



The Association
for Child and Adolescent
Mental Health

Unlocking Therapeutic Powers of Play: Practical Techniques for Safe and Effective Play Therapy

A Guide to Key Concepts, Session Recap, and Further resources



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What You'll Find in This Guide



Session recap

A summary highlighting the most important points
from the session



Further reading

Selected resources for further exploration



Play-based activities

A selection of simple play-based activities explored
in the session

Unlocking Therapeutic Powers of Play: Practical Techniques for Safe and Effective Play Therapy

Dr. Laura Hanks

“

“Play is critical for children and improves well being in adults”

“Therapeutic play consists of activities that are intentionally chosen, usually by an adult, to help children express feelings or manage and understand difficult situations.”

”

Why play matters

Brain Development

Play supports learning through experience

Integrates cognitive, emotional and social processes

Central to how children make sense of the world

Attachment

Play builds connection

It supports attunement and co-regulation

It creates engagement and a sense of safety

What this means for clinical work



Play is essential, not an add-on

It should not be framed as rewards, break or something coming after the “real work”

Intention determines therapeutic value

Activities are not inherently therapeutic. Its value depends on: purpose, use & adult response



Child-centred practice is critical

Professionals should follow the child’s lead, avoid over-directing & preserve the experience of play



Play supports children’s engagement

Particularly useful early in contact or when verbal engagement is limited, helping build trust & safety



Play underpins **engagement**, **regulation**, and **therapeutic change**

3

ways play can be used in practice



Play

Child-led

No specific therapeutic agenda

Supports natural development

Therapeutic play

Introduced intentionally by the adult

Used across settings (health, education, social care)

Supports engagement, expression, and understanding

Play therapy

Structured psychological intervention

Delivered by trained professionals

Based on specific therapeutic models



*What differentiates them is the degree of **intention**, **structure**, and **professional training** involved*

Therapeutic powers of play

Communication

Play supports expression beyond language (e.g. symbolic play, indirect communication)

Strength building

Promotes self-esteem, mastery, creativity and problem-solving

Emotional processing

Enables safe exploration and regulation of emotions (including distress and fear)

Relationships

Facilitates connection, attachment, empathy and social understanding

Information Worth Sharing

 **Play is how children engage.** It's a natural way for them to communicate and take part.

 **How we use play matters.** The impact depends more on intention than the activity itself.

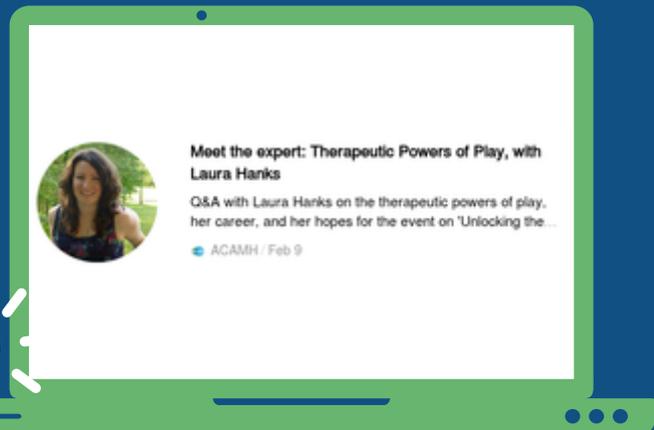
 **Following the child's lead is key.** Too much direction can reduce engagement and meaning.

 **Not all play is the same.** It's helpful to distinguish between play, therapeutic play, and play therapy.

 **Play helps build connection and safety.** It supports trust and creates the conditions for engagement.

Recommended Reading and Resources

Check out this short interview with Dr. Laura Hank on our website!



Evidence-based insights and practical frameworks on how play supports development, learning, and wellbeing.



Interview with Dr Laura Hanks

A conversation on what play therapy is, how it works with children and families, and why a developmentally responsive approach matters.



Play-based activities

These are some of the exercises proposed by Dr. Laura Hank in the session



"Choose an animal"

- **Purpose:** Support emotional expression and engagement
- **Task:** Invite the child to choose an animal that represents how they feel
- **Explore:** "What is this animal like?"/ "What does it need?"

 Useful for starting conversations without pressure



Role play with characters

- **Purpose:** Facilitate indirect communication
- **Task:** Use puppets, dolls, or figures and follow the child's lead
- **Explore:** "What is happening to the character?" / "How do they feel?"

 Useful for exploring difficult topics safely and indirectly



Drawing (free or shared)

- **Purpose:** Support expression and connection
- **Task:** Let the child lead, or draw alongside them
- **Explore:** "What's happening here?" / "Tell me about your drawing."

 A low-pressure way to begin interaction

Play-based activities

These are some of the exercises proposed by Dr. Laura Hank in the session



Building activities

- **Purpose:** Support regulation and a sense of mastery
- **Task:** Invite building, or follow the child's lead
- **Explore:** "What are you building?" / "How does it work?"

 Helpful for children who prefer doing over talking



Simple turn-taking games

- **Purpose:** Support interaction and connection
- **Task:** Use simple games with clear but flexible rules
- **Explore:** "Whose turn is it?" / "What happens next?"

 Supports reciprocity, and tolerance of waiting



Symbolic play scenarios

- **Purpose:** Support emotional processing
- **Task:** Follow the child's lead in creating a story using figures
- **Explore:** "What's happening in the story?" / "What might happen next?"

 Helps explore experiences in a safe, indirect way



Thank you for joining us at this event!

You can explore our upcoming
CPD events and training
opportunities at

<https://www.acamh.org/events/>