



UNDERSTAND YOUR CHILD'S PLAY

What is filial therapy?
We find out...

BY CAMILLA RANKIN

"A dults speak, children play," says psychologist Ilze van der Merwe-Alberts. "Play is the language of the child.

The toys that children use are the words of the child, and the way in which the child plays is their language. When a parent understands the child's play, the parent understands the child." Traditionally understanding what it is children are trying to communicate through their play has been the domain of trained professionals: play therapists. Now, through a fast-growing form of play therapy known as filial therapy, you the parent can learn the skills to read your child's play, build a closer bond and help your child deal with any challenging situations.

What is filial therapy?

Filial (which means parent-child relationship) therapy is a special type of play therapy – with a twist: you, the parent are trained to play with your child in a way that is therapeutic. Cape Town based clinical psychologist Janet Bytheway explains: "Filial therapy involves training a parent to use basic child-centred play therapy skills in order to conduct special play sessions at home with their own child."

"Instead of a play therapist working with your child, a play therapist works with you, and you work with your own child," elaborates Ilze.

As London-based filial therapy practitioner and instructor Geraldine Thomas explains, "Parents are the most important people in children's lives, and when they themselves take part in the process of change for their child it can help both children and parents bring about important changes more quickly. As parents develop better understanding of their children's feelings and motivations and open up communication with their children, they themselves develop more confidence as parents as their feelings of warmth and trust towards their children increase. This reduces frustrating parenting situations, and parents can learn to integrate these

skills into their daily lives so as to prevent future problems."

Parental involvement is the essence of filial therapy, so that any change that happens, happens within the home and to both the family and the child. Ilze says, "In traditional play therapy, the child changes, but the family dynamics stay the same. With filial therapy parents feel

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empowered. Children learn to understand their parents more, and the relationship between the parent and child improves. Parents feel less guilty, because you, the parents, take part and are central to the process, and the strengthened parent-child relationship strengthens the whole family. Geraldine emphasises, "Parents are viewed as essential partners in the process, and the approach focuses on the relationship between parents and their children. Often when parents feel out of control, deskilled and disempowered, this lack of confidence can lead to further worrying behaviours in their children as they mature. So filial therapy not only helps develop the parents' self-confidence but helps children increase their trust that their parents understand them."

Who needs filial therapy?

This special form of play therapy can be used in just about any family or parent-child relationship. "The approach has been successful in many different settings – educational, health and voluntary settings – with different cultural and ethnic groups, and with many child and family challenges," Geraldine says. "It is helpful

with problems ranging from depression, separation anxiety, sibling rivalry, step-parent relationships, relationships with biological parents, adopted and foster children, cultural differences and self-esteem to more clinical issues such as eating disorders, speech problems, obsessive compulsive behaviour, oppositional behaviour, bedwetting (enuresis) and soiling (encopresis), and ADD and ADHD," adds Ilze, "but it can also be used as a preventative method or simply to promote a special relationship between a parent and child."

The process

Not all therapists will offer exactly the same process, but generally the entire process involves three distinct phases: parent training, supervised home play sessions and finally discharge.

Geraldine explains the phases:

1 Parent/carer training phase Where parents are taught the basic skills of filial therapy. When parents are ready to embark on providing the sessions to their own children, the therapist will observe the initial sessions and afterward, while the child is in the care of another adult,



the parent/carer and therapist will talk through what happened, highlighting positive points and difficulties.

2 Starting play sessions at home The family carries out weekly sessions at home that are directly supervised by the therapist. Ongoing support is also

given to help parents use play skills to other areas of the child's life, not just in the play sessions. Supervision goes from weekly to fortnightly once sessions are well established, and parents report improvements outside of sessions. Depending on the progress made, this phase may need to be extended to meet the child and carers' individual needs.

3 Discharge This phase includes one individual or group meeting to consolidate learning, share experience and strengthen links between group members for future support.

"Many parents find that they struggle to parent their children with confidence," Geraldine says. "Well, filial therapy is an approach in which both parents and children feel listened to, understood and empowered." ●

WHAT PARENTS SAY:

"The children definitely express their feelings more. They seem much more fearless and relaxed about life in general"

"My child is more confident and definitely less stressed"

"It has definitely made us understand each child better"

"It has made us conscious that everything does not have to be so perfect all the time. Even parents are allowed to have feelings and get it wrong sometimes".

RESOURCES

Geraldine Thomas (MSc, MA) is a certified filial therapy practitioner, instructor, play therapy supervisor and lecturer based in London, England.

www.filialplaytherapy.co.uk

Ilze van der Merwe-Alberts is a psychologist and family expert at Bella Vida Centre. www.bellavidacentre.co.za

