

Becoming an External Regulator for Trauma Integration in Play Therapy

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We use the relationship to allow our client “to re-experience dys-regulating affects in affectively tolerable doses in the context of a safe environment, so that overwhelming traumatic feelings can be regulated and integrated into the client’s emotional life.”

–Allan Schore

Schore, A. N. (2003). *Affect regulation and the repair of the self*. New York, NY: Norton.

Synergetic Play Therapy (2008) is a research-informed model of play therapy based on nervous-system regulation, interpersonal neurobiology, physics, attachment, mindfulness and therapist authenticity. Its primary play therapy influences are Child-Centered, Experiential and Gestalt theories.

Although Synergetic Play Therapy is a model of play therapy, it’s also referred to as a way of being in relationship with self and other. It’s an all-encompassing paradigm that can be applied to any facet of life, and subsequently any model of play therapy can be applied to it or vice versa. Synergetic Play Therapy is both non-directive and directive in its application.

–Lisa Dion

4 Major Perceived Threats

- ❖ Physical Safety
- ❖ Perceptions in the Unknown
- ❖ Incongruence in the Environment
- ❖ “Shoulds” and Unmet Expectations

- Lisa Dion



Nervous System Symptoms of Regulation and Dys-regulation

All symptoms of dys-regulation arise out of perceptions of the events in our lives. When we integrate our perceptions, we change the symptoms in our nervous system. It is wise to master the art of how to integrate our perceptions and how to regulate the symptoms that arise in our bodies to help return us to a more regulated/ventral state.

Sympathetic- Flight/Fight Hyper-arousal Symptoms

Perceptions of Threat/Challenge

- Hyper-alert
- Hyper-vigilant
- Increased heart rate
- Defensive
- “Pounding” sensation in the head
- Anxious
- Excessive motoric activity
- Overwhelmed, disorganized
- Highly irritable
- Uncontrollable bouts of rage
- Aggressive
- Dissociation

Parasympathetic/Ventral Vagal- Regulated Symptoms (Mindful/ “Attached to Self”)

Neuroception of Safety

- Think logically/clearly
- Able to make conscious choices
- Able to make eye contact
- Display a wide range of emotional expression
- Feel “grounded” and “in the body”
- Able to notice breath
- Poised
- Internal awareness of both mind and body
- Able to communicate in a clear manner

Parasympathetic/Dorsal Vagal- Collapse/Immobilization Hypo-arousal Symptoms

Perceptions of Threat/Challenge

- Helplessness
- Appear life-less
- Non-expressive
- Numbing
- Lack of motivation
- Lethargic/Tired
- Dulled capacity to feel significant events
- Emotional constriction
- Depression
- Isolation
- Dissociation

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Updated 2021

Regulated Nervous System

What is regulation?

We use regulation to move towards the uncomfortable feelings and body sensations, not to get away from them.

The child sets the toys and the therapist up to feel how he/she/they FEEL

The Set Up/Offering- Synergic Play Therapy Tenet

We need a mirror to learn about ourselves...

we are constantly projecting our inner reality onto life around us

“It turns out that as we observe others, our brains create a full simulation- even the motor components- of what we are observing. It is as if for a moment we imagine being the person we are observing. Our brain actually attempts to feel what the other person is experiencing and it treats what we observe as an experience shared with others. Our mirror neurons fire when we see others expressing emotions, as if we were also making those facial and body expressions. By means of this firing, the neurons also send signals to the emotional brain centers in the limbic system to make us feel what other people feel (Iacoboni).”

– from *Aggression in Play Therapy: A Neurobiological Approach for Integrating Intensity in the Playroom* (Dion, 2018)

Becoming the External Regulator

“Much like the mother who is implicitly modeling for the child her own struggles to regulate her dys-regulated state, therapists must be able to resonate empathically with our clients, psychobiologically feeling their difficult, intense states. Without this ability to self-manage, we can’t help the client to regulate. Such work implies a profound commitment by both participants in the therapeutic scenario and a deep emotional involvement on the therapist’s part.”

Dales, S., & Jery P. (2008). Attachment, affect regulation and mutual synchrony in adult psychotherapy. *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 62(3), 283-312.

“As the challenging thoughts, emotions and body sensations arise in the session through the play, the child borrows the therapist’s regulatory capacity as their own regulatory capacity develops.”

“In order to help re-pattern a child’s nervous system, the child first needs an external regulator to help integrate the dysregulated state in their nervous system. Integrating intensity must first start with the therapist.”

–Lisa Dion

Using mindfulness to open up to internal feelings and sensations and not defend against them in some way, the therapist begins to modulate the intensity using authentic dialogue describing cognitive, emotional and sensorimotor states, as well as bodily sensations through breath and movement... the child begins to learn that is safe to move towards the intensity.

Ogden, P., Minton, K., & Pain, C. (2006). *Trauma and the body: A sensorimotor approach to psychotherapy*. New York: Norton.

Siegel, D. J. (2010). *The mindful therapist: A clinician's guide to mindsight and neural integration*. New York: W.W.Norton & Company, Inc

Developing the capacity to become the External Regulator requires:

- ✦ The therapist must be willing to feel what is happening in their own body without wanting to avoid or become consumed by the experience
- ✦ The therapist must work through their own fears and past experiences related to the play and stories

One foot in and one foot out

With repeated observation of the therapist's willingness to stay authentic and present, a disruption of the old neural firing can occur bringing the potential for a new experience, giving the child permission to also move towards challenging internal states.

Badenoch, B. (2008). *Being a brain-wise therapist: A practical guide to interpersonal neurobiology*. New York, NY: Norton.

Schore, A. N. (1994). *Affect regulation and the origin of the self: The neurobiology of emotional development*. New York, NY: Erlbaum.

Siegel, D. J. (1999). *The developing mind: How relationships and the brain interact to shape who we are*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Further Learning

- ✦ FREE Lessons from the Playroom Podcast (download on itunes) and monthly webinars
- ✦ FREE handouts/resources under "Training" at synergeticplaytherapy.com
- ✦ Aggression in Play Therapy: A Neurobiological Approach for Integrating Intensity in Play Therapy
- ✦ 6 month online Introduction to Synergetic Play Therapy Training course
- ✦ 6 Day Synergetic Play Therapy Intensive Trainings
- ✦ Synergetic Play Therapy Certification Program

For more information, please go to synergeticplaytherapy.com
