THERAPLAY®: KINDLING EMOTIONAL CONNECTION BETWEEN CHILDREN AND THEIR PARENTS

Phyllis Rubin
Theraplay

Helping Parents and Children Build Better Relationships Through Attachment-Based Play

PHYLLIS B. BOOTH
ANN M. JERNBERG
GOALS

- Describe the basic components of Theraplay: the five dimensions of structure, nurture, engagement, challenge and play.
- Describe the Marschak Interaction Method assessment tool.
- Practice structuring, engaging, nurturing and challenging Theraplay activities.
- Explain how Theraplay strengthens relationships.
HOUSEKEEPING

- Confidentiality
- Role playing
- Questions
- Service mark ®
  - This is an overview workshop.
  - Refer to formal training information at end of handout and at Theraplay website
A Theraplay Group Experience

- Beanie toss
- Eye contact swap
- Hand clapping game
- Pass a squeeze
Defining Attachment

- The exclusive relationship child makes with the caregiver. Once established, no one can replace the attachment figure
- Proximity seeking behavior by the child activated by some threat
- The dyadic regulation of emotions
WHAT IS THERAPLAY?

- Theraplay is an engaging, relationship-focused treatment method that is interactive, personal, playful and fun. It’s principles are based on attachment theory and its model is the healthy, attuned relationship between parents and their children: the kind of interaction that leads to secure attachment and lifelong mental health.

- Theraplay is multisensory: involves touch, movement, rhythm, eye contact, emotional expression – experiences that regulate the brain.

- Goal is to enhance attachment, self-esteem and trust in others.
Let’s evoke two images

- Positive Baby Scene
- Negative Baby Scene
NORMAL PARENT-CHILD INTERACTIONS: VIDEO

- Describe what you saw.
- How is the parent communicating? Through what modalities?
- What is the child experiencing? Through what modalities?
A THERAPLAY EXAMPLE

- Nathan video
- What did you see that is different from the types of therapy you are used to?
- How was therapist communicating?
- How was the parent communicating?
- What was child experiencing?
**Basic Assumptions based on Attachment Theory**

- Positive interactions result in child’s inner representations (IWM) as positive:
  - Self as lovable
  - Others as loving and responsive
  - World as a safe, exciting place

- Negative interactions result in child’s inner representations (IWM) as negative:
  - Self as unlovable, incompetent, unworthy
  - Others as uncaring, untrustworthy
  - World as unsafe, full of threat
NEEDS OF YOUR FAMILIES

- What Inner Working Models are you seeing?
- What are the effects of the child’s history?
- What do the children with negative or unstable IWM need?
- What do their parents need?
NEEDS OF CHILDREN: FOSTER AND ADOPTED

- To experience attunement and regulation
- To feel self-safety
- To trust and accept parental structure
- To develop mutuality and engagement
- To receive and accept nurturing from parents
- To feel competent and worthy
- To feel claimed as part of a family
**Needs of Children: Developmental Trauma**

- To be helped to build a healthy attachment relationship
  - A secure attachment helps children deal with trauma
  - Trauma can disrupt the attachment relationship
- To feel safe and calm within the relationship with their parents (achieve regulation)
- To be able to relax and have fun
GOAL OF THERAPLAY

- Create or fine-tune a secure, joyful relationship between a child and her primary caregivers -- one that takes as its model the joyful, attuned relationship between parents and their young babies.
- We bring parents and child together in sessions to encourage and practice the playful, attuned, responsive interactions that characterize the healthy, secure relationship.
OUTCOMES

- Positive change in child’s IWM
- Better self-regulation
- Increased sense of safety
- Decrease in behavior problems
- Positive change in parents’ IWM
FIVE THERAPLAY DIMENSIONS

- **STRUCTURE**
  - Provides safety and guidance to create positive experience between adult and child.

- **ENGAGEMENT**
  - Accesses and activates the Social Engagement Systems of parent and child for increased self-safety and connection.

- **NURTURE**
  - Helps child feel cared for.

- **CHALLENGE**
  - Promotes child’s sense of competence and confidence.

- **PLAY**
  - Creates shared joy – a bonding experience.
THE MIM:
ASSESSING THE PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

- The Marschak Interaction Method is a structured technique for observing and assessing the relationship between two people.
- It is the assessment tool unique to Theraplay that is the basis of the treatment planning process.
MIM

- Videotaped
- Therapist analyzes
- Therapist meets with parent(s) and gives feedback as they view selected parts of MIM.
- Allows parent(s) to stand outside the moment to observe interactions and better understand child.
- Allows parents to reflect on their relationship with their child.
- Helps you build connection with parent.
Each take a toy animal, make them play together (Engagement, Structure)
Child copies adult’s drawing (Structure, Challenge)
Put lotion on each other (Nurture)
Tell child about when he/she came to live with you (Nurture)
Teach the child something (Structure, Challenge)
Adult leaves the room for 1 minute (Nurture)
Play a familiar game (Engagement)
Put hats on each other (Nurture, Engagement)
Feed each other (Nurture)
MIM Assessment

Evaluates parent capacities

- **Structure**: to set limits and provide order
- **Engagement**: to be attuned to the child’s states and reactions
- **Nurture**: to provide attention, soothing and care
- **Challenge**: to support and encourage the child’s efforts to be successful
- **Play**: to experience joy and well-modulated up-regulation with the child
MIM ASSESSMENT

Evaluates **child** capacities

- **Structure**: to accept limits, order and direction
- **Engagement**: to respond and accept the parent’s attuned attempts to engage
- **Nurture**: to accept parent’s attention, soothing and caregiving
- **Challenge**: to participate in activities that support and encourage their efforts to advance developmentally
- **Play**: to share joy and experience well-modulated up-regulation with the parent
VIDEO CLIP OF MIM
STRUCTURE

- Provides safety and guidance to create positive experience between adult and child.
STRUCTURE MESSAGE FOR CHILD

- Adults behave in organized, predictable and kind ways.
- Your parent can be trustworthy and keep you safe.
- Your parent can help you when you are distressed or uncomfortable.
- You don’t have to take care of yourself.
You can set limits and guide behavior without being punitive.

Even if you could not protect your child in the past, you can do so now.

You can help your child calm down.

You can set up routines in play and daily life that will reassure the child.

When you help your child manage their emotional ups and downs, they eventually learn self-control.
STRUCTURE IN THE SESSION

The therapist:

• Leads and guides
• Organizes the play space and plans sequence of activities
• Uses “take charge” language
• Gives cues: 1-2-3-go!
Practice Structure

- Row your boat
- 1-2-3 Push!
- Stack of hands
- Aluminum foil hand prints

How can structuring experiences help your families?
TRAUMATIZED CHILDREN

- More susceptible to pervasive shame or rage
- Easily dysregulated
- Need to control to feel safe
- Fear intimacy, nurturing, and love
- Avoid deep feelings or only feel big feelings
- Misinterpret intentions of others as threatening
- Amygdala easily activated: brain may be fear-driven.
- Over-focused on non-verbal signals of danger.
- Brain is “hijacked” by automatic flee, fight reaction, or by freezing in the “alarmed” state.
PROBLEM-SOLVE HOW TO ADJUST THERAPLAY FOR TRAUMATIZED (ANGRY/FRIGHTENED) KIDS

- We acknowledge and respect child’s fears
  - “You’re not so sure about this, are you? How about if we do it a little slower?”

- We increase our sensitivity and attunement to build neuroception of safety
  - Notice small signs of anxiety or fear.
  - Reduce surprises that can trigger vulnerability by allowing child to anticipate activities in a session
ENGAGEMENT

- Accesses and activates the Social Engagement Systems of parent and child for increased self-safety and connection.
ENGAGEMENT MESSAGE FOR CHILD

- You are not alone.
- You are safe.
- Your parent wants to be with you.
- Your parent sees and hears you.
- Your parent understands you.
ENGAGEMENT MESSAGE FOR PARENT

- You have the power to connect with your child with your voice, eyes, face, touch and movement.
- Your gentle social connection makes your child feel safer.
- You can create a special “dance” of interaction with your child that no one else has.
- You can understand your child which helps him understand himself and other people.
- You can help your child learn the give and take of healthy relationship.
ENGAGEMENT IN THE SESSION

The therapist:

- Uses non-verbal, “attachment communication” (Schore) that speaks to child’s limbic system.
- Opens eyes, shows emotion in voice and face, touch, gesture, uses expressive “words.”
- Sequences a range of activities involving up-regulation and down-regulation.
Practice Engagement

- Popping cheeks
- Decorating
- Balloon bop
- Create 4-part hand shake

- How can engaging experiences help your families?
- Problem-solve how to adjust for angry/frightened kids.
  - Use matter-of-fact, non-threatening touch
NURTURE

- Helps child to feel cared for.
NURTURE MESSAGE FOR CHILD

- Your parent can help you feel better.
- Your parent can figure out and provide what you need.
- Even if touch and physical closeness were frightening in the past, they can feel safe and good.
- Your parent can calm and soothe you.
NURTURE MESSAGE FOR PARENT

- You can learn how to read your child’s cues.
- You can meet your child’s needs.
- You can figure out the best way to calm and soothe your child.
- Caring for a child isn’t spoiling him or rewarding her bad behavior.
- Gentle touch is an important way to connect and soothe a child.
NURTURE IN THE SESSION

The therapist:
- Notices hurts and cares for them with lotion, feather, etc. Coaches parent to do same.
- Uses activities with a nurturing component (lotion handprints, slippery slip)
- Uses tender songs and feeding to meet child’s early needs.
PRACTICE NURTURE

- Noticing and caring
- Hand tracings
- Find shapes or letters in your partner’s hands
- Slippery slip

- How can nurturing experiences help your families?
- Problem-solve how to adjust for angry/frightened kids.
  - Introduce nurture and intimacy gradually
CHALLENGE

- Helps child feel competent and confident
CHALLENGE MESSAGE FOR CHILD

- You are strong and competent.
- You are capable of making good things happen.
- You can accomplish something that is a bit difficult with your parent’s help.
CHALLENGE MESSAGE FOR PARENT

- You can help your child feel strong and capable.
- You can help your child grow and develop skills.
- You can learn what to expect your child can do.
- You can be a partner with your child.
- You can discover ways to give positive feedback to your child.
- You can enjoy your child’s achievements.
CHALLENGE IN SESSION

The therapist:

- Uses activities that require bigger skills (jumping, punching, running, balancing, guessing)
- Playfully challenges child, but does not compete. No losers!
PRACTICE CHALLENGE

- Cotton ball blow
- Cotton ball - feather guess
- Play 3 rounds of thumb wrestling
- Newspaper punch

How can challenging experiences help your families?
- Problem-solve how to adjust for angry/frightened kids.
PLAY: THE OVERARCHING DIMENSION

- Creates shared joy – a bonding experience
- Message for the child:
  - You are fun to be with.
  - There is joy in relationships.
- Message for parent:
  - You can bring joy and hope to your child.
  - Your play helps your child manage positive and negative feelings.
  - Your play shows your child how to interact with others.
  - Joyful play creates a strong connection and good feelings.
VIDEO CASE EXAMPLE

- MIM
- Theraplay session
- Feedback and guiding parents

- Notice how Theraplay builds attachment-attunement-emotional connection-experience of being nurtured
Reflecting on What You’ve Seen

- How is attachment developing?
- What contributes to increased regulation?
- Why is the touch important?
- Why is the playfulness important? Effective?
- How are parent and child feeling about themselves and each other?
Theraplay Training

- 2-day MIM training
- 4-day Introductory Theraplay
- 3-day Intermediate Theraplay
- 2-day Advanced Training
- 2-day Group Theraplay
- Supervised certificate-track practicums

For more information, go to www.theraplay.org
RESEARCH

- Theraplay has a Level 3/Promising Research rating on the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare.

- Research on Theraplay and Group Theraplay is summarized on Theraplay website.
RESOURCES

- The Theraplay® Institute
  - 1840 Oak, #320
  - Evanston, IL 60201
  - 847-256-7334
