

## Play Therapy Melbourne.

### Autism, the Brain, and How Play Therapy Can Help Support Your Child.

As an increasing number of researchers continue to study the brain in an attempt to gain a better idea of what ASD looks like on a neurological level, we are beginning to form an understanding of the condition that has not been available to us in the past. And in many ways, this research and our understanding of the conditions under which children with ASD thrive are allowing us to tailor our therapeutic approaches to increase your child's experience in a world largely developed for neurotypical brains.

Having your child diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, or ASD for short, can be a challenging experience for any parent or caretaker. There is no right or wrong way to respond to the news, and whatever thoughts may cross your mind or emotions you may experience are valid. One of the biggest concerns Parents share with us is just trying to understand what it means for their Child, and that can be a tricky thing to answer, because every child is completely different.

It is really important to recognise that as with all children, no child with ASD presents in the exact same manner as another child with ASD. As it is named, the spectrum under which one can be diagnosed with ASD is incredibly broad, and something that researchers continue to debate today. As such we cannot place expectations upon our child based on a framework we have of a child with autism. Each child will have their own experiences, their own particular struggles, and their own interests. Some children with ASD will find socialising and communicating easier than others, whilst others will struggle with sensory overwhelm.

Leading researchers that have extensively studied the brain of children with autism have come up with only two definitive factors that remain consistent among all children diagnosed with ASD: **that their brain thrives in predictable environments that they know to be safe, and that they seek structure.** When in a predictable, consistent, safe environment that is familiar to the child, their brain is a sponge for information. They find it easier to learn, to concentrate, and to process incoming sensory data. Alternatively, when their environment is not predictable, the child's brain begins to go into a hyper-aroused state. Their brain is in panic mode, and is shooting off signals and chemicals that is forcing the child into a survival response. When their brain is this busy, it

can be really hard to concentrate! Sensory data sounds louder, more intense, and seems to come from more directions. In survival mode, the danger could come from anywhere, and this leads to a feeling of a lack of control, and as a result, children seek out and set up their own structures to help themselves feel more comforted. These structures aren't always effective, and sometimes they can get in the way! Additionally, when your child becomes overwhelmed, they might be more likely to experience big emotions that seem to come out of nowhere, or to behave impulsively and lash out. If it all becomes too much, they might need to leave where they are immediately.

This is really scary for them! Imagine it is like there is an alarm going off in their body, but they just don't understand what is happening or where the threat is coming from. They don't have the self-awareness to be able to identify specific emotions, and yet their body is reacting intensely. Often they will not be aware of why they behaved a certain way after the fact, because they are trying to control and stabilise a body that they don't have a thorough understanding of. As a result, your child might try different methods to calm themselves. This could be through returning to an interest or systematic process that is familiar to them, an increase in stimming, or a desire for sensory cover. These behaviours create predictability for your child, and as a result of that, feelings of safety. The challenging concept to come to terms with is that offering a child a predictable and structured environment constantly is not something that is realistically ever going to happen. Whilst you can control what your home life looks like, day-to-day activities such as attending school and socialising are both out of yours and your child's control. There are always tools that can be implemented by teachers, but one's environment is never completely fully under their control. As a result, this means that your child's brain will be stimulated with this fear response on a day-to-day basis.

### **So how does Play Therapy help?**

At Play Therapy Melbourne, we want to remind Parents that there is an abundance of work that we can do to decrease the overwhelm and reactive behaviours that may be disrupting your child's world. The work we do can go a long way towards contributing to them leading a positive and happy life. We also work to support children in understanding that who they are, their unique and wonderful selves, is just perfect. One of the most important things for us as clinicians is to provide a safe and predictable environment from week to week and during this time, provide a space for your child to experience a level of control. This means that they see us at

the same time each week, in the same room, and the same rules always exist. As our therapeutic relationship with your child develops, they will learn that we are predictable, that we are safe, and that this is a space where their brain can feel quiet.

One thing we emphasise when working with Parents is that there is so much we can do to decrease the overwhelm and reactive behaviours that may be impacting your Child. Being diagnosed with ASD may mean that your child is starting out without some of the pieces to play a board game, but these pieces can be acquired. For example you child may have trouble processing their social environment as it grows and changes, and that is okay. With acceptance, skills developed by their family, friends, and external supports (such as teachers and therapists), and with people around them to assist them in their processing their experience of the world, your child can lead a fulfilling, joyful life.

We are there to assist them by co regulating them as required, we are there to validate their experience, to help them to understand their world in a context and in language that makes sense to them, and to normalise their emotional experience. Having this place to go each week, that is structured and predictable, sets the perfect conditions for your child's brain to change and grow. We sit in that challenging space with them, metaphorically holding their hands and supporting them to widen their window of tolerance as they integrate their experiences of the world. Because it is not in a fear response, and because we are trained to understand what your child is trying to tell us. Play therapy gives your child's brain a chance to form new – more positive links; some of which reflect the missing pieces of the board game.

For brain growth to occur, and for long-lasting links to be formed in the brain, it requires repetition. Our focus is not on changing a child to make them 'less autistic'. We do not work with antecedents and consequences with a desire to 'normalise' their behaviours. We celebrate children for who they are, our aim is to increase self acceptance and foster a positive self concept. Our focus is on the Child, not the behaviours. We are connecting and attuning with the Child, following their lead, offering insight into cause and effect. Reflecting emotional responses, giving name to feelings and connecting these with the felt sense in your Childs body. At Play Therapy Melbourne our foundation is Synergetic Play Therapy™ (2008) a researched- informed model of play therapy blending the therapeutic power of play with nervous system regulation, interpersonal neurobiology, physics, attachment, mindfulness, and therapist authenticity.

Its primary play therapy influences are Child-Centered, Experiential, and Gestalt theories.

Your child is an entire person separate from their diagnosis. They have complex personalities and can be intelligent, creative, and funny. As all children do, they will have different and unique dreams and desires for the future. It can seem sometimes like they don't want to connect with others, but the truth of it is often connecting is simply too hard for them at the stage that they are at. Other children and people are very unpredictable, and some of society's unwritten rules do not make logical sense; why must we look at someone's eyes for them to hear us? Why do we use phrases that don't seem to make sense?

Children with ASD are no less tenacious, adaptive, or socially curious than any other child. They amaze us with their ability to change and transform when given the most appropriate environment. The work we do at Play Therapy Melbourne offers your child a place to practice social processing, regulating and understanding their emotions, and understanding the complexities of their environment. As they do this hard work, it is our job to facilitate, support them to regulate and to keep them feeling safe even as they push their limits, and to validate anything that may come up in their world and how them to integrate their experiences. With the assurance of a reliable relationship, a predictable space with rules that your child is aware of, play therapy offers your child's brain the best possible opportunity to begin forming positive links in their brain, which are strengthened over time. Forming these links can help to minimise your child's "symptomology," as these links allow them to form more natural social processing and emotional regulation skills when out in the world.

To summarise: having a child diagnosed with ASD can be a big experience, but we really want to stress to Parents that having a diagnosis of ASD does not make your child fundamentally 'less', and does not mean that their life will always be harder. All it means is that some of the things that come naturally to us – that we might take for granted, have to be worked towards. There are always skills, there are always goals, there are always ways to adapt and for us to encourage acceptance and inclusion. Where we might process a situation in a straight line, your child might process it in a maze that they can't quite manage to get to the middle of. This is okay. We can help them navigate the maze. We can help them to find the tools to change the maze, to make it easier to work through. The ending is the same, but the journey is different. Isn't that the same for most of us?

As Play Therapists we are in the privileged position of working with many neurotypical Children. of these Children are neurotypical. We can say that we are continuously amazed by the strength of the children we work with and their unending ability to try to communicate and navigate their world. No matter the experience, the diagnosis, or the ability, children find a way to trust and to learn. They strive for change, for connection, for understanding. Play therapy changes a child's brain. But it could not possibly do that if the child wasn't brave enough to do the work, and to trust us, each and every time.

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