Between Families Newsletter 2022

Unlocking Hidden Emotions: Play Therapy for Foster Children

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<http://foster-adoptive-kinship-family-services-nj.org/play-therapy-for-foster-children-how-does-it-work/>

Trying to understand what a child is thinking can be difficult. Without the ability to express themselves, or if past trauma has affected their ability to do so, handling grief and trauma can become a major obstacle for foster parents. Whether it’s attachment issues, stubbornness, or acting out, behaviors you experience with foster children may be cries for help. Theresa Aiello, coordinator of the Child & Family Focused Learning Opportunity Program and codirector of the Advanced Certificate in Child and Family Therapy at New York University Silver School of Social Work, explains: “Children don’t have the same cognitive ability as an adult to say what’s bothering them. The problem could be a behavioral issue, psychological issue, or maybe even medical.” But how can foster parents break through and help a child when they can’t understand what that child is expressing? This is where play therapy for foster children comes in.

Magical Thinkers: Think Like A Child

For young children, play can be a way to help them bring out those emotions and ideas that are trapped inside them. Play therapy is a technique that employs the child’s natural mode of being – play – in attempts to unlock the trauma that sparks the outwardly apparent emotional and behavioral issues. “Children can work on issues that are distressing to them, can play out issues of what the future will be, and can talk about trauma. If it’s too hard to put into words, they can work on it with play,” Aiello says. The Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center (FARC) explains why this approach is appropriate:

“Preschoolers are ‘magical thinkers,’ and they may believe their thoughts, feelings, or actions caused their loss. They do not readily share their magical thinking, so adults must assess their experience of grief through behavior, play therapy, or other means. Children this age may feel anxious, hopeless, clingy, or withdrawn and emotionally numb.”

For those children who have no means of understanding their trauma, play can be powerful. According to the Association for Play Therapy (A4PT), play therapy can address a multitude of issues stemming from things like including anger management, grief/loss, abandonment, anxiety, depression, ADHD, and autism. A4PT believes that “play therapy is more than working out feelings.” Playtherapy.org tells us that the goal of play therapy for foster children is to create “a safe, confidential and caring environment which allows the child to play with as few limits as possible but as many as necessary (for physical and emotional safety).” The entire focus is to help the child pull out and express trauma that may be resting in their unconscious mind.

Play therapy is a unique opportunity to gain access to the inner, unexpressed feelings of children.

\*Parts of article have been omitted due to relevancy in this context.

Between Families Newsletter  
May 2022

**Unlocking Hidden Emotions: Play Therapy for Foster Children**

**Name:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

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**PLEASE COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONAIRRE FOR ½ HOUR CREDIT AND SUBMIT TO YOUR ASSIGNED FOSTER CARE WORKER**

1. (True/False) Trying to understand what a child is thinking is easy.

2. Handling grief and trauma can become a major \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ for foster parents.

3. (True/False) A child may not have the ability to express what’s bothering them like an adult does, which can make it hard for adults in their life to help them.

4. For young children, play can be a way to help them bring out those \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_and ideas that are trapped inside them.

a) Thoughts

b) ideas

C) emotions

5. Play therapy is a technique that employs the child’s natural mode of being – play – in attempts to unlock the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ that sparks the outwardly apparent emotional and behavioral issues.

6. (True/False) Children always share their magical thinking with adults.

7. Children around pre-school age may feel:

A) anxious

B) hopeless

C) clingy

D) withdrawn and emotionally numb

E) All of the above

8. For those children who have no means of understanding their trauma, \_\_\_\_\_\_ can be powerful.

9. The entire focus is to help the child pull out and express trauma that may be resting where?

A) The unconscious Mind

B) In their recent memories

C) Under their bed

10. (True/False) Play therapy is a unique opportunity to gain access to the inner, unexpressed feelings of children.

Answers are in Red

1. (True/False) Trying to understand what a child is thinking is easy.

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