

## Six Creative Ways to Explain Play Therapy to Parents

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An eight year old boy suddenly stopped painting at the easel in the playroom and froze. The look in his eyes revealed shame, embarrassment, and terror as urine flowed down his legs and made a puddle onto the floor around his feet. This was his fourth session, but unfortunately he was not going to be brought back for another. Instead, I received an email from his parents disclosing their belief that therapy wasn't really getting past their son's surface issues. In fact, they didn't think play was really helpful to him at all, and they wanted a recommendation for a psychologist who would talk with him more. They felt talk therapy would be the most effective way to get to his core issues. To say I was disappointed is an understatement. I spent two days thinking about the email and conversing with colleagues before I drafted my response to his parents. Yet one question evaded an answer: how do I convey the value of play therapy to parents so that they get it...*really* get it? My answer to this question is still developing, but I'll share my thoughts thus far.

**1) Use Stories:** The saying, "For children, toys are their words and play is their language" helps a lot of parents begin to understand play therapy (Landreth, 2002). I try to avoid clinical jargon when describing play therapy. Instead, I find myself using analogies or telling short stories (Wark, 2003). For example, I frequently tell the story about several children who witnessed 9/11 and were quickly placed in a secure, child-friendly environment until clinicians could arrive and help them process what they had seen. The adults gave them many kinds of toys to play with, but they were not allowed to have planes because the adults felt they would be re-traumatized by them. When the play therapists arrived, they were not surprised to find the children pretending that their hands and other objects were planes flying through the air and crashing into things. The clinicians explained to the adults that toys are a child's words, and the adults soon gave the children planes to play with to help them process the trauma they witnessed. Children need the opportunity to play out what they experience.

**2) Use Analogies:** I recently told a father to imagine feeling really angry, but when asked to describe how he felt, he could not use the word "anger." He looked at me bewildered, as if to say, "How am I supposed to tell someone I'm angry if I can't use the word "anger?" I then told him that for children, toys are their words, and not giving them an opportunity to play out their feelings with toys is like taking away his words right before asking him to describe how he feels.

**3) Use Self-Disclosure:** Believe it or not, I thought play therapy was a bit ridiculous when I initially learned about it! I just couldn't understand how blocks and dolls could really be clinically useful, but a new world opened up to me as my training continued. I sometimes tell parents about how I felt toward play therapy when I initially heard about it, and then I invite them to learn more about it like I did. A parent recently said to me,

“When I learned about how you thought play therapy was ridiculous and then you became a strong proponent of it, I thought to myself, “maybe I should give it a chance too. If Amy saw that it really worked, maybe I will too.’ ”

**4) Provide Research and Articles:** In the past year, I’ve started to provide several parents with a variety of articles from various sources, such as magazines, scholarly journals, and professional organizations. Even if parents choose not to read the information, they become aware of the existence of play therapy literature that demonstrates its clinical credibility and extensive research background. In other words, play therapy isn’t brainless or silly. It actually receives scholarly attention.

**5) Tell Them What to Expect:** Like therapy with most adults, play therapy with children is a process (Axline, 1947; Gil, 1994). It’s not a quick fix. Sometimes adults leave a session feeling great, but sometimes they leave a session feeling emotionally off-kilter, and children are no different. Some children change faster than others, and predictions for a child’s pace in therapy are difficult, if not impossible, to provide to parents with confidence. I find that telling this to parents at the onset of therapy can be helpful in setting their expectations.

**6) Use Humor:** Often times I find it helpful to use humor when explaining play therapy to parents. For example, when talking with parents during the intake session, I might ask, “How have you addressed this issue with your child in the past?” Many parents mention their efforts to talk with their children about problems. I reflect that it must be so frustrating for them to try so hard to communicate with their kids to no avail, and then I say something to the effect of, “Yeah, you know I’ve found the same thing to be true myself. I bet if we invited your child into this room, sat him on the couch with us, and asked him why he is doing what he is doing, we probably wouldn’t get too much out of him! It just doesn’t seem to work too well.” When a comment like this is said in a non-attacking, empathic, and humorous voice, parents look at each other, start to chuckle, and nod their heads as if to say, “Yeah, I guess that doesn’t really work, huh!”

As time passed, I became thankful for the email I received from that boy’s parents because it reminded me of the task that lies before play therapists: to effectively communicate the value of what we do to those around us. The future of play therapy depends on our ability to do so. I want to find a place within myself where I no longer feel the need to defend or explain play therapy. Instead, I want parents to find themselves thinking, “I want *that* for my child!” when they hear me talk naturally about what I do. I responded to the email with one of my own, wherein I thanked the parents for their honesty and acknowledged the difficulty many people have in understanding play therapy. I used humor, analogies, and self-disclosure, and I provided them with a few articles. In a follow-up phone call, the parents expressed their desire to resume therapy for their son, as well as a growing interest in this thing called play therapy. To say I was excited is an understatement. I was thrilled.

**References:**

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#### **About The Author:**

Dr. Amy Wickstrom founded More Than a Toy ([www.morethanatoy.com](http://www.morethanatoy.com)) to transform child and family therapy services into fun, practical, and less expensive products. She is a licensed Marital and Family Therapist and Registered Play Therapist-Supervisor in private practice. She was the "Family Expert" on KSON, a country radio station in San Diego and has been featured on NBC News. Her research and writing on play therapy is published in professional journals and clinical books, and she speaks at local and nationwide conferences, churches, schools, and non-profit organizations on topics relating to parenting, toys, play, and child therapy. She is also a wife and mother of two.

#### **Conversation Cards:**

Dr. Wickstrom created Conversation Cards to help clinician's creatively jumpstart conversation with children, teens, and families in therapy (<http://www.morethanatoy.com/products/conversation-cards>). This interactive activity can also be used by parents to spark good conversation with their kids, whether it's around the dinner table, passing time "on-the-go," or winding down to connect before bed. Conversation Cards offer both clinicians and parents a fun and easy way to talk to children about family values, feelings, social skills, and healthy relationships. Receive **10% off your purchase of Conversation Cards** with coupon code: CC10.

You can also **receive a free copy of Dr. Wickstrom's eBook, "Let's Talk Toys!"** when you sign up for her monthly e-newsletter at [www.morethanatoy.com](http://www.morethanatoy.com)