

How effective is therapeutic play in supporting the emotional and social development of children from diverse backgrounds, and what are the implications for inclusive practice?

I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated text as my own work. I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used before, and after the use of AI tools which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

Play is one of the most important aspects of children's lives according to Play Wales (2022) Play can be described as a fundamental behaviour where someone can develop skills and regulate emotions whilst exploring the world around them. It is vital throughout life but especially important through childhood. Through play, children have opportunities to learn naturally, experiment with new ideas, solve problems, and build confidence in their own abilities. It also plays a significant role in emotional development, allowing children to express their feelings, regulate emotions, and cope with challenges in a safe and supportive way.

Play Therapy and Therapeutic Play are described as a psychological approach using play a structured way to help people, mainly children to process experiences, express emotions and develop coping skills (Pica 2024). Play is a natural element that is an essential part of development especially throughout childhood where it is used as a way of communication, emotional expression and learning (Davis 2024). Play Therapy and Therapeutic Play are interactions used by professionals and adults to communicate with individuals through play. Children use play as a way of expressing themselves individually and a way to socialise with others. Children can find it difficult to express their thoughts verbally unlike most adults. To a child, play is a way for them to stretch their imagination and feel they are in control of a situation. Children will use play to explore an environment and connect with the world around them (Jennings 2020). Therapeutic Play is a form of a psychotherapeutic approach and for the children a psycho-diagnostic tool. It is different to Play Therapy as it is not structured. The adult will allow the child to play with the toys at their own pace, so they are able to explore their feelings and hopefully in time the child will be able to accept them leading, to them being able to process their individual emotions and use imagination to portray them through play. It is emphasised how symbolic play, including verbal expression in the way that is seen as developmentally appropriate in supporting the child's needs (Baggerly 2010). It is an approach for the children that will address behavioural and emotional difficulties as it is based on their own individual stages of development. Abstract thinking skills are not developed fully for children under the age of 11 so it has a detrimental effect for their complex emotions, meanings understandings and for their understandings to be communicated through language (Smith 1997).

Play is important to children, giving them beneficial life skills that they will carry with them throughout their lives. It will help children develop social skills, language and communication whilst also developing their physical skills. Children will be able to

learn about caring for others and the environment, connecting refining pathways in their brains (Davis 2024). Play can help a child feel happy, safe and loved and this will strengthen their confidence. While in a setting, practitioners need to make sure children have the chance at free play where it is not directed or intended. They will be free to use their imagination to help develop all the skills they require to help them succeed in life. Children are able to make their own choices, discover their own passions in a time that is unique to them. If adults control the play, rules are set and children will not be able to access all the benefits of play (Landreth 2012). Children will not be able to independently be creative and develop any leadership skills. By children having child-led play they are able to push their own boundaries and actively take part in risky play that will build resilience and determination. Play Therapy and Therapeutic Play can be often get mixed up as the same but there are many differences to the two and making sure a child is getting the right support is vital to their well-being and long-term recovery. They are both methods to support and help children emotionally and for their psychological well-being, but they are different with their professional training techniques, structure and therapeutic intent (Dougherty 2007). Play Therapy is a type of therapy that will use play as a way to help children understand and express their experiences and emotions. Should children suffer with anxiety, depression, trauma, attachment issues and behavioural problems then Play Therapy will be provided and will plan sessions that are specific to that child's individual needs and requirements. The Play Therapy approach is always child-led to allow children to be able to explore their thoughts and feelings in their own time (Landreth 2012). Play will help children communicate and the Play Therapist will use talking as a more supportive way to help the child understand and promote positive change and emotional growth. Therapeutic Play differs and the sessions that provide play activities that are not structured like Play Therapy but still support children's social, emotional and physical well-being. It is more suppressive and preventive, it provides help and support for children to learn to deal with everyday life and stresses they face. It will help to build up their resilience and can support them with their social skills. It is also a stepping stone to help children learn to manage difficult situations that can be stressful like, medical procedures, hospitalisation and unfamiliar experiences (Jennings 1994). Therapeutic Play will provide comforting activities where children will play with the aim to improve communication and reduce anxiety, allowing children a feeling of control and sense of normality. Therapeutic Play is a lot less structured and instead of trying to treat and cure long term psychological difficulties, it supports children with normal development. Another difference for Therapeutic Play is that it does not have to be provided by professionals and there is no need for a formal or academic therapeutic qualification. This is effective as it explains who can provide Therapeutic Play, where it can take place, what activities are involved, and how it benefits children. It highlights that Therapeutic Play is accessible and flexible, allowing trusted adults such as parents, teachers, nurses, and carers to support children's emotional wellbeing without requiring specialist therapeutic qualifications. It can be provided by parents, carers,

teachers, nurses and other health care professionals but basic knowledge of child development would be helpful and beneficial to them. Therapeutic Play activities can take place in settings that are informal and familiar to the child such as schools, community hubs or hospitals. Activities tend to consist of creative arts, drawing, pretend play, role play, relaxation, sensory play, storytelling and doll or puppet play and can also be medically related. The activity will be tailored to help the children to express their feelings and allow them to adjust to challenging experiences in a supportive environment where they will feel safe (Davis 2024).

Therapeutic Play can work with all children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. As play is universal and a natural way for children to communicate, it does not have to rely on verbal skills. According to Axline (1969), play is a child's natural medium of self-expression, enabling them to communicate thoughts, feelings, and experiences that they may not yet have the language to express. Children are able to engage in play activities even if they have additional challenges such as social marginalisation, cultural differences, and language barriers, reducing the likelihood of feeling misunderstood or excluded. When children come from diverse backgrounds, they can often feel isolated and misunderstood. Therapeutic Play is a universal approach that can accommodate all children's needs because it is a child-centred method of communication that is both flexible and inclusive. All children can be included in Therapeutic Play as it is largely a non-verbal medium, allowing children with language barriers or different linguistic backgrounds to participate fully.

Children from refugee or migrant families may experience isolation, displacement, loss, and trauma. Research by Gil (2017) suggests that therapeutic play provides a safe and non-threatening way for children to process traumatic experiences through imaginative and symbolic play. Within Therapeutic Play sessions, children have opportunities to explore and express past experiences through symbolic representation, helping them to regain a sense of control and develop healthy coping strategies.

Socioeconomically disadvantaged children may experience instability and limited access to support services, increasing their exposure to stress and anxiety. Research from the Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2021) highlights the importance of supportive relationships and safe environments in reducing the negative effects of chronic stress on children's development. Therapeutic Play provides a regular, nurturing, and safe space where children can express their emotions, feel secure, and develop resilience. Landreth (2012) argues that child-centred play therapy promotes emotional regulation, self-esteem, resilience, and a greater sense of personal control, making it particularly beneficial for children experiencing adversity.

The play can be adapted to the child's interests, backgrounds and developmental level. This allows Therapeutic Play to be both inclusive and flexible, fostering a sense of belonging and helping with resilience. The play activities should have a

variety of openminded materials that are also non-directive. For example, dolls that have different colour skin tones and culturally appropriate toys, so the child feels safe and surrounded by familiar objects. The first step with Therapeutic Play is to build trust between the child and the person delivering the session. There is no set time for this to happen, it is down to the child and when they feel safe, they will engage in the play. Therapeutic Play supports neurodivergent children by sensory based play, enhancing communication skills and self-regulation, being mindful of their developmental needs. Bowlby (1982) attachment theory shows how children need secure emotional bonds with adults to feel they can trust them enough to be able to feel safe to engage with the socially.

Looking at inclusion through an ecosystem lens highlights how the emotional climate, relationships, materials and space are all interconnected to provide children with diverse abilities opportunities to participate in Therapeutic Play, incorporating Landreth's (2012) child-centred play therapy principles. When adults are carrying out Therapeutic Play sessions, they need to incorporate different strategies and frameworks into activities. The play sessions should be unique to each child to support their individual needs and requirements (Pica, 2024). A Loose Parts environment is flexible and resourceful, and the interaction children have with materials is fundamental to future development (Hughes, 2012). Within Therapeutic Play, Loose Parts play is a child-centred and inclusive approach because open-ended, non-prescriptive materials can be adapted to accommodate a wide range of physical, cognitive, sensory and communication needs. This enables children from diverse cultures, backgrounds and abilities to participate meaningfully and communicate symbolically at their own pace. The play provides children with opportunities to express emotions, develop self-awareness and experience healing in a safe and accepting environment. Loose Parts play also supports physical development through the enhancement of fine and gross motor skills, while encouraging children to challenge themselves and develop problem-solving abilities. Furthermore, it promotes teamwork, a sense of belonging, and connection with nature, while fostering imagination, creativity and independent thinking (Beloglovsky, 2018).

Fearn (2021) details there are some strategies that should be followed when carrying out Therapeutic play to ensure its effectiveness. Adults should watch the child and observe how they are playing with the toys or activities. The adult should not say anything to the child unless the child communicates verbally with them first or until interaction is made with the play. The adult should not attempt to play or interact with the child unless asked or suggested by the child. After the child interacts with the adult, the adult can then interact with the child, reflecting on what the child is doing before talking about what the child is doing. The adult must make sure they do not start to direct the play or pass any judgement (Courtney 2022). Adults should validate the child's experiences by echoing their actions or words. When using open-ended questions, should the child not answer the adult should not ask again or

challenge the child; they should give them time and space as silence is a powerful way to process emotions. By not interrupting their behaviour and validating the child, the child will be able to play freely without thinking or worrying they are being judged, as the adult will have provided a safe environment and trust will have been established, increasing the effectiveness of the therapeutic play session. Although the sessions will be child-led, the adult must make sure that the Therapeutic play sessions are productive, effective, and that both the child and adult are safe. Redirection can be used if the child's behaviour becomes dangerous. Should a child portray resistance within the session, the adult can model play or even encourage without forcing the child to participate (Dougherty 2007).

Play is a meaningful occupation that supports children's development and is influenced by cultural and environmental contexts. Looking at a study examined a short-term, culturally adapted board game intervention involving 12 immigrant mothers and their 12 children in Israel. The program led to improvements in mothers' knowledge, awareness, and self-efficacy related to play, as well as increased child participation in leisure activities. Although these gains showed a slight decline three months after the intervention, mothers reported high satisfaction and perceived the program as beneficial. The findings suggest that even brief, family-centred, play-based interventions can positively impact parental confidence and children's engagement when culturally relevant activities are used. These results underscore the value of culturally sensitive, occupation-based approaches and highlight the need for ongoing support to sustain long-term outcomes in diverse populations (Colliles 2020)

Conducted in a private nursery in northern England, the study explores how three children aged 3–4 articulate understandings of mixed ethnic identity during adult-directed play. Using a praxeological, two-stage qualitative design, data were generated through practitioner interviews and video-cued observations. Findings highlight children's capacity to negotiate and share socially constructed discourses, using both societal and self-generated skin-colour terminology to describe themselves and others. While skin colour shaped their cultural understanding, children also demonstrated awareness of the values attributed to these labels beyond the nursery context. The study foregrounds play-based pedagogy, power and agency in identity formation, and researcher positionality, contributing insights into inclusion, early years practice, and curriculum and policy development.

Both studies conceptualise play as a culturally mediated occupation through which development, identity, and agency are negotiated. Their strength lies in foregrounding culturally sensitive, play-based approaches that amplify family and child voice. The Israeli intervention demonstrates that short-term programs can enhance parental self-efficacy and children's participation; however, the small sample size and post-intervention decline raise concerns about sustainability and long-term impact. The nursery-based study offers rich insight into young children's active negotiation of ethnic identity, challenging assumptions about their social

awareness. Yet its reliance on adult-directed play and limited participant numbers restricts broader applicability. While power, agency, and positionality are acknowledged, structural and policy-level influences remain underexplored. Collectively, the studies highlight the need for longitudinal, multi-context research linking play, identity, and culturally inclusive practice to sustained outcomes (Golos 2021).

After looking at these two different case studies, they show Therapeutic Play is a fundamental component of childhood development, offering far-reaching benefits across emotional, social, cognitive, and physical domains. Therapeutic Play offers children the autonomy to explore, experiment, and communicate in ways that are developmentally appropriate, accommodating diverse abilities, backgrounds, and experiences. Evidence from research emphasizes that culturally informed and family-centred Therapeutic Play interventions can enhance engagement, identity formation, and parental confidence, reinforcing the value of play in fostering holistic development. Ultimately, child-led play—whether therapeutic or recreational—supports children in navigating challenges, expressing themselves freely, and building meaningful connections with adults and peers. By prioritising the child's perspective and providing responsive, empathetic guidance, adults can ensure that play remains a powerful tool for learning, healing, and growth, laying the foundation for well-being and success throughout life.

In today's educational landscape the cultivation of social-emotional skills stands pivotal for inclusive learning environment, particularly for diverse student cohorts (Guralnick 2011). Looking at a study carried out by Paksory and Celik (2019) in mainstream schools in Türkiye, it showed an investigation into the impact of using children's traditional games for the social and emotional development with Therapeutic Play. For social-cultural development and inclusion theories to be researched this study looks at how traditional games will enhance the emotional and social development with preschoolers, children with disabilities and refugee (Syrian) children. Durlak et al 2011 states that by using inclusive practices such as integrating games into the curriculum provide opportunities for children to develop empathy, build positive relationships and enhance their emotional regulation. The study took place over 8 weeks and included 112 children (44 preschool, 45 refugees and 23 with disabilities), 18 teachers and 9 observers. The children's ages ranged between 3-6. Paksory and Celik (2019) describe Türkiye's educational landscape is characterised by its rich cultural diversity. This is then reflected by its historical role as a connection between both cultures and continents. The children took part in play sessions structured for mixed groups and were allowed 4 classes each week. This gives the children the chance to interact with others from different developmental and cultural backgrounds. The different games were chosen due to the fact that the games focused on turn-taking, communication, problem-solving, cooperation and social interactions. The teachers and researchers conducted sessions both outdoors and in the school halls. The Therapeutic Play sessions provided an inclusive

environment by mixing all the children together and allowing the children to participate in games. Assessments of the children's communication and social skills and also their behavioural functioning were carried out both before and after the interventions by the teachers. The researchers gather ongoing observational data throughout and interviewed the teachers at the end of the programme. Inclusion was achieved by structured games that all children could access allowing each child to feel that they are accepted and no feel isolated. As the games allowed the children to share responsibilities and work to complete shared goals. The Turkish children were able to support the refugees by teaching hem words in Turkish and help each other to understand the games whilst encouraging the disabled children to participate. Looking at the results from before and after the interventions, it showed a significant improvement in many areas such as communication and emotional regulation. Peer interaction, social competences, behavioural management and language development. These findings incorporated the effectiveness of play-based activities as an inclusive therapeutic approach. Although this study implies that it had appositive outcome, the downsides of the study show that it is hard to determine if the inclusion improvements were achieved by the games themselves or was there another reason such as a more teacher focus and additional support with the children. Even the natural development of the child needs to be considered, and the time spent with their peers. Another factor is that having only been observed for 8 weeks and no follow up asks the question whether these improved skills were maintained. Teachers also needed to be impartial with their observations and although there is no evidence to suggest otherwise, as they played a big part in the study, they may have felt more positive towards the interventions and so the impaling the results. Looking at the study, shows how the Syrian refugees were able to develop their language skills and social interaction alongside disabled children showing less problematic behaviours and all forming relationships. The inclusive approach of traditional games and interactions showed positive data analysis, but due to the lack of follow up observations the study cannot determine the success criteria was met. This suggests that Therapeutic Play is an effective strategy to promote inclusion and helps towards emotional development, but more evidence is needed. Games play a crucial role in social development, teaching children how to interact with others and build connections (Aydemir 2022; Madondo and Tsikira 2022).

Cowling and Anderson (2023) carried out a systematic review on Therapeutic Play interventions suggesting that they can be effective with social and emotional development of refugee children, but their evidence shows strength variation. Over 10,000 children from diverse cultural backgrounds took part from 71 different studies. A scope of Therapeutic Play interventions were used and the results showed consistent reductions in depression, anxiety and behavioural difficulties summarising that therapeutic play interventions support children with trauma by regulating emotions and social functioning improvements. As most of the findings were preliminary research and pilot studies it made it difficult for the authors to be

confident in determine the effectiveness of the interventions. It was stated that findings were promising but more research is needed to provide evidence to back up the findings.

By looking at these two studies, it is stated that Therapeutic Play interventions are seen to improve the social functioning and emotional well-being of children. The first study focuses more on therapeutic play as a way to support peer relationships and social inclusion with diverse children whereas the second one see Therapeutic Play as a way to reduce trauma and stress within the children. They both highlight that Therapeutic Play can play a crucial role in inclusive practice supporting emotional recovery by offering a chance at belonging, communication participation and also encouraging positive relationships with children from diverse backgrounds.

It is clear to see that after looking at these four different studies that they all show that to support a child's emotional development within diverse children, Therapeutic Play is significant to help and support inclusion and emotional well-being. They show how children can interact with all peers through play and games even with diverse backgrounds. By having an inclusive and safe environment, children are able to communicate with each other through play, in turn supporting one another. The studies show how the children's emotional development became enhanced and how levels of anxiety and depression decreased. The studies emphasis how Therapeutic Play is much more than just a play session. It is an intervention that allows children to develop the coping skills they need to be able to process their emotions and also build relationships. For children of diverse backgrounds, it is vital for them as it promotes a sense of belonging and helps them to take part in games alongside their peers helping them to feel included. Even though there is a need for more research to be carried out and more evidence-based findings, it still states that therapeutic play is a vital way to promote holistic development.

Supporting social and emotional development in children is the main aim of Therapeutic Play, especially for children with diverse backgrounds and will help with inclusive practice. As it is a child-centre approach, it helps the children as a means of communication. As Therapeutic Play does not rely on verbal communication it allows the children to communicate experiences and feelings through symbolic and imaginative expression. For children from diverse backgrounds this is what they need to be able to feel included and heard. Therapeutic Play creates opportunities and interventions for children to take part in despite their cultural background or ability. Practitioners play a big part in the overseeing of Therapeutic Play by letting the children have access to resources that are culturally relevant, allowing activities to be adapted and by building on trust to form relationships with the children. It is evident to see that Therapeutic Play will support both the emotional development and social inclusion of children from diverse backgrounds and is a valuable inclusive practice contributing to the holistic development of children. Therapeutic Play can be used as a powerful form of communication, especially for children who may struggle to express their feelings, showing how Therapeutic Play can overcome language

barriers and provide a safe environment where children feel understood and accepted. The research has demonstrated how play can help children build relationships, develop resilience, and feel a sense of belonging. Many of the case studies involved small sample sizes and short intervention periods, making it difficult to determine the long-term effectiveness of Therapeutic Play. With more research and intervention, the evidence could be strong enough to promote Therapeutic Play further.

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