

# Beyond the walls of the play therapy room...



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## Background

Eighteen months has passed since six Ageing, Disability and Home Care; NSW Department of Family and Community Services employees completed their initial training in therapeutic play through Play Therapy International (PTI). The aim was to build upon the success of phase one of the Play Therapy Pilot initiated by Lucinda Mora in 2008 (OT, Play Therapist and Senior Clinical Consultant). Since then, the ADHC trainee play therapists have discovered a world of powerful possibilities. They have realised their capacity to connect, nurture and heal individuals with an intellectual disability using a creative arts therapy.

## What is Play Therapy?

Play is a natural medium for self expression and is critical to childhood development. As Landreth (2002) states "Birds fly, fish swim, children play." Within the boundaries of a safe and emotionally supportive play environment, the child is provided an opportunity to play out their feelings and problems.

Therefore play therapy is a non-judgmental, non-directive and non-interpretative psychological intervention that offers young people an opportunity to 'play out' their feelings using toys rather than words in a safe therapeutic environment.

Play therapy provides the child the chance to master their world as they create, develop and maintain their own sense of self (Schaefer, 2011), particularly when children do not have the words or capacity to share their needs and wants. The toys become the child's words and their play becomes their language (Landreth, 2002). The therapist then reflects upon what they see, hear and feel in order to support the child to gain insight.

Play therapy outcomes are different for each child and are possible, regardless of stage of development, gender, socio-economics, language, intellect, ethnicity or culture.

## The Paradigm: To direct or not to direct

Many models of play therapy exist which either fall under the category of directive or non-directive play therapy. The ADHC trainee play therapists work non-directively using Axline's (1969) principles. Some of these key principles include accepting the child as they are; going at the child's pace and following the child's lead. Within a session, if a child wishes to stand quietly, talk, paint a picture, make something in the sandtray or bang the drums, the responsibility to make the choice is the child's.

## The Clients

Therapeutic play services are being provided in Metro North region to children aged 4 to 16 with mild to severe intellectual disabilities, who present with a range of difficulties. These include issues relating to communication, anxiety, social isolation, family separation, grief and loss, attachment issues and trauma.

## The Effects: Beyond the walls of the Play Therapy Room

There has been strong evidence of positive changes within session and across settings. The following statements illustrate these changes. Children have learnt to express and regulate their feelings and assert their own needs. Others have learnt how to connect emotionally with other children and adults. Parents and teachers report improved concentration, problem solving and on-task behaviour.

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**“There has been strong evidence of positive changes within session and across settings...”**

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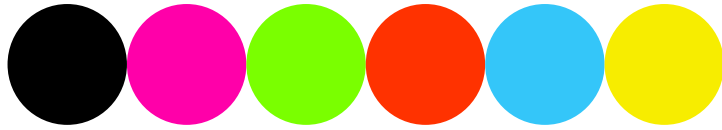
The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 1997) is being used to evaluate outcomes. A statistically significant improvement on total SDQ scores was found ( $p = .008$ ) indicating that the play therapy intervention is obtaining positive outcomes. In addition to this measure, therapists are asking parents and caregivers to rate goals before and after intervention. Parent rating scores indicate a significant improvement ( $p = .007$ ). Analysis suggests that most caregivers and the children themselves are rating positive changes in emotional, behavioural and social states.

Caregivers have reported:

*“Instead of keeping his feelings inside, he will tell us verbally now.” (Grandmother of 10 year old child).*

*“My son can now regulate his temper and tends to calm down a lot quicker by himself.” (Father of 16 year old adolescent).*

*“I used to say that my son was practically non-verbal. With the help of play therapy he has gone ahead leaps and bounds in his communication. Just amazing. Not to mention he initiates affection to us now, going up and giving his dad a hug now is a priceless sight to see.” (Mother of 6 year old child).*



### Further information:

There are several pathways that can lead to becoming an accredited play therapist. For assistance in understanding the development of play therapy in Australia and information about training, visit the Australasian Pacific Play Therapy Association (APPTA) [www.appta.org.au](http://www.appta.org.au)

Play therapy courses are becoming more available in Australia. Practitioners considering becoming Play Therapists will need to investigate providers and their accreditation options thoroughly. A short course in play therapy will not equip practitioners with all they need, to work effectively and safely with children. Play Therapists are certified by recognised profes-

sional organisations and participate in clinical supervision specific to play therapy. ●

### References:

Axline, V. (1968). *Dibs: In search of self*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Goodman, R. (1997). *Strengths and difficulties questionnaire*. UK: Youth in mind.

Landreth, G. (2002). *Play therapy: The art of the relationship*. New York: Brunner-Routledge.

Schaefer, C. (2011). *Foundations of play therapy (2nd ed)*. Canada: John Wiley & Sons.



Family & Community Services  
Ageing, Disability & Home Care

## reviews...



### Book Review: Fragile X Syndrome. Diagnosis, Treatment and Research

*Edited by Randi J Hagerman and Paul J Hagerman. John Hopkins University Press.* (Recommended for professionals) This superb 480 page book is a must for the professional with any interest in fragile x syndrome. Topics covered in part one include epidemiology and the associated cytogenetic and molecular findings, present research regarding protein studies and neuropsychology of the fragile X syndrome. The second part of the book covers treatment and management strategies including genetic counselling, medical follow up, psychopharmacology, psychotherapy, education, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy and protein and gene therapy. This new third edition is not only a very current review but in addition makes for fascinating reading. It is the one definitive text about fragile x syndrome. Available from the *Fragile X Alliance Inc* for \$88.00.

### Organisation Review: [www.sdn.org.au](http://www.sdn.org.au)

As a not-for-profit organisation established in 1905, SDN is one of Australia's most experienced and trusted leaders in early childhood education and care. SDN is a holistic children's services organisation providing mainstream child care and preschool for 3000 children in NSW and the ACT as well as specialist services for children with high support needs and for families facing challenges. They provide a range of early intervention and support services to help children with disabilities, developmental delays, autism spectrum disorder, speech impairments and behavioural problems. Some of the services provided include brighter futures (an early intervention service), child and family resource centre in Granville which includes a toy library and a parent information stay and play group. Community of learners is an early intervention support service for children with disabilities. SDN Beranga is autism-specific service in Rooty Hill that branches into 13 centres. Visit the SDN website for more information.

### Website Review: [www.boxofideas.org](http://www.boxofideas.org)

This website is a fantastic resource for parents that need ideas about everything! It is described as a one stop shop for 1000s of ideas, guidance and information on everything from early years to employment. You are able to search resources/ideas such as book lists, video talks by professionals, in-depth definitions of learning difficulties on the website for something specific or join the discussion with other parents online. There are two main sections of the website,

- *Practical skills for home*; this includes hobbies and leisure, independent living skills, social and emotional behaviour and study skills and attention.
- *Practical skills for education and the workplace*: includes preschool, primary school, secondary school and further education, higher education and employment.

This website is extremely practical and will be helpful for parents and professionals.

