



SYNERGETIC
PLAY THERAPY™

In Just Three Sessions

“He was starting to act like he was going to have a meltdown. When I pointed it out, he took a deep breath instead.”

“She is so much calmer at home and at school!”

“He was able to tell me that when his little sister touched his toys it made him mad. He did not hit his sister.”

I routinely hear comments like the ones above from parents regarding changes they notice in their children after just three sessions. Three sessions; really?! It is truly remarkable to me that Synergetic Play Therapy (SPT) can make a noticeable difference in a child’s life after a few sessions of play therapy. What could be happening in those first few play therapy sessions to so quickly help a child develop insight into his or her behavior, and to make shifts accordingly? On the surface, what is observable in the playroom is not the application of insight-oriented techniques, or the teaching of cognitive behavioral strategies, but child-directed play. Toys might fly off shelves; games of Chutes and Ladders may be lost, won, or abandoned; block towers could be built and destroyed; sand may be poured through increasingly smaller funnels; a sad puppet show’s abrupt ending could be orchestrated; monsters might be slain with foam swords; innocents could be unfairly handcuffed; the siren of toy ambulances might start whaling; or quiet whispers could be spoken in hushed voices. Any of these activities, or thousands of other possible play scenarios, could occur during these first three sessions. The question that emerges from the play is, “What could possibly be occurring, given the variability of the play between a synergetic trained therapist and a child, which supports such early, positive transformations? I believe the answer lies beneath the surface of the play. What is happening in those play sessions is the encounter for the first time of two nervous systems. This initial meeting of unfamiliar nervous systems occurs as the child starts to explore his or her unique challenges through play. It is at this neurological, interpersonal level of connection where the transformation of the child (and the therapist) begins. It is this level of interaction which explains the possibility of remarkably quick changes in behavior and awareness that happen for many children.

At the heart of SPT is the therapist’s tracking of the child’s states of affective and nervous system dysregulations (or vacillating states of hyper- and hypo-arousal), coupled with the therapist’s attuned and articulated response to the child’s play. In many respects, SPT replicates, and is analogous to, early maternal-infant exchanges. These exchanges support the development of a child’s regulatory capacity, as described in the journal article, *Three Facial Expressions Mothers Direct to Their Infants (2003)*¹ “These multimodal exchanges involve special modifications in the mother’s voice, in her body movements, and her facial expressions that seem exquisitely tuned to the state of the infant. The exquisite mutuality of these interactions has led some researchers to posit a kind of primordial interpersonal communication or intersubjectivity that enables shared feelings.” It is this “exquisite multimodal” attunement of the therapist to the child’s play which is expressed in the therapist’s voice, movements, and expressions that initiates a deep interpersonal communication at the neurological level between two nervous systems during those first few play sessions. SPT intentionally employs the implicit

and explicit response of the therapist's somatic and emotional experience to the child's play. In fact, the therapist's physiological dysregulations in response to the child's play is highlighted. While backing away from a toy snake thrust in her face, the SPT therapist might say in a high-pitched, frantic voice, "Wow, the snake is getting closer! My heart is racing, my shoulders are tense, my stomach hurts, I feel dizzy and I keep forgetting to breathe. This is so scary! I am really afraid!" After the therapist's hyper-arousal has been given an opportunity to be felt and responded to by the child, the SPT therapist then explicitly models their own regulatory process for the child. "Deep breath, deep breath," the therapist might say to herself while quickly, and then slowly, bilaterally patting her arms and rubbing her legs. Through this play encounter, the child (sometimes for the first time) begins to feel seen, heard, and understood. At the same time, the regulatory capacity of the child's nervous system is supported by the therapist's authentic, attuned response to encountering the child's world and through the modeling of self-regulation. These attuned interactions between the therapist's and the child's nervous systems actually enable the sharing of feelings, and create a potent regulatory experience for the child. Thus begins the transformation the child's perceptions (behavior) described above.

I have found the transformative process to be mutual. Each time I, as therapist, encounter a new child – a new nervous system – or have a new experience in the playroom, my nervous system (just as the child's nervous system), has an opportunity to learn to regulate and integrate the experience. Each time I enter the playroom, I have the opportunity grow as a therapeutic tool and container, and to grow as a person. Every child who turns off the light and with whom I literally enter into the darkness, each time a child confronts his or her ambivalence about being in relationship, every time a child finds a way to re-parent themselves, I in turn face the scary things in my darkness, I confront my own ambivalence about attachment, and I find ways to re-parent myself. A poignant example for me of the mutual transformative power of SPT happened during a termination session with a 4-year-old boy. I made a card for the child depicting him as the superhero who had emerged as the child's self-object during empowerment play. He marveled at the picture as he realized it was of himself. He put his hands on his hips and strutted around the room. I mirrored his actions, our nervous systems regulating together and in sync. As we circled each other, hands on hips, he looked up at me with an amazed smile and he said, "You are superwoman!" In that moment, I recognized the superhero in me – the resourced, capable being who is able to rescue myself. We stand as mirrors to each other's realizations for a long moment breathing together, before he turns and runs out of the room to show his mother his new understanding of himself. Both of us and our nervous systems are transformed.

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