

Fosterline Wales Factsheet

Relationship-based play

Introduction

Children usually enter foster care following disruption in their caregiver-child relationship, and the quality of the interactions that children have experienced with their birth parents can vary considerably. Relationship-based play can be a powerful tool for foster carers, as it can strengthen relationships and offer children a platform to communicate.

Relationship-based play is a therapy for all the family, the child and parent/carer. It builds and enhances attachment and can help with trust. It really helps with self-esteem and is based on play between parent/carer and the child. In the therapy, the child and parent/carer will play fun games, undertake challenging, but also nurturing activities.

The aim is that by engaging with each other through play, it will help the parent manage the child's behaviour and will help the child feel secure, cared for and safe.

Why might relationship-based play help children in my care?

Early interactions between a child and their primary caregiver are known to have multiple functions. Not only does the 'attachment' to the primary caregiver refer to their strong bonds of care, but it also underpins the way the child develops and understands the world. Forming an attachment is a survival instinct, and the way we behave in infancy is led by our basic care needs.

How the primary caregiver responds can affect us in three different ways. These are: our view of ourselves, our view of others and our view of the world. In basic terms, if our primary caregiver is responsive and warm, we learn that we are worthy of love, my carer is dependable, the world is safe. A disruption in this relationship (loss) or inconsistent responses, may lead the child to experience low self-esteem, a lack of trust in others, and a sense of unpredictability in the world.

By offering a child in your care relationship-based play opportunities, they can experience you as accepting of their feelings, being open and engaging, and that you value your time with them. Structuring this time so it happens regularly, but for short periods of time (around 20 minutes), is helpful to promote feelings of safety and predictability.

Using Theraplay® principles at home

Theraplay® is an attachment-focused model which considers four dimensions of attachment. This guide considers how the principles may be used within your home to provide playful opportunities, for children to experience their caregiver as nurturing, attuned, fun, safe and in control. It is fundamental that the play takes place within the safe care guidelines; the play must be offered in a public space in the home and children have the right to opt out of the play or a specific game.

The four dimensions

Engagement

Beneficial when children may be withdrawn, avoidant of contact, or are highly structured.

Structure

This allows children who try to maintain control, owing to their prior experiences of inconsistency and unpredictability, to experience playful and safe ways to experience an adult being in control, to help them to let go of that burden.

Nurture

This gives children playful ways to experience nurture, whether that's to meet needs that may have gone unmet in earlier years, or to allow the child to experience some positive nurturing.

Challenge

When children have high levels of fear, anxiety or are withdrawn, introducing safe, low level risks can extend their tolerance while giving an opportunity to succeed and share joy.

Introducing Theraplay® games at home

It is recommended that children are invited to play, for a specified short period of time. In this way you might say, '(name), would you like to join me to play for half an hour? I have some new games you might enjoy'. If the child says yes, you might say 'Great. I'll explain the games and let you know five minutes before the end'. This five-minute notice is helpful for structuring the play time and helps children prepare themselves for ending, which they may find difficult if they're having fun. During the last five minutes of the play time, it can help children to end if the next play time like this is scheduled. For example, 'Wow, you seem to have had lots of fun playing these games. We can play them again on Tuesday after school'.

Mirror, Mirror

Sitting face-to-face with your child, copy and mimic what they do. Take it in turns to pull faces, wave, and make shapes with your hands.

It can be fun to mime messages to each other, like pointing to your eye, making heart shape with your hands, and then pointing to your child.

Drum copy

Tap out on a drum (or plastic bowl) a pattern or drum beat for the child to copy.

Try to progress to both tapping the same pattern at the same time. This promotes rhythm in your relationship!

Pop the bubble

The grown-up blows bubbles from a bubble wand and calls body parts for the child to pop the bubble with. Start with something easy, like their hand, then progress to more difficult ones like finger, elbow, forehead or toes.

Follow my leader

The adult always leads and encourages the child to follow them around the room. The adult can playfully find different ways to travel, such as marching, hopping, jumping.

These games and principles are from the Theraplay® book: Booth, P.B & Jernberg, A.M. (2010). *Theraplay: Helping Parents and Children build better relationships through Attachment-Based Play*. Wiley & Sons: San Francisco.

How does this play help?

Regular playful exchanges help to communicate the message to the child that play with them is important to you. Avoiding interruptions and making a regular 'appointment' out of the play time shows children that the play is prioritised. Allowing children to opt out helps to reinforce their sense of autonomy and encourages them to feel safe. It may be that during your play time, children do not want to play the games you're suggesting, but they invite you to play something else.

Plato once said, 'You learn more about someone in an hour of play than a lifetime of conversation'. It's through one-to-one play with your child that you will strengthen your relationship and respect for each other.

How The Fostering Network can help

The Fostering Network offers advice, information and support. Our expertise and knowledge are always up-to-date and available through our vital member helplines, publications, training and consultancy.

Advice

Fosterline Wales

Call us on 0800 316 7664 from 9.30am - 12.30pm Monday to Friday.

If you call outside this time, please leave a message and someone will call you back as soon as possible.

You can email us at:

fosterlinewales@fostering.net

Support and resources

Our website is an essential source of information, while our online community brings together foster carers for peer support and advice. You can login to share your

experience and get advice from other foster carers. Our online community is a safe and secure area to discuss foster care matters.

thefosteringnetwork.org.uk

Training and consultancy

Wherever you are in your fostering career, as a foster carer, social worker or manager, The Fostering Network has a range of training designed to meet your development needs.

For more information, contact our Learning and Development Manager, Sarah Mobedji at sarah.mobedji@fostering.net.

Open Courses

The Fostering Network does have a programme of open courses, one of which is on the subject of Therapeutic Play. The aim of the course is to provide a theoretical understanding of the benefits of therapeutic and relationship-based play and to equip the participants with the confidence to begin therapeutic play at home.

Details of any upcoming courses will be on the [Training and Events](#) page of The Fostering Network website.

If you are a fostering service and would like to commission this training, or if you require more information please contact Sarah on sarah.mobedji@fostering.net.

About The Fostering Network

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity, bringing together everyone who is involved in the lives of fostered children to make foster care the very best it can be.

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