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The Importance of Play-Based Therapy

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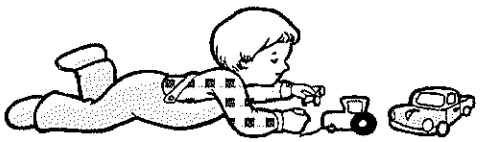

A speech-language pathologist's (SLP) therapy session can be designed in a variety of ways. When working with young children under the age of five it can be challenging for them to sit at a table for an entire therapy session due to higher energy levels and decreased attention spans. Many therapists will use a form of therapy known as played-based therapy. The word "play" means involvement in enjoyable activities. Therefore, "play-based therapy" involves the use of enjoyable activities to target a child's speech and language therapy goals.

In order to plan a play-based therapy session, it is important to understand the five stages of play.

Stage I.	Onlooker play – watching and observing (under 1 years old)
Stage II.	Solitary play – playing by themselves (between 1-2 years old)
Stage III.	Parallel play – playing near others but not engaging with others (between 2-3 years old)
Stage IV.	Associative play – playing with others but sometimes playing by themselves (between 3-4 years old)
Stage V.	Cooperative play – playing with others and will not continue to play without a partner (above 4 years old)

Play-based therapy is beneficial because it helps children:

- Maintain increased attention towards objects and others
- Improve cognitive abilities
- Improve participation in therapy through fun activities
- Build positive adult-child interactions
- Socialize with peers
- Progress with their speech and language goals

Different types of play can be targeted in play-based therapy sessions including:

- Functional play – investigating how common objects work and are used
- Construction play – building things with objects

- Game play with rules – board games that have a clear set rules for playing
- Outdoor and movement play – activities that involve physical movement
- Symbolic, dramatic, and pretend play – common activities done in everyday life as play

When designing a play-based therapy session, an SLP must keep in mind the specific goals for each child. It is often helpful to plan out a play-based therapy session using familiar objects. The terms "playful learning," "guided play," and "structured communicative play", all refer to teaching a child during structured play activities instead of during activities that feel like "work." Playful learning is therapy goals while guiding the learning through play.

When interacting with a child in a play-based therapy session:

- Allow the child to take the lead as much as possible without straying from the overall goals.
- Avoid using terms such as "say this" or "say that" which can make therapy seem more like work than play.
- Show the child how to accomplish a task by modeling.
- Make the session fun and focus on the child's interest to increase participation.

When play-based therapy is performed correctly, it can help the child make associations with real life events and create lasting memories needed to develop speech, language, and social skills.

References:

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