

Communicating without words: Play therapy provides a fun, healthy way for children to express themselves.

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NORTHWEST ARKANSAS — When people think of participating in a therapy session, they may think of lying on a couch and pouring out their deepest feelings.

For clients of play therapists, a therapy session involves playing in a treasure trove of toys.

“ It’s a way for a child to communicate without using words, ” therapist Katherine Arkell said. “ It gives them a voice. ”

Being involved in play therapy not only allows a child to relax by doing something he or she sees as fun, but it gives the therapist an insight into what is going on in the child’s world.

“ Therapy doesn’t have to be a drudgery. They can come in here and have fun, ” Arkell said. “ When they are at ease, they will open up. ”

Arkell is awaiting her final certification papers to arrive before she is allowed to officially call herself a play therapist, but she is already able to incorporate the theories into her therapy sessions with children. Once the final credentials arrive, she will be the only therapist at Vista Health in Bentonville with the official play-therapist certification. Arkell said she ends up using play therapy in some form in more than 90 percent of her sessions.

Although there is a growing interest in play therapy, there are still some misconceptions.

“ There’s a big misconception that it’s only for kids, ” she said. “ Adolescents are also very open to it if its presented in the right way. It can also be useful in family therapy. ”

Arkell has a playroom connected to her office that is filled with a variety of toys for all ages of girls and boys. It is often clients’ toy choices and how they use the toys that tells the most about what is going on in their lives. Play therapists do not choose their toy collections at random — each toy has some meaning that can be tied to it.

For example, Arkell said, some adolescent boys choose to play with an Easy Bake oven, which often indicates that they are craving a nurturing environment. Sometimes the implications of play

therapy are even more obvious as to what the child is trying to convey. Arkell said she has had clients play with the dollhouse and end up reenacting acts of sexual abuse they have endured. Families can be helped with play therapy in several ways, including teaching parents how to play with their children.

“ A lot of people just don’t know how to play with their kids, ” Arkell said.

Play therapy is an umbrella that encompasses several forms of unique therapy, including bibliotherapy, using books that help address issues in a young person’s life. For example, if the character in a book is going through a similar life experience as the child client, then the therapist can use the character to help the child understand his or her own circumstances. Another form is pet therapy, when a licensed therapy pet — often a dog — is brought into the therapy session. The child can be taught everything from how to treat an animal well to simply having a friendly, nonjudgmental listening ear.

As the interest in play therapy grows among child therapists, so does the membership of organizations that support those therapists. Sarah Gheen is president of the Northwest Arkansas Association of Play Therapists, of which Arkell is a member. Gheen is also a school-based therapist through Ozark Guidance in Springdale.

“ They are trying to make sense of their world and are using something that is appropriate for their level, ” Gheen said.

She gave the example of a child whose home was heavily damaged in a storm, but no one at school was aware of the problem. The child came into therapy and repeatedly wrecked the dollhouse until one day she started putting it back together again.

“ She was able to work through it herself, ” Gheen said. “(Play therapy) allows them to process on a level that they can understand. ”

She gave another example, this time of her own daughter. When Gheen’s daughter was 4, her baby sitter’s dog fell into a well and died. The little girl later kept dropping toy dogs down a long cup; then she went to her mother and simply said, “(The baby sitter’s) dog died today. ”

“ She worked through it herself, ” Gheen said.

Although children are sometimes able to use play therapy to work through their own problems, they still often need a licensed play therapist to help interpret what the play means and to guide them to a better understanding of what they are feeling.

“ The interpretation piece is pretty significant, ” Gheen said.

Therapists such as Gheen and Arkell plan to continue to use various forms of play therapy with their clients.

“ There are so many aspects of play that are phenomenal, ” Gheen said. “(The children) know what they need; it’s just a matter of us providing the tools. ”

For more information, visit [www. ar 4 pt. org](http://www.ar4pt.org) or [www. arplaytherapy. org](http://www.arplaytherapy.org).

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