

# What is Play Therapy?

No matter what age a person is, play therapy can be a helpful option for addressing feelings and behaviours that may become “stuck” in reaction to trauma they have experienced

The counselling offered by SACE therapists is focused on addressing the impacts of sexual violence. A common practice for SACE counsellors is to use play therapy when it is deemed developmentally appropriate, most frequently with children ages 3 to 12. In sessions, the child or client chooses objects, symbols, or types of play to express their inner concerns or work through particular problems. Counsellors are skilled in interpreting the child’s play and assist in promoting growth and change while meeting them where they are at. While early sessions are open to the child’s interests and direction, over time and as trust is built, the counsellor may become more directive in play to encourage scenarios that will support the client’s current issues and processing.

## What does play therapy look like?

At SACE, our playroom is equipped with a wide range of therapeutic and intentional toys that allow clients to “play out” their feelings in the way that suits them best. Toys and creative items include a small sandbox and miniatures (people, superheroes, animals, fantasy figures, boundaries like walls and fences, bridges, furniture, etc.), stuffed toys, puppets, dress-up and make-believe items, toy household items, a stocked dollhouse, art materials, construction toys, and indoor games. The counsellor is trained to support the child at their developmental level through first assessing the symbolism, feelings, and dynamics of the play scenarios. The child/client expresses their unconscious thoughts, fears, anxieties, and wishes, which over time the counsellor can support the child to process or resolve thoughts and feelings that have become “stuck.”



Generally, this happens in subtle ways, with effects noticed in the child's daily functioning. The main goals in play therapy are to help the child enhance their self-esteem, and build their coping resources. By analyzing the scenarios a child creates and subtly questioning or using play symbolism to assess and support a child's perceptions, the therapist can help them to process the impacts of their experience. This can support the client's problem-solving, creative thinking, communication skills, emotional expression, and perceptions of the relationships, options, and resources available to them.

### **How to support a child who is accessing counselling services**

Your child's therapist will work with you in order to develop a plan that will address both what your child needs to process their experience of trauma, and any other concerns that you may have. A child's session is regarded as their own timewhere they can openly share with their counsellor. Caregivers are asked not to ask specific questions about their child's session, and instead should make space to listen to their child should they choose to share.

If you should have any questions or concerns about your child's experience in counselling, counsellors are there to help. Counsellors also make sure to share any major concerns with caregivers right away.

It is ok to ask questions! Your job in the counselling process is to be simply be your child's biggest supporter.

### **Supporting processing of childhood trauma at any age**

While play therapy is primarily geared towards children, it can also be adapted for use with clients of any age, and may be useful for youth or adults, particularly those who experienced trauma in childhood. It can be helpful to use play or creative modalities to act as an intermediary or process to support working through trauma that may have been locked in at the developmental stage a person was in when they experienced it. By using the nonverbal, creative, and abstract methods utilized in play therapy, clients can access feelings, memories, and ways of thinking that their rational brain may not be able to reach through direct or verbal processing.

