

## What is play therapy and how does it work?

### Play

Play is the child's natural medium of communication and self-expression and an essential part of healthy emotional and physical development. Play is the medium through which children explore the world, their social relationships and past experiences. Children also use play to express and make sense of their feelings and to find solutions to everyday problems.

Neuroscience has shown that play is essential for healthy brain development and that it triggers the release of positive chemicals, lowering stress and stress responses. We also know that play advances emotional and cognitive development, promotes language development, communication skills, social skills and the ability to make decisions.



### Play Therapy

Because children are comfortable with play and express themselves more fully and more directly through self-initiated spontaneous play than they do verbally, play therapy is a highly effective therapeutic intervention for children who are experiencing emotional difficulties and require a safe space to explore their feelings. Play Therapy is a clinically validated therapeutic intervention which helps and supports children to process, make sense of and come to terms with challenging experiences and situations. As a result they often become less reactive to day to day challenges in their environment and more effective at self-regulating. Play therapy is



sometimes referred to as a 'brain sculptor' as it has many benefits to the cognitive, social and emotional wiring of the brain. As the child has new experiences in the play room, both through the process of play and the

relationship with the therapist, dysfunctional and unhelpful neural pathways are replaced with new and more positive ones. Sometimes this can happen quite quickly, at other times it takes much longer. The more difficult or traumatic the child's previous experiences, the more time will be needed.



**The therapist at Northmead** uses an Integrative Holistic Play Therapy Approach, which is child centred and allows children to freely choose from the toys and art materials in the room and through metaphor and play explore the themes that are most pertinent to them. More directed interventions may occasionally be introduced, when appropriate. This approach works with both conscious and unconscious processes and is

based on the understanding that the human psyche has a desire to heal and that given the right environment and responses in therapy, children will find their own way. The role of the therapist is to provide a safe, non-judgemental space for her client and – where appropriate – to reflect the child's processes and self-expressions in order to increase self-knowledge and understanding. By being fully present with the child throughout each session, the therapist also gains insights into the child's world construct, what his or her problems and concerns are, and who the child desires to be.

#### **After a period of play therapy, children may:**

- Feel less aggressive or anxious
- Feel calmer and psychologically stronger
- Have an increased feeling that everything is well in their world,
- Experience a deeper sense of well-being
- Feel safer in the world
- Feel the world has meaning
- Have an immune system which works better
- Be more able to learn at school
- Demonstrate improved problem solving and prosocial behaviours such as helping, sharing, giving, co-operating, and volunteering.

#### **Who can benefit?**

Play Therapy can help children and youngsters from the age of four upwards. They may:

- Have nightmares or disturbed sleep

- Display inappropriate behaviour
- Have suffered trauma (e.g. bereavement, divorce, neglect)
- Have suffered emotional, physical or sexual abuse
- Have been adopted or fostered
- Suffer from anxiety, stress, phobias
- Be withdrawn or unhappy
- Not communicate well
- Find it difficult to make friends
- Bully others or be bullied
- Not play



### What to expect

Children are typically offered an average of 15 weekly 40 minute sessions, either 1:1 or in a small group. The play therapist's toolkit includes: storytelling, books, role play, dressing up, puppets, art, clay, construction, messy play, music, dance and movement, sand play and sand worlds, relaxation techniques and games. Sessions are confidential and the only reason this confidentiality may be broken is when the therapist has safeguarding concerns or when the child shares something in therapy which constitutes a safeguarding concern. Whenever this is the case, the therapist will follow the appropriate safeguarding procedures.

