

[Search History](#) [Saved Articles](#)

 Search Results for **rebecca burton in Author/Byline**

Florida - Selected Source Types

[Edit Search](#) | [New Search](#)
 Show Help ▼

[Back To Results](#)   ◀ [Previous](#) Article 29 of 35 [Next](#) ▶   [Save this Article](#)

## A half-century of helping children through play therapy

Miami Herald, The (FL) - Tuesday, January 3, 2012

**Author:** *Miami Herald*, *BY REBECCA BURTON*

Mental health counseling is often called “talk therapy,” but words aren’t necessary for Dr. Robert Nolan, who has just one rule for his young patients: Play with no rules.

Watching youngsters interact with age-appropriate toys, the child psychologist gains insight into the issues that brought them to his North Dade office.

“I do very little; it’s just the therapeutic power of play,” he says. “We really believe that play of a certain type is a healing part for kids.”

Nolan, who has been the executive director of Miami-Dade’s Institute for Child and Family Health for more than 35 years, was the founder and first president of the Florida Association for Play Therapy. In November he received The Children’s Trust’s David Lawrence Jr. Champion for Children award.

Play therapy “is based upon the theory that children communicate, particularly at certain ages, better through play than they do through words,” he says. “They may not even be able to vocalize what it is that’s bothering them, but they can sure show you in their play.”

Nolan recalls a 5-year-old girl whose parents were worried about changes in her behavior. After several sessions, he says, he observed her placing a doll family on the edge of a bucket of water. The baby doll fell into the water, and the girl “rescued” it.

“Turns out the parents just had a new baby and she was feeling left out,” he says. “After this happened she was able to identify herself as the big sister. The play is what helped her; she walked out and was happy again.”

Nolan’s empathy for children may stem from his own difficult beginnings. When he was growing up in Jacksonville, his mother was ill and his father was often out of work.

“Food was scarce so I spent some time in the Baptist Children’s Home,” he says.

School was no haven. Because he was hyperactive and had vision problems, he says, he spent three years in the first grade. He dropped out in his sophomore year of high school, and enlisted in the Air Force. He was stationed in Okinawa, Japan, where the seeds were planted for his career.

“I was hanging with my buddies, smoking cigars and drinking beer,” he recalls. “When they asked me what I wanted to do when I got home, I didn’t want to say, ‘Going back to high school,’ so I just said, ‘I want to be a child psychologist.’”

After passing the GED exam, Nolan enrolled at Florida State University, where he earned a

 Related Articles

Tell us what you think...

- ▶ [State \\$\\$\\$ for child health said to pay off](#)
- ▶ [RESCUE MISSION Local agency goal: Insure every chi...](#)
- ▶ [SYSTEM FAILURE - CHILD-SUPPORT PROGRAMS OFTEN SHOR...](#)
- ▶ [Take note for a good exam - Kids need a thorough c...](#)
- ▶ [GETTING A CELL PHONE FOR YOUR CHILD? YOU MAY WANT ...](#)
- ▶ [THE ED SHOW for June 11, 2012. MSNBC](#)
- ▶ [India Today: How Safe Is Your Child From...](#)
- ▶ [Family Matters - We don't get sick or stay well by...](#)
- ▶ [Family Matters - We don't get sick or stay well by...](#)
- ▶ [The Guardian: All out on poverty: Health: HIV/Aids...](#)

 0 Saved Articles  
this article

 [Email](#) ▼

 [Print](#) ▼


Quick Links

doctoral degree in psychology in 1959. He received post-doctoral training in child psychology at the Judge Baker Children's Center in Boston, a Harvard Medical School affiliate.

In 1962 he joined the Institute for Child and Family Health (formerly the Children's Psychiatric Center), and became its director in 1976.

"He loves children; he lights up when he sees them," says his wife, Janet Courtney, who directs a play-therapy center in Palm Beach Gardens. "To have this kind of job, you have to have a delight in children, and he does."

The institute oversees mental health counselors in South Florida public schools, and sees about 7,000 play-therapy patients a year. The need is only growing, Nolan says.

"The threat of lawsuits, to me, is one of the most dramatic impacts on our society," he says. "It has changed the way we interact with people; it has changed the way we permit kids to play. No neighbor in their right mind would let your child climb their tree. ...

"We have restricted that kind of expression that children used to be able to show. Now they can play combat games on the computer and shoot all the people they want to shoot. But I'm not sure if that's the healthiest way for them to express themselves."

---

**Provided By:** The McClatchy Company

**Index Terms:** Institute for Child and Family Health; Florida Association for Play Therapy; Air Force; Florida State University; Harvard Medical School

**Personal Name(s):** Robert Nolan; David Lawrence Jr.; Janet Courtney

**Record Number:**

201201030000KNRIDDERFLMIAMIH\_654da2a63a465a6e1c9e40f216a6eed5

Copyright (c) 2012 The Miami Herald

To bookmark this article, right-click on the link below, and copy the link location:

[A half-century of helping children through play therapy](#)

[Back To Results](#)    ◀ Previous Article 29 of 35 Next ▶

▶ [Find articles by Miami Herald, BY REBECCA BURTON](#)  
▶ [Find all articles from January 3, 2012](#)