



Creative Counselling

Art and play focused counselling for children, adolescents, and their families

*Lori Gill, M.A. Counselling Psychology
Certified Counsellor & Trauma Specialist*

The impacts of early life experiences shape our future; Perry and Szalavitz (2008) describe children as being born readily seeking connection. Kuban, (2007) indicates that a caregiver that is using facial and vocal expressions that are engaging and stimulating while providing consistent and nurturing care allows the developing infant to grow with a sense of security and opportunity to meet developmental milestones. This quality form of care also serves to reduce the arousal level of a traumatized child or infant, providing the type of support that encourages resilience. There are many benefits likely to result from a secure attachment inclusive of optimal development, self-esteem, and the ability to engage in interpersonal relations.

Children learn through play: they explore, learn to problem solve, and develop a sense of pride and independence as they master a new task. Not surprisingly this is also a powerful tool for emotional regulation, building resilience, and forming healthy relationships. When children experience instability, trauma, or disconnection they need stability, security, and connection. When this is received it helps them to grow and develop in a secure and self-regulated manner.

Here are some tips to keep in mind when spending time with your child:

- Try to be present, we live in such a hurried world. Allow yourself to slow down, let your child set the pace and direct the activities. This promotes a sense of importance as well as a sense of independence
- Have fun, be silly, try to see the world as they do through curious and inquisitive eyes
- Encourage your child to let out their feelings in a safe and appropriate way, teaching them to identify and label how they feel and what to do with these feelings is a valuable process. Examples include talking about their feelings, drawing it out, writing it out, dancing, playing, asking for a hug etc.,
- Initially the ability to self-soothe / self-regulate is completed via caregivers (changing, holding, feeding, playing etc.). Over time this needs to be modeled for children i.e., helping them label their feelings, validate their emotions, and helping them chose an appropriate

Phone: (905) 341-3290

Fax (905) 984-3290

Email: Creative.counselling@bell.net

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outlet for their emotions “I understand that you feel angry because we have to go now, why don’t you draw a picture in the car to show me how you feel?”

- It is also important to label and praise the positive feelings as well, “I see you are feeling excited because...”

In her Blog entry, 3 Wishes of Wounded Kids Cherie Spehar suggests focusing on the following:

- 1) Notice me - connection helps prevent children from feeling alone and uncertain. Take time to check in, tell them you love them, and what you love about them, setting aside time for true connection (hugs, eye contact, interest) to allow for meaningful moments.
- 2) Understand me - demonstrate a willingness to listen, validate how they are feeling, and provide affirmation and comfort. Invite them to be open and to share what life is like from their perspective.
- 3) Soothe me - utilize sensory activities that stimulate soothing. Appeal to the senses in a manner that fosters safety and relaxation. Physical affection (hugs, shoulder or hand massage), calming sounds, scents, and sights as well as soft blankets or other tactile items are means for teaching self-soothing.

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Below are some fun activities you can do to promote safety and positive relationships:

Water Play

In addition to filling hours of play time, water play can also be extremely soothing, especially for an anxious child. Filling a large bowl, or sink with teach children how to splash and swirl the water and play in it using various toys or household items (funnels, strainers, spatulas etc.)

Painting, Drawing, and Clay

Finger painting, painting with brushes, using crayons, markers, pencils as well as play dough or clay are all fantastic mediums to promote fine motor skills as well as a sense of control. Teach your child how they can take the lead during playtime, let them set the pace, level of intensity, and focus. Encouraging them to make choices and accepting the choices they make builds confidence, independence, and encourages imagination. Teaching children how to manipulate three-dimensional mediums such as clay and play-dough can be a very calming sensory experience. This is a fantastic opportunity to teach them how to roll, squeeze, press and poke the clay.

Sand Play

Sand-play is a sensory based medium which allows for expression, creation, and reconstruction. Children can build, mold, manipulate, re-shape, and re-create structures and scenes in the sand which can be a very empowering process. This can also provide an opportunity for problem-solving when structures do not remain intact as anticipated.

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Dancing, Singing, and Music

These are all things that most children love to do. Make this a fun and interactive activity. Following their lead and allowing them to set the pace empowers them and allows them to learn and feel a sense of control. For young children this should be fun and informal, playing with instruments that require no instruction such as tambourines, toy drums, maracas, harmonicas etc. This allows for hours of fun connection with your child.

Nature Walks

Take time to go on a nature walk, let your child to set the pace and direction and allowing them to stop and be curious when something catches their eye. Be curious with them! Talk about what you see, note the textures, colours, sounds, smells etc., of the various things you see.

Reading and Snuggle Time

Take time to snuggle up and read a book, this is another great opportunity for connection while also developing literacy skills. There are so many fantastic books, however for a child seeking safety finding a book that reinforces this will be soothing. Some of my favorites for toddlers are as follows: I'll Love You Forever, On Mother's Lap, Mommy Loves Her Bunny. Explore your local library and find some favorites of your own!

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