

Theraplay

"A child whose behaviour pushes you away is a child who needs connection before anything else"

Kelly Bartlett

According to the [Theraplay Institute](#), "Theraplay is an engaging, playful, relationship-focused treatment method that is interactive, physical, personal, and fun. Its principles are based on attachment theory and its model is the healthy, attuned interaction between parents and their children."

Theraplay activities are very simple and are supported by the trained therapist. "The simplicity allows the full impact of the process to be felt by the child. Theraplay activities aim at creating a feeling of closeness between the child and parent, which is attained through activities in which the child experiences the adult as creating the structure (the rules, etc.) and also nurturing the child. The goal of therapy is that the child be more at ease with adults and other children, have less of a need to stay in charge, and be more spontaneously able to experience and express her feelings." (Theraplay Institute).

Theraplay is designed to help children to find ways of regulating themselves and their emotions with the emotional containment from their parent/carer. The child needs support in order to get back on track in their developmental process. Therefore, Theraplay is geared toward a child's emotional level, not their chronological age. Theraplay is used with a wide variety of issues. Children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Reactive Attachment Disorder can all benefit from Theraplay. It is also used to work with children with developmental delays and Autism. Some children without a diagnosis can also benefit from the interactions of Theraplay, including children who are acting out, angry, non-compliant, withdrawn, depressed, and those with attachment insecurities.

What is Theraplay?

Theraplay is a child and family therapy for building and enhancing attachment, self-esteem, trust in others, and joyful engagement. Theraplay can be helpful for children of all ages and provides responses more linked to the child's emotional developmental age rather than their chronological age. It is based on the natural patterns of playful, healthy interaction between parent and child. It 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.

The Theraplay therapist guides the parent and child through playful, fun games, developmentally challenging activities, and tender, nurturing activities. The very act of engaging each other in this way helps the parent regulate the child's behaviour and communicate love, joy, and safety to the child. It helps the child feel secure, cared for, connected and worthy.

How Does Theraplay Work?

"You are mistaken if you think we have to lower ourselves to communicate with children. On the contrary, we have to reach up to their feelings, stretch, stand on our tiptoes."

Janusz Korczak 1925



Theraplay can improve children's behaviour in unique ways. Using the therapeutic benefits of joyful play and sensitive caregiving, Theraplay focuses on strengthening the parent/carer relationship with the child. It works to enhance the sense of connection and mutual understanding so that the child finds a different way to be. As the most important people in a child's life, caregivers are actively involved in sessions. The child and carer will work to experience delight and enjoyment in each other.

The relationship with each other is the most powerful and most influential element for change. How the carers respond to the child can make a huge difference. In Theraplay sessions, the therapist helps the child experience interactions that have previously been hard or troublesome in new ways. The child experiences that relationships can be positive and even fun, and that the carer understand their needs.

Who Can Benefit from Theraplay?

At any age, children who are withdrawn, passive, or depressed, children who are overactive or aggressive, 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.

Evidence-Base

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, behavioural problems often significantly diminish and can also disappear.

Possible outcomes from Theraplay

- To understand the child's feelings and behaviours; why are they behaving in this way.
- How to respond to behaviour in ways that will support self-esteem while, at the same time, decrease child's need for the behaviour.
- How to circumvent and other times address head-on the child's difficult behaviours in ways that further the parent/carer-child bond and build the child's self-control, feeling of competence, and sense of continued connection.
- For the child to experience care giving – as a strong, dependable, and caring parent/carer who can manage the child's struggles and challenges.
- How to reconnect with the child (repair) after the inevitable disappointments the child presents to you and bring him quickly back to a place of well-being.

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- To create pleasurable moments of connection and fun with the child that will bring shared joy and strengthen the relationship.
- Experiencing these moments in the Theraplay sessions with the child with the continual support of your therapist. In Theraplay, we don't just talk about being different with the child, we actually do things differently with the child in the session. This will provide a hands-on, totally supported experience of improving interactions with the child.

Child outcomes Theraplay

- The child will learn to see the carer/parent as strong, wise, and skilful in helping them out of distressing moments and to use different behaviour.
- The child will feel closer to their caregiver whose influence will grow.
- In response to the carers new skills, the child will feel more competent and confident.
- She will feel calmer, less anxious, angry, frightened, or timid.
- The child will get along better with other authority figures and with peers and siblings.
- They will not have to resort to problematic behaviours to get his needs met.
- Children who have suffered separation, loss, abuse or neglect will learn: they can trust to be taken care of.
- They can rely on their carer giver to meet their needs for nurturing and comfort.
- To accept appropriate structure, limits, rules.
- The child will increasingly enjoy engaging with their parent/caregiver.
- They will feel worthy of care, counteracting their negative experiences.
- Children with developmental/communication issues will learn: 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 is a primary or adjunctive approach.

What Is a Typical Theraplay Session?

A Theraplay session usually lasts 50 minutes in a therapy room at Tiptoes centre. In a typical session, 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. Typically, every fourth session is a parent-only session, where you and the therapist will talk about progress and how to address any presentation or behaviour issues at home.

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