

How to Help Families in Trouble

BRIEFING SHEET

PLAYPACKS AND ACTIVITIES TO USE WITH FAMILIES

This factsheet is part of a series designed to work alongside the book **How to Help Families in Trouble – a short guide** (by Honor Rhodes, published by the Family and Parenting Institute). The book is available from the Institute website: www.familyandparenting.org/publications.

What are toys and playpacks used for?

When you have toys and activities of some kind with you, either when you visit families or they visit you, it demonstrates that you are child-centred. It states that you recognise the role and importance of children and young people, you are not someone who thinks that only parents should be communicated with. Indeed, you can't actually work with families if you do not communicate with children. There is too much evidence around that even those who make vital decisions about children's futures do not always feel comfortable talking to them, which is very frightening indeed.

Having said that, on any particular occasion there are many different intentions that you may have in terms of what you are planning to do. One way of looking at it is to see a spectrum from 'giving the children something to do' through to a therapeutic activity, like play therapy or family therapy, focused very clearly on the child's emotional needs. This leaflet is not about formal therapy, as important as it is, because that requires a specific training: here, we focus on how to be reflective and thoughtful when observing children's play.

How might toys and activities be used with the family?

In a situation where the whole family (or at least one adult and one child) is going to be present, your plan as a worker will depend on things like:

- What your goals are for the session?
- Is it a first session?
- Are you looking at levels of development?
- Are you making an assessment of relationships and dynamics?
- Do you simply want the children to be constructively occupied?
- Or do you want to work on the play skills between parent and child?
- Or are you hoping to learn about the child's view of their family?

The answers to these questions will also determine how you structure the session. If your main focus is the adult(s) then you will not be observing a lot about the children's play. You will miss important details. If, on the other hand, you are watching the dynamics of the relationships between adults and children, and between the children, then at least part of the session will need to be given over to focusing entirely on those interactions, unless you can co-work and share the responsibilities. Who calls the tune in this family? Who fights back? Who does the parent support? Who is aggressive in their play or creates angry or aggressive play situations or images? This is a complex area and a great deal has been written and courses are available.

In relation to how the child sees the family and presents him or herself, Nancy Boyd Webb (see reference) talks about three useful requests of a child: 1) draw a person for me; 2) draw a family; and 3) draw anything you like. Her book explores very well the things you can look for. For example, if the family drawing has someone missing, that tells you a lot!

It is always important to consider who you are working with, their cultural and ethnic background and their recent family experiences. Dr Kedar Nath Dwivedi, who has written excellent texts on working with children and young people, commented in relation to working with a minority ethnic family:

".. the therapist is conditioned to look for the overt affectionate behaviours within the session as evidence of love between the family members while the family is conditioned to express their deep love for each other by hiding it, especially in front of onlookers!"

Our understanding of play in families is as good as our knowledge and experience of patterns of behaviour and communications in families.

What might be in the playpack?

Having explored the dimensions of playing with the family it is now time to think about what play resources and materials might be most useful. There is a shortlist which appears in most of the literature which looks something like this:

- Drawing materials in the form of reasonably large decent clean paper. Scraps of used paper do not suggest a commitment! Coloured pencils, felt tips, wax crayons are important but need to be selected according to age. Do not use felt tips or other forms of pen that leave permanent marks or you might not be invited back. Have enough for each child to have key colours, including a strong black, without sharing.
- Coloured paper, glue, tape, sticky shapes and scissors.
- Small family dolls that are distinguishable as adults or children and by gender and reflect the ethnicity of the family. Plenty of them.

- A doll's house is great but difficult to get into your pocket or bag! But you can have a flat rubber or card 'house' with the rooms of the ground floor marked out, so that people can move around.
- Play-Doh or other material for modeling.
- Vehicles are useful as they can also be used aggressively so include a range of tanks, lorries, cars and vans. Aeroplanes, rockets and JCBs help too.
- Building blocks or Timberr which doubles up as a competitive game
- A toy hammer
- Hand or finger puppets are very useful as they provide alternative voices for children and the adults can join in and you can ask some of the questions you want to ask!
- Farms and farm animals with both young and old also provide a vehicle for demonstrating relationships, emotional states, wishes and dreams
- Useful musical instruments, if you can cope with the noise, would be castanets, finger cymbals, shakers and tambourines.

There are many other options, like real babies' bottles - often used by play therapists - and, indeed, making your own games, like board games, that meet a particular need. It is important to realise that if you turn up with a magnificent array of toys or materials at the home of a family who could not afford them, it might be very embarrassing to the parent(s) and in itself set up a very unhelpful dynamic between yourself and the family members, so you need to be sensitive to that possibility.

How do I begin?

Before you decide to have a playpack you need to know why, what your plan is, who will be there, what you need in it, read some literature, if that would help you feel confident, and then go for it. Hopefully everyone will enjoy and learn more from the sessions.

References:

Nancy Boyd Webb *Social Work Practice with Children*, Guilford Publishing
Play in Family Therapy, Eliana Gil, Guilford Press
Child Centred Play Therapy, Janet West, Arnold Press
The Handbook of Play Therapy, Linnet McMahon, Routledge
Play Therapy Home Study Course, www.learningcurve-uk.com
Working with Children, Adolescents and their Families, Martin Herbert, Karen Harper-Dorton, Blackwells
Dibs in Search of Self, Virginia Axline, Ballantine Books
Meeting the Needs of Ethnic Minority Children, K N Dwivedi, A Handbook for Professionals, Jessica Kingsley Publishers

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