

**PLAY WITH THEM—  
THERAPLAY GROUPS  
IN THE CLASSROOM**

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# PLAY WITH THEM—

THERAPLAY GROUPS  
IN THE CLASSROOM  
A Technique for Professionals  
Who Work with Children

*By*

PHYLLIS B. RUBIN

*and*

JEANINE TREGAY

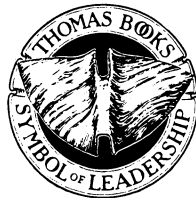
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*To Our Families*



## FOREWORD

I am so grateful to Phyllis Rubin and Jeanine Tregay, not only for giving me the honor of writing the foreword to this wonderful book, but for having the wisdom, spunk and generosity to write it in the first place. They have exceeded what I could have envisioned in writing my own book, *Theraplay*, ten years ago. Their message comes at a time when too many children grow up doubting both their own self-worth and the emotional investment that adults are willing (or able) to make in them. The authors have demonstrated that the Theraplay method can be applied to the classroom to give children hope, joy, and the conviction that there are adults who care about them as genuinely valuable human beings. Rubin and Tregay convincingly guide teachers through the steps that will help vast numbers of normal and not-so-normal children develop self-confidence, joie de vivre, and the assurance that the world can be a trustworthy and enjoyable place after all. Their gift of this book to teachers and their students is what I mean by generosity.

Rubin and Tregay's contributions are twofold. First they present helpful principles and then they tell the reader specifically how to apply them. Some of these principles would be startling in their novelty, and perhaps even unacceptable to some individuals, were they not offered with respect and compassion. Readers will find themselves feeling grateful, curious and excited to try out many of the book's suggestions. "Unlearning or How to Stop Teaching" (in Chapter 5) is one such example. The repeated elucidation of the Rules for Group Theraplay (NO HURTS—STICK TOGETHER—HAVE FUN) is another.

Their introductory descriptions of Theraplay Groups in action are intriguing and joyful. The Pretend Face Painting as it would be viewed through the eyes of an outside observer (Chapter 1) is particularly noteworthy.

Throughout their book, in beautiful style and with lovely examples, they direct specific suggestions to leaders of child Theraplay Groups. Their focus is on helping both individual members and the group as a

whole. The experience they provide the reader is lively, personal, and action-oriented. Thus, even in their language they carry out Theraplay's directly engaging approach.

Rubin and Tregay's book could well have been entitled "Enhancing Humane Behavior: Lessons in Respect and Empathy." Just as the teachers themselves are taught with respect and empathy, so also is that same attitude conveyed to the children. The readers will learn to attend to and communicate a child's special, invaluable individuality. At the same time they will learn how to acknowledge children's fears, anxieties, anger and sadness. They will learn how to encourage children to share their small hurts and major traumas. And they will learn how to help them share their triumphs. They will learn how to recognize the new trust that grows when children begin to feel safe in sharing with adults and with one another. And, since most of their sharing will happen in a loving, upbeat climate, they will learn to feel hope and joy in the process.

In sum, I am convinced that the labors of Rubin and Tregay and the usefulness of *Play With Them: Theraplay Groups in the Classroom* will be deeply appreciated not only by the children themselves but by those many individuals who will interact with them in their future.

Ann M. Jernberg, Ph.D.



## INTRODUCTION

**Y**ou are about to read a book that would be better in video! The technique of Theraplay that guides our thinking throughout this book is one that is highly visual and non-verbal. We struggled in the beginning, not knowing how to put into words an experience, a feeling, an atmosphere. What we came up with was a combination of discussion, narratives of actual group sessions, and stories that might evoke in you the feelings similar to those that must be present in a Theraplay Group.

It is important that you “feel” our groups. That you feel how intimate they are; how regressive and nurturing they can be. That you feel the unconditional acceptance. And that you feel the playfulness. Groups based on Theraplay are all of these.

Theraplay Groups are for children who have emotional needs: children who are withdrawn (or “quiet”), over-active (or “bossy”), frightened (or “shy”), compulsive, or rigid, for example. Children with learning problems, speech and language problems, intellectual deficits, academic problems, and/or family problems often have unmet emotional needs and can benefit from a Theraplay Group.

Theraplay Groups are adult-directed structured play groups in which all the participants, the adult included, are actively involved together in pleasant, fun activities. These games are geared to foster self-esteem, a sense of belonging, the ability to care for oneself and for others, and to develop increased trust of others. The members of a Theraplay Group often are able to provide for each other what they may not be able to get otherwise: nurturing, attention, recognition, and appreciation.

Theraplay has a unique characteristic that you will notice immediately: it is highly nurturing, so much so that frequently the activities we use can look “babyish.” It is not unusual to play a lotion or powder game, or to feed each other in a Theraplay Group. As you go through this book, you will learn why we do these things.

We used Theraplay Groups in the classroom to create a sense of family and connectedness among a group of people who spent a great deal of

time together. This technique can be used in other types of settings as well, such as hospitals, preschools, day care centers, or mental health centers.

Theraplay Groups are for professionals who work with children. Teachers, special educators, psychologists, social workers, counselors, speech/language therapists, all might find this approach useful in their settings and within their repertoires. In this book, we speak directly to those in schools. Those of you in other settings can adapt the technique to your needs.

In writing this book, we considered the issue of non-sexist language. We took the following points into account. Our style and content required that we clearly differentiate between the adults and children described in the book. The book is based on our experience working primarily with female adults and male children. Presently, most primary caretakers are mothers, most professionals who work with young children are women, and most children in special education are male. We might wish this were different, but it is not. Thus, for the sake of simplicity and ease of reading, our writing reflects this reality. Do not interpret this to mean that Theraplay is a “women’s” approach to working with children. Both men and women therapists use Theraplay. Neither are we saying that Theraplay and Theraplay Groups are for only troubled boys, because this is certainly not the case.

We have ourselves come a long way in writing this book. It all started almost ten years ago. Susan Riley was the senior Theraplay therapist, and Phyllis Rubin the junior Theraplay therapist, for the Proviso Area for Exceptional Children cooperative in Maywood, Illinois. (Both Riley and Rubin were also speech/language therapists.) At the end of one school year, Riley began leading a Theraplay Group in a classroom and told Rubin about it, suggesting that Rubin might want to try to do the same the next year.

Rubin did not really want to, however. She could not envision herself successfully leading a **group** of special education children. But, somehow, she was compelled, and found the courage, to try. She had been working individually with a very withdrawn child in a behavior disorders class. In hopes that a group may serve to transition the child from individual, to group, to appropriate classroom functioning, Rubin asked the classroom teacher if she would like to try a Theraplay Group in her room. The teacher was willing.

They began a successful group, a successful teacher/Group leader

relationship, and modified the group as they went along. They shared their knowledge and learned from each other. And they learned from the Group.

During that same year, Rubin was providing individual Theraplay for a child in Jeanine Tregay's behavior disorders class. Tregay was concerned about three other children in her class and was planning to refer them for individual Theraplay. When Tregay told Rubin about these three children, Rubin said she could not possibly see them all. But Rubin suggested a Theraplay Group. Thinking a group might help the timid, withdrawn child she was seeing for individual Theraplay, Rubin saw this as the rationale for the group.

Tregay was interested, but she had other ideas for this group. It would not be for just the Theraplay child, but for **everyone**. This way, her three other children, and the whole class, would be the focus of the group. Hopefully, everyone could get a little bit of Theraplay, which by now, she was convinced was a good thing.

Rubin led the group for three years, until she was no longer able to set aside time for leading groups. She was, however, able to set aside time to support teachers who wanted to learn how to lead the groups themselves. Would Tregay like to learn? No! Well then, Rubin could not lead the group. But Tregay wanted the group to continue in her room. Finally, she agreed, with trepidation, to try it herself with supervision and support. She took the Introductory Workshop in Theraplay, given by The Theraplay Institute, and she began videotaping her groups for supervision with Rubin after school.

Then one day, Tregay said that these groups were so beneficial, Rubin should write about them. Rubin said she would if Tregay would help her! And here we are.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**F**irst and foremost, we wish to thank Dr. Ann Jernberg, creator of the Theraplay technique and clinical director of The Theraplay Institute. She continuously encouraged our efforts, supported and promoted the Theraplay Group training program, and gave us invaluable editing advice on the book. Her trust in us and her belief in the value of Theraplay Groups in the classroom was an inspiration from start to finish.

The following people supported us as we developed the Theraplay Group approach, made presentations, and actualized the Theraplay Group training program. From the Proviso Area for Exceptional Children, Maywood, Illinois: Larry Foster, Richard Perry, Susan Riley, Terry Smith, and Debbi Greengold Welch. From District 87, Berkeley, Illinois: Richard Riley and Neil Winebrenner. From The Theraplay Institute: Adrienne Allert and Phyllis Booth.

Leonard Grossman, Sonja Hall, Naomi Hene Diamond, and Helen Rubin were kind enough to edit and proof-read our manuscript. The various perspectives with which they viewed our writing helped make the book more readable for people in a wide range of professions. Pauline Coffman and Ruth Schmitt provided additional advice. Naomi Diamond deserves special thanks for suggesting the title for the book.

We especially wish to thank the eight people who participated in our first Theraplay Group training program. They are: Betty Brown, Mary Alice DaCosse, Aviva Goldman, Karen McCabe, Susan Noble Pelafas, Karen Schuster, Lisa Tatar, and Ellen Whelan. The experiences they shared, and our experience working with them had a significant impact on the book. Their willingness to try something new, and their enthusiasm about their Theraplay Groups brought us new insights from the viewpoint of the trainee (i.e., the readers of this book).

Without a computer, and someone to save us from power outages, this book would have been lost many times over. We wonder whether we would ever have written this without the assistance and support of

Howard Rubin. He not only provided computer expertise and editing advice, but took an active interest in our project, spent countless hours helping us with it, and really cared that it come to fruition. We cannot thank him enough.

Phyllis Rubin  
Jeanine Tregay

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## Chapter 1

### WHAT IS A THERAPLAY GROUP?

**Y**ou are visiting a school. You are stopping in the classrooms for brief glimpses of school life. You are in for some surprises.

The first room is a pre-school special education class. The children, their teacher, and the group leader are all on the floor, in a circle, on their stomachs, facing into the circle. The leader is holding a cotton ball and putting it down on the floor in front of her. She says: "I'm gonna blow it to Jamie." She blows the ball with a big Whoosh all the way across the middle of the circle to Jamie. Everybody laughs. Then Jamie blows the ball. But the leader stops him, "Wait a minute! Wait a minute! Who you gonna blow it to?" (Jamie forgot to "announce" the recipient of the cotton ball.) Jamie says: "Miss Walsh." (He has picked his teacher.) Leader: "OK. Blow!" Jamie blows, but the ball only goes half way across the circle, and Jamie does not pursue it. Leader: "Come on. Blow it more." Jamie moves up to the ball and blows again, blowing it all the way to Miss Walsh. Leader: "Good! Who are you gonna blow it to, Miss Walsh?"

Miss Walsh: "I'm gonna blow it to Mannie. Ready? Here it comes! (She takes a deep and exaggerated breath) Ah-ah-ah- Whoosh!" Once again, the ball only goes half way, and the leader steps in to encourage the teacher: "Come on, get it, get it!" Miss Walsh moves up to the ball, gives a big blow, and sends the ball right to Mannie's face. Everybody laughs.

The leader then turns to Mannie and says: "Mannie, who are you gonna blow it to?" But Mannie only points. Leader: "What's his name?" Mannie mumbles a name. Leader: "Nicholas? OK. Give it a blow." But Mannie, who forever looks sad and out of it, aloof and on the edge of the group, does not blow. Instead, he throws the cotton ball across the circle. The kids laugh. But the adults do not reprimand. They stay pleasant. The leader retrieves the ball, puts it in front of Mannie, and, with a smile, says: "Wait a minute. No fair throwing! Mannie! (Getting his attention.) Mannie! A blow—blow it. Can you blow?" Mannie blows the

ball. Leader: “Good! More, more!” And Mannie blows it again, this time almost all the way across the circle. Leader: “Good! Good for you!”

What fun they are having! You wonder what they might be learning from that activity. But they are only pre-schoolers. Pre-school classes always use play. And they are special education children at that.

So you move down the hall to a regular kindergarten room. But the entire class is on the floor here also, barely able to fit on the rug! The teacher, leading her own group, is starting a game. She has a large paint brush in her hand. “Guess what we’re going to do today. We’re going to paint our faces! Bet you never did that before. I’ll show you how. In this carton I have some special colors. I have magical green, magical purple, magical blue. You can’t see them, but something special will happen when I start painting. Teddy, get ready, cause I’m going to paint your face.” She puts the clean brush into an empty egg carton. “First, I’m going to paint your wonderful nose blue.” She takes the clean brush out of the carton and strokes it gently and artistically over Teddy’s nose. “Ooo! Oh, how beautiful! And your eyebrows. I’ll make them magical silver.” Again she dips the brush into the empty carton, then stroking Teddy’s brows in admiration. “And your chin with that special dimple. Here’s some magical red for the hole in your dimple.” “Pop!” She dabs some pretend red on Teddy’s chin. “Look, everybody. Doesn’t he look wonderful?” And Teddy grins as everyone Ooo’s and Ah’s. “Now Teddy, you get to do Sharon’s face.” Teddy takes the paint brush and turns to Sharon. “I like your ears best. I’m going to paint them magical yellow with green and purple stripes.” And he does. You are amazed at how fascinated the children are by this activity. With gazes fixed on each other, they are watching the painting unfold as if it were really happening. The **atmosphere** is magical – captivating. It almost makes you remember what it felt like to be a child!

Reluctantly, you leave this class and go on to another special education room of children six to eight years old. Since these children are school-age, you are sure they will be doing typical schoolwork at desks. But no, they too are on the floor in a circle, the teacher and aide with them, all smiles. You are soon to find out that they are passing around silly faces. The teacher says: “Oh, I’ve got one! (And facing the child next to her, she crosses her eyes and twists her nose with her fingers.) Everyone laughs including the teacher, proud that she surprised everyone with a funny face. Smiling, Sam says: “I can’t do that. I can’t cross eyes.” But he does it anyway. And the first funny face gets passed around the

circle. Leader: "Oh! Look at Ann's face!" More laughter at each person's turn. "Oh! Look at Tim! Does he pass along a good face!" They are having such fun! You wonder what this all means, why it is being done, and how the teachers justify all this play in school. Meanwhile, you move on.

The next class is a regular first grade with thirty children. Now you are not so surprised when you find them on the floor also. But they are not in a circle. They are on their hands and knees, one in back of the other, each one holding onto the feet of the child in front, making a long snake. And that is just what they are playing. Slowly and carefully, they wind around the room. The teacher who is watching and directing says, "OK, now the snake is going to sleep. Be careful when you go to sleep so no one gets hurt." And the kids lean over carefully and lie down on the floor, still in line. "Time to wake up!" Carefully, they get back on their knees, taking hold of feet, and slowly slide around the room. "OK, snake, come on home." The children all snake back into a circle and sit on the rug with legs crossed and knees touching. One child is slightly outside the circle, head down. Susie says: "Mrs. Smith, Fred isn't sticking together." Mrs. Smith: "Well, tell him." Susie: "Fred, you're not sticking with us. You've got to stick together." And Fred moves into the circle. But he seems sad, and his head is still down. Mrs. Smith: "Uh-oh, Fred looks like he has a problem. Are you OK? Did you get hurt when we played snake?" Fred shakes his head yes. Mrs. Smith: "Oh, no! What got hurt?" Fred shows us his hands, which may have gotten pinched by Lois' foot. Mrs. Smith, "Lois, you know what he needs, don't you?" Lois says, "He needs some lotion." And Lois takes some lotion and rubs it gently on Fred's hand and says, "Does it feel better?" Fred says: "Yes." Now he's smiling, head up and ready to participate. You feel relieved that he feels better.

You move on, back to a special education room. But these are big kids. You are visiting an intermediate learning disabilities room with children aged ten to thirteen. Maybe you'll see something you are more familiar with, more used to. You peek into the room. The class is on the floor with two teachers. Two children are in the middle of the circle, facing each other, sitting on the floor, holding hands with knees bent. They are looking straight at each other, waiting. One teacher says: "Are you ready?" The two in the middle say "Yup!" Then the whole group says: "Get ready—get set—GO!" And with this cue, the two in the middle smoothly pull up into a standing position, to the applause of all.

Now the questions are racing through your mind. Why so much play here? Give me the rationale! Give me the theory! Is this something special? Does it have a name? You want an explanation.

But there is one more class to see. Another special education room with about ten children aged six to eight, a teacher, an aide, and a group leader who has one child in her lap. One child is walking around the outside of the circle of children, tapping heads. You know this game. It's Duck-Duck-Goose. Right, but with one special modification. The head tapper says—"Goose!"—but instead of starting a chase, he runs one way and the Goose runs the other way until they meet and—HUG!—with big smiles on their faces. When this game is over, the group quiets down for the end of the session. The leader takes a pretzel from a bag and says: "Ready for a real funny one? This one's for you, Carl." And she tilts her head back and puts the pretzel on her chin. The class reacts, laughing: "Oh, no! Oh, no!" But Carl does not hesitate. He stands up, opens his mouth, and eats the pretzel right off the leader's chin! No hands! There are laughs around the room. What is this? The leader says: "Your turn, Carl." Now Carl has to think of a funny way to give a treat to his neighbor, Lisa. Copying the leader, he tries to put another pretzel on his own chin, but he cannot keep his head tilted for long enough and it keeps falling off! So he puts it on his elbow instead. Leader: "Oh, good idea!" Lisa laughs and bends over to eat the pretzel off Carl's elbow. So continues the pretzel eating around the circle until everyone has had a chance to eat one off a funny body part. Then everyone sings, "If you're happy and you know it, give a hug." And the group is over.

What is going on here? You have happened to arrive at these classrooms at Theraplay Group time. And of course, you have questions about all this. You hope someone is around to answer them. Well, that is why we are here. That is what this book is about. Now that you have had a taste of and peek at Theraplay Groups in classrooms, read on to find out what? why? and how?



## Chapter 2

### THE THERAPLAY® PRINCIPLE

Theraplay<sup>1</sup> was developed by Dr. Ann Jernberg, founder and clinical director of The Theraplay Institute, Chicago, Illinois (1979). It is a short-term therapeutic technique with roots in object relations theory, self-psychology, psychoanalysis and developmental psychology. The basic aim of Theraplay is to replicate the healthy parent/infant relationship. It is based in part on the work of Austin DesLauriers (1962, 1969) who stressed intrusiveness and physical contact in his efforts to establish relationships with schizophrenic and autistic children.

Theraplay is a structured, intensive, physical, individual therapy, using the type of play activities that characterize the healthy parent-infant relationship. There is little discussion. Instead, the focus is on pleasurable activities that will enable the child to **experience** the relationship with the adult. In Theraplay, the priority is on **personal interaction** (Jernberg, pg. 52), and thus, although there may be a few “props”, there is minimal use of material objects (pg. 55). Rather, it is the therapist’s and child’s **selves** which are primarily used (pg. 54). As is characteristic of parent/infant play, fun and surprise (pg. 54) are used to keep the child engaged in the relationship. As is also true of parents and infants, it is the adult, not the baby, who is “in charge.” (pg. 50-51)

Theraplay is in dynamic contrast to child-directed play therapy,<sup>2</sup> and should not be confused with it.

In contrast to traditional play therapy, the Theraplay approach does not use props or toys or encourage the child to act out unconscious issues. The Theraplay therapist does not relate past experiences to the current interaction, or use inquiry in an attempt to elicit reflections or insights; he or she does not offer interpretations. In Theraplay there is no room for non-directive responses such as those associated with the Axline model of child therapy. Theraplay, instead, emphasizes the current relationship and offers a level of intimacy not evidenced in other prevailing forms of child psychotherapy. (Golden, 1983)

All infants have certain basic requirements for healthy development within the parent-child relationship. Theraplay conceptualizes these

requirements under the terms Nurture, Intrusion/Stimulation, Structure, and Challenge, all taking place in as playful an atmosphere as possible.

A good parent:

1. **nurtures** her child: i.e., feeds, bathes, rocks, and comforts him
2. **intrudes** by stimulating her child to attend to the environment: i.e., plays peek-a-boo, gives piggy-back rides, plays “This little piggy”
3. **structures**: i.e., makes rules, says “No,” keeps her child from danger
4. **challenges** her child to grow and learn: i.e., helps him to stand up, encourages his first step.

Theraplay sessions involve a focus on one or more of these areas, depending on the specific needs of each child. The therapist carefully evaluates each child in interaction with his family to develop a custom-tailored treatment plan. Activities are specifically chosen not only to provide intervention in one of the four major areas, but also to provide:

1. The element of “fun,” spontaneity, and frivolity and
2. The focus on body contact, whether it be vigorous, playful, and competitive or tender, soothing, and nurturing. (Jernberg, pg. 21)

In a typical Theraplay session, the therapist may discover a child’s muscle and demonstrate that the child is strong enough to push the therapist over; find a freckle right under a sparkling blue eye; turn around a resistive “no” with a song about “No, no, no!”; and put powder all over two little feet. A child who is withdrawing with hands over his face may become engaged by the therapist’s discovery of a little pink ear on one side—and another one over there! Always the emphasis is on engaging the child, surprising him with something that is fun. Always the child will experience pleasurable activities with the therapist who knows well what a special person he is. Engaging the child in these interactions provides experiences that meet the child’s needs in the four Theraplay areas, guiding him in learning to develop healthy relationships with others.