



**Building Professional Excellence- Part 2**  
**Session 8: Using Play Therapy for Affect Regulation**  
**Webinar Follow-up Question and Answer Session with Heloisa Portela**

**1. Question from Rebekah Jaeger-Meyer**

Can play therapy be used with adults?

Answer from Presenter

Yes, absolutely! My most commonly used "play therapy" modality that I use is sandplay. However, I also incorporate some theraplay activities or concepts, specially related to nurturing (lotion and food, for example).

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**2. Question from Michael Shaw**

What are some effective methods of assessment for Affect Dysregulation using play?

Answer from Presenter

Well, you will probably "see" the affect dysregulation very easily in your session. The dysregulated child will have difficulty adapting to different situations... So, let's say you forget to give the 10 minute cue that the session is to end (and only give a 5 minute one). This change of the routine will likely be enough for the client to dysregulate. This may look like screams, tantrums, or even dissociation (or hide in the fort, for the client I presented, and scream). In the play itself, you may see chaos, too much water, too many toys, mess...

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**3. Question from Sharon Ipes**

When divorce occurs in early childhood, would it be considered a trauma?

Answer from Presenter

Absolutely! Unfortunately, parental divorce is normally very traumatic for children. It is almost like the world came to an end. From there on, what will make a difference is how well the parents co-parent, how they communicate with each other, how respectful they are, how collaborative (or highly conflictive) their divorced relationship is and how similar their house rules and routines are.

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**4. Question from Jacintha Henry**

What are some brainstem activities/ types of play that you can do with a teen or adult?

Answer from Presenter

Sandplay is one of the best, for sure. EMDR also works on brainstem level (it really crosses all brain levels, even more so if combined with aromatherapy). Aromatherapy, for sure. And lotion, feeding (some modified theraplay activities). Remember to have a sensory rich office and to nurture your clients!

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### **5. Question from Pam Lyons**

What are some good resources for those beginning to do play therapy? What are three initial activities to incorporate in play therapy?

#### **Answer from Presenter**

The Association for Play Therapy (PT) is a great resource (and their state branches) to help you find trainings. If there is interest, maybe NBCC could sponsor a webinar about the nuts and bolts of play therapy (or sandplay). I would recommend Landreth's "The art of a relationship" book (it is a must for play therapists and would answer many questions). And of course, Axile's "Dibs in search of self." These are good starting places. Also, a good Registered Play Therapist Supervisor is important.

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### **6. Question from Ida Duplechin**

Is there a possibility that Affect dysregulation due to abuse will change the DNA as epigenetics suggests?

#### **Answer from Presenter**

This question is in reality beyond my expertise, since I have not studied epigenetics in depth. However, it is my understanding (and believe) that trauma changes our body, our brain, and likely our DNA. Actually, all our experiences (good and bad) determine our cellular development... So, it is not nature versus nurture, but rather nature and nurture interacting together to make us who we are--in all levels.

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### **7. Question from Brandon Harper**

For an individual with difficulty with communication like an adult with Asperger's, how could one utilize play to teach social skills?

#### **Answer from Presenter**

Sure. You are talking about a more direct play therapy approach. Just note that such task would likely be working in the limbic brain system (social skills) and cortex (teaching/cognition).

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### **8. Question from Rebekah Jaeger-Meyer**

How much training do you do with the parents of the children you are treating? How do you handle parents who do not nurture play?

#### **Answer from Presenter**

It depends on the parents and on the client. For an affect dysregulated child and following the session structure presented, every session is part of a parent training (by modeling, since parent is included in the session). What you see is that parents start seeing progress with the child and start incorporating things we do at our session at home. I also schedule parent only sessions--again, for some parents more often than others--where I can listen to parental issues that are interfering with how they interact with their child as well as I can teach about



parenting techniques in a more direct way, if necessary. Our sessions are NOT a class, though. Any teaching follows what is being presented and is normally "short and sweet" (and incorporated in our talk). Parents are important allies. And they know their kids more than we do (and we want to foster that!). I always remember that they would not be there if they did not love their children... Try to bring their love to the forefront (not the problems). If a parent does not nurture play, he/she may need more support and "teaching" the importance of play for children's development. It would also be important to explore how they foster play in their own lives...

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**9. Question from Bethany Bagley**

Can you explain the differences between Sensory Processing Disorder and Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Answer from Presenter

SPD is what we discussed in our presentation. Many children (and adults) in the autism spectrum present sensory issues--however, autism goes beyond SPD. At the same time, a client presenting sensory issues does not mean he/she is in the autism spectrum. Yes, having sensory issues may be a red flag for autism, but it is not exclusive of autism. I have clients with high anxiety, for example, that have SPD.

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**10. Question from Virginia Asher, Elizabeth McGinnis**

How do you prompt the start of using sand trays? Is it directive or open?

Answer from Presenter

I follow Dora Kalf's sandtray approach, which is indirect and Jungian. There are some people who use sand trays in a direct and cognitive way. Just remember that using the sand tray in a more cognitive or verbal approach brings that technique to a higher brain level (while my approach is a brainstem one). So, these are very different modalities. I often invite clients to let the sand (and my miniatures) "speak" to them and use the sandtrays however their hearts desire.

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**11. Question from Wendy Sabin**

Do you utilize board type games? Which are most useful?

Answer from Presenter

Traditional non-directive play therapy does not recommend board games. However, more direct play therapy approaches may use some games (often with some modification). Remember that board games are also not bottom of the brain interventions... My recommendation if you are to use board games is to still focus on being client centered. For teenagers, the ungame has its place in my practice. And years ago, my 10 year old client was the one who taught me to play chez (he asked me for it and I got a set for my office). However, it was never about chez for me, but about him, about our relationship and him feeling special about teaching me... It was part



of his treatment. If I am playing games, I am also mindful of who is winning and I can "help myself" win or lose depending how things are going--but you have to do this in your technique, no cheating!

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**12. Question from Michael Shaw**

Can you say a few words about working with children who are not living with family (i.e., foster care, residential treatment center) who may not have long term availability for continuity of care?

Answer from Presenter

In foster care, work with foster parents. In residential or when there is not someone who can participate, you do it yourself and advocate for you to be the one adult that is not changing for the child...

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**13. Question from Denise Henderson**

How directive or nondirective are you in the sessions?

Answer from Presenter

I am directive in the beginning of the session (when I am working with parent and child), indirect during the later part.

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**14. Question from Nisha Talwar**

During play therapy do you ask children any questions, in other words is there any interaction or tracking or processing taking place or you let the child take the initiative?

Answer from Presenter

No questions during play. Questions are cognitive and work on the cortex. However, Some minimum questions during the check in and EMDR portion of the session are included.

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**15. Question from Elzbieta Wojnarowska**

As a therapist, how do you deal with the logistics of play therapy (preparing supplies, cleaning up and getting ready for every client on a busy day)?

Answer from Presenter

I try to have my office set up in a way that makes it easier in between clients. I have some supplies that may not be out and are not used as often but they are easy to get as needed. The challenge for me is when the sandtrays are used--the 5 minutes are very tight for clean up. If you have spare time, I would advocate allowing more time in between clients for clean up....

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**16. Question from Oksana Thompson**

Do you process feeding with the client?

Answer from Presenter

No. I want to stay in the brainstem. Processing is cortex based. Besides, verbal language is not the primary language of children (play is, doing it, not talking about it).

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**17. Question from Elzbieta Wojnarowska**

How do you increase parents' involvement in at "home" play therapy?

Answer from Presenter

The same as what I explained before. A lot of modeling and psychoeducational

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