

PLAY THERAPY CAN  
PROVIDE  
BREAKTHROUGHS WITH  
CHILDREN WHO ARE  
HAVING EMOTIONAL  
DIFFICULTIES



Make-believe: Play therapy is a way of communicating with children. PHOTO: JEAN CURRAN

begins with a home visit.

"That's particularly important for younger children so they know what the play therapist looks like," says Sarah Rush. "I usually bring a photo of the play room so that it seems a bit familiar to them. It's so that everyone is feeling a bit more comfortable with it. You could imagine that a four- or five-year-old might feel a little bit anxious about coming to this new place.

#### Feedback

"Another important thing is that mum or dad is sitting in the waiting area during the play therapy session. That lends a huge amount of emotional safety for the child so that if half way through the session they're working on some difficult feelings, they know they can go out to check on mum or dad and say hello before coming back into the play session."

While children can talk freely about what goes on during the play session, parents are asked not to quiz their child about it.

"I would meet with mum or dad every three to four sessions and give them general feedback on what I see the child is communicating in the play-therapy session," says Sarah. "We look together at what things could happen at home to better meet the child's needs.

"I always focus on the fact that the parent is here, they really care about their child and they want to make things better for them. They've taken a really important step in coming here and it's a collaborative process

between the parents and me.

"I'm finding myself using filial play therapy more and more. Filial means the parent-child relationship and this type of play therapy involves supporting and training parents to do special play times at home with their child. They're not play-therapy sessions and the parent is clear that they're not a therapist at the end of the training.

"It's about supporting the parent to learn relationship-enhancing skills that they're going to be able to use to do child-centred play sessions at home with their child."

One area where filial play therapy is of particular help is in dealing with attachment problems that some adopted or fostered children experience.

Michelle\*, from Dublin, is using filial play therapy with her daughter Ruth\*, who was adopted from overseas when she was 14 months old.

"She was in an orphanage and then in foster care for several months," says Michelle. "The handover to me was quite fast so she didn't get the chance to get to know me over a period of time. I can imagine the stress of that for a young child - to be taken from a culture she'd known and people she'd known and then she was living in another country.

"She was developmentally doing well but when she went to school I started to see some problems arising. She didn't develop relationships with the other kids and she had issues around control. Her need for control



### TIME PLAYING IS NO TIME-WASTING

PLAY therapy is useful for children dealing with emotional difficulties but playing, in general, is important for all children.

"Play is an important way that children learn about the world," says Sarah Rush. "Engaging in unstructured, imaginative play helps children develop social skills, contributes to cognitive and emotional development and helps them cope with stress.

"Through imaginative play children practise regulating their feelings and behaviour. Children with good self-regulation are able to control their emotions and behaviour and exert self-control and discipline.

"Play is also a form of stress relief - through imaginative play, children build fantasies that help them cope with difficult situations and conquer fears and worries."

was a big challenge.

"It was suggested that play therapy might be a good idea. With any form of therapy, you can see some disimprovement at the beginning when some issues come up but my relationship with my daughter has gotten an awful lot better and I understand her more. Her play is a lot less intense and she's more chilled out.

"I felt there were skills that I could use in my relationship with Ruth so I decided to go down the filial play-therapy route. It gives us an allocated time slot when we can focus on play and on each other.

"If my daughter is explaining play therapy to someone else, she'll say, 'it's about getting mummies and daddies to talk to children better and know what they're thinking'. I think that's a great way of summing it up."

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON PLAY THERAPY VISIT THE IRISH PLAY THERAPY ASSOCIATION'S WEBSITE: [WWW.IPTA.IE](http://WWW.IPTA.IE) OR CHECK OUT THE BRITISH ASSOCIATION OF PLAY THERAPISTS' SITE AT: [WWW.BAPT.INFO](http://WWW.BAPT.INFO).

\* NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED

## TAKE A FEW MINUTES OUT AND HAVE SOME FUN WITH YOUR CHILD

SARAH has these tips for parents on ways to play with their children.

- Create a play space in your home.
- Provide open-ended play materials and toys that encourage imaginary and active play that can be played with in more than one way - for example old telephones or mobile phones, cooking utensils and saucepans, old clothes and hats, dolls, writing materials and old cardboard boxes, building blocks, etc.

- Make time to engage in child-led imaginary and make-believe free play.
- Follow your child's lead and let him/her develop the play themes.
- Try to avoid asking questions and directing the play activity.
- Show your child that he/she has your undivided attention by providing a play commentary of their activity.
- Positive parent-and-child play experiences can help develop strong emotional bonds and are an

- opportunity to engage fully with your child.
- Playing with your child is an opportunity to see the world through your child's eyes and creates a bank of positive feelings and experiences to draw upon in more difficult times.
- Set limits for unsafe and unacceptable behaviour.
- Have fun - playfulness and humour are associated with good mental health.
- Playing with your child can be stress relief for busy parents!

