

# Relationship Based Play

## Early Years Team

### **What is Relationship Based Play?**

Relationship Based Play is a play-based intervention that is modelled on healthy adult-child relationships. The focus of the play is the relationship between the child and adult. 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 focuses upon the relationship between participants

### **Why should I use Relationship Based Play?**

Relationship Based Play aims to develop the child's understanding that they are special, loveable and competent, 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 does Relationship Based Play work?**

Relationship Based Play activities help the child to engage in joyful play-based activities that help them to practise positive and appropriate engagement with an adult. This helps them to safely practise allowing an adult to be "in charge" or to place structure on activities.

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

## **How is Relationship Based Play delivered?**

The adult leading Relationship Based Play will play with a child in ways that allow them and the child to enjoy each other's company, much as a parent and infant does.

One example is by choosing games from four main groups or dimensions:

**Engagement Games** – These games are very much about shared joy and pleasure and feeling connected. Beneficial when children may be withdrawn, avoidant of contact, or are highly structured.

**Structure Games** - This allows children who try to maintain control to experience playful and safe ways to experience an adult being in control.

**Nurture Games** – Many of children's early experiences are about nurture. The development of nurture underpins the child's understanding of their internal regulation. These games give children playful ways to experience positive nurture.

**Challenge Games** – The challenge games help the child to feel more confident in taking the next steps in their development. When children have high levels of anxiety or are withdrawn, introducing safe, low-level risks can extend their tolerance, help them to manage tension, whilst giving an opportunity to succeed and share joy.

Example session structure:

<b>Entrance</b>	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 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.
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<b>Greeting</b>	<p>The adult will greet the child in a cheerful, friendly and engaging way e.g. the adult 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"> <li>• We are kind/no hurts</li> <li>• We stick together</li> <li>• We have fun</li> </ul>
<b>Check-ins</b>	<p>The adult will use check-ins to increase the child's sense of belonging to the session and sense of being special.</p>
<b>Activity</b>	<p>The adult will then choose a <a href="#">range of games</a> to play in the session. The games chosen will depend upon the desired outcomes for the child involved as they can be chosen from four main groups or dimensions - Engagement, Structure, Nurture and Challenge, all of which support differing outcomes.</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 coregulate, 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>
<b>Snack and drink</b>	<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. Offer drinks 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>
<b>Song/close</b>	<p>The session is closed in a similar way to the way it is opened – in a warm engaging way- thanking the child for playing and ensuring they know that their contribution is valued. The hello song may become the goodbye song, or the child may repeat their special handshake.</p>

<b>Exit</b>	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.
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### **What if a child resists?**

It is quite likely that a child will initially resist playing, or may resist some of the activities. 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.

### **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 games**

#### **Engagement games**

- Copy funny faces: Sit facing your child, pull a funny face, can your child copy it?
- Check ups: check your child brought their big smile to play, check they brought their ears, did they bring wiggly toes or still toes? Go through lots of body parts. Did they bring strong arm muscles, can they show you? Did they bring long legs? etc.
- Foil prints: use tin foil to make impressions of different body parts (make a robot glove with foil using your child's hand. Can you make them a robot leg by wrapping foil around their leg? Etc.
- Fortune telling: Take your child's hand in yours and pretend in a playful way to tell their fortune. Say lots of positive and playful things.

- Play hand clapping games such as Patty Cake and A Sailor Went to Sea. Google different hand clapping patterns for older children. There are some great challenges to learn!
- Sticker match: use two sets of stickers, stick one on your child's nose (if they are comfortable with that). Ask them to make you match. Repeat until you both have lots of stickers matching. Check out how silly you look in a mirror together.

### **Structure games**

- Cotton ball blow: Adult and child hold one end of a scarf or long cloth between them and blow a cotton ball back and forth. The adult says 'ready, steady, go'. You can add more cotton balls or increase the length of the scarf for older children.
- Drawing around hands, feet or bodies: Make a picture of your child's hand or foot by drawing around it. Can you draw around the whole body (if it feels safe to do this)? Talk about what you're doing whilst drawing. Can you colour it in together?
- Funny ways to cross the room: You and your child stand at one end of a room and say you are both going to cross the room in a certain way (hopping, tip toeing, backwards, crawling, wheelbarrow or like lots of different animals).
- La La magnets: You and your child sit opposite each other with your hands together in the middle. Swing them from side-to-side singing 'la la la' then adult says a body part and you match them together (for example, thumbs, put your thumbs together like magnets, toes, put your toes together like magnets).
- Pop the bubble: Blow a bubble and catch it on a wand. Playfully tell your child to pop the bubble with a particular body part, for example, little finger or toes. Then you can do this blowing lots of bubbles.
- Simon says: Take it turns to be the leader. The leader gives instructions to copy starting with 'Simon says...' Occasionally give the instruction without saying Simon says, your child has to not copy when Simon doesn't say.

### **Nurture games**

- Cotton ball or feather guess: using two similar feeling items (a makeup brush and cotton pad will do for example instead of a cotton ball and feather if you don't have them), ask your child to close their eyes while you touch them somewhere on visible skin. Can they guess which item touched them? This needs to feel safe, playful and fun. It should be a quieter and relaxing activity. Try not to tickle as that can over excite children.
- Pretend face / body paint: using soft brushes or cotton wool again, pretend to paint your child's face / hand / foot. Ask them what they would like to be painted as. Talk about the pretend colours you are using. Again, this should feel relaxing and soothing.
- Lotion: gently apply lotion and give a gentle hand massage. You could do with feet also.

- Hand / footprints: Using child's paint, make handprint pictures, fingerprints pictures or even footprint pictures. Try to increase the amount of touch as this is part of nurture (if your child will accept / enjoy it as part of the activity).
- Blanket swing: this requires two adults. Ask your child to lie on their backs in the middle of the blanket. Slowly pick them up by each adult lifting two corners of the blanket. Gently swing them singing a song such as 'Twinkle Twinkle'. Try to keep some eye contact. Again, this should be calm and slow rather than an activity to excite.
- Feeding: Sit closely with your child sharing a snack or drink. You could feed each other or feed your child. Listen for crunches or other eating noises. You could have a few different snacks, ask your child to close their eyes and see if they can guess which one they have been given (apple, banana, crisps etc). Listen to some calm music together.

### Challenge games

- Balancing activities: Have your child lie on their back with their feet together in the air, can they balance a cushion on their feet? How many can they balance? Can they kick them off when you say 'Ready, steady go'? How far can they kick them? You can do lots of balancing activities such as balancing hats and seeing how far the child can walk before they fall off.
- Balloon tennis: how many balloon passes can you do together before the balloon falls? Can you beat your own score?
- Crawling race: make a stack of cushions in the middle of the floor, have a crawling race, can you catch your child's foot before they catch yours? Give a 'Ready, steady, go' signal.
- Pick up cotton balls: Start with two cotton balls or similar sized objects. Can your child pick them up with their feet? How many can they pick up at once? With younger children, ask them to pick them up and drop them into your hands one at a time.
- Shoe and sock race: Race with your child to see who can put on / take off their socks and shoes first. Keep it playful rather than competitive.
- Straight face challenge: Ask your child to try to keep their face straight while you try to make them laugh. How long can they do it for?

