

Therapeutic Play for Children

*An overview of different
Therapeutic Approaches.*



Introduction

Therapeutic Play is the use of different fun and engaging play based activities to support children with their emotional, social and cognitive development. Through different types of therapeutic play, children can be supported to understand and express feelings and emotions; learn ways to socialise and communicate effectively; build their own confidence and self-esteem and enhance their general wellbeing.

Therapeutic play activities are found in a range of different contexts including: schools; libraries; play centres and community hubs. They may also be incorporated into professional therapy sessions.

For more information on which ones are available through Dragonfly Counselling, please see my website.

This booklet will give you an overview of some of the main types of therapeutic play activities that can be found, and why they are beneficial for your child.



Art Therapy

Art therapy is the use of creative activities to help someone express what they are feeling inside. True Art Therapy will be conducted by a trained and specialist Art Therapist, who will also use psychotherapy techniques alongside the art work.

The purpose of art therapy is to allow the child to use creative means to be able to express and understand complex emotions and thoughts that they may otherwise struggle to articulate.

This type of therapy can include a whole host of media including paints, clay, collage, construction type activities and the use of pens and pencils. This makes it accessible and engaging for so many different children as they can choose the type of materials that they enjoy and are interesting to them.

Alongside allowing the person to express their feelings and help understand emotions, art therapy can also support with:

Finding a different way to communicate;
Supporting to make connections
Help understand your self more
Give a safe, non-judgemental time and space.



For those in a non-therapeutic setting, the use of creative arts work is also beneficial to help with these skills. For example, an arts and crafts group in the local community centre, or the use of arts activities within an early years classroom.

Play Therapy

Children have a natural tendency to play, and through this it provides a natural, fun and engaging means for them to, amongst other things:

Express emotion
Learn empathy for others
Develop collaboration skills
Develop confidence and resilience
Learn new ways of communicating
Develop Problem solving skills
Build their self esteem

Using play as a means of therapy is a non-threatening context that allows children to act out scenarios, experiences and situations with a degree of removal. It allows children to use a range of objects or activities, for example, puppets or small world toys, in order to act out and understand scenarios and experiences that may be troubling them. Furthermore, it gives them a way to do it that may be easier to express than words.

Professional Play Therapy should be undertaken by a trained and registered play therapist. However in non-therapeutic sessions, such as playgroups, schools, playgrounds and community centres, different play based games and activities can support children to develop a wide range of skills, as noted above.

Play is natural to children and is a safe, known, comfortable way to help them express and understand emotions, work out difficult feelings and find an alternative way to express what words may not be able to.



Music Therapy

Music therapy is the use of music; sounds; instruments; our own vocalisations in order to connect together and share an experience. Our reactions and emotions to different music and sounds is unique to each of us and through music therapy, the therapist will work with the client to help them express their reactions, feelings and emotions through the music and sounds that speak to them.

There are many benefits to accessing music therapy including:

Providing a way to communicate with each other that does not require words;

Providing a collaborative experience;

Providing a way to express emotions, feelings and thoughts in a creative and safe way;

Providing an experience that helps boost confidence and self esteem along with emotional wellbeing;

Providing a fun way to connect, communicate and express.

Music therapy may include the use of instruments for the child to use to express their emotions and feelings, or they may listen and react to music and sounds shared by the therapist. Using music in a non-therapeutic setting is also important to allow for expression and understanding of emotion and feelings.



Sand Play Therapy

Sand Play Therapy is a type of play therapy that has been in use since the 1950s. With this type of therapy, children will have access to a sand tray and a range of different toys which represent symbols. Through using the sand tray, the children have free access to use the toys to tell their story, with the characters representing different people, feelings or emotions.

The use of toys in the sand help the child to be able to express their inner feelings, emotions and experiences in a safe way. It allows for the child to express their feelings and emotions without having to use words, or in a way that makes it accessible if they do not have the words or language development.

Once the child has created their world in the sand tray, the therapist will then support them to talk about it and process what it means for them. Through then helping the young person to make changes in their symbolic world, the hope is that they can transfer changes into their real world.

Sand play therapy is useful for a number of different challenges including;

Developing self esteem;

Processing and understanding emotions;

Dealing with trauma.



Drama Therapy

True Drama Therapy is carried out by a qualified and registered Drama Therapist who is trained to use a mixture of psychotherapy and drama techniques to support their clients.

In Drama therapy, the young person can use a wide range of methods to express themselves and their inner thoughts and feelings. For example, they may use story telling or role play techniques to express an experience that they cannot verbalise. Alternatively they may use music and movement to express themselves, their thoughts and feelings.

Drama therapy is a safe and non-threatening way for young people to engage with story telling, role play and drama work in order to express and share things that are causing them challenge. It allows them to remove themselves as the person that the story is about and see what is happening from an outside perspective. Through doing this, it also allows the child to explore and understand the situation or experience that they have had. Using drama therapy allows the child to remain in control of the events, whilst understanding, expressing and processing things that are challenging for them.



Animal Assisted Therapy

Animal Assisted Therapy is the use of animals such as dogs or horses in order to support a person in feeling comfortable and safe to express their innermost thoughts, feelings and challenges.

Animals can support a person feel more comfortable in a therapeutic type setting. As animals are naturally empathic and non-judgemental, they can help children and young people feel safe and secure in a different way to humans.

Having an animal to focus on and share the space with can help children feel more comfortable in being able to share things that they are finding difficult. It may be that the child feels that they are talking directly to the animal rather than having to face the human who is listening.

Being close to an animal through cuddling or petting it can give us a natural sense of calmness which in turn will help reduce levels of stress and anxiety. Helping to learn to communicate and interact with whatever animal is used within the therapy also allows the child to form new perspectives and ways to communicate. When accessing animal assisted therapy, it is important to check that the animal has been vetted and deemed safe for the work.



Mindfulness Activities

Mindfulness activities encompass a wide range of different experiences that can help a person to learn how to stay in the moment and focus on the here and now.

Through engaging in mindfulness activities, it helps us to learn how to focus our attention and develop our concentration. Alongside this, it helps to keep us grounded in the present moment rather than worrying about the past or future.

Learning the skills of Mindfulness allows us to develop strategies to help keep us in the moment and to calm anxieties, stresses or worries that we may have. We all practice some of these skills without realising, for example, taking a big breath before saying something that may be difficult. Learning to control our breathing is one of the key processes within mindfulness.

Mindfulness is about being present in the here and now and being aware of ourselves and our surroundings in the moment. It can support children to understand and feel their emotions, giving them time to understand them before reacting. Consequently helping to support with their emotional regulation and emotional awareness. The more we teach our young people mindfulness practice, the more automatic it will become for them, supporting them to be less anxious and more emotionally intelligent.

Mindfulness activities can include:

Breathing techniques;

Meditation;

Mindfulness outdoor nature walk;

Mindfulness colouring;

Engaging with sensory objects and activities.



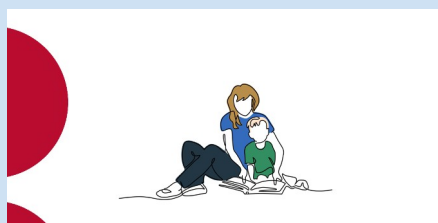
Therapeutic Storytelling

Therapeutic story telling can work well alongside drama therapy or sand tray therapy, as all are means of supporting the child to use objects, role play or stories in order to share their own experiences, thoughts and feelings.

Story telling can be a powerful way of helping someone to express their inner worlds and also make connections between their inner thoughts and feelings and their external experiences.

Through using stories with children, it can help them connect to difficult situations they have faced, understand them more and help to process them. Storytelling can empower the person to understand how they can act in different situations.

Stories also help us to understand the perspectives of others and to develop empathy, therefore, through therapeutic storytelling, children can also develop their communication, connection and empathy for others. Using stories helps to keep the child 'one step removed' from the situation, allowing them space, safety and time to connect and process their own experiences to what is happening in the story.



Outdoor Play

There are so many therapeutic benefits to outdoor play and the knowledge of this helps to drive forward initiatives in schools such as 'Forest Schools' and also the fact that in early years, children must have access to outdoor learning environments.

Being in the outdoors fosters a natural curiosity and sense of awe and wonder in children. They have the opportunity to explore the environment using all of their senses. Furthermore, outdoor play gives means of co-operating, communicating and playing with others. Alongside this, it supports physical health and wellbeing which in turn impacts on our overall health and wellbeing.

Outdoor play has numerous benefits including:

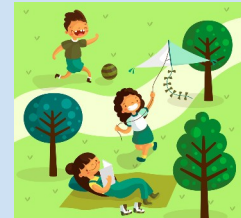
Engaging in sensory play and exploring the environment in a mindful way;

Collaborating, co-operating and communicating with others during play;

Using their imagination and linking in with story telling and role play activities that may help them understand complex feelings and emotions;

Being in the outdoors gives a sense of calm and relaxation, which in turn lowers stress levels;

Physical activity in the outdoors helps to release our 'feel good' chemicals.



Sensory Play

Sensory play helps children to explore, understand and make sense of the world around them, using all of their senses.

Sensory play can encompass so many different activities and media including using sand; water; paints; textured materials; slime; kinetic sand; gloop; light and sound toys and so on.

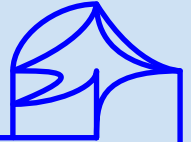
By engaging with these, it helps to encourage children to use one or more of their senses to interact and engage with the activity. Sensory play helps children understand their body and its place in the environment.

Sensory play helps to regulate our sensory system and also supports with general regulation. This means that sensory play can support a child to regulate their emotional system, be calm, reduce anxiety and stress.

Sensory play also helps to develop curiosity, imagination, resilience and a sense of wellbeing.



The Benefits of Therapeutic Play



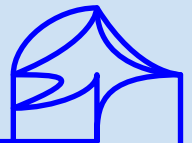
Emotions

The types of therapeutic play identified all support children with development, understanding and processing of emotions.

Through using play based activities, it provides a safe, fun context for children to explore and express difficult situations or feelings. Often young children do not possess the language to articulate what they are feeling, but through play based activities such as role play or drawing, for example, they are given the freedom and means to express emotions.

Play also allows those who have experienced traumatic events work through any challenging situations through interactive and non-threatening ways. Through using play such as sand tray therapy or role play, the child can explore and process difficulties that they have faced, using the objects or toys as a representation of themselves.

During play based activities, either on your own or in a group, children may experience challenging emotions such as frustration, anger or disappointment. However, through engaging and learning skills during play to manage these types of emotions, will support the child's ability to emotionally regulate in other contexts.



Stress Reduction

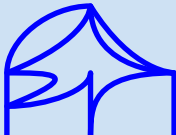
Engaging in play is a natural past time for children and one that gives us a sense of joy and fun when we are younger. Consequently, engaging in therapeutic play type activities allows the child to have fun whilst dealing with challenging topics and feelings.

However, because play is a naturally enjoyable activity for children, it helps to reduce stress and anxiety that may be related to the challenges they are facing.

Furthermore, play can support children to make friendships, develop communication and relationship skills. This helps to build a foundation for further development of these skills into later childhood and adulthood. In turn, this supports an overall positive wellbeing.

Specific play based activities such as mindfulness activities, help to support the development of skills that reduce anxiety and stress. Engaging in these types of activities in particular, will support the child to learn to focus and concentrate on the here and now, rather than worrying about past or future events.

The Benefits of Therapeutic Play



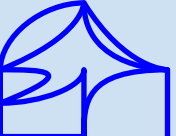
Communication Skills

The range of different therapeutic play opportunities means that children have the option of communicating their innermost thoughts, feelings and challenges in different ways.

For younger children, they may not possess the necessary words in order to express what they are feeling, whilst others may find verbal expression of challenging situations extremely difficult. However, through media such as art therapy, story telling, role play, sand tray therapy, to name a few, children can be supported to communicate and express themselves in non-threatening, safe ways.

Alongside this, therapeutic play can support with understanding and developing language. For example, some activities may support children to learn and name the emotions that they are feeling. Alternatively, engaging with other people during therapeutic play can support the language and communication development further.

Trust and Attachment



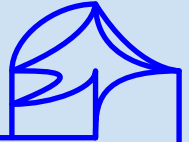
Children who have suffered trauma or adversity can have difficulties with trusting others and with having secure attachment. Due to the play based nature of the work specified, children have the opportunity and consistency to work with an adult, over a period of time, on safe and fun activities. This in turn will help to foster a sense of trust with that adult.

Therapy for children and adults requires a trusting and safe relationship between the trained professional and the client. Consequently, engaging in therapeutic play activities gives the child the opportunity to build this trust and be able to work with the person in understanding their challenges.

This development of trust can also support with building attachment and demonstrating safe and secure relationships for the child. If parents or carers are also involved in the work, that too can help develop trust and attachment with them, for the child.

The skills and understanding of trust and attachment that the child can develop through therapeutic play, can then be transferred into other relationships they have outside of the therapy work.

The Benefits of Therapeutic Play

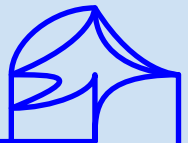


Social Skills

Play is a key source of supporting children with developing their social skills. Perhaps a child is attending some therapeutic play activity specifically to support with their ability to relate to other children.

Different play activities will give the opportunity for children to interact with others, whether this is the therapist or if working in a group, other children. The context of play is a natural environment for children to learn to work with others. Play and games give the opportunity for communication of ideas, negotiation of next steps as well as learning how to see things from the perspective of others.

Play also supports children in learning how to problem solve with others, and find ways to compromise and co-operate. All of these and solid foundation skills for later life experiences.



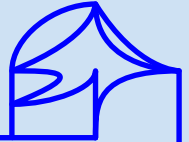
Cognitive Development

Play supports children so well with developing a wide range of cognitive skills as well as their physical development. This is why play is such a crucial part of Early Years Teaching, as it supports the foundation for learning so many skills later on.

Some of the more creative therapeutic play activities such as drama, art and music help to foster imagination and creativity. Alongside this, children develop fine motor skills. When working in groups, they can also develop communication, co-operation and social skills.

Other types of play support the development of problem solving and thinking skills. Again, these create some of the key building blocks to later life development. Children who learn early how to solve problems, think creatively and co-operate with others to find solutions, will develop key skills for later working life.

The Benefits of Therapeutic Play



Self Esteem and Empowerment

Engaging in play activities is very much in control of the creator. Consequently, when a child engages in an activity such as creating a painting or making up a story, they are in charge of the pathway.

Overcoming challenges and difficulties in play also supports children to develop their confidence and self belief. The power of positive thinking when it comes to ourselves is important in having a positive and healthy mind set about who we are.

Building confidence in our play and realising that we can achieve and accomplish goals, helps children to have a sense of self and sense of belief which will translate into other areas in their lives.

Furthermore, because the child is in control of their play and making the choices and decisions that they want to, it helps them to feel empowered and improve that sense of belief.



Positive Behaviour Reinforcement

For some children they may need additional ways to help them understand rules, boundaries and manage their challenging feelings.

Through using play, children can learn the rules of games which in turn gives them an understanding of expectations and boundaries in wider society. Children can use the skills that they learn through play, such as following rules or learning and accepting how to lose a game without becoming angry or dysregulated.

Play can be used as a way of showing and modelling appropriate responses to different situations. For example, through using therapeutic story telling, children can be supported to see characters encountering challenging situations that may mirror the child's. They can learn how the character copes with and manages the situation, which in turn can support the child to do the same.