

Filial Therapy: What Every Play Therapist Should Know

Part One of a Series

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In the 54 years since Dr. Bernard Guerney walked onto the back porch of his home and suggested the idea of Filial Therapy to his wife, Dr. Louise Guerney, the method has been refined, researched, and disseminated throughout the world. Because the concept was far ahead of its time, it was met with

initial criticism. Critics could not quite imagine that parents would be capable of making a difference in their children's

lives this way, especially because the prevailing view was that parents were the cause of all the child's problems. The Guerneys and their colleagues answered those criticisms by doing research—research that clearly showed that parents were capable of learning to conduct the special play sessions and research that clearly showed that this method led to lasting improvements for children and their families.

It is perhaps only in the past 20 years that Filial Therapy has gained a strong foothold in the professional community, and just in the past decade that international interest in this effective form of family therapy has grown rapidly. As is often the case when a therapeutic method gains popularity, there grows with it misunderstanding and misapplication. People with insufficient training or partial understanding of the method try it, often without good results, and others claim it for their own while changing its essential nature. Others obtain training but little or no supervision, and once again, the strength of the method can be diluted, or its use is never expanded to its full potential.

Risë VanFleet, PhD, RPT-S, Psychologist and Play therapist, is well-known internationally for her books, articles, DVDs, and training programmes on Play Therapy, Filial Therapy, and Animal Assisted Play Therapy. For over 30 years she has disseminated information and



trained child and family professionals in Filial Therapy and has been conducting multiple training programs in the UK each year since 2002. She is a past-president/board chair of the Association for Play Therapy in the U.S. and founder of the International Collaborative on Play Therapy.

a vast range of families and problems, including very severe ones. Since so many Play Therapists, Family Therapists, and other clinicians have seen

In the history of psychology, this phenomenon can be observed many times, and I have seen it affecting the practice of Filial Therapy. I am excited that so many of my colleagues throughout the world have embraced Filial Therapy and found it to be as powerful as I always have, but I am also concerned that there are so many misunderstandings about what Filial Therapy really is and isn't. Most often, people underestimate its strength and applicability, limiting its use to cooperative or motivated families. I learned Filial Therapy from both Bernie and Louise Guerney 30+ years ago, and I still marvel at the theoretical and practical brilliance of their conceptualisation of the method. The Guerneys played a role in the refinement of the method throughout their careers and even into their retirement and this evolution of the approach is also misunderstood by some. Because of the flexibility that was built into Filial Therapy from the beginning, I have found very little need to "tinker" with it, despite using it with a

the value of Filial Therapy, whilst there are others who have not, I thought a series of articles detailing its foundations, methods, and adaptations would be helpful at this time.

What Is Filial Therapy?

Filial Therapy is a form of family therapy. It is based on a psycho-educational model, not a medical model, of service delivery. It harnesses the power of Play Therapy. It empowers children, parents, and families. It changes children. It changes parents. It changes the family.

The term "filial therapy" derives from the Latin filios or filias, meaning sons or daughters. Loosely translated, it means parent-child. As Filial Therapy evolved, the Guerneys and others tried to find more user-friendly terms for it, but the name Filial Therapy has stuck. In 2003, Louise Guerney (personal communication) asked that the term be capitalised when referring specifically to the Guerney model of conducting Filial Therapy (FT), and that the

