



Sample Syllabus:

Graduate Play Therapy Course

A Message for Instructors

This resource is a sample play therapy course syllabus for an introductory course. It includes recommended prerequisites, readings, learning objectives, assignments, and other activities. It should be used as simply a guide when developing your own syllabus in accordance with your university guidelines and accreditation standards, if applicable.

Each instructor should tailor the syllabus to their university requirements and the needs of their students. This resource is not meant to be used "as-is" in its entirety. Requiring students to complete all the recommended readings and assignments or attempting to cover all the suggested learning objectives in one academic semester would be impractical.

To satisfy its mission *to promote the value of play, play therapy, and credentialed play therapists*, the Association for Play Therapy (APT) wishes to increase the availability of graduate-level play therapy instruction at colleges and universities. The committee does not intend that this document be disseminated among universities whose mental health faculty members have not yet completed formal play therapy training.

Its Curriculum Development Task Force designed these syllabus guidelines in February 2005 and revised this document in 2010, 2018, and again in 2023, to both guide and encourage Registered Play Therapists (RPT) and Supervisors (RPT-S) to design and teach introductory and other play therapy graduate courses at colleges and universities.

The term *mental health* refers to the psychology, social work, counseling, marriage and family therapy, and other mental health disciplines as well as those who research, practice, and teach them.

These syllabus guidelines provide an overview of the essential elements and principles of play therapy, including history, theories, modalities, techniques, applications, and skills. Further, an experiential component focuses on basic play therapy skill development within the context of ethical and diversity-sensitive practice. The syllabus is meant to be inclusive but offer flexibility at the same time. Instructors are not bound to require every suggested reading or assignment, but these readings and assignments are indicative of those the committee knows to facilitate student development into play therapists with adequate foundational knowledge.

While it is expected that instructors will adapt these guidelines to fit their own course time frame (e.g. semester, quartermester, week-long, weekends, etc.), it is highly recommended that those teaching in a condensed format (e.g. week-long, weekends, etc.) will consider dividing the course in half, roughly along the lines of theory and practice to support student acquisition and implementation of content.

Students are best served by an instructor who, if not currently a RPT/S, is a licensed mental health practitioner and is either pursuing play therapy credentialing or is a practicing play therapy practitioner with formal play therapy training.

Section A. Introduction

In this course, students will learn the basic principles and procedures of play therapy, which is considered the most developmentally appropriate mental health intervention for young children. Students will explore historical, theoretical, and multicultural foundations of play therapy and will learn how to implement basic play therapy skills to facilitate the child's self-exploration, self-expression, self-understanding, personal growth, and development.

Section B. Course Description

Notes to instructor: This is a sample course description. For existing courses, the course description should be copied from your university catalog. For new courses, you will need to draft a new description. Refer to your university policies regarding course descriptions.

Because courses are approved at multiple levels, making it difficult to change the description, it is recommended that your course description be kept brief so you have flexibility to modify in the future if needed. The course objective section will allow you to add more specificity, including the class format and content.

This course is taught through (experiential, hybrid, lecture, etc.) methods to provide foundational knowledge and basic skill competencies to facilitate play therapy as a therapeutic intervention for children and families. This course provides students with the philosophical basis for play therapy, including a review of the history of play therapy, how to develop a relationship with a child through developmentally appropriate play-based skills, an introduction to one or two theories of play therapy (child-centered, cognitive behavioral, Adlerian, Ecosystemic, etc.), an introduction to various theoretical applications, and play therapy best practices. Students will demonstrate play therapy micro-skills as well as demonstrate an understanding of the purpose and goals of play therapy, therapeutic stages and themes, ethical issues, social and cultural diversity implications, basic developmental and neurological implications, and the ability to communicate the treatment process to various stakeholders including parents/caregivers and teachers.

Section C. Course Prerequisites

Minimally, students are encouraged to have successfully completed graduate level coursework in the areas of child development, counseling theories, ethics, basic counseling skills, multicultural competencies, and techniques (appropriate to their profession, e.g., social work, marriage & family therapy, counseling, psychology).

Section D. General Play Therapy Readings

Notes to instructor: Instructors are encouraged to select 1-2 foundational textbooks (in-depth book explaining a specific seminal play therapy theory) and 1-2 supplemental texts.

Foundational Textbooks

- Axline, V. (1964). *Dibs in search of self*. Ballantine.
- Axline, V. (1947). *Play therapy*. Houghton-Mifflin.
- Crenshaw, D., & Stewart, A. (Eds.). (2016). *Play therapy: A comprehensive guide to theory and practice*. Guilford Press.
- Gil, E., & Drewes, A. A. (Eds.). (2021). *Cultural issues in play therapy* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Giordano, M., Landreth, G. & Jones, L. (2005). *A practical handbook for building the play therapy relationship*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Kaduson, H. G., Cangelosi, D., & Schaefer, C. E. (2020). *Prescriptive play therapy: Tailoring interventions for specific childhood problems*. Guilford Press.
- Knell, S. M. (1993). *Cognitive behavioral play therapy*. Jason Aronson, Inc.
- Kottman, T. (2011). *Play therapy basics and beyond* (2nd ed.). American Counseling Association.
- Kottman, T. & Meany-Walen, K. K. (2015). *Partners in play: An Adlerian approach to play therapy* (3rd ed.). American Counseling Association.
- Kottman, T., & Meany-Walen, K. K. (2018). *Doing play therapy: From building the relationship to facilitating change*. Guilford Press.
- Landreth, G. L. (2023). *Play therapy: The art of the relationship* (4th ed.). Routledge.

- Mullen, J. A. & Rickli, J. M. (2013). *Child-centered play therapy workbook: A self-directed guide for professionals*. Research Press.
- O'Connor, K. J., & Braverman, L. D. (Eds.). (2009). *Play therapy theory and practice: Comparing theories and techniques* (2nd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.
- O'Connor, K. J., Shaefer, C. E., & Braverman, L. D. (Eds.). (2016). *Handbook of play therapy* (2nd ed.). Wiley.
- Ray, D. C., Ogawa, Y., & Cheng, Y. J. (Eds.). (2022). *Multicultural play therapy: Making the most of cultural opportunities with children*. Routledge.
- Schaefer, C. (Ed.). (2011). *Foundations of play therapy* (2nd ed). John Wiley & Sons.

Supplemental Texts:

- Carmichael, K. D. (2006). *Play therapy: An introduction*. Pearson Education, Inc.
- Drewes, A. A., & Schaefer, C. E. (Eds.). (2010). *School-based play therapy* (2nd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.
- Goodyear-Brown, P. (2020). *Parents as partners in child therapy: A clinical guide*. Guilford Press.
- Goodyear-Brown, P. (2019). *Trauma and play therapy: Helping children heal*. Routledge.
- Goodyear-Brown, P. (2010). *Play therapy with traumatized children: A prescriptive approach*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Gil, E., & Selkman (2015). *Play in family therapy* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Grant, R. J. (2023). *The AutPlay Therapy Handbook. Integrative family play therapy with neurodivergent children*. Routledge.
- Grant, R. J., Stone, J., & Mellenthin, C. (2020). *Play therapy theory and perspectives: A collection of thoughts in the field*. Routledge.
- Homeyer, L., & Bennett, M. M. (2023). *The guide to play therapy documentation and parent consultation*. Routledge.
- Moustakas, C.E. (1959). *Psychotherapy with children*. Harper and Row.
- Oaklander, V. (2007). *Windows to our children: A Gestalt therapy approach to children and adolescents*. The Gestalt Journal Press.
- O'Connor, K. (2000). *The play therapy primer* (2nd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.
- Ray, D. C. (Ed.). (2016). *A therapist's guide to child development: The extraordinarily normal years*. Routledge.
- Ray, D. C. (2011). *Advanced play therapy: Essential conditions, knowledge, and skills for child practice*. Routledge.
- Schaefer, C. E. & Drewes, A. A. (2013). *The therapeutic powers of play: 20 core agents of change* (2nd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.
- Schaefer, C. L., & Carey, L. (1994). *Family play therapy*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Webb, N. B. (2015). *Play therapy with children and adolescents in crisis* (4th ed.) Guildford Press.

Supplemental Research Articles:

- Bratton, S., Ray, D., Rhine, T., & Jones, L. (2005). The efficacy of play therapy with children: A meta-analytic review of treatment outcomes. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 36(4), 367-390. doi:10.1037/0735-7028.36.4.376
- Ceballos, P. L., Bárcenas Jaimez, G., & Bratton, S. C. (2020). Considerations for play therapy research with Latino populations. *International Journal of Play Therapy*, 29(4), 213.
- LeBlanc, M., & Ritchie, M. (2001). A meta-analysis of play therapy outcomes. *Counseling Psychology Quarterly*, 14, 149-163. doi:10.1080/09515070110059142
- Ray, D. C., Armstrong, S. A., Balkin, R. S., & Jayne, K. M. (2015). Child-centered play therapy in the schools: Review and meta-analysis. *Psychology in the Schools*, 52(2), 107-123. doi: 10.1002/pits.21798
- Lin, Y. W., & Bratton, S. C. (2015). A meta-analytic review of child-centered play therapy approaches. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 93(1), 45-58.
- Patterson, L., Stutey, D. M., & Dorsey, B. (2018). Play therapy with African American children exposed to adverse childhood experiences. *International Journal of Play Therapy*, 27(4), 215.
- Ray, D. C., Burgin, E., Gutierrez, D., Ceballos, P., & Lindo, N. (2022). Child-centered play therapy and adverse childhood experiences: A randomized controlled trial. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 100(2), 134-145.
- Taylor, L., & Ray, D. C. (2021). Child-centered play therapy and social-emotional competencies of African American children: A randomized controlled trial. *International Journal of Play Therapy*, 30(2), 74.

Other Professional Documents:

- Association for Play Therapy (2022). *Paper on touch*. https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.a4pt.org/resource/resmgr/resource_center/Paper_on_Touch_2022_-_Final.pdf
- Association for Play Therapy (2022). *Play therapy best practices: Clinical, professional, and ethical issues*. https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.a4pt.org/resource/resmgr/publications/best_practices.pdf
- Association for Play Therapy (2020). Why play therapy is appropriate for children with symptoms of PTSD. *Play Therapy™ Magazine*, 15(2), 4-7. https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.a4pt.org/resource/resmgr/publications/why_play_therapy_is_appropri.pdf
- Turner, R., Schoeneberg, C., Ray, D., & Lin, Y.-W. (2020). Establishing play therapy competencies: A Delphi study. *International Journal of Play Therapy*, 29(4), 177–190. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pla0000138>

Articles Summarizing Seminal & Historically Significant Play Therapy Theories:

- Booth, P., & Lindaman, S. (2019, September). Attachment theory and theraplay®. *Play Therapy™ Magazine*, 14(3), 14-16. https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.a4pt.org/resource/resmgr/publications/pt_theories/Attachment_Sept2019_FINAL.pdf
- Carroll, F., & Orozco, V. (2019, September). Gestalt play therapy. *Play Therapy™ Magazine*, 14(3), 36-38. https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.a4pt.org/resource/resmgr/publications/pt_theories/Gestalt_Sept2019_FINAL.pdf
- Drewes, A., & Cavett, A. (2019, September). Cognitive behavioral play therapy. *Play Therapy™ Magazine*, 14(3), 24-26. https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.a4pt.org/resource/resmgr/publications/pt_theories/CognitiveBehavioral_Sept2019_FINAL.pdf
- Kottman, T., & Ashby, J. (2019, September). Adlerian play therapy. *Play Therapy™ Magazine*, 14(3), 12-13. https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.a4pt.org/resource/resmgr/publications/pt_theories/Adlerian_Sept2019_FINAL.pdf
- Lilly, P., & Heiko, R. (2019, September). Jungian analytical play therapy. *Play Therapy™ Magazine*, 14(3), 40-42. https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.a4pt.org/resource/resmgr/publications/pt_theories/Jungian_Sept2019_FINAL.pdf
- O'Connor, K., & Vega, C. (2019, September). Ecosystemic play therapy. *Play Therapy™ Magazine*, 14(3), 32-34. https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.a4pt.org/resource/resmgr/publications/pt_theories/Ecosystemic_Sept2019_FINAL.pdf
- Punnett, A., & Green, E. (2019, September). Psychoanalytic play therapy. *Play Therapy™ Magazine*, 14(3), 46-48. https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.a4pt.org/resource/resmgr/publications/pt_theories/Psychoanalytic_Sept2019_FINAL.pdf
- Ray, D., & Landreth, G. (2019, September). Child-centered play therapy. *Play Therapy™ Magazine*, 14(3), 18-19. https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.a4pt.org/resource/resmgr/publications/pt_theories/ChildCentered_Sept2019_FINAL.pdf
- Scuka, R., & Guernsey, L. (2019, September). Filial therapy. *Play Therapy™ Magazine*, 14(3), 20-22. https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.a4pt.org/resource/resmgr/publications/pt_theories/Filial_Sept2019_FINAL.pdf

Section E. Learning Objectives

Notes to instructor: You should select objectives to meet the needs of the course and your students. These are recommended options. You should refer to your department to ensure all university policies and accreditation standards are met. These are APT suggested objectives; we acknowledge that many universities may have policies regarding an appropriate minimum and maximum number of course objectives. If allowed, a novice play therapy instructor may want to consider covering less objectives (5-7) to help the course feel more manageable.

Student Learning objectives are aligned with the APT's Professional Play Therapy Competencies and tri-phasic play therapy education guidelines. APT designates that a 1-hour graduate level course in play therapy provides 22.5 play therapy instruction hours. This 3-hour course provides 67.5 of the required 150 play therapy instruction hours required for application as a Registered Play Therapist (RPT)/School-Based Registered Play Therapist (SB-RPT).

1. Compare and contrast play therapy pioneers, theorists, and organizations that shaped the history of the profession of play therapy through a historical and multicultural/social justice lens. (APT Primary Area 1)

2. Differentiate between normal and abnormal development in children and determine when play therapy may be a beneficial intervention. (APT Primary Area 2).
3. Identify developmentally and theoretically appropriate play therapy toys and materials from diverse representation for the purposes of both assessment and treatment. (APT Primary Area 3)
4. Conceptualize a child's presenting mental health issue(s) and psychosocial problem(s) through a developmental and theoretical play therapy framework. (APT Primary Area 2)
5. Demonstrate an understanding of the role of the play therapist and play therapy in the context of the child's comprehensive ecological and systemic world, which includes considerations for family, school, community, social groups, diversity factors, strengths and risk factors, and mental health/psychiatric factors. (APT Primary Area 2).
6. Identify and differentiate the stages within the play therapy process from intake to termination, including a child's progress in the play therapy process, and be able to articulate these stages effectively to key stakeholders (such as parents/caregivers and teachers). (APT Primary Area 5)
7. Examine, discuss, and demonstrate key elements in a play therapy relationship. (APT Primary Area 2)
8. Demonstrate basic play therapy skills (with non-clinical volunteers) including (but not limited to) structuring, tracking, reflection of content and process, returning responsibility, facilitating self-advocacy, and limit setting. (APT Primary Area 3)
9. Evaluate personal and professional relational style and the impact of relational style on the unfolding relationship with the child. This will include issues of transference and counter-transference (APT Primary Area 2).
10. Compare and contrast the legal and ethical issues that are unique to play therapy and those shared with other modalities, i.e., documentation, competence, informed consent, confidentiality, boundaries, and duty to warn and protect, use of touch. (APT Primary Area 4)
11. Identify and recognize the evolving body of current or up-to-date qualitative and quantitative play therapy research, and demonstrate a clear understanding about play therapy effectiveness as an evidence-based treatment for children. (APT Primary Area 4)
12. Develop knowledge, attitudes, and skills for practicing play therapy in a diverse society, including examining biases, community needs, and play therapy environment. (APT Primary Area 5)
13. Identify the training and supervision guidelines and play therapy best practices outlined by the Association for Play Therapy. (APT Primary Area 4)
14. Compare and contrast seminal or historically significant theoretical models of play therapy and the formats in which they are most commonly offered (individual, group, family, etc.). (APT Primary Area 2)
15. Demonstrate an understanding of the importance of parent/caregiver involvement in play therapy and identify the essential key elements in parent/caregiver consultation.
16. Demonstrate an understanding of the similarities and differences on how play therapy is implemented or modified and how its outcomes are measured in diverse populations.
17. Describe the influence of culture and diversity in play therapy:
 - Demonstrate an understanding of the role of the play therapist and play therapy in the context of a child's broader clinical (medical/psychiatric treatment) and non-clinical systems (family, school, community).
 - Demonstrate an understanding of the role of racial trauma history and systemic inequities (economic, education, and healthcare) and long-standing oppression on children's well-being (social, emotional, and behavioral status).
18. Demonstrate the ability to facilitate a parent/caregiver intake and parent/caregiver consultation.

Section F. Suggested Instructional Components

Instructor Designated Assignments: Students will complete independent and/or group assignments aimed at demonstrating their understanding of the learning objectives.

Sample assignments may include, but are not limited to:

- biographical sketches of seminal people in the field of play therapy
- create a mobile play therapy kit or mock-up play room with rationale for the selection of materials and toys with diverse representation
- reflection paper exploring reactions to assigned reading from textbooks or free continuing education programs provided by APT
- discussions in class or in on-line discussion boards regarding assigned readings and other course content
- complete a research paper studying the impact of a specific theoretical approach to play therapy on a specific presenting problem. For example, review and synthesize research demonstrating the effectiveness of child-centered play therapy on externalizing symptoms.

- study a population of interest (including diverse populations, presenting problems, etc.) to demonstrate the impact of play therapy as well as gaps in literature
- case studies which may include identifying a diagnosis from a child in a movie/tv show/book and recommending a treatment plan
- present evidenced-based modifications to play therapy with children who have diverse identities
- conduct one or more observations of a child at play and compose a reflection noting what you learned about children's play and how your own assumptions may have been confirmed, challenged, or expanded
- paper comparing at least two major play therapy theories
- paper explaining the role and therapeutic rationale of limits and describes at least two models for setting limits in play therapy
- conduct, record, transcribe, and reflect on mock play therapy sessions. For classes in which students are able to apply and practice play therapy skills with non-clinical volunteers, students may conduct practice play therapy sessions and parent/caregiver consultation sessions. Students should record and transcribe their play therapy sessions and review and critique their skills, noting their strengths and areas for growth from their sessions as well as discuss possible play themes and alternative play therapy responses which they could have used. Instructors should consider developing an informed consent document for students to discuss with parents/caregivers prior to recording sessions or sharing for supervision.
- review recorded mock sessions in class in an individual or group supervision format
- conduct mock sessions with live observation and supervision
- observe local professionals, the instructor, or recordings of experts facilitating play therapy and submit a reflection noting content/process observations
- observe a parent/caregiver intake and/or parent/caregiver consultation
- engage in play therapy role plays with classmates during class time. Instructors may assign specific role play scenarios and conduct live supervision to foster skill development.
- review a series of play therapy sessions and create a treatment plan and progress notes that demonstrate the theoretical orientation utilized as well as the process of play therapy
- create a documentation system for the play therapy process
- submit two recordings of mock sessions practicing from two different theoretical approaches covered in class
- conduct a self-assessment of knowledge and skills based on APT competencies
- final paper summarizing what was learned over the course of the semester
- quizzes, midterm, and/or final exams covering course content

Section G. Teaching Methods

The methods for delivery of this course may include lecture, assigned readings, small and large group discussion of assigned readings, role plays, individual or group presentations, videos and/or demonstrations of play therapy basic skills, individual and/or group supervision, journaling, skill-building and expressive arts modalities to enhance student self-awareness. In this course, the instructor will primarily utilize a (child-centered, Adlerian, trauma-informed, psychoanalytic, relational cultural, etc.) theoretical perspective and incorporate a (Integrated Developmental Model, Discrimination Model, etc.) of supervision in a culturally sensitive manner.

Section H. APT Credentialing Requirements

The Association for Play Therapy (APT) offers three credentials by which licensed mental health professionals and school counselors/psychologists might demonstrate and promote their specialized play therapy knowledge and training.

- Registered Play Therapist (RPT)
- Registered Play Therapist-Supervisor (RPT-S)
- School Based-Registered Play Therapist (SB-RPT)

Please visit the [Play Therapy Credentials](#) section of APT's website for more information. For questions concerning the Credentialing Program, contact APT at 559-298-3400 or info@a4pt.org.

Section I. Acknowledgments

APT gratefully acknowledges and appreciates the contributions of these Professional members to the development of these syllabus guidelines:

Update February 2024: *Chair* Kasie Lee, PhD, LPC-MHSP, RPT-S, Lipscomb University, Nashville, TN and the University Education Committee.

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