# Therapeutic play assignment

## Purpose

This process analysis will detail the creation and reflections upon a hypothetical use of a therapeutic story. This evidence-based therapeutic tool formed part of the case work for a child with Cerebral Palsy (CP) who was experiencing difficulties with his self-concept. More specifically, he was coming to terms with the physical difficulties he was facing and how this impacted on his sense of self. This analysis will begin with an outline of the key psychological concepts underpinning general cognitive behavioural approaches as it relates to therapeutic work with children. These will then be applied to the case in question. Unfortunately, due to the mandated government response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, this work could not be delivered as initially conceptualised. Nevertheless, the work was designed for a child I worked with and for whom I conducted consultations with the school and family. As such, this work will provide reflections on the hypothetical work, as well as the problem analysis, formulation, and delivery of psychoeducation.

## Key therapeutic principles

The foundation of any Educational Psychologists (EPs) work with a child or young person (CYP) is their relationship with said CYP Billington (1995, p. 36). Without a strong basis built on trust, mutual respect, and empathy, an EP cannot hope to support a CYP with any difficulty they may be experiencing. There have been previous calls for EPs to engage in more therapeutic work with CYP (Maddern, 2010) and not be mere gatekeepers of resources. As such, tools have been developed to explore CYPs understanding of their world in a safe way and support them therapeutically. One such tool is the therapeutic story.

Therapeutic stories are fictional narratives which seek to explore a complex issue a CYP might be facing. Typical issues include feelings of not belonging, lack of self-esteem, feeling angry, and anxiety. The issues are explored via helping to make sense of the CYP’s world (Pomerantz, 2007). Imagery and metaphor are used because, as Sunderland (2000) states, children typically do not seek to overcome a problem using language. Rather, they use strong imagery found in metaphors and visuals, often found in stories and dreams. By using imagery, this allows the child to explore the potentially difficult and complex situation easier to understand and safer language and forms. The CYP may respond to the story consciously or unconsciously. This methodology allows automatic thought patterns to be examined and the potential for more positive ones to be explored.

## Stages of Construction

Sunderland (2000) presents a number of steps to constructing a therapeutic story. The first is the identification and formulation of the key difficulties or themes that may arise. This is during the individual work with the CYP, consultations with the school and family, and observation of the child at school. The child was initially brought to my attention as they have a diagnosis of CP. The child was struggling with focusing during class, their self-concept, and emotion regulation at home. This child was liked and had friends, but was struggling to maintain the same level of activity due to their CP. Their CP was also affecting their ability to concentrate in class, due to the tightness in their leg muscles. These factors were combining to undermine their self-esteem and sense of self, because they loved to play football and this was one of the main ways in which they socialised with their friends.

It was agreed with the school that I would engage in 1:1 sessions with this child to explore their understanding of self and give them a more positive framing of their strengths and needs. The hope was that this positive reframing would not only bolster their self-esteem, but also their understanding of their difficulties and therefore increase their willingness to engage with the support (exercises etc). This in turn would increase their mobility and ability to play with their friends.

The key concept of understanding oneself was the emotional theme, with the hope that this would lead to greater self-acceptance and self-confidence. This theme underpinned the fictional narrative of created for this child. A zebra was selected as the avatar for the child because the child had previously stated it was their favourite animal.

## Therapeutic Story:

Zebiba the Zebra loved nothing more than running with his friends across the savannah. To feel the win in their mane, the fresh air, to hear the sound of their friends shouting with delight, made Zebiba feel as happy as could be. He had always done this, for as long as he could remember. He liked going to school, but what he truly loved was running free with his friends.

Zebiba not only loved to run but was also very fast. He could often run faster and longer than his friends and they often complimented him on how good he was.

“Woah, you can run so fast! Your legs are amazing!” said his friends. Zebiba was very happy as he loved to see himself as a fast and strong runner. He wanted to keep running with his friends forever.

Sometimes Zebiba was injured, but he always came back as strong as ever. His friends would say “We missed you Zebiba, we are glad you are back!” and then they would go and run during breaks between lessons.

As Zebiba got older, he never stopped loving running. But he found his legs were starting to cramp quicker than usual. They would often become quite painful, and he would walk with a limp without realising. He never complained about it though; he just kept on going to school and running with his friends.

But this time the pain didn’t go away. Sometimes, it would be there when he woke up and he hadn’t run at all. Sometimes it would be there when he was sat down in class. This made it hard for Zebiba to concentrate in Eliza the Elephant’s lessons. But he didn’t want to stop running, and he didn’t want his friends to know about it. So he just kept on running as fast as he could.

But one day, when out running with his friends, his legs hurt so much he had to slow down. “Wait for me!” he shouted to his friends. But his friends kept on running. Soon he couldn’t see them, not even the dust kicked up by their hooves. Zebiba felt very sad. He loved to run with his friends, but now he could not run and his friends had left him. Zebiba slowly walked back towards the class, feeling very sorry for himself.

“What’s up Zebiba? Why do you look so sad?” asked Eliza the Elephant?

“My legs hurt and I can’t run as fast as the others. So they left me” said Zebiba sadly.

“Hmm, that doesn’t fun. Why do you think they kept running when you stopped?” asked Eliza.

“Because they don’t like me and don’t care that I’ve stopped” replied Zebiba.

“Well, maybe they didn’t hear you?” said Eliza. “I know your friends really like and value you. I don’t think they’d leave you behind intentionally”.

Zebiba hadn’t thought about it like that. Maybe they hadn’t heard him. Maybe they didn’t run away because they didn’t like him.

“Shall I ask them when they get back from class?” asked Eliza.

“Okay” said Zebiba shyly.

Once all the other students had returned to class, Eliza stood in front of them and asked about what happened that afternoon when Zebiba was left behind.

All Zebiba’s friends cried out in shock and immediately apologised.

“We are so sorry! We didn’t see you had stopped! We didn’t know your legs hurt, that must be really painful to stop you running. Is there anything we can do to help?”

Zebiba felt so much better that his friends were being so kind to him and that they did care about him. They agreed they would run as fast as Zebiba wanted so he he didn’t feel left out. With Eliza’s help, it was agreed how Zebiba could tell his friends if his legs hurt. That way, some of his friends could stay back with Zebiba. They also gave him the comfiest spot so he could stretch his legs out and feel more comfortable. Zebiba was very glad that his friends were supporting him and still liked him for who he was, even if he couldn’t run quite as fast as before.

## Reflections

Whilst it was a positive experience researching and creating this therapeutic story, it is a shame that I was not able to deliver this to the child in question. I am lucky in that the school is generally receptive to my ideas for how to work with a child, so once the 1:1 sessions had been commissioned I had the opportunity to work with the child in the way I believed to be best for the child. However, due to not being able to be face-to-face, I decided not to use this tool. This is because of the importance of developing a rapport with the child. Although I believe I developed a rapport with the child in question remotely, given the sensitive nature of the tool, I believed it would be best to use this tool in person. This was because I could use my body language to bring the child in and make it more fun for them, an aspect of communication that is necessarily lost in video calls (Novick, 2008). However, more recent research has suggested that little is lost during video calls with those a professional is trying to support (Agar, 2019). Given this, perhaps I did not feel comfortable as an EP still in training to use my therapeutic story remotely. I may not have felt comfortable using an unfamiliar tool that is very different to the tools I have previously used remotely.

This tool seems like a valuable use of my professional time. Whilst there was an initial time investment, I believe it may be used in the future for children who experience a similar difficulty. However, given the highly specific nature of the difficulties of the child, the chances of this tool being used in its exact form is low. However, it can be used as a template or a guide for future work. There are also a large number of freely available therapeutic stories, which also include pictures or cartoons and thus may be more appealing for children.

## References

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