



Play Therapy: A Developmentally Appropriate, Trauma-Informed Intervention for Pediatric Behavioural and Emotional Concerns

Prepared for Pediatricians and Primary Care Providers by the BC Play Therapy Association

What Is Play Therapy?

Play therapy is an evidence-based, developmentally appropriate mental health intervention that allows children to express thoughts, process emotions, and resolve psychosocial challenges through the natural language of play. It is particularly effective for children experiencing:

- Behavioural challenges (e.g., aggression, defiance, hyperactivity)
 - Emotional dysregulation (e.g., anxiety, sadness, fear)
 - Trauma and loss
 - Attachment disruptions
 - Social difficulties and school problems
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Why Play Therapy Works

Developmentally Appropriate

Children often lack the cognitive or verbal ability to fully articulate emotional distress. Play is their primary mode of communication and learning. In play therapy, toys become words and play becomes conversation — making it an ideal therapeutic method for young people.

Trauma-Informed and Neuroscience-Aligned

Research from trauma experts like **Dr. Bruce Perry** and **Dr. Dan Siegel** shows that traumatic experiences impact the lower brain, impairing emotional regulation and language. Play therapy addresses these areas through sensory, relational, and emotional engagement — helping regulate the nervous system and reestablish a sense of safety.

Neuroscientific Benefits

- Engages the **right brain**, responsible for emotions, imagery, and implicit memory
 - Supports **co-regulation** and builds **neuroplasticity** through consistent, attuned therapeutic relationships
 - Helps reorganize traumatic memory stored in non-verbal areas of the brain
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Evidence from the University of North Texas

The **Center for Play Therapy at the University of North Texas (UNT)** is the leading global research center for play therapy. Their work on **Child-Centered Play Therapy (CCPT)** demonstrates strong clinical outcomes:

Key Findings:

- **Large effect sizes** for reducing behavioral and emotional symptoms (Bratton et al., 2005)
- Greater outcomes when caregivers are actively involved
- Effective across diverse cultural, economic, and diagnostic populations

“Play therapy has been shown to produce statistically and clinically significant improvements in children’s behavior, emotional well-being, and interpersonal functioning.”

— **Bratton et al. (2005)**, *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*

Therapeutic Powers of Play¹

Research identifies multiple healing mechanisms within play therapy:

- Emotional expression
 - Development of coping and problem-solving skills
 - Reenactment and mastery of traumatic experiences
 - Strengthening of attachment and relationships
 - Regulation of stress and physiological arousal
 - Empowerment and increased self-efficacy
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When to Refer to Play Therapy

Consider referring children to a qualified play therapist if you observe:

- Persistent behavioural issues unresponsive to parenting strategies
 - Emotional withdrawal, hypervigilance, or nightmares
 - Regression, toileting issues, or separation anxiety
 - Impact from trauma, divorce, loss, or medical procedures
 - Difficulty forming relationships or adapting to school environments
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Conclusion

Play therapy offers pediatricians a trusted, developmentally sensitive referral option for children facing behavioural, emotional, or traumatic challenges. It aligns with current neuroscience, supports whole-child development, and offers measurable outcomes.

Please feel free to share this document and the attached “A Caregivers’ Guide to Finding a Play Therapist” with parents.

For additional information, please contact:

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Key References

- <https://evidencebasedchildtherapy.com/>
- <https://cpt.unt.edu/research-and-publications>
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