

Foreword

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When Vivien and Helen told us of their intent to write a parenting book based on Theraplay principles, we at The Theraplay® Institute in Evanston, IL, USA, let out a cry of joy and relief! Finally, a book on Theraplay written for parents that will explain the simple, essential and oft-forgotten parenting principles to help families thrive! For 50 years, The Theraplay® Institute has focused on training as many psychotherapists in the Theraplay method as possible so that they could help children heal. But what about the parents and children who don't need a visit to a therapist, but where joy and connection between them seemed to be overshadowed by the obligations and stresses of everyday life? Many families asked us to write a book to address these issues, but the leadership were too busy to undertake the task. Then along came Vivien and Helen. We could think of no better people to write this book for parents: Vivien Norris and Helen Rodwell are shining stars in the universe of parenting wisdom. They combine the highest calibre of professional rigour with personal experience and uncompromised compassion. Between them they have worked with hundreds of children and their families in the quest to find harmony and connection at home.

Rest assured that Theraplay is based on the most up-to-date scientific research on developmental psychology, neurobiology and trauma theory. Theraplay has also been rated as 'Effective' (highest rating) by the United States Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse. Helen and Vivien have summarised the most relevant 'whys' and 'whats' of the method so that you can get to the heart of the matter as quickly as possible: how to feel more connected with your child so that you can have a cooperative and joyful family life.

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What Is Theraplay and How Does It Work?

Theraplay is a way for adults and children to be together which deepens the relationship between them. It centrally involves the parent in engaging in particular ways with their child. Theraplay draws on a wide range of very simple activities that create ‘in the moment’ connection between two people and develop closeness. The activities themselves are just a vehicle to help with this connection and, through the process of sensitive ‘here and now’ interaction, the child is able to relax and be a child. The activities are led by the adult and are varied, some lively, some quiet, and they require few or no materials.



The Theraplay approach developed out of a project in the 1960s in Chicago called the Head Start programme, which was designed to support children and families living in at-risk or deprived circumstances. The developers of Theraplay spent considerable time observing how typical parents and children interacted and came up with a range of playful activities that they thought could help children with difficulties. They quickly realised that it would be very important to include parents and carers in the play. They called this relationship-focused approach Theraplay.

The aim was to strengthen the relationship between the children and their carers. Using a range of simple play activities, they hoped to help children feel better about themselves and to reduce difficult behaviours. What surprised everyone working on the project was how much day-to-day problem behaviours improved, even without discussing them. Aggressive children became calmer, withdrawn children came out of their shell. Parents felt more confident and closer to their children. It seemed that supporting families to interact in a positive and relationship-focused way, through the play activities, was having a profound effect on all areas of family life.

In the years since the early success of Theraplay, there has been a lot of research by scientists, academics and practitioners who are interested in the kinds of parenting that lead to healthy development in children. We now have much more understanding about what is happening in the developing brain. Theraplay has benefited from this research and has been refined to become a focused therapy approach. There has been a great deal of thinking about the underlying theory and an increasing body of research about its effectiveness. Theraplay is now practised by various professionals across the world and with a range of groups from infants, children and parents to the elderly.