



Setting Boundaries in Play Therapy: A Synergetic Play Therapy Approach

The primary purpose for setting boundaries in a play therapy session is to support the therapist in being able to stay within their own window of tolerance (capacity to hold the intensity in any given moment) and thus support the child in being able to move towards the uncomfortable thoughts, feelings and sensations the child is attempting to integrate. The exception to this purpose is when there is a safety issue. If there is a safety issue, the therapist does whatever is needed to keep both themselves and the child safe.

The moment to set the boundary is when the therapist perceives the play/stories are about to be outside of their window of tolerance and/or they are beginning to feel emotionally flooded.

Setting boundaries is a flexible experience as the therapist's window of tolerance changes from moment to moment. What might feel ok in one session might not feel ok in another session. It is important for the therapist to honor their own window of tolerance in any given moment. Personal history, current life events, how the body is currently feeling, etc all influence the window of tolerance and the ability to stay present and attuned to the child.

When setting boundaries, it is important to acknowledge before redirecting. "Jamie, this is really important...show me another way". Acknowledging before redirecting helps the child understand that the therapist is not disapproving of the urges and behaviors being demonstrated, but rather redirecting the expression so that the therapist can still stay present with them in the play. This helps the child not internalize shame from the boundary.

Setting the Boundary:

As boundaries are set, the following are important:

- Take a deep breath to ground yourself
- Get present so that the child can energetically feel you
- Use a non-threatening, yet serious voice
- Make eye contact when possible, but don't force it
- Acknowledge before redirecting
- Keep feeling out of it. Feelings can be discussed later.

Redirect with Action:

- Gesture where you want the energy to go
Example: Joey is attempting to hit you on your head with a sword...
"Joey, hit me from here down." (gesture everything below your head)
- Bring in containment to keep it moving
Example: Susie is dumping sand onto the floor...
"Susie, this is important for you to do. The sand needs to come out." Grab a shower curtain and quickly put it on the floor and invite her to continue dumping.
- Pretend
Example: Joey really wants to dump sand onto your head or put it in your hair

“Joey, pretend to dump it on me.” Once he does, respond as if it were just dumped on you.

Redirect with Words:

- “Show me another way”
Example: Matt is handcuffing you and it really hurts
“Matt, I know you want me to understand, show me another way”
- “I don’t need to hurt/my body doesn’t need to hurt to understand”
Example: Laura is throwing marbles at you and you’ve attempted twice to acknowledge and redirect. “Laura, I don’t have to hurt to understand. Show me another way.”

Emotional Flooding:

- Emotional flooding happens in every play therapy model because emotional flooding is part of a relationship.
- When the child is flooded or moving towards flooding, the only task is to help the child have a perception of safety in the moment!
- If flooding happens for the therapist or the child, repair offers healing and integration for both the therapist and the child.

Tips to help the therapist from emotionally flooding:

- Get out of tunnel vision by pausing throughout the play and looking around the room. Orient yourself to time and space.
- Remind yourself that what you are experiencing is occurring in a play therapy session—help yourself feel the play while simultaneously knowing it is just play.
- Regulate yourself in the midst of the dysregulation, allowing yourself to be in the intensity without being consumed by the intensity
- Use your breath and movement to ground yourself.
- Name your experience out loud to help calm your amygdala.
- Make sure you are using observational statements throughout your sessions to track the play and help your rational brain stay engaged.
- Set boundaries! Acknowledge and redirect when you start to feel that the play is going outside of your window of tolerance.