



# Therapeutic Parenting Using Play

Carol Duffy, Child and Adolescent psychotherapist and supervisor, trainer and author  
Core Trainer, Academic Registrar CTC  
Member of EAIP Training Standards Committee  
M.E.A.I.P., M.I.A.P.T.P., M.I.A.H.I.P.



Copyright Carol Duffy - Do not share, copy or modify without authors written permission. ©



# Who am I!?



Residential care



PLAY Therapy



Housed in Tusla and working with PPFs, Alternative care and Child Protection teams.



Team member – social care leaders, project workers and family support workers



Academic tutor



Delivering training on the use of PLAY

Copyright Carol Duffy - Do not share, copy or modify without authors written permission. ©

# Attachment

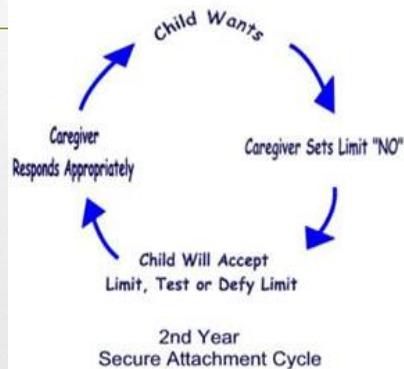
“Given that Human infants are “designed” to maintain contact with attachment figures, there is no greater threat than the disruption to the “parent-child” relationship”



Dozier, M & Bick, J. (2007) *Changing Caregivers: Coping with Early Adversity*, Paediatric Annals, 36:4

Copyright Carol Duffy - Do not share, copy or modify without authors written permission. ©

# Attachment cycle



Copyright Carol Duffy - Do not share, copy or modify without authors written permission. ©

## Relationships and Resilience

---

*“Focusing on resilience-promoting child protective factors, more specifically the quality of children’s relationships in a variety of contexts or improving their “relational health,” may be just as effective at not only preventing trauma but buffering its effects.”*

Hambrick, Seedat, Perry, 2021

## Play, relationships and emotional Regulation

---

- *“In play, children learn how to regulate their fear and anger and thereby how to maintain emotional control in threatening real-life situations.” (Peter Gray)*
- *“Lack of free play may not kill the physical body, as would lack of air, food, or water, but it kills the spirit and stunts mental growth.”(Peter Gray)*
- *“The parent-child connection is the most powerful mental health intervention known to mankind.” (Bessel Van Der Kolk)*
- *“In order to have a healthy society we must raise children who can safely play and learn. There can be no growth without curiosity and no adaptability without play” (Bessel Van Der Kolk)*
- *“We learn best when we are having fun. Play, more than any other activity, fuels healthy development of children — and the continued healthy development of adults” (Bruce Perry)*

# PLAY and attachment

- Factors crucial to bonding and creating attachment include:
  - time together,
  - face-to-face interactions,
  - eye contact,
  - physical proximity,
  - touch,
  - sensory experiences such as smell, sound and taste.
  - Positive physical contact such as hugging/holding and rocking.



Copyright Carol Duffy - Do not share, copy or modify without authors written permission. ©

11/3/2025

## What is Therapeutic about

# PLAY?

- **PLAY** is the means for communication
- Inherent within **PLAY**
  - Play has therapeutic powers
  - They can support healing and recovery and resilience
- Engages right brain activity
- Transcends language, culture age / gender
- **PLAY** allows expression, organises emotions and allows for healthy empowerment over emotions
- **PLAY** engages the parts of the brain that overlap with healing and social relationships

Copyright Carol Duffy - Do not share, copy or modify without authors written permission. ©

11/3/2025

## Play Idea

*You will need colours, empty toilet roll inserts, straw and a balloon*



Copyright Carol Duffy - Do not share, copy or modify without authors written permission. ©

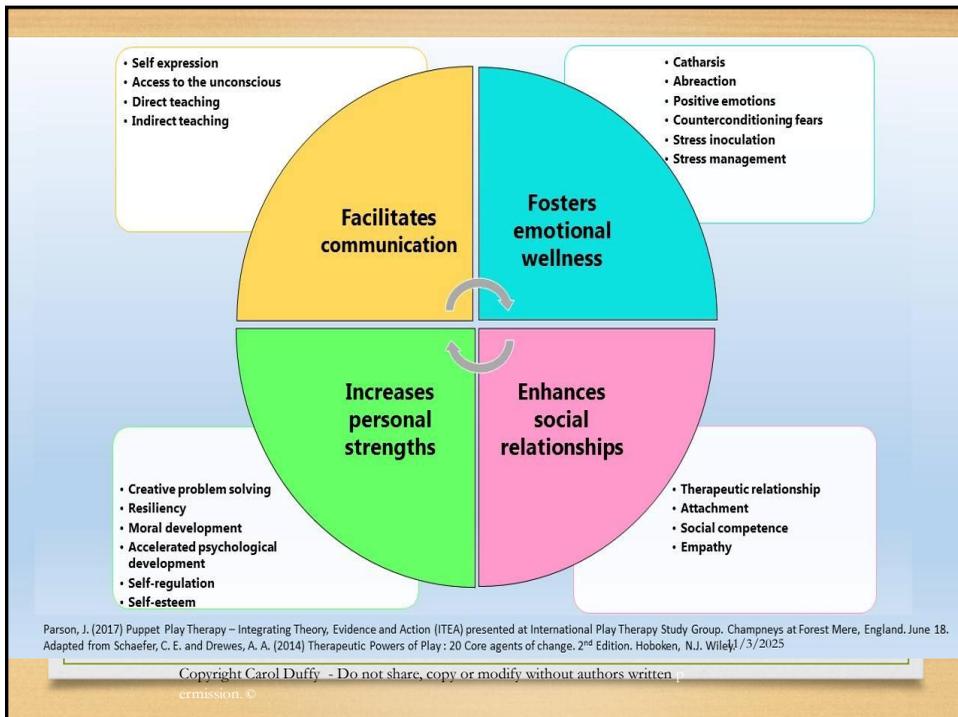
11/3/2025

## CURATIVE FACTORS IN PLAY



Copyright Carol Duffy - Do not share, copy or modify without authors written permission. ©

11/3/2025



## PLAY AND RELATIONSHIPS

- Play promotes good contact with another
- Play facilitates external regulation leading to co-regulation
- These qualities build relationships
- Relationships and the quality of connectedness have been shown to be the most powerful predictors of future outcomes in children. (Hambrick, Brawner & Perry, 2018)

# Why fuse **P**LAY fullness into parenting?

- Helps build relationships
- Neuroception of safety - Regulation
- A brain that feels safe and happy is optimally positioned for engaging and relating
- Emotional fluency and literacy
- Bidirectional quality – it regulates you
- Oxytocin!



Copyright Carol Duffy - Do not share, copy or modify without authors written permission. ©

31/05/2022

# ATTACHMENT AND RELATIONSHIPS

Secure attachment is born of 33% attunement, 33% rupture & 33% repair - Robyn Gobbel LCSW



Copyright Carol Duffy - Do not share, copy or modify without authors written p ermission. ©

11/3/2025

## Play Idea

*You will need a balloon, a toilet roll insert, toilet roll paper sheet, masking tape, scissors*



This Photo, by Unknown Author is licensed under CC-BY-NC  
Copyright Carol Duffy - Do not share, copy or modify without authors written permission. ©

11/3/2025

## Deeper dive into **P**LAY

- **P**LAY and our PLAY system
- **P**LAY and our social engagement system
- **P**LAY and our window of tolerance
- **P**LAY and our coping, sense of agency, empowerment

Copyright Carol Duffy - Do not share, copy or modify without authors written permission. ©

11/3/2025

## What does **P**LAY look like

- **P**LAY versus **P**LAYfulness
- Neuroception of safety
- Voice tone, facial expression, gaze, proximity and touch
- **P**LAY must have choice
- **P**LAY is driven by curiosity and exploration

Copyright Carol Duffy - Do not share, copy or modify without authors written permission. ©

11/3/2025

## What is **P**LAYfulness

- **3 S's: Spontaneity, Silliness, Sense of humour**
- Play **MUST** be enjoyable
- Playfulness is the foundation of play
- Playfulness depends on the environment
- It is a skill that can be honed and developed over time
- **Adult playfulness is critical in forming relationships**

## PLAY Regulates

- **PLAY** regulates and we must be regulated to play!!!
- Focus less on insight and more on engagement and regulation
- Think sensory somatic **PLAY** and play using the body – Activate the senses
- **PLAY** is developmentally matched

Copyright Carol Duffy - Do not share, copy or modify without authors written permission. ©

11/3/2025

## PLAY REGULATES

- What kind of play is therapeutic?
  - Playful
  - Child led
  - Match the appropriate stage
- Sensory tactile play can calm down or wake up our arousal systems so we can engage more meaningfully.
- Reciprocal sensory tactile play has a positive and restorative effect on the brain

Copyright Carol Duffy - Do not share, copy or modify without authors written permission. ©

## SELF REGULATION

---

- Development of SR is dependent on “co-regulation” provided by parents or other caregivers.
- Development of SR can be disrupted by stress and trauma
- SR can be strengthened and taught.
- Play supports this and stretches our window of tolerance

Copyright Carol Duffy - Do not share, copy or modify without authors written permission. ©

## PLAY IDEAS!

---

- Put some time for Play in your day
- Create safety through play
- <https://www.facebook.com/MayoChildandFamilySupportNetworks/videos>

Copyright Carol Duffy - Do not share, copy or modify without authors written permission. ©