

A Practitioner's Guide  
to  
OUTDOOR PLAY BASED LEARNING  
**Therapeutic Powers of Play**  
Guest Blogger : Deirdre O'Reilly- Play  
Therapist

## The importance of play...

In this week's guest blog we hear from Deirdre, a play therapist based in Ireland, who shares the therapeutic benefits of play and some handy **play** tips and activities.

*'Birds fly, fish swim, children play'*  
-Garry L. Landreth, [Play Therapy: The Art of the Relationship](#)

The more I say this quote, the more I write this quote, the more I come to realise the importance of play in a child's life and the therapeutic powers that play brings. Children communicate through play, it is their language. A parent or practitioner who gains a greater awareness of a child's attachment and developmental needs (when explained in simple enough terms), leads to greater motivation to learn the parenting and teaching tools which hold the value of the care giver / child relationship at the core.

**For both parents and practitioners alike identifying and meeting** a child's needs, helps children feel more settled, less stressed and allows them to return to a more calm and balanced state.

## Understanding children....

We love this infographic below which is helpful in explaining behaviors and needs of children.

### Relating to the feelings and meeting the needs that drive a child's behaviour

A: <u>When a child's behaviour is:</u>	B: <u>The child's likely to be feeling:</u>	C: <u>And likely to need:</u>
<p>Behaviour may be erratic. Chaotic. Loud. Screaming. Demanding. Aggressive. Unpredictable. Extremely noisy or withdrawn. Anti-social. Rebellious. Defiant. Maybe dangerous. Attacking. Risky behaviour. Rude. Uncooperative. Lying. Destructive. Distrusting</p>	<p>Some or all: Insecure. Anxious. Afraid. Anger. Rage. Accused. Very frustrated. Threatened, Self-esteem very low. Lacking confidence. Vengeful. Overwhelmed. Confused. Disorientated. Sad. Lonely. Isolated. Unloved. Misunderstood. Judged as naughty &amp; bad. Excluded. Powerless. Vulnerable. Lost. <b>Child has a backlog of unmet needs.</b></p>	<p>Adult to stop &amp; help child feel safe and secure. Adult to help child move from distress/high alert to a calmer state. Lots of reassurance of loving connection. EMPATHY! Messages of "I can help". Keep child and others safe, physically if necessary, but non-aggressively. Needs to feel cared for by a calm, confident adult. To get bad feelings OUT in safe ways; crying / laughing. Understanding.</p>
<p><b>D:</b> Distracted and distractible. Cautious. Disorientated. Frazzled. Sensitive. Easily upset. Resistant. Frequent conflicts with other children. Clingy. Whining voice. Nervous. Demanding of attention/ sugar/ entertainment/ distractions. Small problems result in big reactions.</p>	<p><b>E:</b> Needy. Irritable. Confused. Frustrated. Stressed. Unsettled. Resistant. Unseen. Unheard. Judged. Craving empathy. Uncomfortable emotions. Uncomfortable and squirmy in their body. Lost. Disconnected from self and others. <b>Child has some unmet needs.</b></p>	<p><b>F:</b> For adult to slow down and give their full attention. Warm connection. Reassurance, especially relating to limits. Positive guidance &amp; encouragement. Pressure reduced. Threats reduced. Rhythm, routine &amp; predictability increased. Emotional validation. Guidance &amp; information that's easy to understand. Support stress releasing cries or laughter through play.</p>
<p><b>G:</b> Child is focused on their play. Good at meeting their needs. Expresses clearly when seeking help. Confident. Friendly. Generous. Sociable. Seems alert. Energized but settled. Healthy curiosity. Listens well. Cooperative. Eating, sleeping and learning well.</p>	<p><b>H:</b> Secure. Safe. Calm. Loved. Cared for. Warmly connected. Happy. Supported. Strong sense of belonging. Contributions valued. Good wellbeing. Settled. Satisfied. Seen. Heard. Acknowledged. Emotionally supported. Confident. Energized. <b>Child's current needs are met.</b></p>	<p><b>I:</b> Attachment figure available. Awareness of how and where to access physical and emotional needs. Rhythm &amp; routine. Predictability. Variety. Security. Fun. Friends. Opportunities to meet challenges &amp; practice skills. Overall secure family. Encouragement. Time for free play.</p>

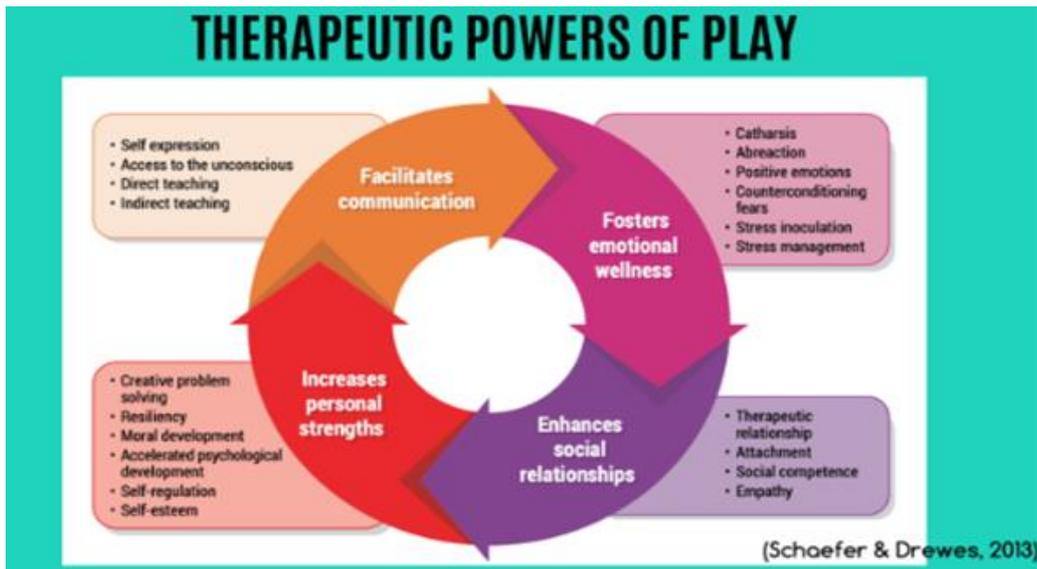
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Infographic (Peaceful Parent) 2021: <https://www.peacefulparent.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Childs-feelings-and-needs-chart-2.pdf>

The chart focuses on identifying the underlying feelings and unmet needs relating to out of balance behavior. It's useful for parents, teachers and practitioners alike! When we focus solely on the behavior, we can miss the opportunity to tune in to and hence support children on an emotional level. This approach is way more effective than using punishments or enforcing consequences. Lockdown has been tough: Right now, everyone is struggling, parents, teachers and children alike. There seems to be no off switch to parenting, we are constantly on, constantly there, at home.

## Therapeutic powers of play!

There is a lot that can be written about the therapeutic powers of play. Charles J. Schaefer would say there are 20 core agents of change that attribute to the powerful effects that play and play therapy has on different areas within a child or adolescent's life.



When a parent or practitioner truly involves themselves in their children's play, a child feels worthy of their parents' time. Zero distractions, just play time. If you allow yourself to be that child again, just enjoy the moment. Creating a bond with your child or a child you are working with is priceless. Allowing yourself to be playful again, shows children that you can be fun, you ARE fun!

- If you are finding it impossible to find “free time”, **start with as little as 10 minutes** per day and work your way up. Children will resolve their pain with a parents or carer gives help and support through play as long as both are regulated.
- For a child to feel calm and regulated they need to have gained trust from their main caregiver, this in turn will help them develop relationships. To be able to express their emotions as they get older comes from a connection made by a care giver during an interaction with the child; **seeing the emotion and naming it**.
- Overtime, the child will learn how they are feeling and express it through words when they reach that developmental mild stone of verbal communication. This is an intentional **two-way communication process** between child and care giver over time, developing on from the previous developmental stage.

## Emotional Regulation Activity..

Learning emotion regulation skills is a powerful way to enhance wellbeing and help young people navigate the sometimes-choppy waters of their experience. A lovely activity to do with a child is to simply blow bubbles. This activity shows the therapeutic power of play at work. It facilitates communication, by direct teaching and it fosters emotional wellness by being cathartic and releasing positive emotions. The simplicity of blowing bubbles is a stress inoculator. It also increases personal strengths by being a creative problem solving activity to do, helping the child to self regulate (by taking deep breaths) and it increases self esteem by mastering the blowing of bubbles and popping them.

## Try this Activity out!

Instead of buying a bottle of bubbles, why not make your own!

- Water
- Washing up liquid
- Bowl / saucepan / basin
- Straws

**Method:**

Pour in water. Squeeze in washing up liquid. Take a deep breath and blow through a straw.

Added excitement to this activity:

Add food colouring / paint then pop the bubbles with different parts of your body!

## About the author

My name is Deirdre O'Reilly and I am a Play Therapist based in Killeshandra, Co Cavan, Ireland. I run a private practice from my home, dealing with clients who have mild to moderate behavioural issues. Play has changed my life, my relationship with my own children and given me a sense of (my) self. You can follow me on Facebook or Instagram by looking up Communication Through Play. Happy play days 😊

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### Useful Links

**Our handy hints and tips on #outdoorplay**

<https://www.inspiringscotland.org.uk/thrive/>

International Play Association (IPA) Booklet for Parents and Carers: Play in Crisis:

<http://ipaworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/IPA-Play-in-Crisis-Booklet-for-parents-and-carers-2020.pdf>

Play Scotland: Resources on The Power of Play <https://www.playscotland.org/play/play-for-health/the-power-of-play/>

Exploring Play: The Importance of Play in Everyday Life Course:

<https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/play>