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## **TRAINING MANUAL FOR PLAY SESSION**

**WHY PLAY SESSIONS?** Play sessions are recommended for children 3 to 11 years old who have problems with their own feelings and/or difficulty in relationships with others. Children often misperceive parents' intentions and feel unhappy or insecure or abused for very little apparent reason. Often the child may not be aware of his own needs and feelings, and thus parents cannot always help him in their usual way. Communication between parent and child on the child's deeper needs is therefore insufficient or incomplete.

One purpose of a play session is to create a situation in which the child may become aware of the feeling she has not allowed himself to recognize. In the presence of the parent, the child has an opportunity to communicate his feelings through play. The parent's acceptance of the child's feelings is essential and helps the child to come to a better understanding of how to cope with his feelings as he experiences or re-experiences difficulties in the session.

Another purpose of the session is to build your child's feeling of trust and confidence in you. If you respond to him in the manner prescribed in the play session, it will increase his feeling that he can communicate with you more fully and honestly about his experiences and feelings. This should eventually lead to more moderate and mature ways of expression. He will have less fear that being open with you will lose your respect or affection.

A third purpose is to build the child's confidence in **himself**. Just as we expect you will eventually experience a greater feeling that your child trusts you, your child should experience your sense of trust in him. One goal is for him to feel more secure in making his own decisions where that is appropriate. He needs to learn to be less fearful of making mistakes. It is important for him to learn that he has choices, and is himself responsible for much of what befalls him. This is very important for any child who has a problem to overcome. this means

being free to make choices (including mistakes) and experiencing the consequences, good or bad. By allowing him freedom of choice in the play session and by allowing him to experience the consequence of free choice, you build his sense of confidence. You build his confidence in himself also by giving him your complete attention in the session, which is a key ingredient not only to self-confidence, but to good adjustment to and in relation with you and other people.

**SETTING UP A PLAY SESSION:** The following specific recommendations are essential for obtaining the desired results of closer understandings between parent and child.

***NOTE: There are two participants in each play session; one child and one parent.***

1. **Set aside a time** (to begin with, at least 1/2 hour, and later somewhat longer) every week for a session with your child. Hopefully, this will be at a time and place where you are completely isolated from the rest of the family and can guarantee no interruptions. *If the phone rings, let it ring.* Try to have arrangements for other children so they will not interrupt this session. Your uninterrupted attention is one of the most important conditions for fruitful play sessions. Do not impede your progress by changing the time each week or canceling a session. Such changes have undesirable effects that go far beyond what you would suppose. Whether they say so or not, children tend to feel that cancellations and changes reflect disapproval of their behavior in the previous play session. It also breeds lack of confidence and trust -- the very things which we are trying to promote. If change is absolutely necessary, it should be discussed in advance with the child. Once you begin play sessions, you should consider their availability to the child as a form of contract, which you cannot break.
2. **Select a room** for play where there will be least concern if things get spoiled or broken. Least preferred is the child's own room, where other toys might be distracting. Water may be spilled, clay smeared, or toys dropped, and broken, so a basement or kitchen floor would be best.
3. **The choice of toys** is important to the success of the play session. Primarily, the toys should be plastic, inexpensive, or unbreakable. The following will be most useful for a beginning.

Inflated plastic bop bag ( at least 4 feet high)

Dart gun with darts

Rubber knife

Non-hardening molding clay

Plastic cowboys, Indians, soldiers

Family of puppets

Doll family (mother, father, brother, sister, baby)

Baby bottle  
Bowl for water  
Crayons, paints  
House box for doll furniture and family  
Cups and saucers  
Drawing paper  
Tinker toy or similar construction toy

These toys are reserved for use in the play session only. Another child should not use them at all, except in his own play session if you are having sessions with him. The child may not take or use toys out of the session (his own drawing or painting is an exception). Ordinarily, he may not add any of his own toys. The toys have been especially selected in order to help the child release his aggressions and to re-enact his feelings in relation to family members in a safe and accepted place.

4. **What to tell the child.** It is not necessary to go into a long explanation with the child. You may simply say you want to spend more time with him. Older children may insist on further details. In this case, place the emphasis on **your** wanting to spend time alone with your child in a special play setting. **Not** that you want to help **him**, but that you want to be together, have fun, and improve your **relationship**. There is usually very little difficulty in getting the child to participate. Some children, of course, take more time than others to feel comfortable enough to express themselves freely. On some occasions, children object to having sessions. But most of the time they enjoy the sessions and look forward to them.

5. **What the parent does.** The role of the parent in a play session is to establish an atmosphere of free play and acceptance for the child. This means that the parent has to take a very unusual attitude toward the child -- very different from the way you usually relate to people. You set the stage by setting the time, and the few basic rules, but what the child does with the toys and what he says in the session are strictly up to the child. The child may use the toys to express things he has not been able to express adequately before, or express things he often express in a more extreme and direct manner. He may want to use the time to be very aggressive; he may want to sit and stare at the wall, unwilling to involve himself at all. He may

wish to leave after a few moments. The parent has to have an open mind and be willing to follow the child's lead, whatever form it takes (including not staying). Therefore, it is important that the parent engage in:

**NO criticism**

**NO praise, approval, encouragement, or reassurance**

**NO questions or leads or invitations**

**NO suggestions, advice, or persuasion**

**NO interruptions or interference**

**NO information giving unless directly requested by the child**

**NO teaching, preaching, or moralizing**

**NO initiating a new activity**

In short, it is important for the parent to establish a setting in which the child, and the child alone, sets the values and judgments.

Equally important, the parent must be fully involved with the child, giving full attention to everything the child says, does and feels. It is most important to be attentive to the child's moods and to note very carefully all the feelings the child is willing to reveal. This will give the child the go-ahead to begin to uncover more of his deeper feelings. If the parent is asked to participate in an activity, he should engage in it fully. But attention should be focused primarily on how the child wants the parent to participate, following his direction, and on reflecting the child's feelings. This child's play in the session need not be conventional. For example, a child may like to cheat at cards or make new rules. In such instances, the parent could reflect only the strong need to win or the child's desire to have things go his way, and the means the child uses to have things go his way, in an uncritical, warm, and supporting tone.

The parent can best demonstrate to the child that he accepts and understands the child's feelings by **reflecting the child's expressed feelings and actions**. This takes the form of noting aloud what the child seems to be feeling: e.g., "You're wondering what to do next." "Now, you'd like to

kick the bop bag." "You wish you could shoot him dead. "You're disappointed it didn't hit the target." "That makes you mad." "You're very upset when I don't answer your questions right away." "It's annoying when it doesn't go together the way you want it to."

The child's **actions are also accepted by verbal comment from the parent:** e.g., "You're really beating him up." "You're going to kick him around." "It's hard to make up your mind what to do." "You love to sit on my lap." "They're all going to be killed." You're aiming very slowly so it will be sure it hit."

These are the only types of appropriate comments from the parent. Complete silence on the one hand or merely sociable conversation on the other are discouraged. In regard to the first; a child may fear disapproval when a parent is silent; so it is important to comment, letting him know that your attitude is continuously accepting. With respect to the second; social conversation leads most children to feel that they should answer questions or talk about what the parent wants to, rather than take the initiative themselves.

More important than any technique is the spirit under which this is undertaken. It is important that you try not to be mechanical, stilted, or artificial. You can avoid this best by bending all your efforts toward trying to put yourself in the child's place and understand the world as he sees it, not as you see it or wish him to see it. Try to understand the child's feelings through what he is doing and saying. Also, leave your own worries or reactions out of it as much as you can. Sometimes it will be difficult. Simply try to understand what the child is trying to express, and communicate to the child that you understand -- that you know what he is feeling, and it's all right with you. You will find that some of the things the child does are distasteful or worrisome. You need not permit such behavior outside of the play session, during any other time. However, it is crucial to the very giving and accepting of any and all behavior ***in the play session*** (except those things mentioned below).

Children quickly pick up the idea that what goes in the play session may or may not be allowed out of the play session; outside the session you can continue to be very firm about prohibiting some of the activities which are permitted in the session.

There are few restrictions on the child's activity in the play session. These "limits" must be adhered to rigidly. If the child should "break a limit," you should point out that this particular behavior is not allowed. If the statement does not suffice and the behavior occurs a **second** time warn him that the play session will end if it occurs a **third** time. Make sure the child understands. Thereafter, the next occurrence ends the session.

***NOTE: This sequence applies to a single session. If the child repeats the behavior at later sessions, start with the warning and at the second occurrence, rather than the third occurrence, end the session.***

This is the one and only sequence for breaking the limit. The session ends without the parent having to get angry. The limits are:

**THE CHILD MAY NOT HIT OR HURT OR ENDANGER PARENT IN ANY WAY**

(He may not point the dart gun with a dart in it at the parent). A similar limit on dirtying or wetting the parent may also be imposed if the parent wishes.

**CHILD MAY NOT LEAVE THE SESSION** (except for one bathroom trip).

**CHILD MAY NOT POKE THE BOP BAG WITH A SHARP IMPLEMENT.**

Do not discuss these limits with the children until the need arises. Tell him at the beginning of the early sessions that he may do **almost** anything he wants and that he can say **anything** he wants. If there is something he shouldn't do, you will tell him. And **do not try to prevent or discourage a child from breaking a limit.** Your task, when prohibited behavior first occurs, or is about to occur, is to let him know the consequences if he does it, or does it again. The ultimate consequence is termination of the session. If he does choose to do it anyway during that or a future session; (a) acknowledge and accept his strong desire to do what he did, and (b) always, **without exception,** impose the consequences **immediately.** Remember that your purpose is **not to prevent** the behavior, but to allow him to **make the choice,** and to **experience** the consequences.

There may be one or two additional limits used at the discretion of the parent, if necessary; such

as no shooting at windows or ceiling, dumping only one bowl of water on the floor (some should be allowed), and no smearing the walls. There should be **no limits** on what the child **says**, including swearing, dirty words, hostile comments towards the parent, or others.

**Children's Reactions.** This can be a very rewarding experience for both parent and child. Some children move quickly in a direction opposite to the way they have been behaving; some at first behave like themselves but in an exaggerated or more forceful manner. Some become very aggressive, some very quiet, some may resort to very baby-like behavior, some like to order the parent around, taking complete control of the situation. Some of the children are unable to express their feelings in the beginning. Some, at first, act as though they have only negative feelings. Others may want you to make decisions, they may do things just to please you because you are spending time alone with them. Try to reflect all of these feelings as they occur, rather than to give explanations or to make the choices for the child. You could learn a great deal about how your child feels at times toward his family and/or himself. You probably will also learn more about your own feelings towards your child.