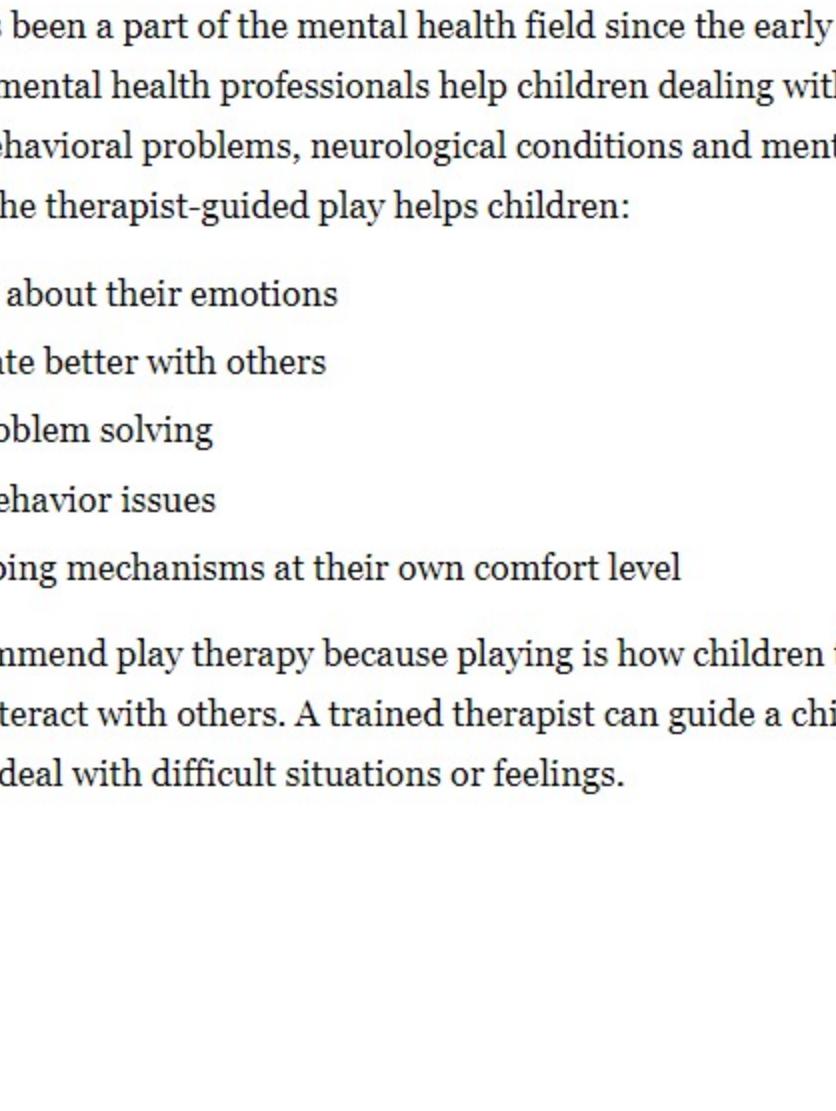
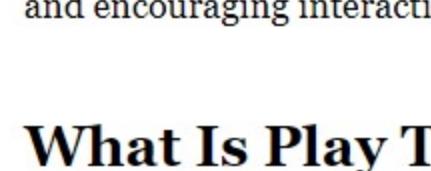


Autism » Autism Treatments » Play Therapy Techniques

# Play Therapy Techniques

By Adrienne Warber

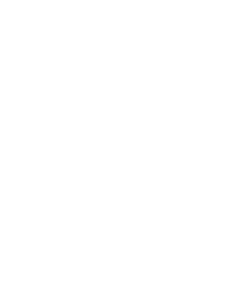


If you are searching for ways to build your child's social skills, consider play therapy techniques for autism. Play therapy can help autistic children improve communication and interpersonal skills. This type of therapy generally involves focusing on a child's interests and encouraging interaction based in the child's favorite activities.

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## What Is Play Therapy?

Play therapy has been a part of the mental health field since the early 20th century. In psychotherapy, mental health professionals help children dealing with emotional trauma, anxiety, grief, behavioral problems, neurological conditions and mental illness through play activities. The therapist-guided play helps children:

- Learn more about their emotions
- Communicate better with others
- Improve problem solving
- Deal with behavior issues
- Develop coping mechanisms at their own comfort level

Therapists recommend play therapy because playing is how children think, deal with their emotions and interact with others. A trained therapist can guide a child through play in learning how to deal with difficult situations or feelings.

## Play Therapy for Autism

Children with autism can also benefit from play therapy. The treatment focuses on developing language, speech, [social skills](#) and interpersonal relationships. It can also be helpful for dealing with sensory issues and encouraging desirable behavior.

### 2005 Study on Autism and Play

A [2005 New England Center for Children \(NECC\) study](#) used video modeling in a combination of play therapy and applied behavioral analysis (ABA) to teach imaginative play to children with autism in hope of encouraging pretend play, motor skill development, cognitive thinking, problem solving and social interaction. Researchers showed a group of about 200 autistic students a series of videos that featured children engaged in pretend play with toys. The children with autism watched the video and were encouraged to copy the behavior of the children in the video. A significant number of the students copied the imaginative play behavior after watching the video.

## Play Therapy Techniques for Autism

Play therapy for autism generally refers to methods such as Floortime, the P.L.A.Y. Project or non-directive play.

### DIR Floortime Play

The most popular type of play therapy technique for autism is Dr. Stanley I. Greenspan's Developmental, Individual-Difference, Relationship-Based (DIR) model, known as Floortime. [Greenspan's Floortime](#) is a child-led approach that involves parents, teachers and therapists playing with a child based upon the child's interests. The therapeutic play has six developmental milestones goals to work toward:

- Interest in the world and self awareness: The child's engagement with her surroundings and her ability to understand her environment may be hindered by sensory processing issues. The play therapy should engage the child with her surroundings and work through any behavioral or sensory issues to interact when possible.
- Relationship building: The play helps build intimacy as the child begins to recognize faces, sounds and speech. As the child gains greater recognition in these areas, she develops vital cognitive and motor skills that will help with improving communication and builds relationships.
- Two-way communication ability: Play activities can help the child interact in two-way communication and better recognize the patterns of cause and effect and problem-solving, which helps these areas of cognitive and social development.
- Complex and nonverbal communication: Complex communication refers to nonverbal communication, such as facial expressions, body language and gestures. Play can help a child figure out the meanings of other people's nonverbal communication.
- Interpreting emotional ideas: Emotional ideas are a part of abstract thought and play can help a child interpret these things and engage in pretend play. Imaginative play does not come easy to many children with autism, and parents can guide play to help encourage it.
- Expressing emotional thinking: Through play, a child may be able to better understand her emotions and the emotions of others. The play can help her develop coping mechanisms for emotional responses to stressful situations.
- A trained therapist can help parents develop a plan for integrating [Floortime](#) into their child's life and make recommendations tailored to the child's specific situation.

### The P.L.A.Y. Project

The Play and Language for Autistic Youngsters (P.L.A.Y.) Project is a treatment program based on the fundamentals of Greenspan's DIR Floortime, but with a greater emphasis on parental one-to-one involvement and parental partnership with autism experts. Dr. Richard Solomon created the P.L.A.Y. Project in 2001. The program also follows the National Academy of Sciences recommendations for treating autistic children. The [P.L.A.Y. Project](#) technique involves the following:

- Early diagnosis and intervention
- Conduct an intensive 25 hours a week treatment plan
- Play sessions are one-to-one interactions between teacher/play partners and the autistic child
- Keep the play interventions fun and engaging for each development level

### 2007 Non-Directive Play Study

Therapists also use general non-directive or child-led play techniques in treating children with autism. A [2007 British University of York study](#) demonstrated that a child with severe autism can build interpersonal relationships and better social skills through non-directive play. A therapist held 16 play therapy sessions with a 6-year-old boy with severe autism who gradually showed the following improvements in social and communication skills:

- He demonstrated a growing trust and attachment to the therapist.
- He showed signs of developing greater independence.
- He began to engage in more imaginative play.
- The study concluded that children with severe autism can improve social and emotional skills through non-directive play and called for more research into the benefits of play therapy for autism.

## Tips for Finding a Play Therapist

Consult your child's doctor and local autism support organizations for recommendations on finding a qualified play therapist. Play therapy can supplement almost any existing autism intervention plan. Depending on your child's needs, a certified Floortime specialist, a child psychologist or an occupational therapist who has experience in using play therapy techniques for autism may be appropriate. You can also find lists of certified play therapists at the [Association for Play Therapy](#) website.

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