

## My approach to working with children ~

When your child enters therapy it is important for you to know what to expect. There are a few general guidelines to help make this a supportive and positive experience.

- I will greet you and your child in the waiting area or at the front door.
- It is not a good time to discuss personal material unless it is an emergency. It is better to set aside time to talk in another setting.
- Your child is the most important person in my focus at this time and I will work to help make this "transition time" go smoothly.
- This is typically not a good time to bring along playmates. Sometimes, understandably, siblings must accompany you to therapy. There are books that you can read to them while you wait. Keeping them quiet is vital. You may want to take them on a walk if the wait is too long.

You have every right to know how your child is progressing and to seek collateral contact. I support you in your commitment to your child's well being. In order to stay well informed, should you desire a conference, you may call at an agreed upon time. The time may be used for you to ask questions or give me pertinent information. This needs to be sometime your child is out of hearing range. (After the first ten minutes there will be a prorated charge at my regular hourly rate, for which I will bill you.) Typically, I will be sharing with you areas of progress and concern, asking questions and offering suggestions to continue the therapy in your child's outside experience. While we will let your child know that we are having appropriate contact, it is important to remember that discussing the actual contents of the therapy is usually destructive for the experience, and the trusting relationship that we are fostering. Note: see attached list of exceptions.

Confidentiality is a basic foundation for the therapy experience and is necessary in order to build trust and to have the experience be useful and as beneficial as possible. Parents often ask about the degree to which they should inquire with their child about the contents of the therapy session. In general, it is good for your child to know that you are interested and open to hearing anything that s/he finds important, but it usually is counterproductive to inquire directly or frequently. This may set up an uncomfortable dynamic between you and your child as s/he works to express her/himself and find alternative options of behavior in our work together. Parents often ask how they can best present the idea of therapy to their child. It is important to be direct, honest, and to the point.

Some ideas are:

- You can say... *Our family is having trouble expressing feelings lately. All families have difficulties sometimes.*

- You might say...*One thing that our family/you have been having trouble with is (adjusting to divorce... dealing with the death of...getting along at school...getting in fights)* simply state the challenge or problem to your child. Tell them that you know someone that works with children and families about feelings. That it is a place where s/he can go and share whatever s/he would like to.
- You can say *Mostly, you will play and talk and I will wait for you until you are finished. Sometimes I may come in with you.*
- Ask your child...*what do you think/feel about this? Do you have any questions?*

*Therapy should never be defined as a punishment or consequence for bad behavior.*

Often letting the child know what I do and what s/he will be doing and how the process works is the best way to approach it.

Below is an explanation:

When working with children I use *Artplay, Imageplay, Sandplay*, and *EMDR*, the same modalities I use when working with adults, only I meet your child at his/her particular developmental level. Children most often come into therapy because a parent is wishing to help them through a difficult life situation. They don't really understand why they are coming to "talk to a stranger" and often times don't have the words to express what is going on for them or the trust in this *new* person that they just met. That is where the use of *Artplay, Imageplay* and *Sandplay* are so valuable (see *Creative Healing Modalities* on website for explanation of each modality). By using these modalities, children, as well as adults can process the challenges of life, without the use of words, and sometimes even better when words are at a minimum.

Because playing is a child's "job" and the language that they naturally speak, having your child start with an art project, an imageboard or a sandworld, may be the best, safest, and not to mention, the most *fun* way to open up the channels of communication. Once your child has completed the project we can then begin to discuss what it means, although it is by no means necessary. Again, processing can take place with or without discussion. I will make every effort to engage your child in dialogue.

It is my approach to follow your child's lead and allow him/her to tell me what it is that they need from the process. *They know!* Sometimes it is verbal interaction and sometimes it is just to do process work in silence. When I feel that a trust is in place and your child shows the desire to share, I can be more direct and probing with my questions. Often times while your child is "engaged with the process" which s/he have chosen, we may discuss life in general. This is very helpful and gives me a chance to get to know him/her. It also helps free your child to be able to communicate about what is important. Sometimes, on the other hand your child will be so focused that it would be very intrusive to even utter a word. In that case I will hold a safe, quiet space, as your child explores at

the deepest levels. When a dialogue does begin around a certain image, issue, challenge or life situation, I will work with your child to come up with solutions that are appropriate for the given situation that is causing concern.

I will include EMDR in the session if your child is open and willing and I feel that it is in your child's best interest. EMDR is a very valuable tool to use with children. If your child is older and willing to freely communicate, then EMDR can be approached in a very direct way; much like is done with adults. I will discuss EMDR with you prior to actively using it with your child, so that I may answer any questions that you may have.

- You can explain to them that I have pictures and figures that help people express feelings with or without words. You can tell them that I also have art that they can do... painting, drawing, clay, and various other supplies. When you arrive on the first visit I show *both* you and your child around and explain how it all works. Following the explanation I will ask you to wait for us in the waiting area, and your child and I can start getting to know each other.

Here are some other issues that can arise during sessions and how we can best handle them in a positive and constructive way.

- In the beginning and sometimes throughout, it may be important for you to actually wait in the area so that your child can "check" on you if s/he needs to. If your child is having severe difficulties separating from you, I may ask you in and work you out gradually. I will cue you directly, and we will assure your child that you are just in the next room and we can leave the door open.
- There might also be times when it would be in the best interest of the therapy work that you were not as available. In that case we can strategize via phone to have you leave during the session and to return later.
- When the session is over, it is important that you be ready to receive your child. Typically, I will give your child ample notice that our time together is nearing an end and that it is time to clean up. I will bring your child out to you in the waiting area.

Sometimes your child will want to have you come in to see what they have done in a sandworld or imageboard or art project. If that is the case we will honor that.

Often as parents, it may be difficult to see what your child is experiencing internally. This is a special time for your child to express openly, *without* undo concern for a possible reaction from a parent. But, if your child does want you come in and see, there are a few general rules to follow.

- Realize that *whatever* your child has created, it is important that s/he was able to express it, and in some cases "get it out".
- Your response should be totally *neutral*. No "reaction" at all. Children are extremely in touch with parent's reactions, even when they are non-verbal.

One verbal response that you can give is to ask "how did it feel to make that?" or say "it must feel good to get that out" or "that must have felt good to do. Stay with feelings, as that is what we are trying to help your child express. Make no judgments of "that's good, bad, nice, super, etc. We do not want your child to do any process for the approval or disapproval of either you or me. They may ask if you like it... a right response might be to ask ... "are you pleased with what you have done." Or say "what's important is do you like it?" Our goal is to help your child feel confident and proud of themselves because of their own "inner acceptance and approval" and not rely totally on the outside world for a sense of accomplishment. *Coming to therapy is something that we want them to look forward to.*

It is very important that your child feel as safe and comfortable as possible. It is then that the real work can begin and continue to be done. Life is complicated, for all of us these days. It can be especially confusing to young minds that are learning to question and try to make sense of a world that can at times be fragmented and feel unsafe. If we work together, as a team, your child included, we can give them the tools to be "in the world" in a constructive, appropriate and empowered way.

Some important things that you can do to help your child and support the therapy process are:

- Make every attempt to share your feelings with your child. *I am sad about.... I feel so angry that... Today I am happy because... They are watching you. It is through your modeling that your child will learn the most about expressing feelings. So express yourself in a way that is a positive role model.*
- Be honest with your child. Always be available and willing to answer their questions. Give them as much information as is appropriate in regards to your life situations and world issues.
- Listen to them. Children want to tell you about their world. *Give your child quality time.* They sense your willingness to "be with them" and it helps keep the lines of communication open.

Your child's well-being is of the highest priority. I look forward to supporting you both in the process of learning how to live in the world in a healthy, happy constructive way.

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*Specializing in emotional healing using the "Creative Process" as a tool, utilizing Artplay, Imageplay, Sandplay and EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing)*

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