



UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF THE PLAY THERAPIST: SCOPE, BOUNDARIES AND INFORMED CONSENT

Imagine this - A parent walks into your playroom feeling worried about their child. They've been told that play therapy can help, and they're hopeful. But before any session begins, one thing matters more than anything else — do they clearly understand who you are, what you do, and what your role is in their child's care?

This is where clarity becomes essential. Play therapy is used by a range of professionals, including psychologists, counsellors and trained play therapists. A psychologist may use play therapy as one of their therapeutic modalities, but their scope of practice is determined by their professional registration as a psychologist.


This article focuses specifically on practitioners whose **primary qualification is in play therapy and who are not registered psychologists**, and the importance of clearly understanding and communicating that role. In a country where access to psychological services is limited and many children need early emotional support, play therapists help fill an important gap. Through structured, child-centred therapeutic play, they create a safe environment where children can express themselves, explore experiences, and develop emotional resilience. But where a practitioner is trained as a play therapist and not as a psychologist, understanding that distinction is critical for ethical, professional, and safe practice.

Understanding the Role of a Play Therapist

Play therapy is grounded in a non-directive, child-centred approach that allows children to communicate through play rather than words. Within a structured and safe environment, the child is given freedom to explore emotions, experiences, and challenges at their own pace.

The play therapist's role is to:

- Provide a safe and structured therapeutic play environment
- Support emotional expression and resilience
- Observe behavioural and emotional patterns within play
- Help children process experiences in a developmentally appropriate way
- Communicate non-clinical observations to parents or caregivers
- Refer to appropriate professionals when concerns exceed scope



This work is supportive and therapeutic — but, where the practitioner is not a registered psychologist, it is not psychological diagnosis or clinical psychotherapy. Play therapists whose primary qualification is play therapy do not diagnose mental disorders, conduct psychological assessments reserved for psychologists, or represent themselves as psychologists. Instead, they provide an early intervention and supportive role, working collaboratively within the broader child mental health ecosystem.

Knowing Where Your Role Begins and Ends

Because play therapy can be used by both psychologists and non-psychologist practitioners, it is especially important to be clear about the qualification you are practising under. A psychologist using play therapy is practising within their psychology scope. A play therapist who is not a psychologist is practising within a defined play therapy scope.

Where a practitioner is working as a play therapist and not as a psychologist, they step outside their role when they begin to:

- Diagnose conditions such as anxiety, depression, ADHD or trauma-related disorders
- Provide psychotherapy for mental health conditions
- Conduct psychological or psychometric assessments reserved for registered professionals
- Use clinical language that implies a mental health diagnosis
- Represent themselves as equivalent to, or instead of, a psychologist

When a child presents with more complex emotional, behavioural, developmental or psychiatric concerns, the responsibility of the play therapist is to refer appropriately — typically to a psychologist, psychiatrist, or other registered professional. This referral pathway is not a limitation. It is part of responsible, ethical practice and ensures that children receive the level of care they need.

Informed Consent: The Foundation of Ethical Practice

One of the most important responsibilities of a play therapist is ensuring that parents or guardians clearly understand the nature and limits of the service being provided. Informed consent is not just a formality, it is a fundamental human right. Parents must understand what is happening in the playroom, the intention of the work, and the boundaries of the therapist's role before any sessions begin.

Clear informed consent should include:

- Your qualification and designation as a play therapist
- Clarification of whether you are a registered psychologist or not
- The nature and purpose of play therapy
- The supportive, non-diagnostic role of sessions (where applicable)
- The limits of your scope of practice
- When referral to a registered professional may be required
- Confidentiality boundaries
- Parent or caregiver involvement

When this is communicated clearly, it protects everyone — the child, the parent, and the practitioner.





Working Within Scope Protects Everyone

Play therapists provide meaningful support to children who may be experiencing:

- Adjustment difficulties
- Emotional stress
- Behavioural challenges
- Life transitions
- Social or developmental concerns
- Mild to moderate emotional difficulties

Through therapeutic play, many children benefit from having a safe space to express themselves, develop coping strategies, and build resilience. Where deeper or more complex issues are identified, referral ensures continuity of care and appropriate intervention.

This collaborative approach strengthens the broader network of professionals supporting children.

Professional Protection and Responsible Practice

Practising within a clearly defined scope is not only ethically important — it is also professionally protective. Clear communication, proper consent, and appropriate referral pathways reduce the risk of misunderstanding and help ensure that services are delivered responsibly.

Professional indemnity insurance is designed to support play therapists in the performance of their professional duties within their defined role. As with any professional service, working within scope and ensuring informed consent are key components of responsible and defensible practice.

A Collaborative Approach to Supporting Children

Play therapists play an important role in supporting children who may not otherwise have access to early emotional support. By providing structured therapeutic play within a defined scope, they help bridge the gap between everyday challenges and more specialised psychological care.

Psychologists who use play therapy, and play therapists who work within their defined scope, both contribute to a collaborative system of care. When roles are clearly understood, communicated, and respected, children benefit from appropriate support at the right level.

Clarity strengthens the profession. Transparency builds trust. And working within scope ensures that play therapy continues to play a valuable role in supporting children safely and responsibly.

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