

## Play Therapy? What's that?

Play Therapy is a type of therapy that's been specially designed for working with kids. Some of the techniques and principles can connect powerfully for adults too, but in this article we're going to focus on kids.

There's a reason why researchers and educators emphasise the importance of play. Play is how children learn about the world, and their place in it. It's also how children process the things that happen to them in life – the ups and the downs. Children struggling with a problem, memory, or event, will “play it out” in the same way that adults “talk it out”. Sometimes kids are able to resolve the problem for themselves, and move on. But for problems that are a lot bigger than them, like bullying, loss, grief or anxiety, they don't yet have the internal and external tools and resources to get through it on their own. That's where supportive adults, like parents, teachers, and therapists, can come in.



Kids don't necessarily have the words or concepts they need to express themselves and explain what's going on for them. And for some kids, talking about it would be too frightening, and too overwhelming. But they can play. When they play, they're in control. They can use the toys to explore, express, and process what's going on, and share their inner world with their therapist, at their own pace. The therapist provides a safe place, a supportive, warm relationship, and a range of toys and resources for the child to play with and use. And this enables the child to work out their problems through their play.

### Sounds good. So what happens in sessions?

Usually, the Play Therapist meets with the parents first. This provides them with a chance to get to know the person who's going to be working with their child, and to talk about what's been going on, and what they hope their child will gain from their sessions. After that, the child starts their sessions, and what happens is up to them! The Play Therapist will have a 'tool kit' of toys and resources that the child will be able to use and play with – things like art materials, musical instruments, puppets, dress ups for dramatic play, stories for storytelling and figurines for sand play.



As well as the physical resources, the therapist also provides a warm, safe environment where the child feels accepted just as they are. A place where they are free to choose just what they want to do or talk about. The therapist follows the child's lead, providing a safe anchor to reality, and reflecting back the themes and content of the child's play and conversation, to help the child gain insight. If the child is grappling with a specific issue or problem, the therapist might incorporate worksheets and exercises into the therapy to help them, or they might not – it depends on the child, and on the situation. Sometimes it might seem that the work is very indirect indeed, but in the play room, children

naturally gravitate towards the toys and resources that will help them to express what they need to say, and will help them to heal.

There are minimal rules/limitations, just enough to keep the child, therapist, and toys safe/unbroken. And what the child says, does, or makes in session is kept confidential, just like how the things an adults says or does in therapy is confidential. However, the therapist will usually check in with the parents periodically to talk about how the child (and family) is going, and if they are worried about the child, they will let the parents know.

### **What is Play Therapy useful for?**

Play Therapy is helpful for children experiencing a wide range of behavioural, emotional, and social problems, and life challenges. Things like anxiety, bullying, emotional dysregulation, loss, trauma, grief, and parental separation/divorce. Play Therapy is most often used with children from about three to twelve, although as noted above, the tools and principles (for example, art and sand play) can be used with people all the way into adulthood. Because it doesn't rely on words for self-expression, it can be helpful for people who struggle to articulate what's going on for them – which is most of us, at some point in our lives.



### **OK, I've got a better picture of it now. But does it work?**

It does. Although Play Therapy is not so well known in Australia, it's actually been around for a long time, and it's very widely used across the UK. There's a solid research base that shows substantial improvements in children who have received Play Therapy.

If your child is in therapy, it might take a while to see improvement, which can be frustrating. Sometimes, things can even look worse before they look better. A good way of thinking about it, is that it's like tidying a kid's messy bedroom. Often, the process of sorting stuff out means making more mess in the short term, before things fall into place. Unlike some therapies, Play Therapy is not about applying a "Band-Aid" quick-fix to a problem. It's about long-term, enduring change, moving slowly but steadily towards healing and wholeness.

**In summary:** Play Therapy is a specialist form of therapy for kids, which helps them to express and "play out" the difficulties they're experiencing. It's led by the child, moving at their pace. So change tends to come slowly, but lasts. The Play Therapist comes alongside the child, providing them with toys to use, and a warm, caring, safe environment, and the hope that things can and will get better, whatever they're facing.

If this sounds like something that would be helpful for your child, or for more information, you can check out [phoenixplace.com.au](http://phoenixplace.com.au), or call us to discuss how we can help you.