An Overview of Nondirective Play Therapy

November 10, 2009 • By Leslie H. Petruk, MA, LPC, NCC, [Play Therapy](http://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/types/play-therapy) Topic Expert Contributor

Non-directive play therapy is a counseling method used to help children communicate their inner experiences through the use of toys and play. Nondirective play therapy, also called child-centered play therapy, is a nonpathologizing technique based on the belief that children have the internal drive to achieve wellness

**Play Therapy Process**

Nondirective play therapists are trained to trust that children are capable of directing their own process rather than the therapist imposing their own ideas of what the child needs to do in therapy to work through any challenges they may be facing. This requires the therapist to enter the emotional world of the child rather then expecting the child to understand the therapist’s world, which is beyond their capabilities. Play therapy is based on the theory that play is a child’s language, the toys in the playroom considered the words a child uses to express their inner experiences and how they perceive and experience the world. The toys in the playroom are then used by the child to speak to the therapist and communicate their inner thoughts and feelings. Within a play session, and over the course of sessions, themes emerge in the child’s play, giving the therapist insight into the child’s experiences, thoughts, feelings, and interpretations of their world.

Bottom of Form

Nondirective play therapy is based on respect for the child and confidence in his or her ability to direct his or her own process. It requires that the therapist maintain [unconditional acceptance and positive regard](http://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/psychpedia/unconditional-positive-regard) for the child. Because children do not typically have the cognitive and language skills to communicate their emotional experiences, by observing a child’s play sequences and play themes, the therapist can gain great insight into the child’s inner world. By creating a safe, free, and protected space, the child is provided the opportunity to work through deeper emotional [fears](http://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/issues/fear), wounds, and experiences. Children are given permission to express themselves in whatever way they are comfortable and are not required to speak, which often feels intimidating and scary to a child.

*“The play therapy process can be viewed as a relationship between the therapist and the child in which the child utilizes play to explore his or her personal world and also to make contact with the therapist in a way that is safe for the child. Play therapy provides an opportunity for children to live out, during play, experiences and associated feelings. This process allows the therapist to experience, in a personal and interactive way, the inner dimensions of the child’s world. This therapeutic relationship is what provides dynamic growth and healing for the child*.” (Landreth & Bratton, 2001).

**Insight Through Play**

It is not uncommon for children to express their inner thoughts and feelings in a maladaptive way at home or school because of their inability to articulate their experiences. They communicate emotional distress through behavior. By reflecting a child’s process and feelings expressed in play and play themes, the therapist begins to give the child a vocabulary of feelings. More importantly, by reflecting the child’s play and [emotions](http://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/psychpedia/emotion), the therapist makes children feel understood and validated. The children experience a connection with the therapist that is often different from any other relationship they have. It is through this relationship and the therapist’s ability to communicate with the child that a child feels safe, understood, and validated, and begins to [gain confidence](http://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/psychpedia/confidence).

Children often misinterpret their world and experiences, which can lead to fears, anxieties, and misbehaviors. A common example of this is when parents [separate or divorce](http://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/issues/divorce) and a child interprets this as something he or she has caused. As a result of this belief, a child may exhibit anxiety, [depression](http://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/issues/depression), insecurity, or defiance. A trained play therapist is able to interpret the child’s play and the themes that emerge so that a reworking of these experiences can occur. As a child gains a sense of safety and realizes that the therapist will not react or respond in ways others might have, they begin to go deeper in their process. They will begin to play out deeper issues and verbalize their thoughts and feelings to the therapist. Often this working through occurs through the metaphor of the toys, and the therapist can engage in a dialogue through the metaphor, helping the child understand and rework the problem. When children are provided a safe and protected environment they will communicate their inner experiences, [worries](http://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/issues/worry), conflicts, and needs.

*“By acting out through play a frightening or traumatic experience or situation symbolically, and perhaps changing or reversing the outcome in the play activity, children move toward an inner resolution, and then they are better able to cope with or adjust to problems.”* (Landreth & Bratton, 2001)

For example, Mary, a six year-old girl whose parents have just divorced has been experiencing extreme [anxiety](http://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/issues/anxiety). As the therapist works with her, the themes that begin to emerge are caretaking. Mary engages in a play sequence with a horse family. She begins to play out the baby horse, protecting and comforting the mommy horse. By engaging in conversation with the baby horse, the therapist can let her know that it is not her job to protect and take care of the mommy horse. That mommy horses know how to do that for themselves. They can then discuss how the baby horse might feel if it knows it doesn’t have to take care of the mommy horse anymore and what it might do instead.

This is an example of how toys provide safe objects for a child to play out their internal experiences in a symbolic manner. The toys provide enough distance and safety from their own feelings and reactions that they can express them through the use of the toys and their play. The therapist can enter into the metaphor of the child’s play to gain additional insight and help them rework scenarios that are parallel to challenges they may be experiencing in their life.

**Limits and Boundaries in Play Therapy**

A list of rules is reviewed at the initiation of therapy. If a child breaks a rule—throwing sand, trying to break a toy—then a limit is set: “I know it’s fun to throw sand, but the sand is not for throwing. You can play with it in the sand trays and toss it from hand to hand, or you can throw a ball.”

Children require limits and boundaries in any relationship to feel safe and accepted. The relationship between a child and play therapist is no different. The therapeutic relationship established in play therapy is one of trust and acceptance, in which the child is valued, but it is not without boundaries.

During a child’s play time, they are allowed to be messy and are encouraged to explore; doing something in a specific or directed way is not required. The therapist in no way controls what the child does or how they do it. Limits are set if they are doing harm to themselves, the toys, or the therapist. Limits are set if and when they are needed in order to help the child learn responsibility of self and self-control. Limits are set in a way that validates the child’s feelings and desires, communicates the limit, and gives alternatives: “I know you would like to take that rock home with you. But it has to stay in the play room so it will be here for you next time. You can take the picture you made with you.” This then allows the child to learn the concept of self-control and making choices, rather than an adult attempting to control the child’s behavior.

**Implications of Play Therapy**

Play therapy has been widely researched as an effective and developmentally appropriate method for working with children dealing with the following types of concerns, among others: depression, [grief and loss](http://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/issues/grief), social adjustment problems, speech difficulties, trauma, hospitalization, reading difficulties, [selective mutism](http://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/psychpedia/psychogenic-mutism), enuresis and encopresis problems, fear and anxiety, [abuse](http://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/issues/abuse) and neglect, aggression/acting out behaviors, [attachment difficulties](http://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/issues/attachment), autism, chronic illness and disability, and parental separation or divorce.

Scheduling a consistent appointment time each week is helpful in providing consistency and predictability for the child who enters play therapy. This also provides continuity and more efficient treatment. Eventually, the play therapist will begin to spread out sessions, making them less frequent, when a child begins to exhibit signs of improvement.

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