

# How Theraplay Works



## What is Theraplay?

Children and adults express their attachment needs through both their behavior and their words. Theraplay is an evidence-based mental health treatment modality designed to assess and treat children and families experiencing social or emotional difficulties by looking at both words and actions. Theraplay uses attachment signals to increase the amount of positive interactions experienced by the child. Trained mental health professionals facilitate Theraplay by interpreting the four critical components of attachment: **Structure, Nurture, Engagement** and **Challenge**. The therapist then uses these same components to provide activities to enhance the communication of these messages according to the developmental level of need.

**Structure** messages say: "You are safe."  
"Adults can provide guidance."  
"You are supported."

**Nurture** messages say: "You are loved."  
"Adults care for you."

**Engagement** messages say: "You are worth my time."  
"I want to pay attention to you."  
"You are not alone."  
"You are understood."

**Challenge** messages say: "I believe in you."  
"You are capable."

## What kind of problems can theraplay treat?

Theraplay has been proven effective in the treatment of a broad range of disorders and stressors:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Oppositional Defiant Disorder
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Grief and loss
- Shyness
- Attachment Disorders
- Stress as a result of:
  - adoption
  - foster care
  - divorce
  - marriage

Theraplay is typically used with young children, but research points to its effectiveness in addressing the mental health concerns of all ages.

## What can I expect?

Theraplay is a joyful and playful therapy which uses mutual understanding to build healthy relationships. To achieve this goal, Theraplay therapists use a set of predictable steps:

**Step 1: Intake** – To determine clients need Theraplay, therapists assess the child and the family system using an interview process, which the therapist uses to develop an understanding of individual needs and family dynamics.

**Step 2: MIM**- In Theraplay, a diagnostic tool, Marschak Interaction Method (MIM), is used to assess each of the four dimensions of family communication. The MIM consists of a set of short games for the child to play with the caregiver. The games are designed to illicit responses from both child and caregiver which convey some information about **Structure, Nurture, Engagement** and **Challenge**.

## Step 3: The Course of Therapy

Based on the intake and the MIM, the therapist determines which specific Theraplay interventions would be useful in communicating the **four attachment messages**. The games are viewed as practice in communicating these essential ingredients of healthy attachment.

During this phase communication between the therapist and the caregiver is very important. Expect to be an active participant in this communication.

Sources:  
*The Theraplay Institute, theraplay.org*

**Catholic Charities**  
*Providing Help. Creating Hope. Serving All.*

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