



## You-You: Why the Therapist is the Most Important Toy



As therapists, we don't often view ourselves as toys. We walk the aisles of the local stores looking for the latest Lego set or biggest bag of sand. We look at drums, we look at dolls, we look at checkered soccer balls, but we don't look in the mirror.

Yet therapists aren't only toys, they're essential toys. Yes, you're the most important one in the room. But why? Why is it necessary for the therapist to use herself in the playroom?

This question is such an important one because the field has overemphasized the child's process and has not sufficiently emphasized the therapist's process or the role the therapist plays in the child's healing.

I tell my students all the time, "You are the most important toy in the playroom." And it's true, because at the end of the day, it's the relationship between the child and the therapist that ultimately is the healing agent in the room.

Science has revealed that right brain-attuned communication heals our patients. To effectively help a child, the therapist must possess a certain level of attunement within herself which allows her to attune to a child in a way that engages a deep level of collaborative communication.

### Synergetic Play Therapy

Synergetic Play Therapy, a type of play therapy that focuses not on managing children but on understanding them, uses the principle of "the setup" (or "the offering"). Practitioners know that children *set up* toys to feel what they feel as part of the projective process. But

children also *set up* therapists to feel what they feel. This is the essence of “the setup”: children set up the toys in the room, including the most significant toy: you.

Once children do this – once they invoke “the setup” – they watch to see how therapists handle the experience. It’s easy to miss this part of the equation, leaving us missing out on an opportunity as well. As we know, children learn most effectively through observation.

Of course, it’s not just children learn this way —adults do it all day long. In fact, there is never a time when we aren’t doing it! We engage with people through our language, our tone of voice, our pacing, our timing, our movements, whether or not we honk when they cut us off in traffic. We provide information that allows them to catch a glimpse or a “felt sense” of what it feels like to be us in any given moment. Essentially, we set people up and then we watch how they handle the experience.

We also look for new ideas, alternative strategies, and solutions for managing our internal states.

In the playroom, every child does this. For example, a child who has a perception of feeling deeply controlled is going to show up in the playroom controlling the toys or the therapist. It’s not because the child is bad and it’s not because that behavior needs to be stopped and redirected. Rather, it’s so the therapist can feel what it feels like to be that child. So the therapist can feel what it feels like to be controlled.

In Synergetic Play Therapy, the therapist recognizes what the child is doing and begins to name, move, and modulate that energy. By doing so, she is modeling to the child how the child can have a relationship with himself in the midst of that particular experience.

So, when I say the therapist is the most important toy in the playroom, it’s true. The toys themselves don’t actually matter as much as the emotions and sensations that arise when the child plays with the toys. The toys are used to facilitate the relationship between the therapist and the child. To have a play therapy session, all that you really need is a child and a therapist who is deeply attuned and willing to have a relationship with herself and willing to experience “the set up.”

This willingness allows her to engage in right brain to right brain collaborative communication, enabling the child to begin to integrate the experiences and challenges that he hasn’t been able to thus far.

As play therapists, we might not be as glamorous as dress-up clothes or as pliable as Silly Putty, but we must use ourselves in the playroom. Remember that – the next time you’re roaming the aisles in search of the perfect therapy toy, stop: you’ve already found it.