapy for your child is a major decision, often made when the family is in crises or has “tried everything else.” One of the major advantages of Theraplay® is that change can happen very quickly once treatment begins. So, even though the first sessions are more about “getting to know you and your child”, you will probably notice significant progress shortly thereafter.

Your first appointment is an information-gathering interview, preferably with both parents. Next, we ask you and your child to complete a set of simple tasks together, such as make two toy animals play with each other. This is called the Marschak Interaction Method (MIM) assessment. The MIM is videotaped, and your therapist will look at the video in preparation for your next appointment at which you and your therapist will discuss the interaction between you and your child and the therapist’s recommendation for treatment.

At your next session, your therapist will demonstrate with you the Theraplay® activities to familiarize you with what to expect. Theraplay® activities are playful and fun, and done in combinations that focus on your child’s needs for structure, engagement, nurture and challenge—the four Theraplay® dimensions.

Then, Theraplay® treatment begins with your child. After every Theraplay® session, your therapist will meet with you without your child to discuss progress and goals and to help you support the Theraplay® treatment at home.

Typically, the total number of sessions is eight, with four follow-up sessions over the next year.



Treatment Plan for Families Created Through Foster Care or Adoption

Children who have experienced separation, loss, trauma, multiple caregivers or institutional care typically need more help than the standard Theraplay® treatment protocol described above.

Our assessment process may lead to a recommendation of more sessions, longer sessions or more frequent sessions. While Theraplay® treatment is often recommended in the early appointments in order to strengthen the parent-child relationship (attachment), eventually your child might need to process the past using other protocols such as Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP). A significant aspect of your treatment plan is supporting you in your role as an adoptive/foster parent. We will teach you about why your child behaves the way he does based upon the latest scientific research about the developing brain and attachment. You will learn why your child's unique background requires a different parenting style than you might have expected—therapeutic parenting.

In all cases, our therapists will be sensitive to your family's needs and make appropriate referrals for services.

What Is a Typical Theraplay® Treatment Session?

A Theraplay® session usually lasts 40-50 minutes. The therapist will invite you and your child into the Theraplay® room in a fun way, such as hopping on one foot, and lead you and your child to a special seat that the therapist has prepared. The therapist will lead the child through a series of simple, fun games and activities, while helping the child be successful and competent. If the child resists the activities, the therapist will find responses that get the child back on track while still maintaining a positive connection with the child. In addition to playful, physical games, the therapist will also initiate quiet activities to nurture your child. Depending on the stage of therapy (parent involvement increases as therapy progresses), the therapist will ask you to play the games in order to facilitate the connection with you and build your skills at responding to your child's needs. At the end of the session, the therapist may ask you to play some of the games at home. A parent-only session, where you and the therapist will talk about progress and how to address any behavior problems at home occurs between family sessions.



Your therapist, we'll call her Jane, comes out of the treatment room, welcoming you and your child with a smile, a brief check on whether your child brought his bright eyes, and inviting you to come into the room in a fun way, like taking giant steps together to the Theraplay® space. Sitting down herself in front of your child, Jane may take her shoes off and see if you and your child would like to do the same. This is so you are all comfortable sitting in a cozier way and playing together. Then Jane will notice special things about your child to get to know him better. "Well, Joe, I see you have wonderful curly hair, and your eyes are deep brown, like M&M's. That is so cool! And let me check your hands. Oh, you have two of them! Good! (and Jane winks at him to let him know she is making a silly joke). But, you know, it is cold outside today. I wonder if your hands are warm or cold." Taking one of Joe's hands in hers, Jane cups her hands over Joe's. "Oh, this one is quite cold. And (doing the same with the other hand) this one is cold, too. I'm going to see if I can warm them up." Jane cups each or both hands in hers, and rubs briskly, all the while watching Joe to make sure her touch is OK with him and that she is not rubbing too hard. Jane may say to you, "I bet you can warm Joe's hands really good, cause you're his mom (or dad)." And you get a turn to take care of your son's hands. During this "check-up," Jane will be sure to take care of any hurts she happens to notice, whether large or small. If there is, let's say a scratch on Joe's arm, Jane would show concern and say, "I'm going to just give this a bit of attention," and she might rub some lotion around the perimeter of the hurt or dab it with a cotton ball. "Now if that feels better, we can have some fun." Then Jane will engage Joe in a series of activities that first increase in liveliness and then become calmer as the session draws to an end. Your child might be asked to punch through newspaper, pop bubbles with different body parts, balance on pillows or blow a cotton ball back and forth. Jane might measure his hand or ear with fruit tape, or the circumference of his head with crepe paper streamers. In beginning sessions, Jane may be the person playing with Joe while you watch, but she will gradually have you join in and also guide you to play with Joe while she watches. If Joe has trouble with an activity, Jane will find ways to re-engage him, always keeping the interaction between Joe and her, or Joe and you as the most important, healing thing to preserve. After between three to five activities, Jane will make sure Joe is comfortable again and offer some treat (crackers, fruit snacks, cookies) to give Joe a clear experience of being nurtured. She may offer you the treat, too, to have you be part of the nurturing. In this session or in subsequent ones, she may have you feed Joe, too. Then, Jane is likely to sing Joe a special song geared to help him feel he is special, important, and valued. This can involve some cuddling and



physical closeness between you and Joe. This tender, ending activity can help parent and child feel closer to each other, more emotionally connected. Then Jane will help you and Joe leave the therapy space, possibly in the same way you came into the room. And the session is over.

Angela Holoubek, LSCSW, RPT-S has been trained in the two levels of Theraplay®. She provides Theraplay® based therapy as she is not a Certified Theraplay® practitioner.

The information contained in this document is taken from The Theraplay® Institute website. Angela has modified her Theraplay® based treatment protocol to fit her practice.