## 4 Tips to Help Align With Parents In Child/Play Therapy

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People who bring their children to therapy are a diverse bunch. Some are coming in to get your help with their child's behavior problems at school. Others might seek your help in guiding their child through healing from abuse or other trauma. Still other parents might be going through a divorce or separation, and want to make sure that their child remains emotionally healthy during this difficult time.

Though each of these reasons for seeking therapy are different, they all have a major commonality: the parents are feeling panicked, disoriented, and stressed. If they are bringing their child into a therapist's office, they have reached the end of what they know how to do to help that child. This can make parents feel inadequate.

At the beginning of any counseling situation, you seek ways to join with the client. Before you try to help them make changes in their lives, you have to know what their lives are like. That injunction goes double for your child therapy clients, because you will want to align not only with the child, but with their parents as well. Here are some tips to align with parents:

- **1. Hear their perspective on the situation.** This parent has probably had a lot of people telling them what to do about the concern they have for their child. Their family members, friends, and the child's teachers have likely all had their chance to weigh in. But it's very possible no one has asked the parent what they think is going on. Whether or not you end up agreeing with their perspective clinically, knowing where they're coming from helps set you up as an ally to the parent.
- **2. Ask them what they think play therapy is, and fill in any gaps that arise.** It is helpful to ascertain their conception of play therapy before you provide an explanation so you can assess what they already know. Also, hearing their unaltered perception may bring out misconceptions about play therapy so you can correct any misconceptions. Erasing those misconceptions will put the parent more at ease about the process and again, set you up as their partner in the healing process.
- **3.** Talk to them up-front about reactions their child might have to therapy. Experienced child therapists know that children might cry and cling to their parents the first time they come to therapy. Alternatively, they might also throw a fit and refuse to leave the playroom! We, as therapists, have been trained in how to deal with this. But it could be alarming to a parent to see these kinds of reactions, causing them to second-guess the decision to come to therapy. Prepare the parent for these possibilities and ask them to allow you to manage these scenarios. They will appreciate the respect you are showing them.
- **4. Check-In.** One of the big mistakes I made when I started working in play therapy was slacking off on regularly scheduling parent consults. As a result, when the

parents didn't have a routine opportunity to share their concerns with me, things built up until there was too much to deal with all at one time. I quickly learned that I saved myself a lot of catching up - and earned a better relationship with my client's parents - when I made frequent consultation appointments. Aligning isn't just a one-time thing. It's an ongoing process.

Remember that your work with the child in the play therapy room is only 1 hour in the week. The other 167 hours are largely governed by the parents. Anything you do to help support the adults ultimately helps the child in the form of greater treatment consistency at home and an increased likelihood that the parent will continue to bring them to therapy.

That's why it's so important to align with parents when working with children. It not only boosts your credibility with the child, it also gives you an invaluable partner in the play therapy process.

## About the Author

Stephanie Ann Adams is the author (along with Dr. Carol Doss) of *The Beginning Counselor's Survival Guide: The New Counselor's Plan For Success From Practicum To Licensure.* She runs the Beginning Counselor social networking site www.beginningcounselor.webs.com and is a partner in the new training program, MBA In Private Practice. (www.mbainprivatepractice.com)

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