



PLAY THERAPY NEWS

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Children and Anxiety

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Anxiety disorders are considered to be the most common mental health difficulty encountered in clinical practice with kids.

Left untreated, they can lead to academic problems, social alienation, unemployment, substance abuse and psychiatric disorders, as well.

Play therapists find it important to engage the parents as 'co-therapists' in treating children's anxiety by giving various written

materials to inform them on how to overcome the anxious symptoms (Rapee, Abbott and Lyneham (2006) and teaching them less intrusive parenting techniques leading to child self-efficacy (Wood, et al.). Many methods for treating anxious children are play-based. Highlighted below are examples of how to work with these disorders through play therapy treatment.



Play is a major avenue for learning to manage anxiety. It gives the child a safe space where he can experiment at will, suspending the rules and constraints of physical and social reality. In play, the child becomes master rather than subject...

Play allows the child to transcend passivity and to become the active doer of what happens around him.

—Alicia F. Lieberman,
The Emotional Life of the Toddler

Anxiety Disorders

Generalized Anxiety: Symptoms include fidgeting, short temper, being uptight or easily tired.

The child may have trouble keeping their mind focused and sleep poorly.

Separation Anxiety: Symptoms include hanging on the parent to keep them from leaving, doing things to avoid school or struggling with fears related to sleeping alone.

Social Phobia: Symptoms include the child who may be very shy, not want to talk to or eat with people outside the family. The child can be very afraid to be with unfamiliar people or in new places.

Obsessive-Compulsive: A child may unnecessarily repeat an activity over and over again. One example, washing hands so much that their skin becomes raw. These activities serve to help the child to stop thinking their uncontrollable and/or upsetting thoughts.

Anxiety and Play-Based Treatments

After joining with the child and building an active level of trust, the therapist can use several methods to address a child's anxiety: 1) Therapeutic board

games to help kids identify feelings and problem-solve. 2) Play techniques such as sandtray, puppets and art medium let children explore fears and worries in

a safe place. 3) Using a listed hierarchy of anxieties rating anxiety-provoking situations to express detailed perceptions to identify cognitive distortions that can

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be replaced with reality-based, positive cognitions that mediate the anxiety response. This will help to increase a child's confidence in coping with their fears. 4) Somatic management skills to decrease emotional arousal with progressive relaxation, breathing and counting, as well as creative visualization and guided meditations to teach children how to relax. 5) Narrative techniques allow the child to communicate concerns and practice coping strategies by making books or storytelling to externalize issues within a safe psychological distance of play. 6) Psycho-education to help parents learn how to respond to an anxious child with calm confidence while avoiding over-reactions that may serve to reinforce the child's fears. They can help the child increase age-appropriate assertiveness. The therapist coaches parents to apply problem-solving to incidents with children and establish regular routines to diminish the family's stress.

Resource Corner

A hurried lifestyle and a heavy academic, as well as extracurricular, load is taking its toll on our children; balance is needed!

A report from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) states that free and unstructured play is healthy and *essential* for helping our children to reach those developmental milestones and in helping to manage their stress. For more, go to:

<http://www.aap.org/pressroom/play-public.htm>

The report defends play and is in response to forces threatening free play and unscheduled time, such as changes in family structure, the competitive college-admissions process and federal educational policies that have led to reduced recess, creative arts and physical education in many of our school systems.