

Relationship based play Early Years Team



Early Years Team

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What is relationship based play (RBP)?

Children who have had early experience of poor parenting, or have had to cope with any trauma, separation and/or loss of carers, often find it difficult to feel comfortable in a parent/child, or indeed any adult/child relationship, for example, the educator/child relationship, and may be described as children who have attachment difficulties or show traits of having an insecure attachment. These difficulties are known to have a profound effect on the rest of their development including their wellbeing and success within education.

In the early years for these children, basic skills are not easily learnt within these relationships, most notably the ability to regulate emotions and the ability to understand and think about their own and other people's behaviour. These skills are important if children are going to continue to engage in successful relationships including friendships, as well as laying the foundations for their future emotional and cognitive development.

As the children move forward into education, it can be seen that if they struggle with relationships they may not be able to successfully engage in the full range of opportunities that their setting has to offer as well as it impacting upon their wellbeing, social and emotional skills and their academic progress and attainment.

An important task for parents, carers and educators alike is therefore to help children develop trust and to feel comfortable within the relationship. One way in which educators such as staff in early years/pre-school settings and schools can do this is via relationship based play (RBP).

What is relationship-based play?

Relationship based play is a play based intervention that (based on the principles of Theraplay*), is modelled on healthy parent-infant relationships. Taking place on a 1:1 or group basis, the focus of the play is the relationship between the child and adult, or the child, adult and peers. It is playful, interactive and empathic. In this type of play, the main task is enjoying being together. This is different to more task focused play when, for example, you help the child to complete a puzzle or to learn colours. Relationship based play makes minimal use of toys but instead focusses upon the relationship between participants.

Goals of relationship based play

This play dramatises for the child that they are special, loveable and competent, that others can be responsive and that the child can count on others. By recreating the early attachment process, the child experiences adults within their setting as safe and reliable. This allows the child to:

- Feel safe, calm and comforted
- Re-establish trust for those around them – enabling them to have more secure and successful relationships with educators and peers alike
- Learn that it is good to be a child and safe to play and take part in the opportunities given to them within the educational setting
- Learn the pleasure of joyful engagement with an adult and peers in school
- Enhance self-esteem
- Feel more confident and competent
- Develop skills in all areas of development

How can relationship based play be used to support young people in the education setting?

Relationship based play can support children and young people with a wide range of attachment, emotional and social difficulties.

Need to be in control

Many children insist on doing things their own way and on their own terms. They won't let the educator take charge, enforce rules, and provide limits or structure.

Relationship based play helps the child through playing with structure and it provides the child with playful experiences of the carer being in charge.

Difficulty engaging with adults

Some children, especially those who tend towards avoidant attachment behaviours avoid eye contact, physical contact and can demonstrate superficial friendliness. They may hide their feelings, sometimes mimicking others rather than being themselves. They often avoid enjoyment and reciprocal fun.

Play can be used to help the child feel special and to feel that they belong. It can help them to experience engagement however briefly – this sense of connection can be built upon over time.

Difficulty accepting care

Avoidant children are good at taking care of themselves. They may prefer to care for others rather than to be cared for. They will struggle to be soothed, comforted or nurtured. They may allow comfort from others but only on their own terms.

Relationship based play provides opportunities to nurture the child in a way that is appropriate and safe within the education setting. Nurturing activities can be built in to alternate with more active, stimulating play. Activities such as hand printing can provide opportunities for nurturing as hands are washed and dried. Adults can be responsive within the play – noticing facial and body cues, acknowledging feelings and mirroring the child's reaction with attuned responses e.g. if the child is sad, talking to them quietly and sympathetically, whereas if the child is angry talking to them with more intensity and vigour.

Negative feelings of self-worth and incompetence

A lack of experience of loving and attentive parenting can leave a child feeling just not good enough. This might be displayed through a feeling of deserving what has happened to them and through a rejection of positive praise, and other forms of positive attention like rewards.

When using relationship based play it is important to understand the child's emotional age, as maintaining self-control and reciprocal play may be difficult, but with the range of games available this is easily supported. Play is warm, caring and attentive including nurturing and caring behaviours. Challenging activities are also designed to be successful.

Problems with regulation and expression of emotion

If the child has not been helped to manage their emotions as an infant, they may be left with difficulties in coping with even mildly intense feelings. Feelings can emerge in out of control behaviour. Alternatively children may cope by withdrawing from their feelings, locking them away.

Relationship based play provides opportunities to comment on feelings and to nurture, acknowledge and mirror the child's feelings back to them. In that way, the child can be helped to find their feelings acceptable. Games involving facial expressions and identifying feelings are very effective.

Further difficulties are shown in the table below.

Type of problem	Typical observable behaviour	How does RBP help?
Avoidant	<p>Lacks eye contact</p> <p>Isolates self</p> <p>May not initiate interactions</p> <p>Unresponsive to others</p>	<p>Amongst other ways RBP;</p> <p>Provides structure in a way that the child can feel safe to accept it.</p> <p>Allows the child to take the role of child and relinquish control.</p>
<p>Disruptive</p> <p>Oppositional</p> <p>Defiant</p> <p>Manipulative</p>	<p>Refuses to accept responsibility for actions</p> <p>Always changes subject</p> <p>Attempts to control</p> <p>Disruptive</p>	<p>Creates atmosphere of safety and nurturing without overwhelming.</p> <p>Builds trust and caring for self and others.</p>
<p>Withdrawn</p> <p>Fearful</p> <p>Autism/PDD</p> <p>Asperger's</p>	<p>Difficulty with touch or physical closeness</p> <p>Lacks eye contact</p> <p>May look sad</p> <p>Prefers to play alone</p> <p>Difficulty in tolerating change: attempts to control; rigid</p>	<p>Encourages acceptable alternatives in aggression</p> <p>Encourages appropriate assertiveness</p> <p>Promotes effective social interaction including eye contact.</p> <p>Keeps the child engaged with others</p>
<p>Needy</p> <p>Anxious</p> <p>'Immature'</p>	<p>Never 'gets enough'</p> <p>Constantly demands attention</p> <p>Seeks nurturing in inappropriate ways</p> <p>Cannot share or take turns</p>	<p>Provides incentives for staying engaged</p>
<p>Impulsive</p> <p>Distractible</p> <p>Hyperactive</p> <p>Sensory Issues</p>	<p>Lacks impulsive control</p> <p>Easily overstimulated or revved up</p> <p>Shortened attention span</p> <p>High activity level</p>	

Regulation Issues	May avoid eye contact	
Aggressive	Physically or verbally attacks others	
Has trauma history	May pick fights	
'Little Adult'	Attempts to control environment Refuses nurturing Assumes adult role by role by directing others	
Dependant fearful	Clingy Excessive crying Difficulty separating Difficulty working independently	

How does relationship based play work?

Relationship based play is based upon and uses the principles of Theraplay which is a special type of play based activity that can improve a child's behaviour in unique ways. Using the benefits of joyful play, sensitive support and caregiving, it focuses on strengthening relationships with the child, enhancing the child's sense of connection and mutual understanding with adults and/or peers so that he/she may no longer need to resort to challenging or difficult behaviours. As one of the most important people in a child's school life, key adults, (often teaching assistants) are actively encouraged to be involved in sessions.

Activities from the four dimensions help the child to engage in joyful fun based activities that help them to practise positive and appropriate engagement with adults or peers, that help them to safely practise allowing an adult to be "in charge" or to place structure on activities in school, and to allow an adult to show care and support for them. Activities can also support children to enable adults to support them to regulate their emotions, so eventually they will learn to successfully regulate them more independently.

Activities used in relationship based play are delivered in a non-competitive and supportive way so that the child succeeds as far as possible in every activity. This will help to challenge the child's self-image or "internal working model" helping them to feel effective, successful and to gain in self-esteem.

Relationship based play is also extremely effective for all ages as learning occurs on a non-verbal level. Instead of talking about positive social behaviour, these activities are about experiencing positive social behaviour. This encourages the child to feel more positively about him/herself and others – enabling the child to give and receive more readily. It allows the child to 'be themselves', giving the message of caring, acceptance and encouragement. Gradually, these positive messages will become a part of the child's internal sense of him or herself.

When this happens, the child will then show more self-control and increased desire to relate appropriately on their own.

See below for how the play supports children of differing attachment styles.

How do the games help a child with ambivalent attachment behaviours?	
<p>Appears attention needing.</p> <p>Finds it difficult to settle by themselves or with groups of children.</p> <p>Hyper-vigilant.</p> <p>Finds it difficult to follow rules.</p> <p>Poor understanding of cause and effect.</p> <p>Can escalate confrontation in order to hold the attention of others.</p> <p>Over-sensitive to signs of rejection.</p>	<p>Games are predictable and structured this supporting fear of the unknown and promote sequencing.</p> <p>Games encourage turn-taking and sharing.</p> <p>Check-in activities acknowledge the child.</p> <p>Allows time for nurturing.</p> <p>Gives the child a different experience when being non-compliant.</p>

How do the games help a child with avoidant attachment behaviours?	
<p>Withdrawn and quiet.</p> <p>Generally appear more self-reliant and independent than expected for their age.</p> <p>May try to take care of the teacher.</p> <p>Avoids intimacy.</p> <p>Resists help from the teacher.</p> <p>Fear of failure.</p> <p>Acts with indifference to new situations.</p> <p>Limited use of language.</p>	<p>Gives positive experience of the adult taking control and caring for the child.</p> <p>Encourages appropriate physical and emotional engagement.</p> <p>Encourages eye-contact.</p> <p>Games are not-competitive therefore there is no failure.</p> <p>No need for lots of language.</p> <p>Allows a child time to have fun and be "child-like".</p>

How do the games help a child with disorganised attachment behaviours?	
<p>Tendency to be highly controlling or peers and adults.</p> <p>Tendency towards anger and aggression.</p> <p>Child has poor stress tolerance.</p> <p>Anxiety escalates when experiencing unpredictability, uncertainty or the unexpected.</p>	<p>Gives positive experience of the adult taking control and caring for the child.</p> <p>Encourages appropriate physical and emotional engagement via the rules of session.</p> <p>Supports a child's ability to begin to allow an adult to co-regulate their emotions.</p> <p>Games are not-competitive giving child experience of taking part on equal terms.</p> <p>Session structure is predictable.</p> <p>Allows a child time to have fun and be "child-like".</p>

How is relationship based play delivered?

The adult leading relationship based play will play with a child/children in ways that allow them and the child to enjoy each other's company, much as a parent and infant does. Games will be chosen from the four main groups or dimensions of games as described below. Please also see the back of this booklet for a list of games matching each of the dimensions described below.

This will involve:

- Engaging the child in structured and playful ways
- Challenging the child to keep their interest
- Nurturing the child to help them feel cared for and special

Via the structure of the session and the choice of games made the adult will:

1. Structure the play - (Structure games)

The unwritten rule of relationship based play is that the adult delivering the session is always "in charge" (* see below). The adult sets limits, defines boundaries, keeps the child safe and helps to complete sequences of activities. The child can let go of the responsibility for maintaining and controlling interactions.

The adult will take charge to make the play safe and fun and to initiate interactions, for example, he or she will directive in play e.g. "We are going to ...", rather than "Shall we ...?", and will direct the play in response to the child's reactions. For example, he/she might notice the child getting too excited and stimulated, so will direct the play to more soothing and comforting activities. If the child becomes restless and bored, he/she will direct the play to more challenging and exciting activities.

2. Engage the child - (Engagement games)

This helps 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.

The adult will aim to be exciting, surprising, stimulating. This draws the child into playing and to become engaged in the activities.

3. Nurture the child - (Nurture games)

The adult will support the child to experience appropriate warmth and tenderness and will soothe, calm and comfort the child as appropriate. This reinforces the message that the child is worthy of care and that adults will provide care without the child having to ask.

4. Challenge the child - (Challenge games)

The adult will encourage the child to move ahead, to strive and to experience a sense of mastery. This helps the child to feel more competent and confident by encouraging the child to accomplish an activity with adult help.

All of the dimensions are included as appropriate for each particular child following the typical session structure as follows:

Entrance	The adult makes the entrance to the session as welcoming and engaging as possible right from the outset. Often the session will begin outside the room where the session takes place. The child/ren will take off their shoes and enter the room in a way structured by the adult – e.g. enter the room pretending to be mice/fish/frogs, enter the room carrying a balloon between you without using your hands.
Greeting	<p>The adult will greet the child/ren in a cheerful, friendly and engaging way. Often the adult and children may choose to use a special handshake or to sing a special hello song at this point. This will encourage the child to be engaged and feel welcomed and valued in the session. They may also choose to select a special group name.</p> <p>This section of the play may contain a reminder of the session rules which are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We are kind/We have no hurts • We stick together • We have fun <p>* see below for more details re these rules.</p>
Check-ins	The adult will use check-ins to increase the child's sense of belonging to the session and sense of being special. For check-in ideas, see later in this pack.
Activity	<p>The adult will then choose a range of games to play in the session. The games chosen will depend upon the desired outcomes for the child/ren involved as they can be chosen from four main groups or dimensions - Engagement, Structure, Nurture and Challenge, all of which support differing outcomes. See later in the pack for an explanation of the four dimensions and examples of games in each group.</p> <p>In general, the adult may structure games to begin in a calm nurturing way, then will increase the excitement and challenge before returning to a more calming nurturing ending to the session. This will support the child to allow an adult to support them to co-regulate and then learn to regulate their own emotions more effectively independently.</p> <p>The number of games can be flexible to suit the length of the session required to meet the child's stage of development and needs.</p>

<p>Snack and drink</p>	<p>Sessions will often include the provision of a snack and/or a drink at the end. This continues the nurturing element of the session as being provided with a snack and drink is a pleasurable nurturing thing to receive. Often drinks will be in cartons with a straw as sucking liquids through straws is recognised to support children to feel calmer and more regulated. Snacks may also be crunchy or chewy as crunching and chewing are also regulatory activities for children.</p> <p>Workers from the virtual school will always gain permission to include snacks and drinks in sessions due to allergy issues/school policies towards food and drink.</p>
<p>Song/close</p>	<p>The session is closed in a similar way to the way it is opened – in a warm engaging way- thanking the children for playing and ensuring they know that their contribution is valued. The hello song may become the goodbye song or the children may repeat their special handshake.</p>
<p>Exit</p>	<p>Children exit the session in a similar way to the way they entered it – in a structured activity – e.g. pretending to be an animal of some kind or other similar challenge.</p>

Further explanation of the rules of the session*

The adult is in charge (unspoken rule not shared with the children)

- Provides structure
- Allows the child to take the role of child
- Nurtures
- Maintains safety

‘No hurts/kind hands’

- Creates atmosphere of safety and nurturing
- Builds trust and caring for self and others
- Encourages the children to recognise use acceptable alternatives to aggression
- Encourages assertiveness

‘We stick together’

- Provides structure
- Promotes social interaction and teamwork

- Keeps the child engaged with others

'Have fun' rule

- Provides incentive for staying engaged
- Provides pleasure and enjoyment in interacting with others
- Helps the child rise to challenge
- Provides playfulness
- Encourages expression of feelings

How do you make play age-appropriate?

When choosing play activities, it is important to consider the emotional age of the child/young person, rather than their chronological age. Many children who have had experiences of trauma and loss are emotionally very young. Their early experience has not stimulated emotional growth. Even when a child behaves in a very mature way, they may still have missed out on early play experiences and may benefit and enjoy the opportunity to play with you in this young way.

It is important to play and care for the child in line with their emotional needs, gradually helping them to grow and develop. Although we want them to fit in, to relate to the children at school and to be appropriately independent in the neighbourhood, they will only achieve this gradually. Imagine that you are taking the child on a journey from where they are now (a) to where you would like them to be (b). They cannot jump from (a) to (b) independently but have to be led there step-by-step.

Look for clues to the child's emotional age. What age children do they get on with best? What TV programmes do they like? Think especially hard about the child who is pseudo-mature (mature beyond their age). They may hide the child within to keep you at a distance.

Many of the games seem emotionally young for the young people we teach, but we will often find that they love joining in with the games that are simple but bring them success and enjoyment without any difficulty.

What if a child resists?

It is quite likely that a child will initially resist playing, or may resist some of the activities. They may fear getting close and being dependent upon an adult leading the play. They thus resist intimacy, often trying to stay in charge to keep you at a distance. Stay with

it. Find ways to surprise the child into being engaged with you. Help the child learn to trust and follow your lead. The stronger the resistance to this type of play, the more likely it is that the child needs this relationship with you. Build in brief playful interactions until the child can manage longer play sessions. Help the child to find enjoyment in the interaction.

In this way the child will learn:

- To enjoy experiences missed in early childhood
- To enjoy being sensitively responded to
- To feel safe with healthy touch and play
- To be in control of their emotions and to be able to manage these emotions when feeling excited or stressed
- A greater awareness of their own body and senses
- To enjoy a relationship/relationships with others
- To be joyfully engaged with another person

Planning the sessions

1:1 or in a group?

Sessions of relationship based play can be delivered in a variety of ways including 1:1 and group sessions. This depends upon the needs of the child that is being supported and the intended outcomes for the sessions.

1:1 might be considered if outcomes are for the child to become more securely attached to a key adult, in which case the key adult would be included in the session, or the games and activities are to be carefully and specifically tailored to meet a child's emotional needs.

Group relationship based play could be used to develop peer relationships and also work more generally to support the children's emotional and social needs.

Whether 1:1 or in a group the session would take a similar structure as the table shown previously. Examples of planning sheets that can be used follow later in this pack.

It is also important to consider:

Parent/carer permissions - it is the responsibility of the school to obtain permission for the work to take place from parents and carers but the virtual school will provide

appropriate letters for this purpose if required. See the model letters for permissions later in this pack.

Importance of appropriate touch – touch is an integral and very important part of relationship based play. When planning sessions, however, it is still important to honour the policy of particular schools for using appropriate touch with children.

The use of lotion – some of the activities in relationship based play include the use of hand lotion. Care is taken for lotion to be hypoallergenic where possible, but schools may prefer to ask parental permission for the use of lotion within sessions. Again see the model letters within this pack.

Inclusion of snacks and drinks in the sessions – as previously described snacks and drinks are often an important part of a session. The inclusion of snacks and drinks will also be an area where workers will honour the policy of the school on food and drinks and care will be taken to gain permissions when there may be a risk of allergy.

Resources/toolkit needed

- Key resources include:
- Hand/body lotion
- Talcum powder
- Baby wipes/paper towels/muslin cloth for wiping hands
- Black card
- Cotton wool balls
- Pompoms
- Straws
- Newspaper
- Masking tape
- Bean bags
- Tin foil
- Shower puffs – for balls
- Cushions/carpet squares

- Coloured sticker shapes
- Coloured feathers
- Bubble mixture – normal and unpopppable bubbles
- Soft toys
- Snacks – e.g. bread sticks, pure fruit snacks
- Drinks – juice boxes/pouches/water in small bottles

Observing and tracking progress and developments

Relationship based play supports both social and emotional aspects of a child's development, and progress in these areas is often hard to demonstrate in a clear measurable way. There are however ways to identify a child's emotional and social needs and to show the progress that they are making – these include use of:

- Observing Children with Attachment Difficulties in Preschool Settings: A Tool for Identifying and Supporting Emotional and Social Difficulties in Preschool Settings (*Kim Golding, Jane Fain, Ann Frost, Eleanor Durrant, Sian Templeton October 2012*)
- Observing Children with Attachment Difficulties in School: A Tool for Identifying and Supporting Emotional and Social Difficulties in Children Aged 5-11 (*Helen Worrall (Author), Sian Templeton (Author), Netty Roberts (Author), Ann Frost (Author), Kim Golding (Author), Eleanor Durrant (Author), Jane Fain (Author), Cathy Mills (Author) - available from the virtual school or book shops/Amazon. November 2012*)

Or

- Observing Adolescents with Attachment Difficulties in Educational Settings: A Tool for Identifying and Supporting Emotional and Social Difficulties in Young People Aged 11-16 (*Kim S Golding (Author), Mary T Turner (Author), Helen Worrall (Author), Jennifer Roberts (Author), Ann E Cadman (Author)*) also from the virtual school or book shops/Amazon. October 2015)
- Boxhall profile
- Other checklists as included in this pack

Information and guidance for this booklet comes from a range of sources:

The Theraplay Institute

Dr Kim Golding formerly of the ISL Health and Wellbeing Team, Worcestershire

Sources created by members of the Virtual School for Looked After and Adopted Children, Worcestershire