

PLAY IS MY WORK

How adults can support children

by Susan Whitney, The Dougy Center for Grieving Children

What is Play?

- Play is the work of my childhood. It is my response to life. It's how I make the pieces of the puzzle fit. It is always an unfolding process.
- Play is the way I discover who I am and how I relate to others. I need to try on lots of hats to see how they feel.
- Play is my life. If I cannot play you should be as concerned as if I could not sleep or eat.
- Play is my language; it is my way of telling you how I feel. Please take time to listen to my words and learn this language.
- Play is my outlet for all the yucky feelings I have inside: the fear, the anger, the anxiety, the frustration and the guilt. If I know these don't scare you, they won't scare me. If I can play them out, then I don't have to carry them inside my body.

When I play, I need you as an adult to:

- Honor my work by not interrupting or leading my play.
- Validate my experience and perception of the world and who I am in it by reflecting what you see as accurately as possible.
- Trust me by never attempting to hurry my play or my healing.
- Keep me emotionally and physically safe by setting clear and firm limits within a framework of freedom, not control.
- Build my self-confidence by keeping yourself firmly grounded in the belief that I have within myself the ability to solve my own problems and find my path to healing.
- Respect my work by giving me the responsibility to make choices and institute change in my play and in my life.
- Have your own playful child close at hand. I like to know you can have fun too!



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Guidelines for Play

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- Contemplate what the conflicts are between the child's inner reality of his or her external world. Know that the behaviors exhibited are the best solutions that the child has created.
- Significant issues will be repeated again and again. You will know that the issue has been met and resolved for the moment when it no longer appears in the child's play and the child moves on to other things.
- The rules in a play group must be kept simple and clear. Accidents count. The more ambiguous the rules, the more dependent the child.
- Let the child initiate. In your movements and verbal statements follow the child. In that way, your movement and interaction will be more relevant to the child's experience.
- Stay open to your process. Let yourself know your feelings of anxiety, frustration, anger and control. Make sure you allow yourself emotional support which includes confrontation.
- Be direct in your statements without blaming or criticizing. Allow yourself to say such things as: "I smell poop." "You didn't make him die." "Your mother hits you." "You like being the boss." Stealing, sex, fights, death and abuse are all available subjects in the playroom.
- Let the child know he has confidentiality. Inform him when you are having a parent consultation. Ask if there is anything the child wants us to talk to the parents about or anything he/she doesn't want us to talk to them about. Respect that. If you feel it is important to talk to the parents about something the child doesn't want you to address, be honest with the child about this. Be open to including the child in the consultations.
- Don't try to fix them or change them or encourage them or teach them or therapize them. *Just be with them.*

Eight Principles of Child-Centered Play Therapy

by *Virginia Axline*

- A warm and friendly relationship is established with the child, in which good rapport is established as soon as possible.
- The child is accepted exactly as he/she is.
- A feeling of permissiveness is established in the relationship, so that the child feels free to express his/her feelings completely.
- The feelings that the child is expressing are recognized and reflected back to him/her in such a manner that he/she gains insight in his/her behavior.
- A deep respect is maintained for the child's ability to solve his/her own problems if given an opportunity to do so. The responsibility to make choices and institute change is the child's.
- The child's actions or conversation are not directed in any manner. The child leads the way.
- The child's process is not hurried along. It is a gradual process and is recognized as such.
- Only those limits necessary to anchor the child to his/her reality and to make the child aware of his/her responsibility in the relationship are established.

Four Principles of Supportive Play

Structuring

This delineates this as a special, safe time for the child to express him/herself in. It provides the context and helps them to note that this is a special context and not the norm, i.e. this is our special play time.

Imaginary Play

The person supporting the child allows the child to direct, or lead the play, and enters into the child's imaginary play willingly, as the child directs, and only at the child's invitation. The supporting person does not attempt to lead, direct, or openly question the child's play.

Reflection

The person supporting the child reflects back to the child, like a mirror, what the child is saying, doing and expressing. Content of the play, as well as feelings apparent in the play can be reflected. (You're throwing the ball really high and it looks from your smile like that makes you very happy.)

This helps to build a safe holding environment for the child's processing. It helps them to feel heard, understood and helps them to have a new understanding of their own thoughts and feelings. We reflect tentatively and only reflect back what the child is giving to us, not our adult interpretations, wishes, etc.

Limit Setting

This helps anchor the child to reality; helps them to learn about their responsibility in the relationship; and helps them learn to tolerate limits, as well as keeping them safe in their expressive process. Only those limits necessary are established, and they are only established as the situation arises.

Three-step Limit Setting Process

- Limit is stated.
- Limit is stated again, as is consequence.
- Consequence is implemented.

—*Adapted from Filial Therapy by Rise Van Fleet*

Ways Children Play

- Solitary – plays alone, limited interactions with children
- Spectator – observes, but does not initiate play with others
- Parallel – plays alongside, but not directly with others
- Associate – starts to interact with others in play
- Cooperative – plays directly in shared goals/aims with other children