

# JESSICA PERRISS

**Play Therapist and  
Therapeutic Social Worker**



**Photography and Interviewer Megan Wilson-De La Mare**

**I recently got in touch with Jessica Perriss because of my curiosity and interest in the therapeutic benefits of play. Perriss is a play therapist and therapeutic social worker based in South Devon. She kindly discussed the therapeutic model of play therapy, her experiences, and the role of play in childhood.**

**Megan Wilson-De La Mare**

Could you explain what play therapy is and what the benefits are?

**Jessica Perriss** Play therapy uses the ‘child’s first language of play’ (Landreth, 2002) to alleviate emotional and mental health difficulties in children and young people. It draws upon a wide variety of play and creative arts techniques, including the therapeutic use of art, music, drama, dance, sandplay, storytelling, creative visualisation, puppets, masks, mandalas and sensory play activities. Play therapy can be both non-directive, where the child chooses their activities, or more structured, where the therapist will offer specific activities tailored to the child’s needs. The therapy builds on the natural way that children learn about themselves and their relationships in the world around them. Through play, the therapist can help the child to express their thoughts and feelings, make sense of their experiences, and explore and develop a positive sense of self. Play can also help children identify difficulties, discover new possibilities and build new skills.

**MWDLM** Can you tell us how you came to be a play therapist?

**JP** As a social worker for Children Looked After, I became increasingly aware of the long-term impact of developmental trauma and the need for healing hurts that go beyond moving a child from an unsafe situation to a safer one. I was particularly moved when I read family histories in which the impact of trauma had been passed from one generation to the next and was desperate to find a therapeutic model that would be effective for children without placing an expectation on them to have to ‘talk about their problems’. In play therapy I found an approach that not only helps children to express themselves non-verbally but also gives them an opportunity to explore and embrace their inner world in a non-threatening, creative, and child-centred way. It’s often a magical and transformative process to behold.


**MWDLM** The concept of play being the child's first language is interesting. How do children use play as a form of communication?

**JP** As soon as children are born they find their first 'playground' in their caregiver's face, with both infant and adult exploring and mirroring the other's facial expressions. This interplay helps to form vital attachments, and later helps the child to identify and understand their feelings. Games such as peek-a-boo and hide-and-seek soon develop, furthering attachment security. In every game, the child is learning about themselves, others and the world around them. When a toddler repeatedly drops their beaker from the edge of their highchair and squeals with delight when the adult keeps returning it to them, they learn that objects still exist even when they can't see them. Later, children naturally enter a world of fantasy and role play in which they can safely practise all the skills they'll need for the adult world, whether that's overcoming seemingly insurmountable tasks such as slaying the dragon, or rehearsing social and practical skills whilst playing nurses. Creativity helps us to access what is already known from the unconscious, whilst helping to find new perspectives and broaden alternatives.

This process is as true for adults who use play or creativity in therapy, or for reflection in their work. Essentially play and the creative arts help us to express what is beyond words.

**MWDLM** What effect if any do you think the increase in screen based play is having on children?

**JP** Whilst the virtual world has many benefits, there are obvious limitations when it comes to children's global development. In order to enjoy successful and meaningful relationships we need to understand and regulate our feelings, but it is much harder to do this if we haven't yet acquired physical awareness and sensory regulation.

The development of the systems that help us to process touch, taste, sight, smell, sound, as well as balance and coordination, should naturally be incorporated into a child's play, preferably including lots of mess and time outdoors! Screen based play may offer certain adventures, but we are multi-dimensional creatures, physical and spiritual, who are designed to explore the world in a multi-sensory way. We are far more prepared to face our demons, the dark forest, the storm, or desert, if we've first dared to experience them safely through play. 

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