

ARTICLE

Healing Through Play



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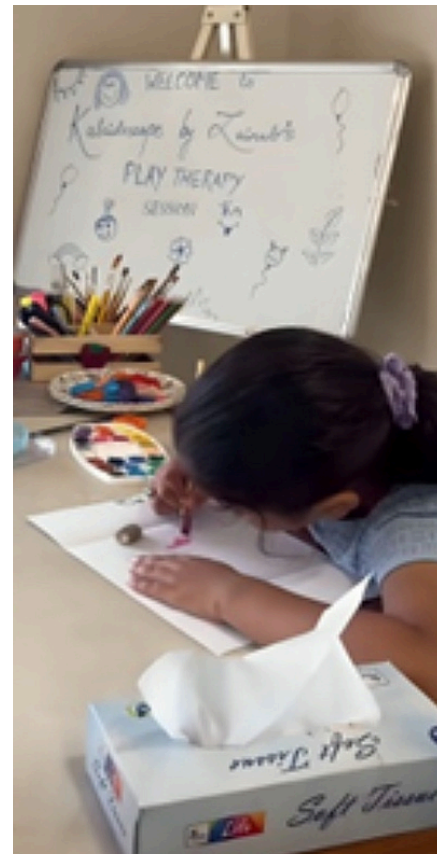
Childhood is a developmental period between infancy and puberty, and it is often seen as a time of innocence, joy, and boundless energy. During this delicate period, play has a vital role as it contributes to the child's physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development. Play is not just a source of enjoyment but a crucial building block for overall growth and learning in childhood, as it allows children to find a way to express their emotions, practice decision-making, and develop resilience.

Unfortunately, beneath the surface, many children tussle with emotions, behaviours, and developmental challenges that can cloud their happiness and hinder their growth. According to a study published in Indian Journal of Psychiatry 2019, at any given point in time, nearly 50 million Indian children suffer from mental disorders, and this number will increase if the adolescent population is considered as well. The World Health Organization states that worldwide, 10% of children and adolescents experience a mental disorder, but the majority of them do not seek help or receive care. Many parents may deny or misunderstand their child's emotional or behavioural problems, attributing them to phases or discipline issues rather than recognizing the need for professional help. This is where play therapy can serve as an easy, gentle, and effective approach to addressing these issues.

Author and clinical psychologist Dr. Virginia Axline, in her book "Dibs in Search of Self" (1964), illustrates how five-year-old boy Dibs, who rarely interacted with others and threw temper tantrums was thought to be mentally disturbed by his teachers even though he seemed highly intelligent at times. Even his parents acted cold to the situation and thought Dibs could not be helped. On Axline's request, the parents agreed to bring the child to a weekly play therapy session. After a few sessions, Dibs opened up about his feelings to Axline, and she slowly tried resolving everything. Years later, Axline saw 15-year-old Dibs' letter defending a friend, written in the school newspaper. It illustrated that the child was bright, and with a little help, he turned out to be morally upstanding and courageous.

ROLE OF A THERAPIST: A GUIDE AND A SUPPORTER

During my interaction with Zainab Samiwala, a certified psychotherapist, counselor and art & play therapist based in Nagpur, Maharashtra, I gained more insights through her experience in play therapy. She currently conducts play therapy sessions for children aged five to eight years old and has a separate playroom in her residence used only for these sessions.



Here is an illustration of a short interview session with her talking about play therapy:

Saba - What is play therapy?

Zainab - Imagine a child playing, lost in its own imaginary world, acting out scenarios, creating colourful masterpieces. For adults, what might seem like a mere play is actually a window to a child's inner world—a language through which they express their feelings, fears, and hopes. Just as adults use words to communicate, children use toys, games, and creative activities to express what they might not be able to verbalize. Using play as a therapeutic tool, therapists try to understand and resolve the emotional and psychological difficulties the child is going through.

Saba - Does play therapy actually help children express their inner emotions?

Zainab - In my three years of experience as a psychotherapist and play therapist, I have witnessed that play therapy creates a safe space for children to communicate feelings of anxiety, sadness, or confusion that are otherwise difficult to verbalize. Through my sessions, children, in their own unique ways, reveal emotional struggles through play, as it is their natural mode of communication. They often express emotional abuse from parents, constant comparison with older siblings, family dynamics, and peer competition in schools. As each session unfolded, children were seen to explore their emotions through different activities and role plays, and parents were amazed by their resilience, improved behaviour, and ability to process their inner world through play.

Saba - A typical session is done in a specially designed playroom. What equipment is there in these playrooms?

Zainab - A typical playroom has art supplies for creative expressions, puppet and masks for role-playing scenarios, dolls and action figures to act out family or social situations, sand, tray and miniatures for creating and exploiting symbolic worlds, and games and blocks for teaching problem-solving skills and cooperation through structured play.

Saba - Among all these, what do you mostly use in your sessions?

Zainab - I use a variety of tools, such as age-appropriate games, art supplies, figurines, puppets, dolls, and sensory apparatus, in facilitating the play therapy sessions. As a psychotherapist and a play therapist, I blend more than two to three techniques in my sessions as per the severity of a child's problem.

Saba - How long are these play therapy sessions, and how many sessions are needed for a child?

Zainab - The foremost thing to be done is to build trust with the child; it is the heart of play therapy. I try to create a safe and supportive environment in which the child feels safe and comfortable enough to explore and share its difficult emotions, and this takes time. It cannot be done in a single session; one has to be patient with children. Each session typically lasts 45 to 60 minutes, once a week, depending on the child's needs. Sometimes it takes months for the child to heal completely, again depending on the severity of the problem.

Saba - Is there a certain approach for conducting the sessions?

Zainab - Yes, a play therapy session is tailored to each child. There are two main approaches to play therapy: child-centered and directive play.

In child-centered play therapy, the child leads the session, choosing the toys and activities themselves. The therapist only observes the child, interacting occasionally but largely allowing the child to direct the session. This freedom of choice gives the child a sense of control, which is crucial for emotional expression and healing.

In directive play therapy, the therapist takes an active role by directing the play to address specific issues or goals. This might include introducing the child to a new toy or game to provoke discussion about certain topics, feelings, fear, or social interaction.

Saba - Most parents hesitate about seeking help for mental health conditions of their children; do you recommend parents opting for play therapy for their child?



Zainab - With my extensive experience in play therapy, I highly recommend parents to support their children for emotional expression all the time. Parents should consider play therapy because:

It offers them an opportunity to heal and grow in a way that is natural to them.

Emotional disturbances, such as stress from family dynamics, school pressure, or trauma can manifest in behavioural changes, and play therapy allows children to confront these issues at their own pace.

Play therapy helps children develop emotional intelligence, confidence, self-worth, self-regulation, and coping skills.

So, investing in their emotional well-being early can make a profound difference in their overall development and mental health.

Saba - How can parents support their child's healing process outside of therapy sessions?

Zainab - I believe parents play a very crucial role in supporting their child's healing process outside of therapy sessions. One key way is by creating a safe and open environment at home where the child feels comfortable expressing their emotions. Encourage free play and use of creative apparatus, and being patient with their feelings can help reinforce what they experience during therapy. It's also important to listen attentively and validate their emotions, even when they can't fully verbalize.

CONCLUSION:

Imagine witnessing your child transform from an anxious, sad and withdrawn individual into a confident, emotionally resilient and joyful person. That's the magic of play! It's not merely about mending the broken pieces within them, it's also about helping them explore their inner strength, navigate their emotions, and develop the skills necessary to thrive in life. As we continue to break the stigma surrounding mental health and raise awareness, more children can get the benefit from the transformative effects of play therapy - unlocking their potential and paving the way for a brighter, healthier future.

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