

GLOSSARY OF THERAPY PLAY TERMS

BY CHARLES E. SCHAEFER, PH.D., RPT-S & MARY ANNE PEABODY, ED.D., RPT-S

A stack of approximately 15 books of various colors and thicknesses, including green, red, blue, yellow, and dark grey, resting on a light-colored wooden surface. The books are stacked vertically, with some showing signs of wear and age.

**COMMENTS BY
CLINICAL EDITOR:**

Authors initiate the development of a play therapy specific glossary of terms.

Words matter!

From infancy, we learn to think and express ourselves in words. They form the basis for the clarity of our thinking and the effectiveness of our communication with others. Without a general agreement on the meaning of our words, the ability to accurately share our thoughts with others would be very difficult, if not impossible.



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Unfortunately, in our field there are few, if any, definitions of play therapy terms that we all agree on. Diverse definitions abound in the literature on such basic terms as “play,” “play therapy,” and “fun.” We can and must do better in defining our terms so that we can reach a general agreement on their meaning. To this end, we have developed a proposed “Glossary of Play Therapy Terms.”

The glossary project grew from conversations with colleagues regarding the importance of clarity in play therapy communication. The initial steps began by first developing inclusion criteria. The six criteria selected were: a) Clarity: The meaning of the definition should be clear and easy to understand. The definition contains terms already in common usage and avoids using ambiguous, obscure, or figurative language; b) Concise: A fifty-word sentence would be the maximum word count. The definition should exclude non-essential information, such as implications, extensions, interpretations, or other rationale; c) Specific: The definition should contain the essential features of the word and be applicable to play therapy only. Words that could be also found in general therapies were excluded; d) Distinct: The reader should understand the difference in meaning for this word and other related words (e.g., what distinguishes “fragile” from “weak”); e) Positive Wording: The definition is positively phrased; and f) Non-circular: The definition does not circle back to the word or root with which it began.

Next, a list of core play therapy terms was generated and reviewed against the aforementioned criteria. Once consensus was reached, a review of the literature began. In some cases, existing definitions were adopted directly or slightly modified while others were written based on a composite of literature. The draft definitions were circulated to play therapy practitioners for feedback and minor modifications adopted.

As the glossary is not an exhaustive list, the need for continual updating and periodic review will be necessary. We believe the glossary list is an important contribution to the play therapy field whereby practitioners, play therapy faculty, and students may be reminded of the importance of clear, distinct, and understandable communication with others. We hope that many play specialists will enjoy and visit the glossary. For more on the importance of clarity in our communication, keep an eye out for the upcoming *International Journal of Play Therapy* article, “Semantic Clarity in Play Therapy,” slated for publication later this year.

Glossary of Play Therapy Terms (2016)

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Adlerian Play Therapy. An integrated approach that combines both non-directive and directive play to encourage, teach, and partner with the child and parents to foster egalitarian relations, social interest, explore lifestyles, gain insight, and teach new skills.

Adolescent Play Therapy. The application of play therapy approaches specifically geared for adolescents, ages 13 to 19 years.

Adult Play Therapy. The application of play therapy approaches specifically geared for adults, ages 20 years and up.

Animal-Assisted Play Therapy (AAPT). “The use of animals in the context of play therapy, in which appropriately trained therapists and animals engage with children and families primarily through systematic play interventions, with the goal of improving children’s development and psychosocial health as well as the animals’ well-being.” (Vanfleet, 2007, as cited in VanFleet, 2008, p. 19)

Art Therapy. A method of psychological treatment that is based on using art as a form of communication and self-expression or as a form of visual language through which clients express their thoughts and feelings.

Child-Centered Play Therapy. An approach wherein the therapist believes that children have the innate ability to be constructively self-directing and self-healing if provided the essential conditions of unconditional positive regard, empathic understanding, and congruence by the therapist.

Cognitive-Behavioral Play Therapy. A therapeutic approach that teaches clients, through play activities, how to control their thoughts so they can better manage their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Directive Play Therapy. An intervention wherein the therapist assumes responsibility for initiating and structuring the client’s play activities in order to promote healing.

Dyadic Play Therapy. A short-term approach that uses play interactions to foster friendship skills in a pair of children.

Ecosystemic Play Therapy. A developmentally sensitive approach that takes an all-inclusive view of the systems impacting a child’s life to formulate a case conceptualization and treatment plan that focuses on maximizing children getting their needs met so as to gain enjoyment in life.

Experiential Play Therapy. A synthesis and extension of the principles of relationship play therapy and child-centered play therapy.

Empirically Based Play Therapy. Play interventions whose effectiveness has been supported by well-controlled outcome studies.

Evidence-Based Practice in Play Therapy. Evidence-based practice is the integration of the best available research with clinical expertise in the context of patient characteristics, culture, and preferences. (American Psychological Association. Presidential Task Force on Evidence-Based Practice, 2006, p. 273).

Filial Play Therapy. An intervention wherein therapists train and supervise parents or guardians to conduct child-centered play therapy with their children.

Fun. A behavior characterized by smiles, laughter, and a feeling of mirth.

Game Play Therapy. A psychotherapeutic method that utilizes a variety of game forms, such as board games or card games, to help apply the therapeutic powers of play.

Gestalt Play Therapy. An approach that uses play activities to promote the development of client self-awareness and personal responsibility with a focus on the present.

Group Play Therapy. A model involving play interactions between two or more children under the facilitation of a trained therapist.

Integrative Play Therapy. A treatment that combines interventions from two or more schools of play therapy.

Jungian Play Therapy. An approach that seeks to increase clients’ awareness of their inner world by facilitating and interpreting symbolic expression in fantasy play to help them become psychologically whole.

Narrative Play Therapy. An approach that helps children to communicate difficult situations and emotions through co-constructed stories with their therapist.

Nondirective Play Therapy. Based on the belief that children have an innate drive towards health and healing, this approach leaves the responsibility and direction of the play sessions to the child.

Object-Relations Play Therapy. An integrative approach for children with attachment disorders that combines the research based on children’s thematic play with a neuropsychobiological framework to alter negative working models of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Pathological Play. A play activity that results in physical and/or psychological harm to self or others.

Play. An activity with the following key attributes: freedom from constraints of reality, positive affect, flexibility, intrinsic motivation, inner control, and a focus on the process of the activity rather than the outcome.

Playfulness. A natural disposition to engage in play behaviors.

Play-Based Assessment. The use of play to gather information about a child in order to make decisions about his or her treatment or education.

Play Skill. The ability to perform a play activity competently (e.g., block play).

Play Therapist. A licensed mental health professional who is credentialed as a play therapist by a national play therapy association.

Play Therapy. “The systematic use of a theoretical model to establish an interpersonal process wherein trained play therapists use the therapeutic powers of play to help clients prevent or resolve psychosocial difficulties and achieve optimal growth and development.” (Association for Play Therapy, 1997, p. 7).

Play Therapy Strategy. A therapeutic response by the therapist to what the client has just said or done during play (e.g., reflecting feelings, limit setting).

Play Therapy Technique. A play procedure initiated and structured by the therapist to promote therapeutic change in a client (e.g., Mutual Storytelling).

Play Therapy Theory. A set of interrelated ideas and principles that provide a broad theoretical framework for understanding how experiences affect children, how psychopathology develops, and how to remedy it through play interactions.

Posttraumatic Play. A child's repetitive and compulsive reenactment in play of a traumatic experience without gaining relief from the anxiety associated with the event.

Prescriptive Play Therapy. Based on evidence of "what works," this approach employs an eclectic range of play therapy theories and techniques so as to tailor the intervention to the individual needs of clients.

Pretend Play. Playing as if something or someone fictitious is real.

Psychoanalytic Play Therapy. An approach that uses play to facilitate the emergence of unconscious material in the client so that interpretations by the therapist can explicate the meaning of this material and thus promote healing.

Psychodynamic Play Therapy. A simpler and less lengthy alternative to psychoanalytic play therapy, this approach is based on the premise that many surface psychological problems of children are rooted in the conscious &/or unconscious emotional difficulties expressed in their play.

Registered Play Therapist (RPT) & Registered Play Therapist Supervisor (RPT-S). State licensed clinical mental health practitioners who have satisfied criteria established by the Association for Play Therapy (www.a4pt.org).

Relationship Play Therapy. An approach wherein the positive relationship that develops during play sessions between therapist and child as a result of the therapist's attitude of acceptance, faith, and respect can provide a corrective emotional experience necessary for healing (Moustakas, 1997).

Sandplay Therapy. An approach using play with sand and miniature objects that requires extensive training in Jungian interpretation and symbolism leading to a specialized certification.

Sand Tray Therapy. A trans-theoretical approach that uses miniatures, sand, and occasionally water to help clients communicate and process intrapersonal and interpersonal concerns.

School-Based Registered Play Therapist. State licensed school counselors or school psychologists who have satisfied criteria established by the Association for Play Therapy (www.a4pt.org).

Sensory-Motor Play. Play activities wherein children use both their senses and motor skills (e.g., an infant who mouths a rattle and then shakes it).

Short-Term Play Therapy. Play interventions that are planned to be effective within 10 to 20 sessions.

Solution-Focused Play Therapy. A time-limited approach that helps clients find their own answers to their problem(s) through the medium of play (e.g., puppets, sand tray, art).

Thematic Play Therapy. An object-relations model of play therapy designed for children with attachment disorders.

Therapeutic Powers of Play. The mechanisms in play that actually produce the desired change in a client's dysfunctional thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviors.

Therapeutic Play. Play activities that reduce the negative impact of the common stresses of life.

Theraplay®. "A short-term, attachment-based intervention utilizing non-symbolic, interactional play to re-create experiences of secure attachment formation between parent and child." (Theraplay®, n.d., para. 1)

Trauma-Focused Cognitive-Behavioral Play Therapy. A treatment for trauma-related impairment, including post-traumatic stress disorder, in which through play, children and their families learn skills to help cope with the traumatic experience(s) in a healthy way and to manage distressing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

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