



Embark Counseling Services, LLC

Empowering Children and Families for Hope and Healing

Preparing Your Child for Play Therapy

Parents/guardians and caregivers often worry when a child has a problem that causes them to be anxious, sad, disruptive, inattentive, rebellious, or unable to cope with their circumstances. You may be concerned about your child's development, eating or sleeping patterns and how they are getting along with others at home or at school. Every child is unique and special, but sometimes, they experience problems with feelings or behaviors that cause disruption to their lives and the lives around them. The commitment to provide your child the opportunity to start working through these distressing feelings and behaviors is a significant step in providing the support and loving guidance your child deserves.

What is Play Therapy?

Play Therapy allows children to change the way they think about, feel toward, and resolve the issues and problems the child is experiencing. As adults, when we encounter a problem or difficulty, we are able to think about the issue from many different angles, problem solve through options or consult with another trusted individual for wisdom and guidance. Children are different. They simply do not have the ability to approach or solve problems the way adults do. In my practice, I create an environment that is safe, accepting and warm. Play Therapy gives children expressive freedom and an opportunity to learn how to solve problems, explore different ways to react emotionally, and change any negative behaviors, in addition to navigate social rules and norms. Research shows that Play Therapy typically occurs at a minimum of 20 session, with more long term effects occurring closer to 40 sessions. This depends upon the intensity of the presenting problem, the child's personality and temperament and the implementation of environmental supports at home, or at school, if necessary. It is important that you, as the caregiver, recognize that Play Therapy is a process. While results are important and anticipated, your child's growth cannot be hurried or pushed. Some children demonstrate change quickly, while others take a little more time, making it difficult to predict how many sessions a child will need. Children may leave the session feeling great, and other times may leave feeling emotional. Each play session is a personal experience, and it may impact the child differently each week.

How does Play Therapy help?

Play is vital to every child's social, emotional, cognitive, physical, creative ability and language development. It helps in the learning process for all children, including the young ones where verbal expression is difficult. The playroom provides a child-friendly environment equipped with a range of therapeutic toys and art supplies for the child to carefully select from. These items allow your child to play out themes of real life, safely express their feelings and allow creative expression. Recent brain research has shown that the brain has "plasticity", which essentially means it continues to grow and mold based on experiences. That is why Play Therapy works! It works at an experiential level, giving the child the opportunity to play out real-life situations in the context (and safety) of the play in order to gain understanding about themselves and the world around them.

How do I prepare my child for their first Play Therapy Session?

Tell your child that they are going to play with Ms. Teresa in a special playroom with lots of toys each week. This is usually enough. However, if your child needs more information, "When things are hard for you at home, sometimes it helps to have a special place to play."

What should I say to my child after their Play Therapy Sessions?

It is very important for you, as the parent/guardian, to support your child through this process. If your child wants to tell you, they are most welcome to, and respond by showing interest, but do not ask questions. Allow your child to lead the conversation. If your child is quiet after a session, follow their lead as they may be continuing to think and process the session. Resist the urge to tell your child to “be good”, as therapy is not about being ‘good’ or ‘bad’ and expressing both of these feelings is a normal part of the therapeutic process. Questioning children about their sessions may negatively impact their experience of therapy. When greeting your child after the session, I recommend saying something general, such as, “Hello. We can go home now.” Although resisting the urge to ask about what they did in the playroom may be very difficult, showing your child that you trust the process and respect their growth will add to the the therapeutic process in a supportive way. I value the collaboration of parents/guardians in the treatment process, and I will share more information about the child’s progress in a separate parent meeting, usually held every 4 weeks, unless there is something that needs to be communicated in a more time efficient manner. However, I welcome open communication and this can help target the issue and facilitate acceptance and empowerment for the child, as well as within the family. You may provide significant information through secure email or by phone, and I will return messages within 24 hours.

The Efficacy of Play Therapy with Children: A Meta Analytic Review of Treatment Outcomes, Bratton et.al (2005).

The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent Bonds, Ginsberg, (2006), American Academy of Pediatrics.