

Theraplay Activities by Dimension

Note to Parents

The primary focus of Theraplay is on building/enhancing the parent-child relationship, self-esteem and trust in others through joyful engagement not correction or cognitive learning. Theraplay activities are designed to build an emotional connection with your child while maintaining a flexible level of structure. Activities are simple and create opportunities to connect through eye contact, touch, smell, sound and taste. Parents take the lead and initiate play. This is an opportunity to amplify the positive emotional states between you and your child. Parent sets the emotional tone and carefully watches/attunes to the emotional state of their child. Be enthusiastic, empathetic, smile, laugh, maintain appropriate levels of eye contact, establish close physical proximity, and ensure safety. Above all else, have fun with your child everyday.



Structure

Purpose: To relieve the child of the burden of maintaining control of interactions. The adult set limits, defines body boundaries, keeps the child safe, and helps to complete sequences of activities.

Bean Bag Game: Place beanbag or soft toy on your own head, give a signal and drop the beanbag into child's hands by tilting your head toward the child. Take turns.

Cotton Ball Hockey: Lie on the floor on your tummies (or sit with a pillow between you). Blow cotton balls back and forth trying to get the cotton ball past your partner's defense. You can increase the complexity by saying how many blows can be used to get the ball across the pillow, or by both trying to blow at the same time to keep the ball in the middle.

Drawing Around Hands, Feet or Bodies: Make a picture of the child's hand or foot by drawing it on a piece of paper. Full body drawings require the child to lie still for some time and are therefore more challenging. Be sure to maintain verbal contact with the child as you draw, for example, "I'm coming to your ankle; I'm coming to the tickle spot under your arm." Hang the picture up in the child's room or on his/her door.

Eye Signals: Hold hands and stand facing each other. Use eye signals to indicate direction and number of steps to take, for example, when you wink your left eye two times, both you and the child take two side steps to your left. For older children, you can add signals for forward and backward movement as well (head back for backward, head forward for forward). You can hold a balloon or pillow between you by leaning close to each other as you move.

Measuring: Measure the child's height, length of arms, legs, feet, hands and so forth. Keep a record for later comparisons. Measure surprising things, such as the child's smile, the length of his ears, how high he can jump and so forth. You can use fruit tape for measuring, then tear off the length and feed it to the child. "This is just the size of your smile." You thus combine structure with nurture.

Patty-Cake: Hold child's hands and lead her through "Patty-cake." "Patty cake, patty cake, Baker's man/Bake me a cake as fast as you can/Roll it and pat it and mark it with a (child's initial)/And toss it in the oven for (child's name) and me!" You can use feet as well.

Pop the Bubble: Blow a bubble and catch it on the wand. Have child pop the bubble with a particular body part, for example, finger, toe, elbow, shoulder or ear. This is a structured way of playing with bubbles. Bubbles readily capture the interest of young children and can be used as an engaging activity either in this structured form or in a manner that invites more spontaneity (for example, by having the child pop all the bubbles as quickly as she can).

Red Light, Green Light: Ask the child to do something, for example, run, jump, move arms. Green light means go, red light means stop.

"Mother, May I?" Parent gives instructions to the child to do something, for example, "Take three giant steps toward me." Child must say "Mother May I?" before responding to the command. If the child forgets, she must return to the starting line. The goal is to have the child come to her parent and get a hug on arrival. Instead of "Mother May I?" you can also have them say "Yes Mommy" or "Yes Daddy."

Engagement

Purpose: To establish and maintain a connection with the child, to focus on the child in an intense way and to surprise and entice the child into enjoying new experiences.

Beep and Honk: Press child's nose and say "beep!" then press chin and say "honk!" Guide the child to touch your nose and chin. Make appropriate beeps and honks, as you are touched. Child may be able to supply noises also.

Cotton Ball Hide: Hide cotton ball (candy, a touch of lotion or powder) somewhere on the child. An older child can hide the cotton ball on himself. If parent or another adult is available, she can find the cotton ball, if not, you can find it.

Blowing Over: Sit facing the child and holding hands (cradle the child in your lap), have child "blow you over." Fall back as the child blows. Once the child understand the game, you can blow her over.

Check Ups: Check body parts, such as nose, chin, ears, cheeks, fingers, toes, knees to see if they are warm/cold, hard/soft, wiggly/quiet, and so on. Count freckles, toes fingers, and knuckles.

Hand Clapping Games: Older children enjoy these games very much. They can be simple (Patty Cake) or complex (elaborate rhythmic clapping patterns) and can have a variety of chants, for example, Lemonade or the Sailor Went to Sea.

Mirroring: Face the child, move your arms, face, or other body parts and ask child to move in the same way. For a very active child you can use slow motion or vary the tempo. Take turns being the leader.

Peek-a-Boo: Hold child's hands (or feet) up together in front of your face. Peek around or separate the hands (or feet) to "find" the child.

Pop Cheeks: Inflate your cheeks with air and help child to pop them with his hands or feet. Child inflates cheeks and you pop them in turn.

This Little Pig: Wiggle each toe as you chant, "This little pig went to market/This little pig stayed home/This little pig had roast beef/This little pig had none/This little pig had none/This little pig cried "Wee, wee, wee," all the way home." Change details to fit the particular child. As you say "all the way home," walk your fingers up the child's arm in a playful way.

Free-Throw: Divide into two teams. Using cotton balls, marshmallows or newspaper balls, each team throws the balls at the other trying to get rid of all balls, on their side. Players may set up a "shield" with pillow and throw from behind the shield.

Nurture

Purpose: To reinforce the message that the child is worthy of care and that adults will provide care without the child having to ask.

Caring for Hurts: Check hands, feet, face, and so forth, for scratches, bruises hurts, or "boo-boos." Put lotion on or around the hurt, touch with cotton ball, or blow a kiss. Check for healing in the next session.

Cotton Ball Touch: Have child close eyes. Touch gently with cotton ball. Have child open eyes and indicate where she was touched. Child can do this to you also.

Decorate Child: Make rings, necklaces, bracelets with play-doh, crazy foam, crepe paper streamers, or aluminum foil.

Face Painting: Paint flowers and hearts on cheeks or make the child up like a princess. Mustaches and beards are interesting for boys and their fathers. A variation on this is to use a soft dry brush and pretend to paint the child's face, describing her wonderful cheeks, her lovely eyebrows. And so forth as you gently brush each part.

Feeding: During snack time put child on your lap or face seating the child. Feed the child, listening for crunches, noticing if child likes the snack and when child is ready for more. Encourage eye contact.

Lotion or Powder Prints: Apply lotion or powder to the child's hand or foot and make a print on paper, the floor mat, a pillow, your dark clothing, or on a mirror. If you make a lotion print on dark construction paper, you can shake powder on it and then blow or shake it off to enhance the picture (take care to keep the powder away from the child's face). Hang up the prints with the child's name and date. You can repeat this every 2 to 3 months to see how much he/she has grown.

Lotioning/Powdering: Lotion or powder child's arms/hands, legs/feet. You can sing a personalized song as you do this, "Oh lotion, oh lotion on Sarah's feet/It feels so good, it smells so sweet. Oh lotion, oh lotion on Sarah's hands/It feels so good, it smells so grand."

Lullaby: Cradle the child in your arms in such a way that eye contact can be maintained. Sing your favorite lullaby or any quiet, soothing song. Add details about the particular child to the traditional words.

Manicure: Soak the child's feet or hands in warm water. Using lotion, massage the feet or hands. Paint the child's toes or fingernails using a variety of colors or letting the child choose the color she wants. Make sure that the child is comfortable having the nail polish remain on her toes or fingernails. If not, take it off.

Paint Prints: Rub paint on child's hand or foot, using one color or creating a pattern with several colors. Press the painted hand or foot onto paper to make a print. After prints are made with paint, gently wash, dry and powder the hand or foot.

Twinkle Song: Adapt the words of "Twinkle, twinkle, little star," to the special characteristics of the child. "What a wonderful boy you are/Dark brown hair, and soft, soft cheeks/Bright brown eyes from which you peek/Twinkle, twinkle little star/What a special boy you are." Hold the child in your arms and touch the parts you refer to as you sing.

Blanket Swing: Spread a blanket on the floor and have the child lie down in the middle. The adults gather up the corners and gently swing the child while singing a song. At the end bring him down for a "soft landing." Position yourself so you can see the child's face. If the child is fearful of being lifted off the floor, rock him gently back and forth while he remains in contact with the floor.

Shoe and Sock Race: Adults race to put kisses on feet and then put child's socks and shoes back on before the kiss flies away. Do this in the morning before school and before the child goes to bed at night.

Challenge

Purpose: To help the child feel more competent and confident by encouraging the child to take a slight risk and to accomplish an activity with adult help.

Balancing Activities: Child lies on back on the floor with feet up in air. Place one pillow on child's feet and help child balance it. Add additional pillows one at a time as long as the child is successful. Balance books, pillows or hats on head and walk across room.

Balloon Tennis: Keep balloon in air using specific body parts; head, hands, no hands, shoulders and so forth. If you choose feet, everyone lies on the floor and keeps the balloon in the air by kicking it gently.

Bubble Tennis: Blow bubble high in the air between you and the child. Choose a bubble and blow it to child. Child blows it back. Continue until it pops.

Balance on Pillows, Jump Off: Help child balance on pillows, starting with one and increasing as long as the child can easily manage. Once the child is balanced, tell him to “jump into my arms (or down to the floor) when I give the signal.”

Newspaper Punch, Basket Toss: Stretch a single sheet of newspaper tautly in front of child. Have child punch through the sheet when given a signal. You must hold the newspaper so firmly that it makes a satisfying pop when the child punches it. To extend the activity, you can add a second or third sheet of paper, have child use the other hand, and vary the signals. For the basket toss crush the torn newspaper into balls. Have child toss a ball into the basket you make with your arms.

Pick up Something with Toes: Have child pick up a cotton ball with his toes (shoes and socks off). You can make this more challenging by having the child hop around the room with the cotton ball between his toes.

Straight Face Challenge: Child has to keep a straight face while you try to make him laugh either by gently touching him (avoid sensitive spots or prolonged tickling) or by making funny faces.

Thumb, Arm or Leg Wrestling: Adult guides activity, giving starting signals and insuring safety.

Tunnels: Child crawls through a tunnel made of pillows or of kneeling adults to meet you or his parent at the end.

Theraplay Activities for Older Children

Nurture

Lotioning/Powdering: Lotion or powder child’s arms/hands and legs/feet.

Manicure: Soak the child’s feet or hands in warm water. Using lotion, massage the feet or hands. Paint the child’s toes or fingernails using a variety of colors or letting the child choose the color he/she wants.

Face Painting: Paint flowers and hearts on cheeks or make them up like a princess, animal, rock star, comic book hero, etc. Mustaches and beards are interesting for boys and their fathers.

Feeding: Have an enjoyable snack and feed your child. With older children you might want to toss the food into his/her mouth.

Structure:

Three Legged Walk: Stand beside the child. Tie your two adjacent legs together with a scarf or ribbon. With arms around each other’s waist walk across the room. You should be responsible for coordinating the movement. For example, you may say “inside outside” to indicate which foot to use. You can add obstacles (pillows, chairs) to make this more challenging.

Stack of Hands: Put your hand palm down in front of child, guide child to put his hand on top. Alternate hands to make a stack. Take turns moving the hand on the bottom to the top. You can also move to the bottom. This can be made more complicated by going fast or in slow motion. Lotioning hands first makes for a slippery stack and adds an element of nurture.

Zoom-Erk: Sitting in a circle, the word “zoom” is passed around the circle quickly. When one person stops the action by saying “erk” the “zoom” reverses and is sent back the way it came!

Challenge:

11 fingers (looks like rock-paper-scissors)

Three to five players stand in a circle and make a fist with one hand. Shake the fist 3 times, counting 1-2-3. On the fourth shake each player displays 0-5 fingers. Keep doing until the group displays 11 fingers.

Thumb, Arm or Leg Wrestling: Adult guides activity, giving starting signals and insuring safety.

Seed Spitting Contest: Feed the child chunks of watermelon or orange or tangerine with seeds. You should eat some too. Both save your seeds. Have the child spit his/her seed as far as possible. Try to spit your seed as close to it as possible.

Ball and 2 Ropes: Two members hold two ropes tautly between them and try to roll a large, light ball back and forth on the ropes.

Q-Tips and straws: Use the long straws to blow a Q-tip against the wall or into a corner or designated spot. Protect everyone’s eye!!!

Engagement:

Hand Clapping Games: Older children enjoy these games very much. They can be as simple as (Patty Cake) or complex (elaborate rhythmic clapping patterns) and have a variety of chants, for example, Miss Mary Mack or the Sailor Went to Sea.

Special Handshake: Make up a special handshake together, taking turns adding new gestures, for example, high five, clap hands, wiggle fingers and so on. This can be cumulative over time.

Progressive Pass Around: Sitting in a circle, one person passes a gentle touch to the next person (such as nose beep, or pat on the back). The second person passes that touch to the third person plus one of her own. Each person adds a new touch. Everyone helps each other recall the sequence of touches.

Big Bag of Balloons: Fill up a large plastic garbage bag with inflated balloons and tie it off. This becomes a giant balloon to bat back and forth.