



# PENNSYLVANIA PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

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## What Is Play Therapy?

***By Vincent J. Morello, Ph.D.***

Children have troublesome thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, just like adults. Yet, unlike adults, children do not always readily use words to express themselves. Instead, children express themselves through play. Thus it is said: "Play is the language of children." Psychologists trained in play therapy are not merely 'playing with children.' On the contrary, using specialized toys intended to help children demonstrate their 'problems or issues,' psychologists assist children in facing their difficulties and developing new ways to cope with and resolve their problems.

Competence in play therapy is a specialization. Specific training is required in child development, child psychopathology, and child psychodynamics. Play therapy is used with many different types of problems. It is of tremendous value for children who have witnessed or experienced violence. It helps eliminate fears and phobias. It helps resolve problems in families. And there are so many more applications. For example, much can be learned about a child's level of cognitive (or intellectual) functioning by observing him/her play. A professional trained in play therapy knows that children generate increasingly complex interactions among human figures as they progress through developmental stages. A play assessment is particularly well suited for nonverbal children or children with limited educational experience.

When children complete a course of play therapy they usually emerge with fewer behavior problems and a greater sense of self-confidence and trust in others, particularly their adult caregivers. During the course of treatment, it is essential that the psychologist receive regular input from the child's caregiver about the child's behavior out of the office and about important events occurring in the child's home life. Thus, throughout play therapy treatment parents serve as important partners with the therapist.

***Talk to someone who can help.*** If you would like the name of a qualified psychologist in your area, please try our Psychologist Locator.