



Module 3: Becoming an External Regulator

Module Focus: Dedicated to deepening an understanding of what it means to become an external regulator to help children expand their windows of tolerance, re-pattern their nervous system and integrate their experiences.

Supportive Tenets:

1. The therapist's ability to use **mindfulness to attune** to themselves and the child is an essential component for co-regulation.
2. The therapist becomes the **external regulator** modeling and co-regulating the child for integration and re-patterning of the activation of the autonomic nervous system.
3. The therapist supports the child in **integrating his/her/their perceptions** of the perceived challenging events and thoughts in his/her/their lives.

Reading: *Read Chapter 5 (Developing Yourself as an External Regulator), Chapter 10 (It is Too Intense: Working with Emotional Flooding) and Chapter 9 (Setting Boundaries) from Aggression in Play Therapy: A Neurobiological Approach for Integrating Intensity to understand flooding in more detail*

Learning Objectives:

1. Explain the "funnel analogy" as a way to understand what children are attempting to integrate in their play therapy sessions
2. Describe how Synergetic Play Therapy approaches boundary setting
3. Describe what it means to become the external regulator in a session to help a child integrate their challenges

Handouts Needed: Becoming an External Regulator Key Points, Types of Reflections, Setting Boundaries in Play Therapy

"Rocking the Baby" in the Playroom

- As the child is playing and activation occurs (through The Set up/Offering), the therapist feels the resonance in their own nervous system and allows it to come into conscious awareness.
- The therapist then activates their ventral state (e.g., breathe, movement, a congruent/authentic response). The therapist is "poised" in the dysregulation ("one foot in, one foot out").
- As the attuned therapist regulates, the child borrows the therapist's regulatory capacity. The child is supported in staying in their window of tolerance.
- In the context of this safe environment, the child is better able to move towards the uncomfortable thoughts, feelings and sensations in order to integrate them into their emotional life.
- Reminder: We only regulate when regulation is needed. "The baby isn't always crying."

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“Integration is not the same as blending. Integration requires that we maintain elements of our differentiated selves while also promoting our linkage. Becoming a part of a "we: does not mean losing a "me." Siegel, D. J. (2010). The mindful therapist: A clinician’s guide to mindsight and neural integration. NY: Norton.

Notes:

Becoming an External Regulator

- In order to become the external regulator, the therapist must develop the capacity for “dual attention”, which is the capacity to have **“one foot in and one foot out”- feel the dys-regulation, but not get lost in it.** This is the key to attunement and not flooding (therapist or the child).
- The goal in the playroom is to develop the ability to activate the ventral parasympathetic system while simultaneously feeling the dys-regulation of the activated sympathetic and dorsal parasympathetic states.
- The attuned therapist titrates the intensity so that the child stays at the edge of their window of tolerance.
- The attuned therapist recognizes that they are both a “me” and a “we” in each moment.
- The therapist recognizes that every moment in the playroom is a moment of transference and countertransference.

Notes:

The Funnel Analogy (Window of Tolerance):

After watching a child play in the sandbox with a funnel, Lisa created the funnel analogy as a way to conceptualize what is happening in the playroom.

- The funnel itself represents the child's window of tolerance in any given moment and/or the capacity to integrate perceived data in an experience.
- The water coming into the funnel represents the data of the experience itself.
- As the child interacts with their inner and outer world, the water flows into the funnel. In most moments, the data is within the window of tolerance (within the funnel's capacity to hold it) and therefore the water flows through the funnel (the experience gets integrated).
- During perceived challenging experiences, it's like an increase of water flowing into the funnel. Some of the water overflows, some of it goes down, and some of it gets backed up. The funnel is "flooded".
- It is important to note that in every experience some data (parts of the experience) goes down the funnel.
- In the playroom, the child is bringing to life the challenging thoughts, feelings and sensations that have not "gone down the funnel". In a sense, children are engaging in exposure therapy to give themselves another opportunity in the context of a safe environment to integrate the experience. The therapist's own window of tolerance and regulatory capacity (widening of their funnel) supports the child in moving towards the data that originally could not be integrated.
- When it goes down the funnel- we see a moment of integration!!

Notes:

More on the Projective Process:

Whatever has not "gone down the funnel" will be projected out into the world, onto others, objects, etc. This includes un-integrated painful experiences, as well as disowned parts of self. "Disowned part" means any part that hasn't been loved yet. Whatever we have not been able to integrate into our lives, make sense of, or regulate through will be projected outward.

In SPT, through the use of play and the co-regulated relationship, we are helping the child move towards their challenging thoughts, feelings and sensations so that they can integrate their

painful experiences and disowned parts of themselves into their lives. (ie. get it down their funnel)

Types of Reflections

It is important that the therapist's self-reflective statements are used in addition to observation and tracking statements in the sessions. *Note: As therapists learn SPT, it can be common to overuse self-reflective statements and over regulate when regulation is not actually needed. Remember, only "rock the baby" when the baby needs to be rocked as authenticity and attunement are key!*

Notes:

Boundaries:

- In SPT, limits and boundaries are set to help the therapist stay present and be the "external regulator", unless there is a safety issue.
- Boundaries are organic and arise as needed.
- We try not to say "no," and instead acknowledge and redirect.
- Repair is important after ruptures

Notes:

Flooding:

- When the therapist or child is flooded or moving towards flooding, the only task is to create a neuroception of safety!
- If flooding happens for the therapist or the child, repair offers healing and integration for both the therapist and the child.
- Boundaries are IMPORTANT! Reminder that boundaries are set to help therapists not go outside of their window of tolerance, so that they can continue to regulate the child. Acknowledge and Redirect!
- Implement the tips for flooding found in the Aggression in Play Therapy book chapter

Notes:

Reflective Questions:

- What is one thing I learned about becoming an external regulator that I did not know before?
- What is my pattern when I get flooded? Shut down? Try to control? Dissociate? What clues does my body give me that let me know I am about to flood? How can I use this knowledge in session to help me stay in my window of tolerance?
- What did I learn about setting boundaries from an SPT perspective that I find interesting and useful?
- If someone were to ask me, how does play therapy work? What is really happening in the playroom? How would I describe it now after what I have learned in this course so far?

To Work On:

1. Notice where I more easily emotionally flood in sessions and get curious about how I can bring in more regulation, set boundaries, or track the play to support me staying in my window of tolerance.
2. If I can, either audio or video record a session. Track my types of reflections to see which ones I do often and which ones I don't do and practice these.