

Playing through an Expressive Lens

Play therapy is intentional pairing of a developmentally matched medium with a therapeutic relationship through which children play out their experiences and express their thoughts and emotions. Beyond matching to the child's emotional and cognitive development, play therapy serves other vital functions. Play therapy provides 1) fun, 2) symbolic expression 3) catharsis 4) social development 5) mastery, and 6) release of energy.

Stages of Play Therapy

- The first phase of play therapy is commonly referred to as the initiation phase or exploratory stage. ...
- The next stage is referred to as the resistance phase, aggressive stage, or negative reaction stage. ...
- The next stage is the growing phase or work phase. ...
- Lastly is the termination phase.

Through the therapeutic relationship, play builds social competency, attachment, and empathy. Play gives voice to self-expression, allows access to unconscious thoughts, and allows for direct and indirect teaching. Play gives children space for catharsis and abreaction.

Scholars of play therapy assert that play therapy is effective because it is developmentally matched to the child's ability to express emotions and process information. Like play therapy models, the ETC aligns with developmental models, highlighting the importance of somatic and sensory input as the earliest form of learning, followed by perceptual and emotional, and finally, cognitive processing and understanding.

Kinesthetic/sensory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sandbox • Kinetic sand • Sensory toys • Sand play without figures • Play-Doh or clay • Paint/child's easel • Regulation items • Plush animals • Musical instruments
Perceptual/affective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dress-up • Dramatic play • Sandtray (with figures; without verbal process) • Mastery and building toys • Real-life toys (e.g., kitchen, dollhouse) • Puppets • Music • Feelings cards
Cognitive/symbolic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Games • Collages • Mastery and building toys • Puppets • Sandtray with verbal process • Feelings cards • Structured art activities

Play therapy is an identified expressive therapy intervention developmentally suited for children and some adolescents and adults, depending on their developmental level and specific presenting issue. Although play therapists operate from various theoretical orientations, approaches, and models, the reliance on toys, games, and props for expression is central. In addition to toys, integrating expressive arts into play therapy creates an embodied opportunity to increase awareness and experience emotions and thoughts more deeply. With an expanded play therapy setup play therapists can provide the broadest possible range of expression.

However, many play therapists struggle to meaningfully integrate the full range of expressive therapies into therapy sessions because they lack a cohesive framework to determine when and how to use a combination of directive and nondirective approaches. Fortunately, the expressive therapies continuum serves as a viable framework that play therapists can adapt to their existing theoretical orientation.

Through this lens, integrating multimodal interventions that flow between kinesthetic/sensory, perceptual/affective, and cognitive/symbolic information processing becomes effortless. Furthermore, play therapists can better align therapeutic interventions to the child's pace by identifying the neurological and somatic indicators of processing, which respects the stance of nondirective and directive play therapists. With these things in mind, play therapists can meaningfully integrate other modalities of expressive therapies within the context of the therapeutic powers of play.

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Summary of part of book Expressive Art Therapy by Dr. Cathy Malchiodi