

PLAY THERAPY

By **DAVID SMYTH**

Children are able to benefit from counselling therapy. In the same way that adults tend to use speech as their primary means of communication within a therapeutic relationship, children are most likely to prefer play as their preferred means of communication with the therapist.

A child's age and emotional development is an important factor in their preferred method of play. Young children - up to the age of 6 or 7 - are likely to use play for their communication with the therapist. Older children may use play in association with verbal communication. In this way, an older child may use play materials as a diversion to help them express what they want to say. In other words, while focusing on a practical task, a child may feel more relaxed in their conversation.

When children reach their early teenage years, they may choose play materials for one session and, at another, choose to talk to the practitioner.

This is a broad description of the ways in which children and younger people - in my experience - may use play in a therapeutic setting although there are no firm rules. For instance, older children may elect to use play to recreate earlier life experiences and, of course, adults can also make use of play materials for their personal exploration.

The play materials I have available include, art paper, pens, felt tips, charcoal, pastels, good quality paints, clay etc. Construction kits are provided and occasionally updated with the latest ideas on the market. There are puppets and toys that can be used to create a wide range of representations, much more than the adult mind might conceive. I also use sand tray activities that provide a powerful yet 'safe' experience for children and adults to address, often deeply held feelings about them selves. Story telling is a personal favourite of mine and I may write a story for a specific child that offers an opportunity for emotional healing and development.

I also utilise drama and music in a small way. It is possible to receive specialist training in drama therapy and music therapy and indeed art therapy. However, as a Certified Play Therapist, I feel confident in offering these facilities as an integrated, if non specialist, part of my play therapy service. For details about training and sourcing specialist therapists, please see my Links page.