

Sonnhild – A Play Therapist in Education

My two part-time jobs are both located in the education sector. I work as part of a Behaviour and Education Support Team (BEST) and for a Behaviour Support Team (BST) across 5 primary schools. Like many of my colleagues I am a travelling Play Therapist with a (heavy) transportable playroom.

In schools I work with children who are likely to be excluded due to their behaviour and children whose emotional needs have a serious impact on their learning experience and social interactions. Hence the caseload is very varied, and cases are often complex. Referrals for Play Therapy are usually made by teachers.

Besides the direct work with children, I also liaise with their parents/carers, teachers and other professionals involved in their care. Furthermore, I offer consultations to teaching staff and team members and act as a link to the local CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service). And sometimes, I am just a listening ear to staff members or raise awareness of children's emotional needs amongst them.

Although the majority of my time is taken up by individual Play Therapy sessions, I also work with a whole class, using therapeutic methods or with a parent and child together. Parents also find it helpful to be offered parenting training.

In therapy I work in a person-centred way, which involves direct but more often non-direct approaches. Narrative methods are also used when children explore their perceptions of

themselves and their world. However, with large groups of children I employ structured activities.

Since I am working over five different sites no day is the same. But wherever I go I have to set up the playroom. Most of my days are taken up with Play Therapy sessions. But I also hold review meetings with parents/carers and teachers, contact other professionals involved in some cases, and meet the SENCO (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator) or LBP (Lead Behaviour Professional). Writing up my notes and tidying up the room are usually the way my working day ends. Finally, the toy bag will be carried to another school for the next morning.

At the end of any intervention, review meetings will be held with child, parents and teacher. Whereas the child rates a written form in regards to her/his reasons for referral, (which will, with the child's consent be shared with the parents and teacher) the adults evaluate the therapy verbally. I also use HoNOSCA (Health of Nation Outcome Scales for Children and Adolescents).

And no, I haven't got the same holidays as schools. In particular the summer is the time for report writing, catching up with other professionals, reading and research.

My interest in child therapies developed during my teaching career. I repeatedly met children who struggled to interact with their peers and to engage in learning processes. Having been very lucky to receive supervision from a Child Psychotherapist at this point, I not only enhanced my understanding of children's expressions, but also decided to pursue training in child therapy. I applied for a Play Therapy course as I believed (and still do) that play and art are elemental parts of childhood through which children explore, discover, and learn. Therefore, integrating the processes and the medium of play in a relationship based therapeutic intervention seemed for me the most developmentally appropriate method in the work with children and young people.

I think it is essential for a Play Therapist to have very good interpersonal communication skills with people of different ages and walks of life and being receptive towards their expressions. I always thought my 'train station interest' in observing people is another

helpful tool in therapy, as is being able to play and to use your imagination. Patience and trust are further qualities required of a therapist.

For me being a Play Therapist is a never-ending story: meeting people along their way through life, sharing their stories, their pain and delight and seeing them move on before meeting other children, parents and professionals. Play Therapy is a profession for life-long learning, which also makes it very exciting.

And to anyone considering becoming a Play Therapist, this is my advice: Training in Play Therapy is like mountain trekking. It requires careful planning of the route you want to take and the day you want to set out considering your mental and physical condition. You need at least standard equipment, including a pair of robust shoes (you never know how rocky the trek can get), a compass (you need to know the direction), a strong rope (for hanging on), a helmet (loads of things might fall on your head), water and food (to keep you refreshed and going), a torch (it might not dawn when you expect it to), a guide (you can't talk to maps and ask for advice), a sleeping bag (you might at times get very tired and prefer to hide), a cooker (for stirring things up and letting them boil a little), and a pack of cards (for entertainment).

And then you imagine yourself standing on top of the first mountain: "What a sight" you might cry and feel like you have conquered the world. But you soon realise that to get anywhere, you need to take a route down and when you have reached the valley, the next mountain stands there ready for you to climb. But as it is with mountains, they are not all of the same height and difficulty and when you grow stronger and more experienced they will be easier to scale.

