



The Therapeutic Powers of Play Core Agents of Change in AutPlay® Therapy

The Association for Play Therapy (APT) (2021) defines play therapy as "the systematic use of a theoretical model to establish an interpersonal process wherein trained play therapists use the therapeutic powers of play to help clients prevent or resolve psychosocial difficulties and achieve optimal growth and development."

More simply put, child play therapy is a way of being with the child that honors their unique developmental level and looks for ways of helping in the "language" of the child – play. Licensed mental health professionals therapeutically use play to help their clients, most often children ages three to 12 years, to better express themselves and resolve their problems. Play therapy works best when a safe relationship is created between the therapist and client, one in which the latter may freely and naturally express both what pleases and bothers them. Research suggests play therapy is an effective mental health approach, regardless of age, gender, or the nature of the problem, and works best when a parent, family member, or caretaker is actively involved in the treatment process (www.a4pt.org).

Play therapy is not the same as regular, everyday play. While spontaneous play is a natural and essential part of the developmental process, play therapy is a systematic and therapeutic approach. Play therapy incorporates a growing number of evidence-based practices and techniques.

Schaefer & Drewes (2014) presented twenty core change agents of the therapeutic powers of play. Therapeutic factors refer to specific clinical strategies, and the therapeutic powers of play refer to the specific change agents in which play initiates, facilitates, or strengthens their therapeutic effect. The change agents include self-expression, access to the unconscious, direct teaching, indirect teaching, catharsis, abreaction, positive emotions, counterconditioning fears, stress inoculation, stress management, therapeutic relationship, attachment, social competence, empathy, creative problem solving, resiliency, moral development, accelerated psychological development, self-regulation, and self-esteem.

Through specific consideration and selection of the cores change agents, all children, including autistic and neurodivergent children, can learn regulation ability, develop healthy relationships, learn how to communicate and express themselves, improve emotional modulation, decrease stress and anxiety, address trauma issues, improve their awareness of self and positive self-esteem, increase advocacy ability, and develop problem solving/coping strengths.

The AutPlay® Therapy protocol can potentially incorporate and address any of the 20 core agents of change of the therapeutic powers of play. AutPlay® utilizes non directed play and structured play therapy interventions that are specifically chosen and or created for the individual child. Therapeutic play processes and play interventions are mindfully chosen with input from both the parent and the child. Each intervention embodies one or more of the 20 core agents of change depending on the child’s assessed needs. Although any of the core change agents could be identified and addressed with a neurodivergent child, children typically benefit from a focus on specifically identified agents of change.

Primary Agents of Change in AutPlay® Therapy Protocol

Direct Teaching	Positive Emotions	Therapeutic Relationship	Stress Management	Social Competence
Positive Peer Relationship	Stress Inoculation	Empathy	Counterconditioning Fears	Self-Regulation
Moral Development	Attachment	Self Esteem	Creative Problem Solving	Resiliency

Ultimately, Play is the natural language of all children and holds many benefits including therapeutic components. Play is also the agent of change that propels children forward in healing and growth. Within the therapeutic powers of play, neurodivergent children have a validating and naturalistic process to address needs and work on mental health growth and goals. AutPlay Therapy protocol is mindfully infused with play core agents of change that specifically align with the neurodivergence of autistic children and children with other neurotype needs.

References

Association for Play Therapy (APT) (2021). www.a4pt.org.

Grant, R. J. (2017). *AutPlay therapy for children and adolescents on the autism spectrum*. Routledge.

Schaefer, C. E. & Drewes, A. A. (2014). *The therapeutic powers of play: 20 core agents of change*. Wiley and Sons.