

Theraplay

The primary goal of Theraplay is to enhance the parent-child attachment relationship. Related goals are to increase the child's felt safety and self-esteem, to decrease inappropriate behaviors, and to give parents the tools to continue rewarding and healthy interactions with their child. These tools include the parent's capacity to view the child empathically and the ability to provide guidance with a balance of structure and warmth.

Theraplay is based on increasing the child and parents' experience of shared joy. Joy changes the brain in positive ways and counteracts negative emotions. Specific hormones or neurotransmitters, oxytocin and natural substances in the body called opioids (endorphins, norepinephrine), are associated with play and affiliative behaviors. They increase our feelings of well-being and security, promote bonding, reduce anxiety, and are associated with reward-motivated behavior. Playful interactions between the child and parent promote the child's feeling and belief that he is lovable, special, and competent, as well as increase his positive feelings toward his parent. These processes form the basic foundation for Theraplay.

The therapist first meets with the parents alone to gather information, followed by assessment sessions in which each parent and the child engage in a series of simple tasks in order to analyze their interactions. A structured assessment tool is used called the Marschak Interaction Method. These sessions are videotaped and followed by a feedback session with the parents, when a plan for treatment is discussed and an agreement is made for a specified number of Theraplay weekly sessions. For mild to moderate problems, approximately 20 sessions are typically held, although treatment may extend to 9 to 18 months or more with those whose problems are severe.

Theraplay sessions usually are 30-45 minutes and occur in a comfortable room with floor pillows or a beanbag chair where the therapist, child, and parents can sit on the floor. After first observing the therapist interacting with the child, the parents become actively engaged in playful interactions with the child. Theraplay activities incorporate playful, nurturing touch and foster engagement, such as thumb wrestling, rocking a child in a blanket, blowing cotton balls across a finish line, and others. Homework assignments are commonly given, starting with activities that were enjoyed in the weekly sessions.

Theraplay has been used in a wide variety of settings and with children of varying ages and behavior problems. Some venues in which Theraplay has been used include:

- Group sessions with families
- Children in long-term foster care in Finland
- Children and their mothers in domestic violence shelters
- Play groups of children after the tsunami in Sri Lanka
- Adoptive families
- Residential treatment settings (goal is to establish an attachment atmosphere in the facility and a close relationship with one special staff person)

References

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