



**THERAPLAY<sup>®</sup>:  
KINDLING EMOTIONAL  
CONNECTION BETWEEN  
CHILDREN AND THEIR  
PARENTS**

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THIRD EDITION

# Theraplay

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



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# 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.
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# 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.



# TYPICAL MIM TASKS & ORDER 3 YEARS

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- 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.



# STRUCTURE MESSAGE FOR PARENT

- 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” (Schoore) 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
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- 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](http://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
- *Theraplay: Helping Parents and Children Build Better Relationships through Attachment-based Play*, Booth & Jernberg, Jossey-Bass, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 2010.
- *Attachment Parenting: Developing Connections and Healing Children*, A. Becker-Weidman & D. Shell, Rowman and Littlefield, May, 2010.

