

What is Theraplay?

(Adapted from Theraplay: The Practitioner's Guide by V. Norris and D. Lender)

Theraplay is an intervention that focuses on strengthening the connection, trust and joy between a child and a parent through attachment - based play. This method involves interactive, playful activities using simple face-to-face reciprocal interactions. Theraplay is designed to help children learn to better regulate emotions by experiencing co - regulation, and to improve relationships with their parents, enhance self esteem and trust in others.

- Theraplay is modeled on available, sensitive, and responsive parenting: the kind that leads to secure attachment.
- Treatment involves emotionally attuned, interactive, physical play.
- The focus is on the here and now, not on what happened in the past, interpretation of symbolic meanings or pretend games.
- Treatment is geared to the child's emotional level and therefore often includes activities that might otherwise seem more appropriate for a younger child.
- The therapist takes charge, plans and structures the sessions to meet the child's needs.
- Parents / caregivers are actively involved in the treatment to enable them to take home the new ways of interacting with their child.
- The therapist and caregivers work together to engage the child in a healthier relationship.
- The goal is to empower parents / caregivers to enhance attachment, trust, self - esteem and joyful engagement with their child.

What are the Four Theraplay Dimensions?

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The four dimensions of Structure, Engagement, Nurture and Challenge (based on the elements present in healthy relationships) provide an organizing framework. Each dimension is important and adjusted to the needs of each family to provide safety, social engagement, co - regulation and connection for parents and children.

Therapists are trained to lead (Structure) parent - child interactions within safe social connection (Engagement) with up - regulating (Challenge - Play) and down - regulating (Nurture) aspects. These experiences support the development of emotional regulation and resilience.

- **Structure** - The adult is a reliable leader whose actions create environmental regulation through organization, clear boundaries / expectations, and relational

regulation through pacing, choice of activities and level of energy. This guidance and regulation form the basis for predictability, safety and co - regulation for the child.

- **Engagement** - Engagement is about the joy of companionship, being connected in the “here and now”, being focused on in a personal way and having the sensitivity to pick up on the child’s cues. These interactions allow the child to feel connected and experience shared joy.
- **Nurture** - The adult provides gentle, caring and soothing activities each session, including provisions for food. The adult looks for opportunities to express appreciation and concern and to take care of the child (and parent) throughout the session. These caring activities are down regulating and stress reducing. They make the child feel valued and loveable.
- **Challenge** - The adult supports the child’s development by partnering with the child in playful, physical activities and encourage the child to try new things. Experiencing successful challenge activities creates a sense of mastery and helps the child feel more competent, confident and courageous.

A Word about Videoing

(Adapted from Theraplay: The Practitioner’s Guide by V. Norris and D. Lender)

The purpose of videoing in Theraplay is to improve the effectiveness of the intervention. In other words, the purpose is therapeutic rather than evaluative. The videoing is not intended to be used as a way to collect evidence of poor parenting or to focus on the therapist’s mistakes. The goal is to be strengths - based.

- Together, the therapist and parent view selected clips to aid in discussion and understanding.
 - Parents and therapist can rewind and view video in more detail, review the pattern or sequence of moment - to - moment interactions.
 - Reviewing these interactions will significantly improve the quality of understanding about strengths and challenges for the parent and therapist.
 - When we review a video, we are always surprised at how much detail we see that was not obvious at the time.
 - The video is an incredibly rich resource which, when used well, can significantly impact parents’ perception and experience with their child.

