Axline’s Basic Principles of Non-Directive Play Therapy

Much of current play therapy practice is based upon Virginia Axline’s work*.

The therapist:

• Must develop a warm and friendly relationship with the child.

• Accepts the child as she or he is.

• Establishes a feeling of permission in the relationship so that the child feels free to express his or her feelings completely.

• Is alert to recognise the feelings the child is expressing and reflects these feelings back in such a manner that the child gains insight into his/her behaviour.

• Maintains a deep respect for the child’s ability to solve his/her problems and gives the child the opportunity to do so. The responsibility to make choices and to institute change is the child’s.

• Does not attempt to direct the child’s actions or conversations in any manner. The child leads the way, the therapist follows.

• Does not hurry the therapy along. It is a gradual process and must be recognised as such by the therapist.

• Only establishes those limitations necessary to anchor the therapy to the world of reality and to make the child aware of his/her responsibility in the relationship.

These principles emphasise the importance of a practitioner being able to use a comprehensive ‘Play Therapy Tool-Kit’ which will enable the therapist to follow the child’s lead.

*Axline was influenced by the person centred approach of Carl Rogers. She is recognised as the originator of non directive Play Therapy. Her well known book 'Dibs: In Search of Self' written in 1964 which describes how she worked with Dibs and how he was able to heal himself over a period of time is an excellent introduction to the subject. Axline in turn influenced Violet Oaklander who added a gestalt therapy approach to play therapy and extended the 'tool-kit' concept as described in her book 'Windows to Our Children'.