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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.

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

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 year 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)



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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.



Resources:

Play-Based Treatment: Basic Strategies for Exceptional Instruction. Presented by Meredith P. Harold, PhD, CCC-SLP retrieved 6/15/16 from [www.speechpathology.com](http://www.speechpathology.com)

The Four Stages of Play by Kay Sikich, Early Childhood Educator. Retrieved 6/20/16 from <http://www.district196.org/ec/TeacherCurriculum/KaySikichTheFourStagesofPlay.cfm>

What is play-based speech therapy? Is it right for your family? By Jill Flores, M.S., CCC-SLP and Kristy Hirokawa. Retrieved 6/20/16 from <http://bridgestocommunicationsf.blogspot.com/2011/05/play-based-speech-therapy.html>

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