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Play Therapy from a Family View

By MARY FROST, M.S., RCC



What's fun, educational, enlightening and effective for parents who encounter a road block in their parenting skills with young children? Play therapy, of course. No, as a parent, you don't get to play (although many parents have eyed the toys and the sand enviously) but there is a playful atmosphere to the whole process. Play therapy is a way of engaging young children in thinking through and resolving—at their developmental level—their part in family problems. From this perspective, everyone has a role to play in keeping the problem

going, including children. From the child's view, keeping the problem going may seem like the best thing to do. But it is remarkable how, in a series of 50-minute sessions, young children are able to lay out the problem as they see it and then use toys and art materials to change. As a result, their thinking, feeling and behaving become gradually more developmentally appropriate for their age.

In the meantime, parent sessions are spaced in between the child's play sessions at a ratio of one parent session to every four for the child. Although children can "play through" their thinking and feeling about a problem, they are not the only ones who need to work toward change. The family is an open system. Often unresolved parental problems or patterns that have existed in the family for generations contribute to the ways parents and children interact. Children and parents influence each other in a complex interweaving of emotional fields that shift and change in their intensity depending on the anxiety in the family. It is not uncommon for young children to regress developmentally when their parents separate. Some children, for example, may show distress with a return of night fears. So, a sleeping schedule that was relatively stable becomes "a nightmare". The young child may delay bed time, fuss, whine or wake up in the middle of the night. Or, if falling asleep is the child's problem, now that a separation is looming, bedtime becomes much harder. When parents come to me for their first session, we explore a thorough history of the early problems of the child and family. Then I share a philosophy of how play therapy works in a family systems context and how play therapy works for the child. In an accepting atmosphere, children seem to naturally play out the stresses in their lives from their point of view. In the difficult bedtime scenario, for example, a child experiencing an increase in night fears may in her first play therapy session show how the parents were fighting in the dollhouse and then how a little girl tries to sleep in her bed but wakes up in the middle of the night and joins her parents in the "big" bed. Over successive sessions, the child may build "a special bedroom" in the dollhouse for the little girl doll and show her sleeping alone in her new bed. The child may show less conflict between the mother and father dolls. And, in fact, with support from her parents, this may actually reflect what is happening at home. The parents may have worked to reduce confrontation in front of the child and may have helped make the child's bedroom special and/or become more consistent in bedtime routine. There is still work for the parents to do around the separation but the child is kept separate from the problems of the adults. In short, this method of working lessens anxious focus on the child and frees the parents to address issues only they can resolve.

The parents are then free to engage in a thoughtful process to explore their own family process as it impacts them, their spouse and their children. Some parents become so intrigued with this way of working that they devote multiple sessions to exploring their family process. As a result, they see slow but gradual changes in themselves and their families.

If you would like to learn more about family systems and how it can help your family, visit www.livingsystems.ca for local courses and conferences. And if you encounter a stumbling block with your children, you are always welcome to contact me at Living Systems at 604.926.5496 Ext 303.



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