

PARENTING

Playing attention

If your children are acting up and you can't figure out why, don't send them to the corner, try sending them to play therapy. It's a good way to help them work through issues

Lisa Jewell

ljewell@independent.ie

PLAY therapy isn't as well known or widely used in Ireland as it is in the UK and the States but it is a useful tool in helping children deal with emotional problems. Sarah Rush, who is a play therapist at the Owen Connolly Counselling Centre in Dublin, says there would be a huge benefit in having more play therapists in this country.

"Play therapy is a therapeutic intervention that's really designed to help children be as happy and well adjusted as possible," she says. "If the child is a little bit stuck in their development because of something that's happened, then play therapy can help them get back on the developmental track."

"Most parents who opt for play therapy for their child notice that the child has more confidence and self-esteem after a few sessions. It's giving them the emotional support so they can look at a difficult life experience that they've gone through."

Play therapy is often used for children dealing with parental separation or divorce, bereavement, attachment problems, family illness, anxiety or abuse. It is generally used for children aged three to 12 years.

Expression

At the best of times, children can find it difficult to articulate what they're feeling and that's only accentuated when they find themselves dealing with bigger life issues.

But play can be a way for a child to express their feelings about what's going on and they can open up to someone who is not directly involved in the situation.

"We use an enhanced play environment and the child has an opportunity to come in and choose what toys or materials they want to use," says Sarah, who worked in a Barnardos Family Support Centre for seven years and has a degree in psychology and an MA in Non-Directive Play Therapy.

"It's child-centred and it's non-directive, which means I don't use structured exercises but let the child lead the play. For instance, there's a doll's house in the corner of the room and that might be an opportunity to play around issues about home."

"There are dolls, nappies and bottles, which give opportunities to play around issues to do with nurturing, attachment and that sort of



Connecting: Play therapist Sarah Rush at the Owen Connolly Counselling Centre

thing. There's a huge collection of dress up and children often use role-play as a way to express issues they're going through. Often the child will give me a role – they might want to be a powerful king fighting the witch.

"I try not to push the therapy in any direction. If a little girl were coming to me because her mum and dad have split up, I wouldn't be asking direct questions about how she feels about that. I'd be very much focusing on

developing this trusting relationship and making her feel safe.

"I'd be paying very close attention to this little girl and how she might be feeling. She might express that through non-verbal behaviour or she might express it through her play. So if she wanted to play a powerful king and I'm the witch, there might be certain feelings that she's expressing through that role."

"I'm trying to help her understand her feelings by making verbal reflections, like 'Oh you're the powerful king and you want to get rid of this witch'. The child will often say, 'Yes' so you know you're on the right track with it and you're helping them understand how they feel."

Play therapy can provide breakthroughs with children who are having emotional difficulties.

In one such case, Barbara* from Wicklow couldn't work out why her daughter Laura* got hysterical about going to school.

Attachment

"She started school in September 2007 and for the first two weeks, she loved it," she says. "Then towards the end of the month my father was diagnosed with cancer. Laura was very close to him and she took it very badly."

Over the next year, Laura would cry every morning about going to school.

"Everyone in the house was on tenterhooks because of it," says Barbara. "Nothing that we tried with her seemed to work. My father passed away in the April and Laura went back to school in September and the problem was still there."

Barbara's GP mentioned play therapy to her and she decided to give it a try.

"We thought Laura had been acting that way because my father had died but it was only through the feedback from the play therapy that we realised the problems had started back when he got sick. Laura associated going to school with being sick and she told the play therapist that when she went to school, she was afraid she wouldn't see me again."

"She was obsessed with people dying and she had this thing about people going into hospitals and not coming back out. It was a lot for a five-year-old to be dealing with."

"But since she's had the play therapy sessions, she's like a different child. She looks forward to going to school and it's like all those feelings she had have lifted."

"I'm glad she did the play therapy because it's like my GP said, if we didn't find out what was causing her anxiety about going to school, she might have ended up with more problems because of it."

Play therapy usually takes place over the course of six to eight sessions and it first