

Information Sheet: What is Play Therapy?

"Play Therapy is based upon the fact that play is the child's natural medium of self expression ... It is an opportunity which is given to the child to 'play out' his feelings and problems just as in certain types of adult therapy an individual 'talks out' his difficulties."

From "Dibs in Search of Self" by Virginia Axline

Play Therapy works for children as counselling or psychotherapy does for adults. Play Therapy helps children to work through emotional and behavioural issues and helps to address family problems.

Children who have been traumatised by sexual abuse have special therapeutic needs. They may have been scared into silence; many have had their trust in adults betrayed; they may be angry and acting aggressively and, if young, they may lack the language skills or sexual knowledge to clearly describe or understand what has occurred.

Whether or not a child knows how to communicate with a counsellor, all children know how to play. In Play Therapy, the counsellor enters the world of the child, following the child's lead, developing a safe place and a relationship of trust. Through play, the child is encouraged to create a world that she or he can master, practice social skills, and overcome frightening feelings; with the aim of conquering the upsets and traumas that have stolen the child's sense of well-being.

Play therapy sessions are conducted in a playroom that has a wide range of carefully selected toys and materials. In the playroom, the child can express feelings, thoughts, experiences and behaviours through his or her play. Toys are used like words and become the child's natural language.

Often the child selects the toys and activities to play with. The counsellor may, on the child's direction, join the child in imaginary play. At other times the counsellor may guide the play for the session. Limits are set as and when needed. This is done in a way that helps children make choices and develop self responsibility.

Parents are important allies in the Play Therapy process, and can do much to support and enhance the work their child does in Play Therapy sessions. It is important for parents to meet regularly with the counsellor to discuss what is happening in the child's daily life, to share important observations and to give suggestions on how parents can support the child's therapy.