



## **AutPlay® Therapy Theoretical Underpinnings and Research**

AutPlay® Therapy is a neurodiversity paradigm informed and affirming framework for implementing play therapy approaches with Autistic and other Neurodivergent children.

The AutPlay® framework highlights individualized selection and implementation of play therapy through an affirming lens. The theoretical underpinnings of the AutPlay® framework include humanistic, family systems, developmental, and cognitive behavioral theory. Play therapy modality primarily comprises the AutPlay® framework mental health focus along with neurodiversity affirming protocol integration.

An integrative framework is defined as a progressive form of psychotherapy that combines different therapeutic tools and approaches to help address the mental health needs of the individual client.

- Underpinnings/integration from play therapy theories and approaches include:
  - Child Centered Play Therapy (research support for addressing various mental health needs of neurodivergent children).
  - Filial Therapy (research support for addressing various mental health needs of neurodivergent children and their caregivers).
  - Theraplay® (empirically supported as a therapy approach for working with autistic and neurodivergent children and their families).
  - Gestalt Play Therapy (research supported as an approach for working with neurodivergent children with sensory processing and integration needs).
  - Cognitive Behavioral Play Therapy (research supported and incorporates multiple practices for addressing various mental health needs of neurodivergent children).
- Underpinnings from family systems, developmental, humanistic, and cognitive behavioral theory:
  - Wide research support and multiple evidence-based practices for addressing mental health needs of autistic children, neurodivergent children, and their families.

It is important to remember that Autistic and other Neurodivergent children do not need any particular therapy just because they are Neurodivergent. Instead, therapy should be sought out for and help with specific needs of the child and those needs addressed through a neurodiversity affirming framework. Thus, research related to Autistic and other Neurodivergent children should be focused on a particular issue or need the child is having, not fixing, curing, or correcting their neurodivergent identity. Research should support the self-worth, value, and identity of Neurodivergent children.

## Research and Evidence Based Practices

The following five considerations are provided regarding the AutPlay® framework, neurodivergence, and research.

- 1) AutPlay® is not a theory, approach, or step protocol. It is a diversity framework focused on neurodiversity affirming tenets in seminal play therapy theory integration which is mindfully individualized for each Neurodivergent child. Thus, what you see with one child in one session is not going to be the same for another child in another session.
- 2) Regarding research support, this paper highlights the research outcomes of seminal play therapy theories that are conceptualized in the AutPlay® framework (a list of relevant research is provided further in this paper).
- 3) Research and play therapy theory integration guide the AutPlay® framework of individualization for each Neurodivergent child, but the foundation is a thorough understanding of the neurodiversity paradigm and neurodiversity affirming principles. For any therapy or therapist to be supportive, healing, helpful, resolving in any way, it/they must be grounded in neurodiversity affirming principles. There is no other way for a true therapeutic experience (void of ableist messages) when working with Neurodivergent children.
- 4) When conceptualizing play therapy work with Neurodivergent children, AutPlay® proposes an Affirming Evidence-Based Practice (AEBP) integration which highlights three distinct but equal parts - client perspective, research and lived experience, and clinical expertise. The AEBP is the integration of:

*Client/patient/caregiver perspectives* - The unique set of personal and cultural circumstances, values, priorities, and expectations identified by a client and their caregivers. The client is the expert on themselves. Their voice should be heard and respected in the therapy process.

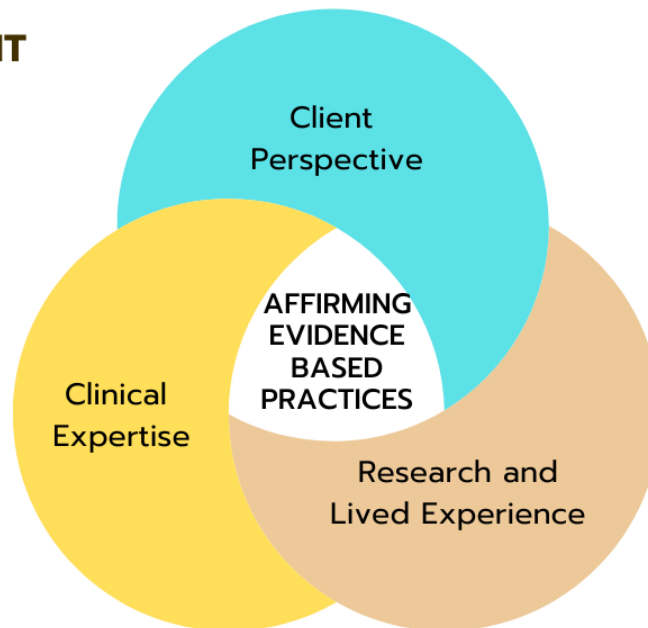
*Research and lived experience* - The best available information gathered from scientific literature (external evidence) conducted with affirming principles and from data and observations collected on an individual client (internal evidence). Research should strive to support neurodiversity affirming practices and include Neurodivergent voices (those with lived experience) in the research process.

*Clinical expertise/expert opinion* - The knowledge, judgment, and critical reasoning acquired through a therapist's training and experiences (seeking out neurodiversity informed and affirming education). When working with Neurodivergent children, the therapist should strive to gain information, understanding, and awareness from neurodivergent individuals (those with lived experience).

When all three components of AEBP are considered together, therapists can make informed, therapeutic decisions and provide high-quality services reflecting the interests, values, needs, and choices of the Neurodivergent individuals they serve.

## **THREE FACTORS FOR NEURODIVERGENT THERAPEUTIC EXPERIENCE**

When conceptualizing play therapy work with neurodivergent children, AutPlay® utilizes an Affirming Evidence-Based Practice (AEBP) integration which highlights three distinct but equal parts - client perspective, research and lived experience, and clinical expertise.



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5) There has been historically, and still currently exists, a significant ableist process, language, and implementation when conducting research with Autistic children, children with developmental disabilities, and children with other neurodivergence. Research has grossly devalued neurodiversity, strengths, and identity. It is encouraged for anyone seeking or interested in research with Neurodivergent children to read the following:

Avoiding Ableist Language: Suggestions for Autism Researchers-

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344126668\\_Avoiding\\_Ableist\\_Language\\_Suggestions\\_for\\_Autism\\_Researchers](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344126668_Avoiding_Ableist_Language_Suggestions_for_Autism_Researchers)

Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) Statement on Research-

<https://autisticadvocacy.org/research/>

Ableism in Autism Research- <https://www.spectrumnews.org/news/community-newsletter-ableism-in-autism-research/>

The AutPlay® framework is not a therapy or a treatment approach. It is a diversity focused understanding for implementing play therapy through a neurodiversity affirming lens. Single case study and clinical outcome designs (reports on individual cases that provide anecdotal evidence, and can include individual quantitative data, on the use of a particular intervention) have been conducted by therapists who have received the AutPlay® training (Grant, 2023). Results have shown significant gains and improvements in targeted therapy goals. Parent reports have also been positive and supported therapy gains for their child, parenting knowledge gains, and improvements in the child/parent relationship. Therapists also report increased levels of confidence and capability in working with Neurodivergent children and an understanding of affirming

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practices after completing AutPlay® Therapy trainings. Case examples and outcomes can be found in several published writings focused on the AutPlay® Therapy framework. A list of sources is provided at the end of this paper.

## **Sample Neurodiversity Affirming Research and Literature Review**

**Neurodiversity paradigm** is a specific perspective on neurodiversity – a perspective or approach that promotes the following fundamental principles (Walker, 2021):

1. Neurodiversity is a natural and valuable form of human diversity.
2. The idea that there is one “normal” or “healthy” type of brain or mind, or one “right” style of neurocognitive functioning, is culturally constructed fiction.
3. The social dynamics that manifest in regard to neurodiversity are similar to the social dynamics that manifest in regard to other forms of human diversity (e.g., diversity of ethnicity, gender, or culture).

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## **Sample Play Therapy Research and Literature Review**

The Association for Play Therapy provides the Play Therapy Evidence-Based Practice Statement (PTEBP) summarizes and reviews play therapy research published from 2000-2015. The purpose of PTEBP statement is to provide practitioners with an advocacy tool to share the positive and effective outcomes of play therapy in the new millennium. Full information can be found at <https://www.a4pt.org/page/Research>

The Evidence-Based Child Therapy database aims to include all available play therapy intervention outcome research since 1995 to the present published or translated in English that meets the definition of play therapy established by the Association for Play Therapy. The database can be found here <http://evidencebasedchildtherapy.com/>

Note: The research below highlights literature review on studies done on play therapy and neurodivergence. Some of these studies may present ableist or non-affirming constructs or language.

Anggraini, I., Alifatin, A., Aini, N., & Pradita, V. (2022). The effect of play therapy among children with autism: A scoping review. *Jurnal Aisyah: Jurnal Ilmu Kesehatan*, 7(1), 287-294. doi:10.30604/jika.v7i1.836

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## **Published Writings on AutPlay® Therapy**

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