

The Most Important Toy in the Playroom: Why It's You and How This Knowledge Can Transform Your Practice



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Part 1- 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 roam up and down in search of the perfect miniature or a brand new puppet. 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 themselves in the playroom in the capacity of a toy?

This question is an important one - the field of play therapy 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 am the most important toy in the playroom" should be the battle cry of play therapists everywhere! Why? Because of relationship. It is the relationship between the child and the therapist that ultimately acts as the healing agent.

Working with the Set-Up

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 themselves, allowing for attunement to a child in a way that engages a deep level of collaborative communication. Synergetic Play Therapy® uses the principal of "the setup" (or "the offering") to facilitate this attunement.

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 experiences. It's easy to miss this part of the equation, leaving us missing out on an opportunity as well. This opportunity presents in the form of observation.

As we know, children learn most effectively by watching others. Of course, it's not just children who do this —adults do it all day long as well. 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 the other person 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. A child who has a perception of feeling deeply controlled, for example, is going to show up in the playroom controlling the toys or the therapist. It's not because the

child is bad or because their behavior needs to be stopped and redirected. Rather, it's so the therapist can feel what it feels like to be that child.

In Synergetic Play Therapy®, the therapist recognizes what the child is doing and begins to name, move, and modulate that energy. By doing so, they are modeling to the child how the child can have a relationship with themselves in the midst of that particular experience. This reinforces the idea that the therapist is the most important toy in the playroom. The other toys are used to facilitate the relationship between the therapist and the child.

To have an effective play therapy session, all that's needed is a child and a therapist who is deeply attuned and willing to have a relationship with themselves and willing to experience "the set up." This willingness allows for engagement in right brain to right brain collaborative communication, enabling the child to begin to integrate the experiences and challenges that they haven't been able to thus far.

As play therapists, we might not be as glamorous as dress-up clothes or as mysterious 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.

Part 2– Learning About Yourself as the Most Important Toy

Play therapists are dedicated individuals. We work tirelessly to support the children and families in our practice. We also study, a lot – our minds filled and our noses in books. We choose to spend weekends away from our loved ones. We disengage from our personal lives opting instead to focus on sand trays, art, puppets, and games. We travel long distances to take classes that teach us how to work with parents in the playroom and how to support children who have experienced trauma in their lives. We attend conferences, we watch webinars, we listen to podcasts and we devour research to learn new techniques that we can apply to our sessions.

But, despite all this, we often forget the most important toy in the playroom—the therapist. Have we lost sight of the fact that we are the only toy needed for healing to happen? Have we forgotten that it is the therapist who facilitates the techniques used in the playroom? Have we failed to realize that it's the therapist who makes these techniques successful and not the other way around?

Of course, it's easy to forget, to dismiss this idea of the therapist as the most important toy: we don't take classes to learn about the clinician in this way. We don't picture ourselves inside toy boxes or sitting on closet shelves, growing dusty from lack of use. We don't imagine needing two double A batteries in order to work.

Simply, we don't think of ourselves as toys.

Instead, we spend more time learning about other toys – we spend time, almost literally, with our heads in the sand. But this doesn't mean we shouldn't strive to understand ourselves specific to whatever is occurring in the playroom.

As neuroscience and interpersonal neurobiology continue to reveal what's happening between two people when they interact, it's become increasingly important that we focus more attention on learning about how and why the therapist is the most important and influential toy in the playroom. The more we understand neuroscience, brain function, nervous system states, and what is really going on between the child and therapist, the more profound the integration inside any given session.

The potential for healing in play therapy is so much greater than we ever imagined! Yes, we need to continue to hold space for the child as they work through challenges and offer them techniques to resolve what's bothering them. We must use art and sand and puppets. We must summon troops of plastic army men into battle. We must take sips of imaginary tea and dance to the beat of plastic drums. But, we must also remember the backings of neuroscience – what ultimately matters is how the therapist shows up and engages with the information that surfaces in each session.

Research has revealed that one of the key things therapists can do is focus on moving towards the challenging thoughts, emotions, and sensations that arise in play. This deep level of engagement allows the therapist to connect to both themselves and their client in a way that helps integrate the challenging thoughts, the emotions, and the sensations the child is experiencing inside. Such a deep level of engagement then creates a special kind of attunement. It's the kind of attunement that helps a child feel "felt" at a core level. It's the kind of attunement that widens the window of tolerance. It's the kind of attunement that reaches the child's brain stem, allowing it to rewire from the bottom up.

For this level of attunement to occur, therapists must know how to attune to themselves first and foremost. They must know how to understand their own internal states of nervous system activation. They must know how to read the feedback (the sensations, emotions, and thoughts) that arise in their bodies during sessions when they are playing with the child or watching the child play. And they must know what to do with this information, instead of pushing it away or ignoring it.

Without learning about ourselves as the most important toy, we miss part of the magic in the playroom and we miss understanding how play therapy truly works. When we don't understand and know how to interpret our own internal states, we cut off access to a deeper level of the intuitive knowledge available to us during the play and we miss the ability to fully connect with the child. We also increase the probability of burnout and compassion fatigue. Why? Because we aren't taking care of ourselves.

The therapist is an untapped resource of knowledge. Remember, you have everything you need in any given moment to facilitate the process with your child client. You just have to know how to understand the information being presented to you—information from the child and information that arises inside yourself.

So, next time you consider taking a play therapy course or reading a book on a play therapy technique, choose one about the most important toy in the playroom—you.

Part 3 - The Importance of Being Authentic in the Playroom

A major element of understanding yourself as the most important toy in the playroom involves authenticity: free to be you. We intuitively understand that it is important to be authentic with our clients, but do we understand why authenticity is crucial according to our clients' brains? And do we know the implications for therapy if we fail to obtain this authenticity?

The minds of our clients seek authenticity – they continually look for signs of truth. This isn't limited to children in therapy or children in general, either: we all do it – we're human. As we move through the world, we are constantly scanning for anything that might be a threat or a challenge to us. The amygdala, located in the limbic area of our brain, helps us by assessing if any of the sensory data we take in has any possibility of danger: it acts as our internal worry wart.

The amygdala assures, for instance, that we're always on the lookout for threats to our physical or emotional safety. But it's also on the lookout for a threat that is less understood: "incongruence in the environment."

When there is incongruence in the environment, it means things aren't adding up. It's this particular threat that relates to authenticity in the playroom. It's this threat that makes authenticity so important.

We assess congruence through communication, much of it nonverbal - we use our felt sense and read peoples' faces and their body language to see if what they express is what they feel inside. A classic example of incongruence is when someone is feeling incredibly anxious, yet has a smile on their face. Or when someone is angry, but they say that they're fine. Intuitively, we know something is off: this is the brain letting us know that person is not being authentic. It's also one of the primary reasons we might not trust someone (their incongruence tells us that they're not trustworthy).

Children are barometers of authenticity: they discover congruence or incongruence within seconds. And this lets them know whether or not someone is trustworthy. For this reason, it is incredibly important to consider what we're giving off: are we a threat to our clients and the therapy process simply because we're not willing to be ourselves? Does our language match our emotions? Are we pretending to not feel something that, in fact, we do? Do our words match our actions? Do we make sense to our child clients?

It takes a lot of courage to be ourselves because it requires us to be congruent with our thoughts, emotions, and actions. It requires us to feel and go towards the uncomfortable emotions and sensations that we experience in the therapy room so that we can model to our clients that it's okay for them to move towards their uncomfortable experiences. It requires us to stop pretending and to stop avoiding our emotions. It requires us to be deeply real.

In fairness, it isn't always easy to do, but it's very necessary. We want children to feel safe with us – this allows them to orient inwards instead of needing to orient outside of themselves. The latter happens when their brains perceive a threat in the environment.

It can be a big and even scary thought to consider our own authenticity and our ability to really be ourselves (inside the playroom and outside of it!). Often, many therapists think they are practicing

authenticity more than they actually are. Most of us carry beliefs about who we should or shouldn't be and what is or isn't acceptable to do or say. Most of us also have emotions and experiences that we haven't yet fully integrated and when those thoughts, emotions, and sensations enter the play, it's much harder to move towards them and embrace them.

This is our work as clinicians: can we find a way to be authentic so that we can then teach our clients to do the same?

Being yourself is such a gift: it's a gift to you and the children you work with. As they try desperately to figure out how to be themselves, what they need is a role model for being authentically human in this world.

Don't be afraid to be you! Give yourself permission to be genuinely authentic with your clients. They will watch and they will learn that it's okay to be themselves as they move along their journey towards self-discovery.

Show them that it's okay to be real, imperfect, and human and you'll show yourself why dolls and drums and puppets may be important, but you're the toy that is irreplaceable.

For information on our courses and training, please visit synergeticplaytherapy.com.