

More Than Fun & Games: Beginning Play Therapy



Heather Stephenson, MS, CMHC, RPT-S



- **Heather Stephenson** earned her master's degree in mental health counseling from University of Phoenix. With a career dedicated to supporting children, teens, families, and individuals across the lifespan, she has been the owner of a private practice (Spring Tree Counseling) in Logan for 16 years. A sought-after supervisor and mentor, Heather has supervised many people pursuing their Registered Play Therapist credential. She currently serves on the Board of the Utah Association for Play Therapy as treasurer and is a past president of the organization. Heather is also a seasoned presenter, offering professional training in play therapy and how to integrate EMDR into the play therapy room.
- Beyond her professional accomplishments, Heather is a proud mother of two adult children and two doodle puppies. She loves spending quality time with family and friends. Heather also enjoys hiking, traveling, and binge watching all the things.
- Contact Heather at HeatherS.LPC@gmail.com
- Phone: (435) 232-6259



What is 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***

Play Therapy Evolution



EARLY WORK

Early work focused on psychodynamic theory principles



VIRGINIA AXLINE

Virginia Axline pioneered child-centered play therapy



CURRENT MODELS

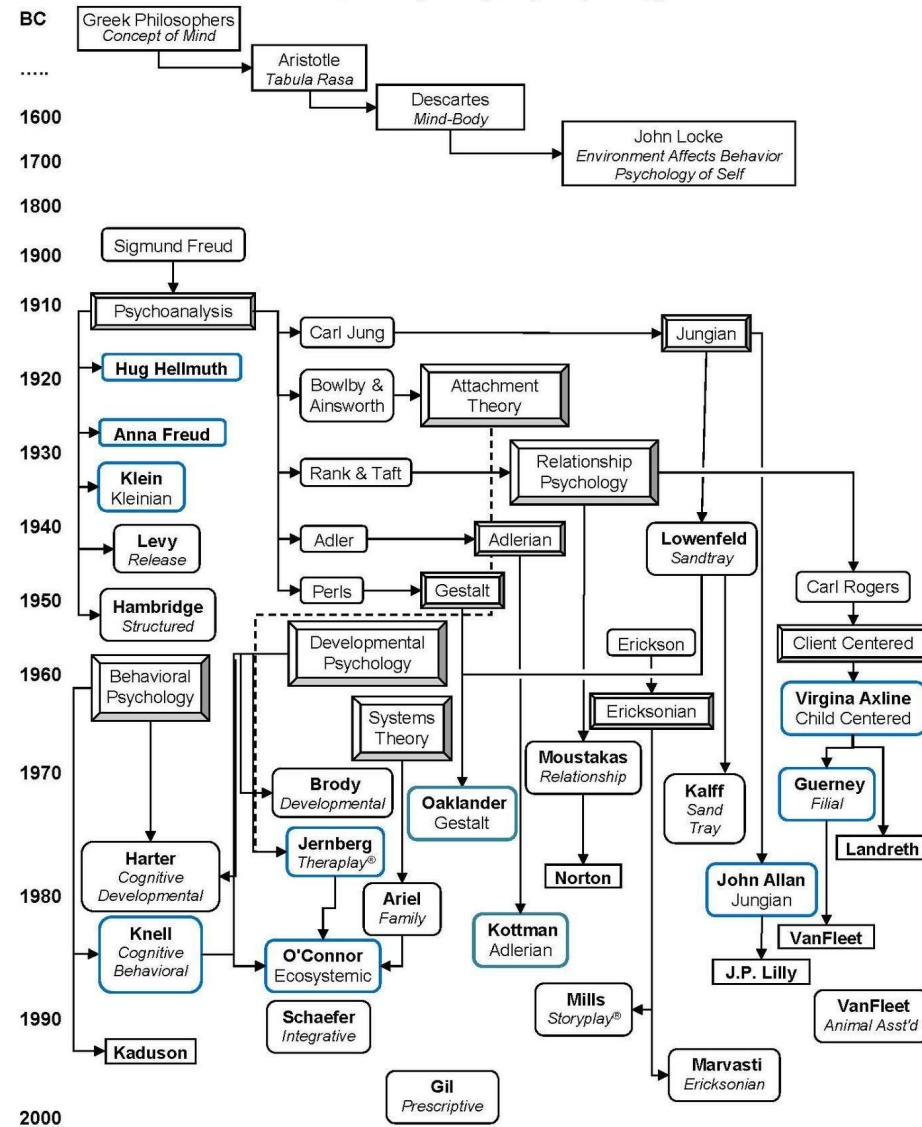
Current models incorporate diverse therapeutic approaches



EVOLUTION

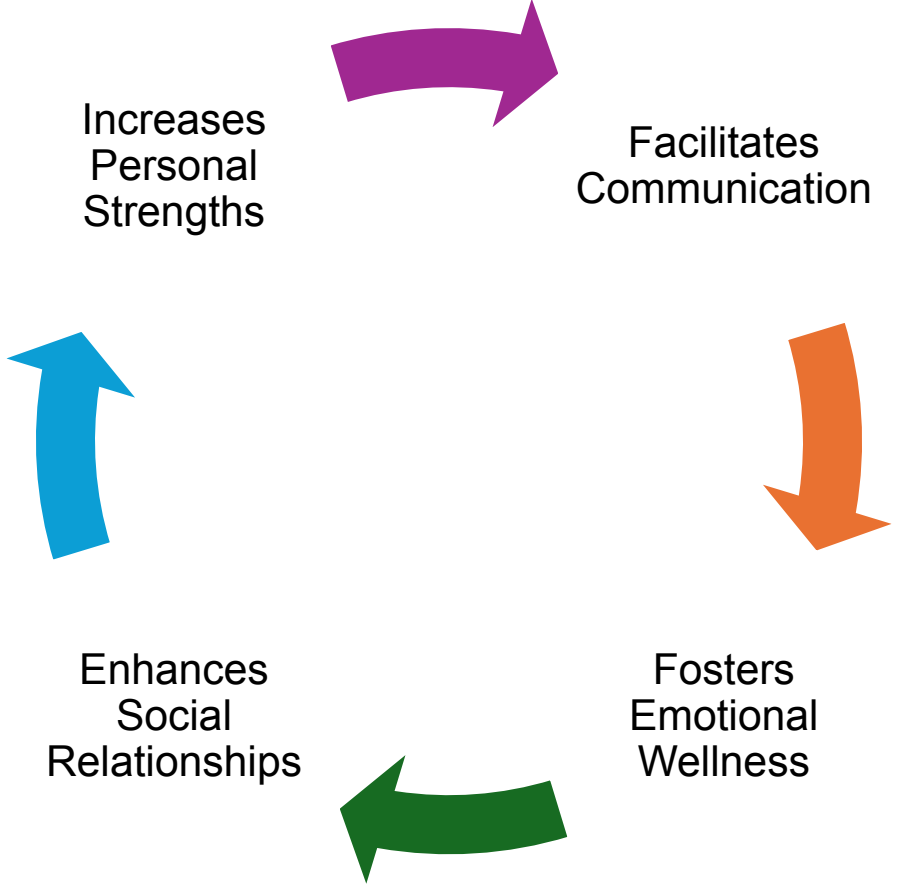
Play therapy has evolved over many decades

History of Play Therapy



Two dimensional boxes = Major theories. Boxes with rounded corners = People who developed play therapy specific adaptations of the various theories. Boxes with square corners = People who have played a major role in carrying an existing form of play therapy forward. Blue Outline = APT designated historically significant theories of play therapy. After the early 2000s there was such a proliferation of play therapy approaches it was not feasible to enter all of them.

The Therapeutic Powers of Play





Facilitating Communication

- Self expression
- Access to the unconscious
- Direct teaching
- Indirect teaching

How Does Play Facilitate Communication with Children?



HOW IS FACILITATING COMMUNICATION THERAPEUTIC?

- Offers developmentally appropriate language
- Reduces pressure and threat
- Facilitates relational needs and attachment patterns
- Supports co-regulation and emotional expression
- Integrates cognition, emotion, and body



Let's Play!



With a Partner...

Share your favorite TV show,
color, or ice cream flavor.

But...

You can't say a word.
Find another way to
communicate!

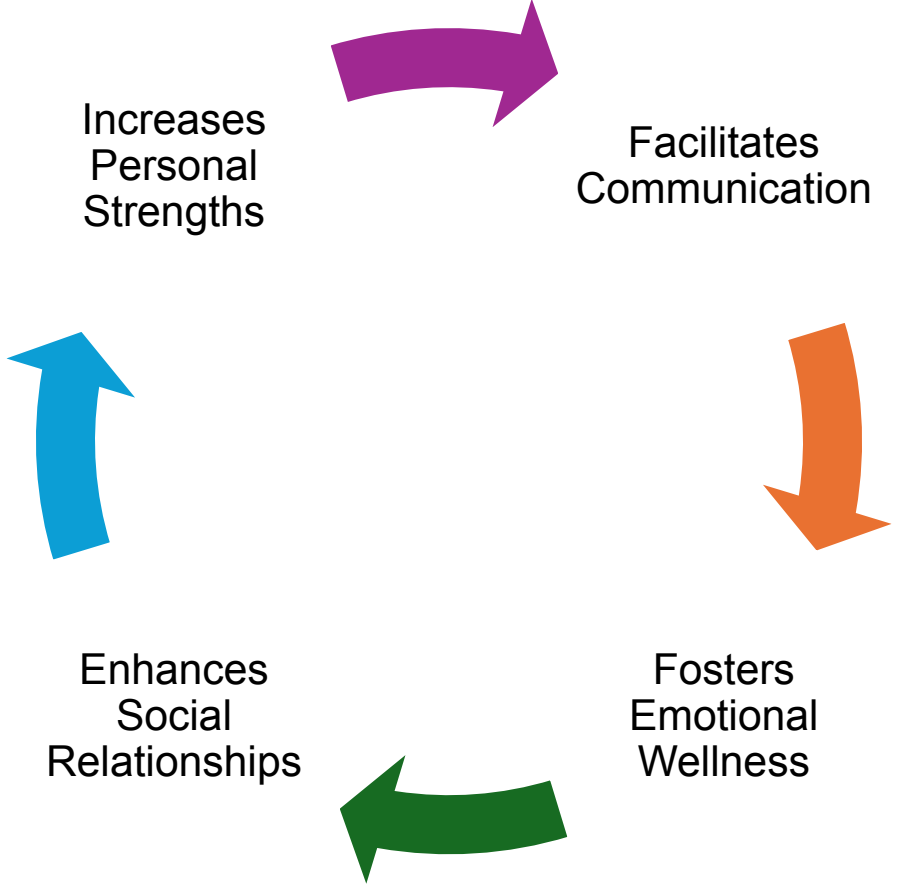




Benefits of therapeutic communication

- Self-expression is critical to our happiness
- Play provides kids the chance to express their feelings and thoughts
- Play allows kids to make sense of their experiences

The Therapeutic Powers of Play



FOSTERING EMOTIONAL WELLNESS

- Catharsis
- Abreaction
- Positive Emotions
- Counterconditioning Fears
- Stress Inoculation
- Stress Management



PLAY REDUCES STRESS

- Self-soothing & regulatory through sensory materials
- Escape through fantasy & games



Adults Play All the Time!

- Game play
- Outdoor recreation
- Expressive arts

What Do You Do?



SELF-SOOTHING/ RELAXATION PLAY

- Tactile and sensory play (i.e. water, sand, and paint) lead to improved regulation and functioning
- Collaboration with Occupational Therapists

What are other examples?





PLAY IS THE NATURAL LANGUAGE OF KIDS

- Natural way of expressing themselves
- Play out feelings like adults talk out feelings

Unfamiliar → Familiar →
Understanding

“Play facilitates understanding and understanding thus facilitates children’s self-expression.” --Gary Landreth

PLAY GIVES PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTANCE

- Dolls or puppets act things out
- Kids replay traumatic events
- When kids play, full self-expression occurs



Consolidation of Skills

- Repetitive play
- What fires together, wires together
- Integration of emotional, mental, sensory, and somatic.
- Particularly with ND community





Quick Draw

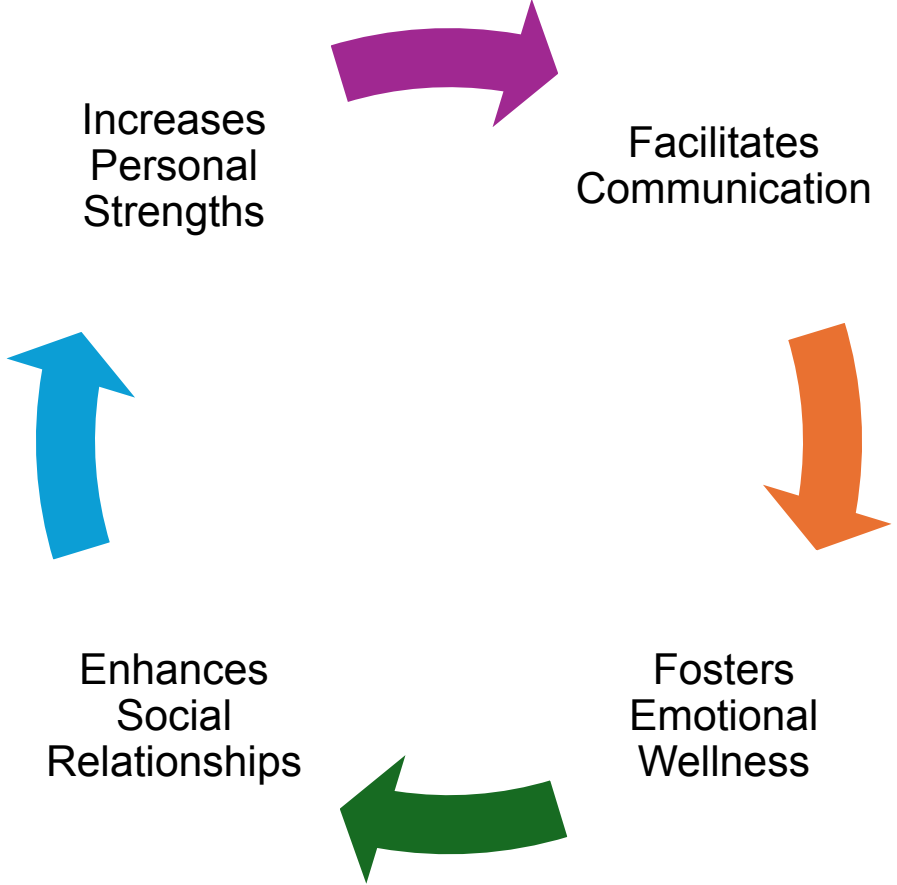
One Minute!

Draw something from your childhood. Whatever comes to mind, whether it's a favorite toy, a childhood friend, or a place you liked to go.

No judgment on appearance or outcome. Just the pen/pencil move.

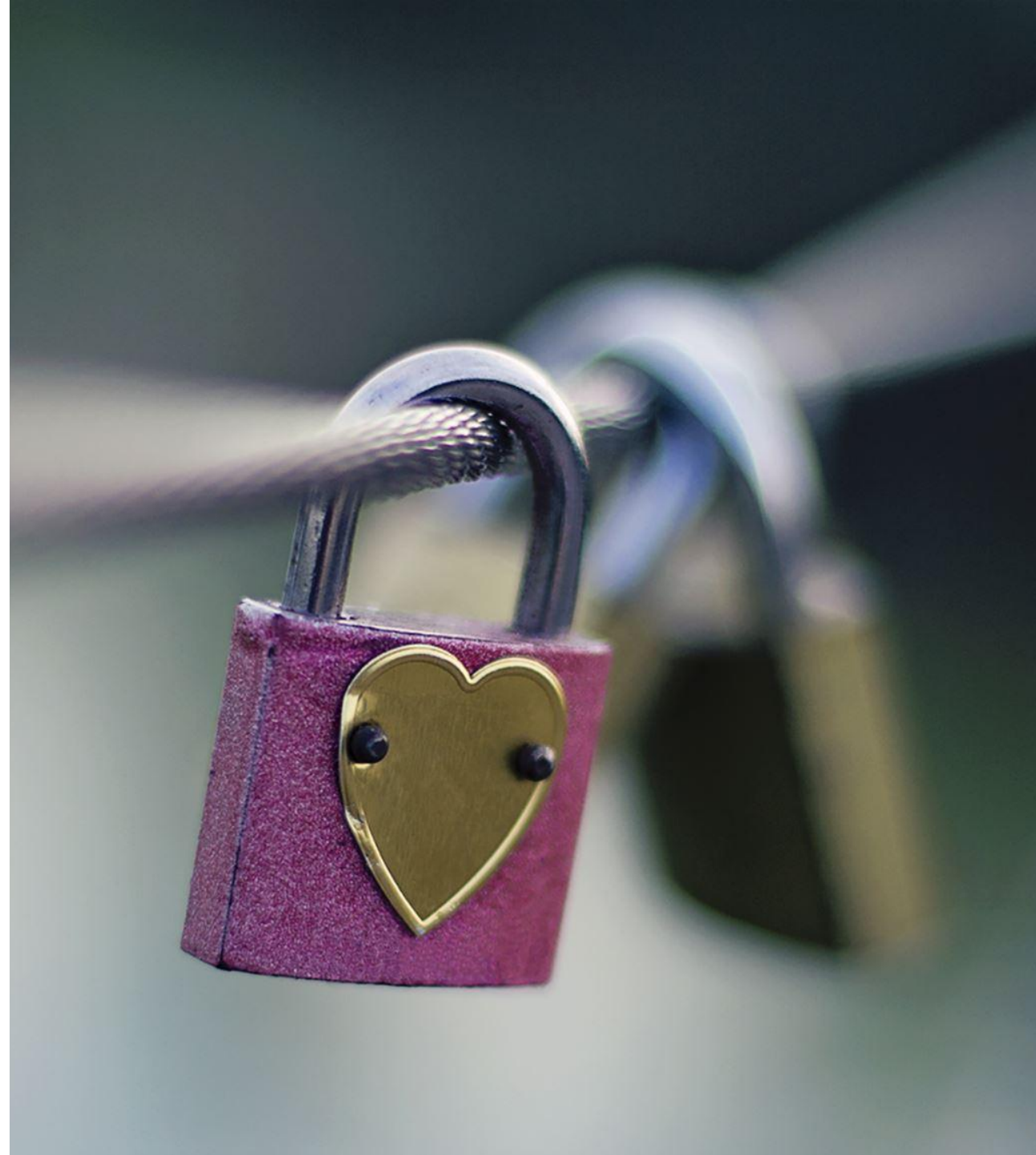
What do you notice?

The Therapeutic Powers of Play



Enhances Social Relationships

- Therapeutic relationship
- Attachment
- Social competence
- Empathy



The Therapeutic Power of Relationships

We've long recognized the significance of interactions with caregivers in a child's life.

Neuroscience reveals that a child's "environment of relationships" shapes brain development.

Quality interactions and relationships mold brain circuits, impacting future outcomes.

The therapeutic alliance mirrors a healthy parent-child relationship, fostering healing.

The Art of the Relationship

“The therapeutic relationship is a shared experience where the client is ‘fully accepted as a person of worth’ through respect, without expectation, and is felt by both the therapist and child.”

- Garry L. Landreth



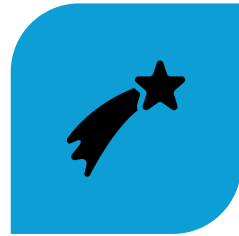
What a Play therapist Provides



A THERAPEUTIC
HOLDING
ENVIRONMENT



ACKNOWLEDGING
AND CONFIRMING
EXPERIENCES



RECOGNIZING AND
CELEBRATING
PROGRESS

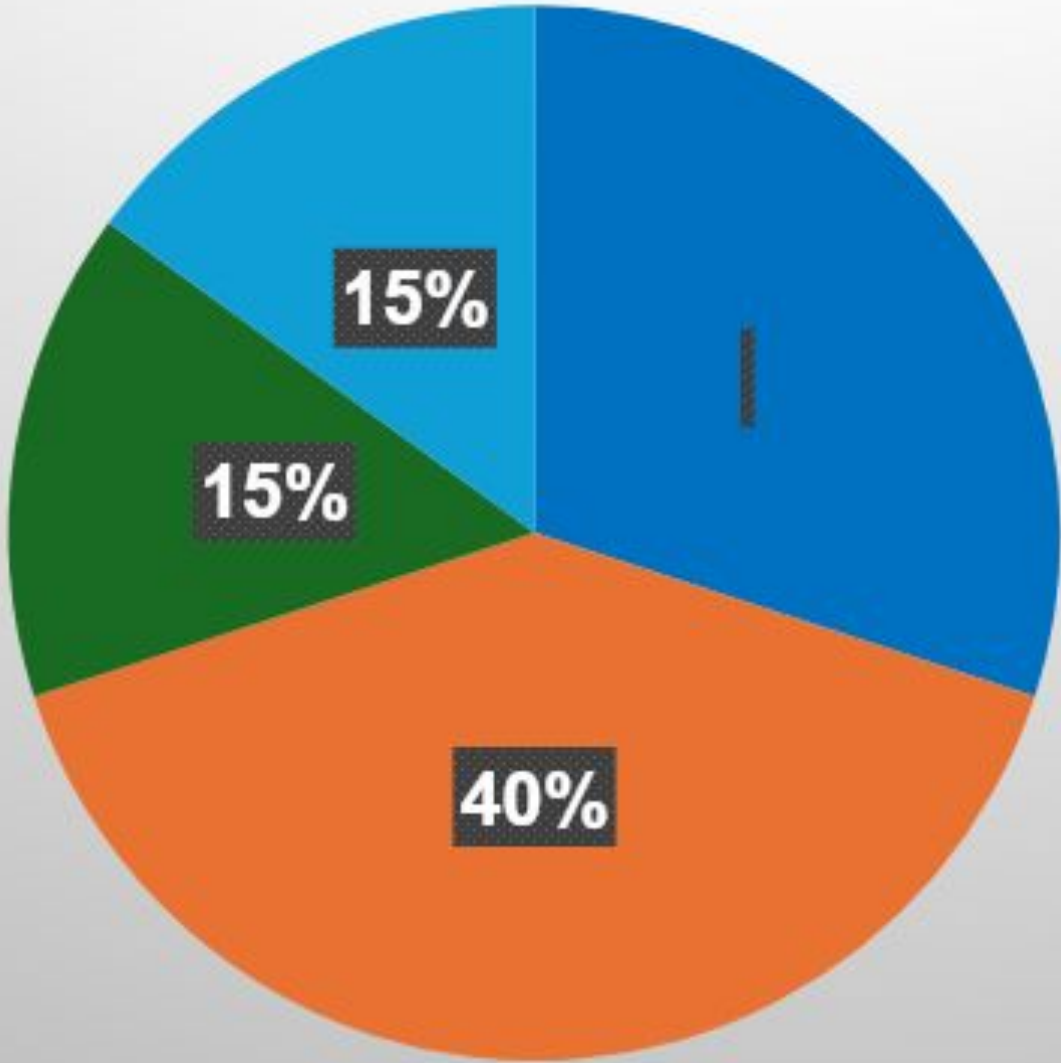


MAKING THE
UNCONSCIOUS
CONSCIOUS



INTERPRETING
PLAY BEHAVIORS
AND
VERBALIZATIONS

What Makes Therapy Work?

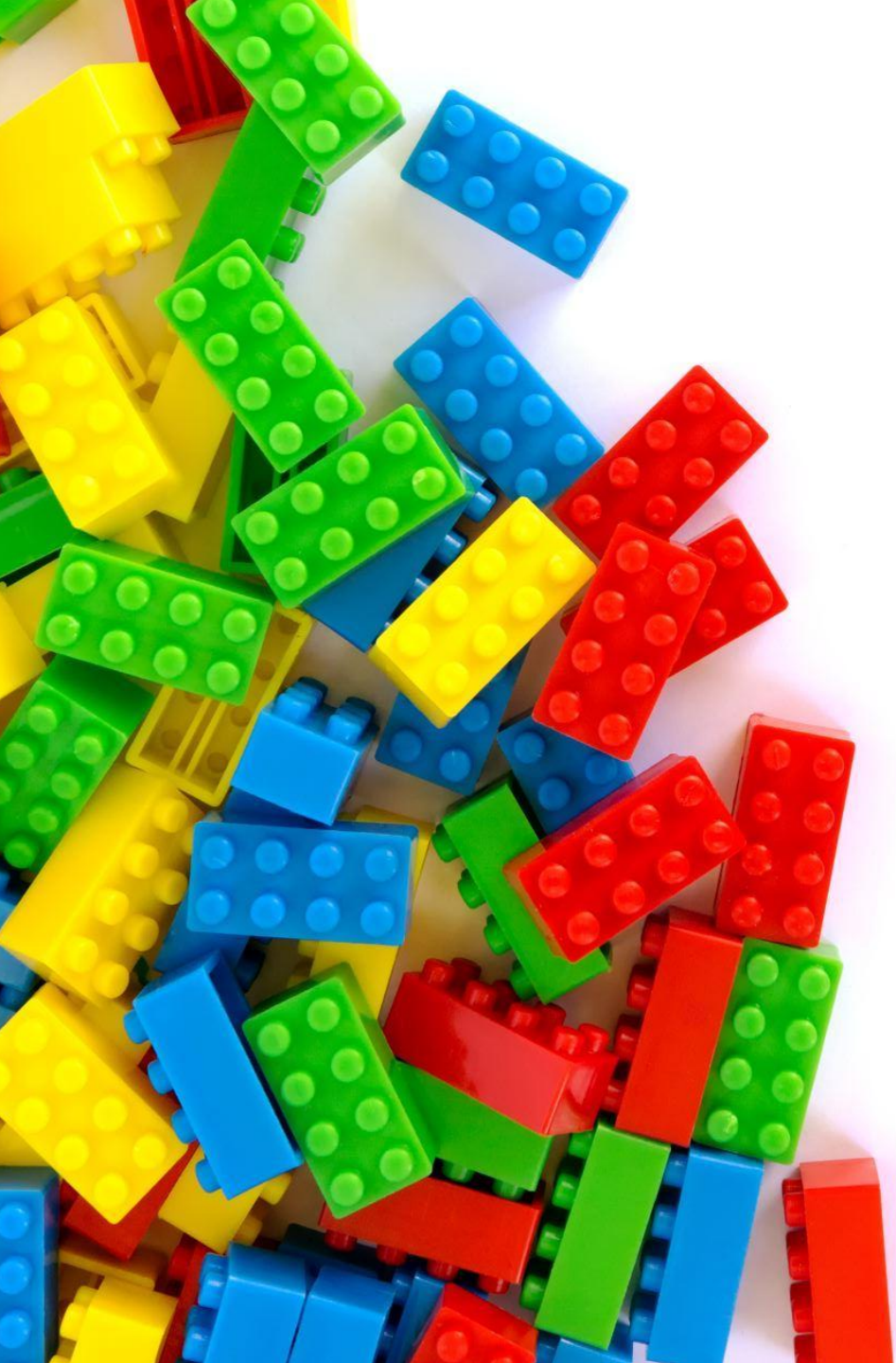


- Therapeutic Relationship
- Clients Differences & Events Outside of Therapy
- Therapeutic Approach & Techniques
- Client Expectancy & Placebo Effects



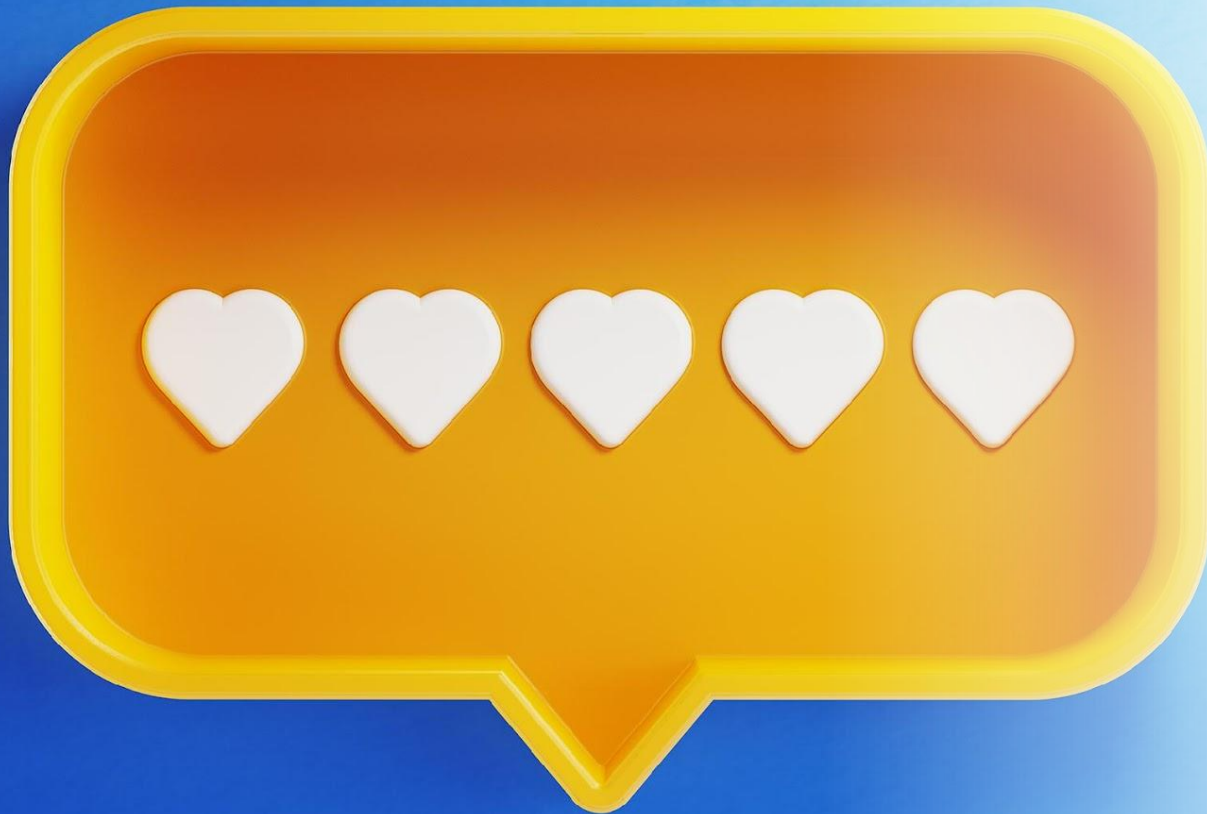
Role of the Therapeutic Relationship

- Play enhances the therapeutic alliance:
 - Increases oxytocin levels, fostering trust
 - Activates mirror neurons for accurate resonance
 - Promotes neuroplasticity, forming new neural patterns
- Play creates a “pleasure bond,” strengthening relationships
- Impact of play in therapy:
 - Verbal and nonverbal communication
 - Playful flow deepens the therapeutic relationship



Context of the Therapeutic Relationship

- Create a safe environment free from physical and emotional harm
- Offer a safe space for the child to explore without fear of judgment
- Provide an environment that is nonjudgmental towards the child's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors



Time to Talk!

How do you feel connected, attached, or seen?

How is this similar or different from the way children do?



FANTASY/PRETEND PLAY

- Gradual exposure & desensitization opportunities
- Kids gain a sense of control
- Develop flexible problem-solving skills
- Enhance their adaptability to current & future stress



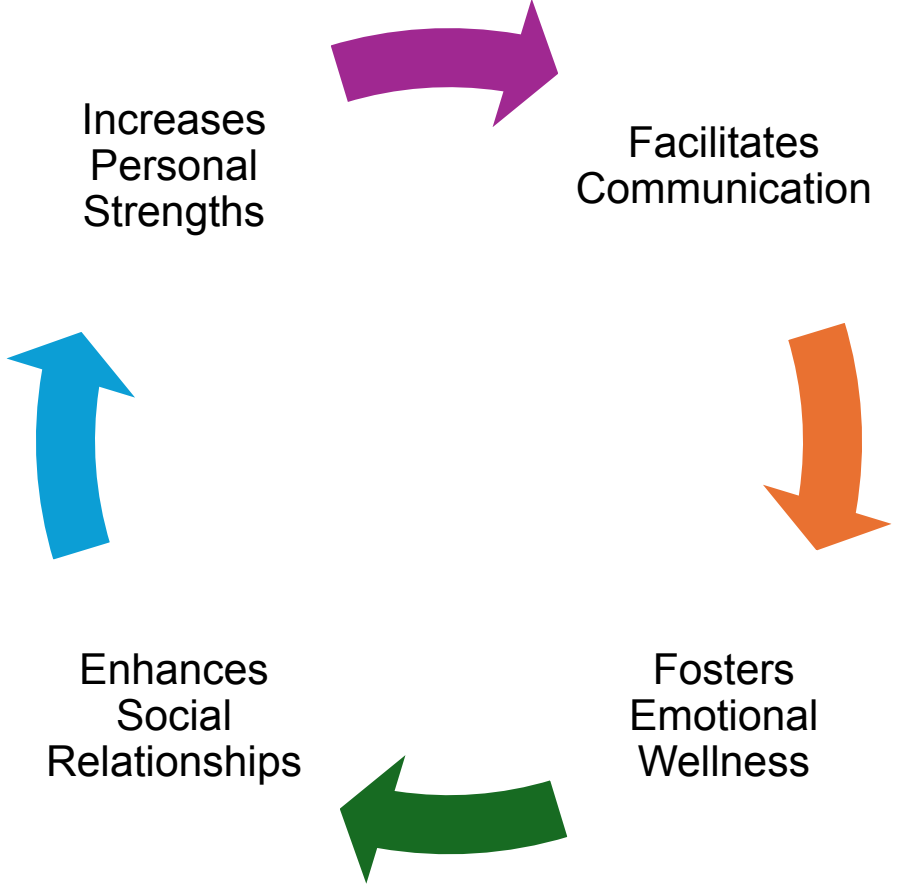
EXPLORATORY PLAY

HUMOR

- Coping strategy or titration of exposure to traumatic event
- Laughter occurs spontaneously in play
- Humor helps establish a therapeutic relationship



The Therapeutic Powers of Play

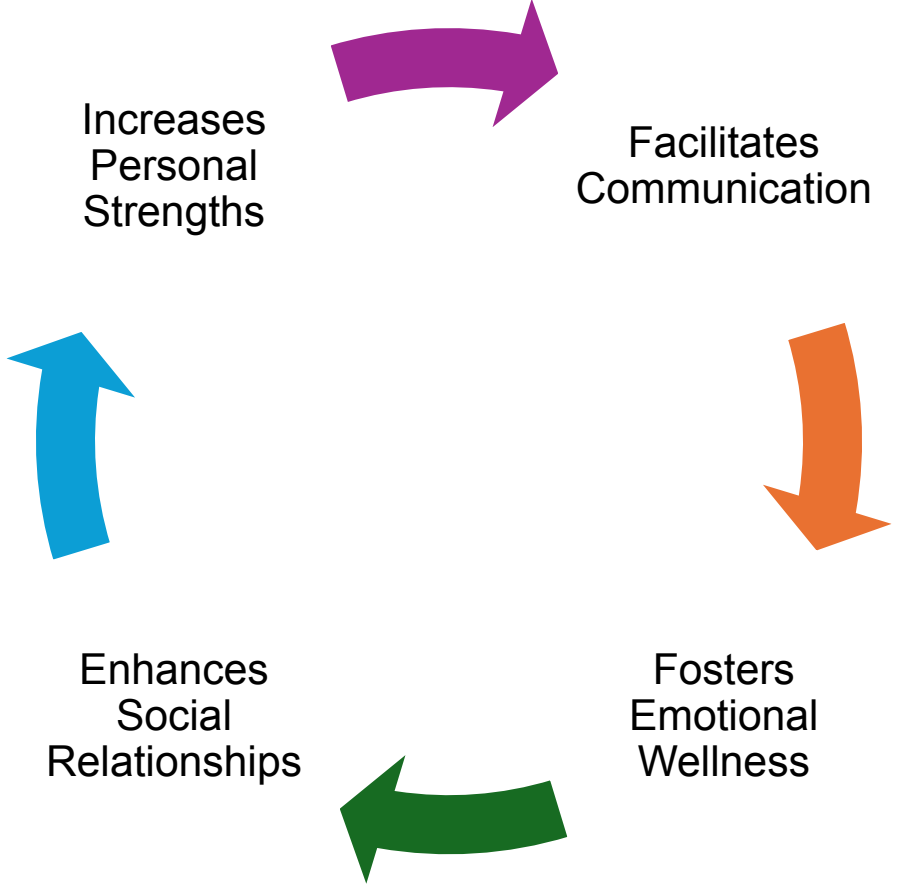


Increases Personal Strengths

- Creative Problem Solving
- Resiliency
- Moral Development
- Accelerated Psychological Development
- Self-regulation
- Self-esteem



The Therapeutic Powers of Play





The Powers of Play

Play provides a **safe** and **supportive** environment for clients to explore and accept all aspects of themselves, including their strengths, weaknesses, and vulnerabilities, fostering greater self-acceptance and self-love.



The Powers of Play, cont'd

- Fosters a positive sense of self-worth, confidence, and self-acceptance in individuals
- Allows children to make mistakes, learn, and overcome obstacles which in turn build self-esteem



The Impossible Task

- Build the tallest tower you can with only the materials provided.
- You have 5 minutes
- No planning first, just start building.

Continuum of Theories



Origins of Child Centered Play Therapy

- Developed by **Virginia Axline** in the mid-20th century
- Rooted in **humanistic psychology**, influenced by **Carl Rogers**
- Nondirective approach: **child leads, therapist follows**
- Emphasizes **innate growth potential in children**
- Furthered by **Garry Landreth**



Garry Landreth's Tenets

Children are not miniature adults.

Children are people.

Children are unique and worthy of respect.

Children are resilient.

Children have an inherent tendency toward growth and maturity.

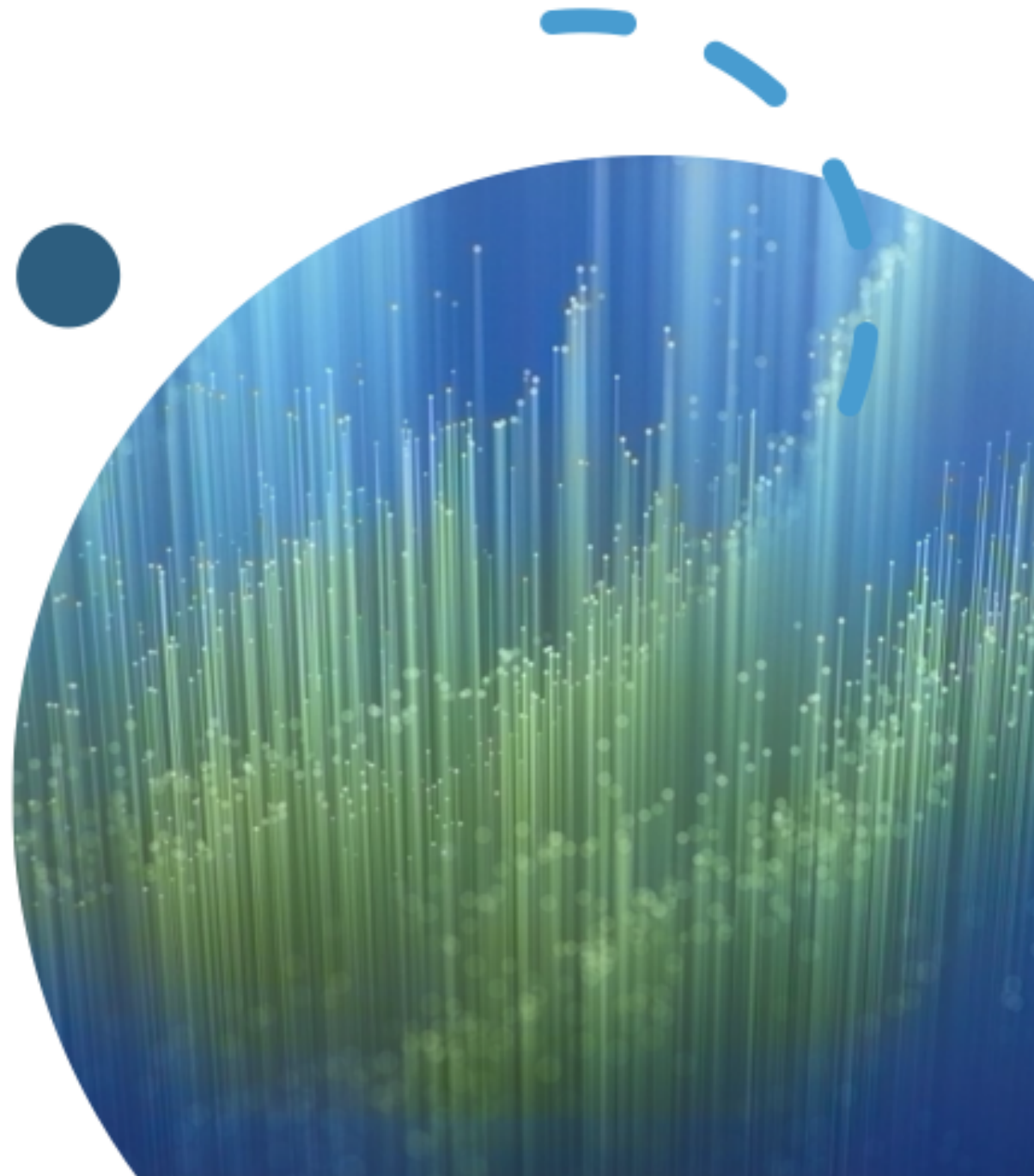
Children are capable of positive self-direction.

Children's natural language is play.

Children have the right to remain silent.

Children will take the therapeutic experience where they need to be.

Children's growth cannot be sped up.



Core Principles

- **Unconditional Positive Regard:** Accept the child as they are
- **Empathic Understanding:** Deeply reflect the child's feelings
- **Congruence/Authenticity:** Therapist is genuine and present
- **Child Leads, Therapist Follows:** Child chooses play, topic, pace



Role of the Therapist

- Create a **safe, accepting environment**
- **Reflect feelings and content** without judgment
- **Track behavior** to convey presence
- Set **therapeutic limits** when necessary



The Playroom

- Carefully chosen toys to support **expression and exploration**
- Toy categories:
- **Real-life toys:** dolls, kitchen sets, figurines
- **Acting-out toys:** toy weapons, figures, vehicles
- **Creative expression toys:** art supplies, clay, sand





Limit Setting

- **Acknowledge** the child's feeling ("I see you are angry")
- **Communicate** the limit clearly ("But we can't hit")
- **Target** acceptable alternatives ("Let's throw the ball outside")

Goals of CCPT

- Foster **emotional regulation**
- Promote **self-responsibility**
- Strengthen **decision-making**
- Support **self-acceptance and self-direction**





Experiential Time – Do Not Fix

- Divide into pairs
- One partner will describe a difficult situation
- The other will listen and reflect
- But will not:
 - Ask questions
 - Give reassurance
 - Offer Insight
 - Or try to fix anything

Association for Play Therapy

- Founded in 1982 by Charles Schaefer and Kevin O'Connor
- Goal was to standardize, elevate, and promote play therapy as a scientifically valid modality of mental health treatment for children.
- Organized the Registered Play Therapist credentialing to help standardize training for therapists.
- Now has grown to over 40 state branches and over 6000 members, a quarterly magazine and professional journal.
- Website: www.a4pt.org

Local APT Chapter: UAPT

- Membership includes national and state membership
- Hold around 4 trainings a year.
- Annual training by a nationally recognized name in the play therapy community.
- Monthly newsletter
- Website: www.utahplaytherapy.org
- Social Media:
- Facebook: Utah Association for Play Therapy
- Instagram: Utahapt

Questions?





What are your takeaways from today?

How would you define play therapy now?

References

Bordin, E. (1979). The generalizability of the psychoanalytic concept of the working alliance. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 16, 252-260.

Lambert, M. J., & Barley, D. E. (2002). Research summary on the therapeutic relationship and psychotherapy outcome. In J. C. Norcross (Ed.), *Psychotherapy relationships that work: Therapist contributions and responsiveness to patients*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Landreth, G. L. (2012). *Play therapy: The art of the relationship* (3rd ed.). Routledge.

Mischel, W., Shoda, Y., & Rodriguez, M. L. (1989). Delay of gratification in children. *Science*, 244, 933-938.

O'Connor, K. (2002). The value and use of interpretation in play therapy. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 33(6), 523-528.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

References

Brown, S. (2009). *Play: How it sharpens the mind, opens the imagination, and invigorates the soul*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.

Landreth, Garry L. *Play Therapy: The Art of the Relationship*. Routledge, 2012.

Schaefer, Charles E., and Heidi Gerard Kaduson, editors. *Contemporary Play Therapy: Theory, Research, and Practice*. Guilford Press, 2014.

Reddy, Linda A., and Carol B. C. Mulligan, editors. *The Role of Play Therapy in Psychotherapy: In Search of the Clinical Child*. American Psychological Association, 2007.

Schaefer, Charles E., and Athena A. Drewes. *The Therapeutic Powers of Play: 20 Core Agents of Change*. Wiley, 2013.