



## Draft Guidelines for the Use of Group and Class Theraplay

### Group Theraplay or “Crew Circles”.

Group Theraplay is an intervention designed to support the social and emotional development of children in group /classroom settings from Early Years to Year 6 and above.

Group Theraplay builds trust and creates positive relationships within a classroom through a variety of fun activities.

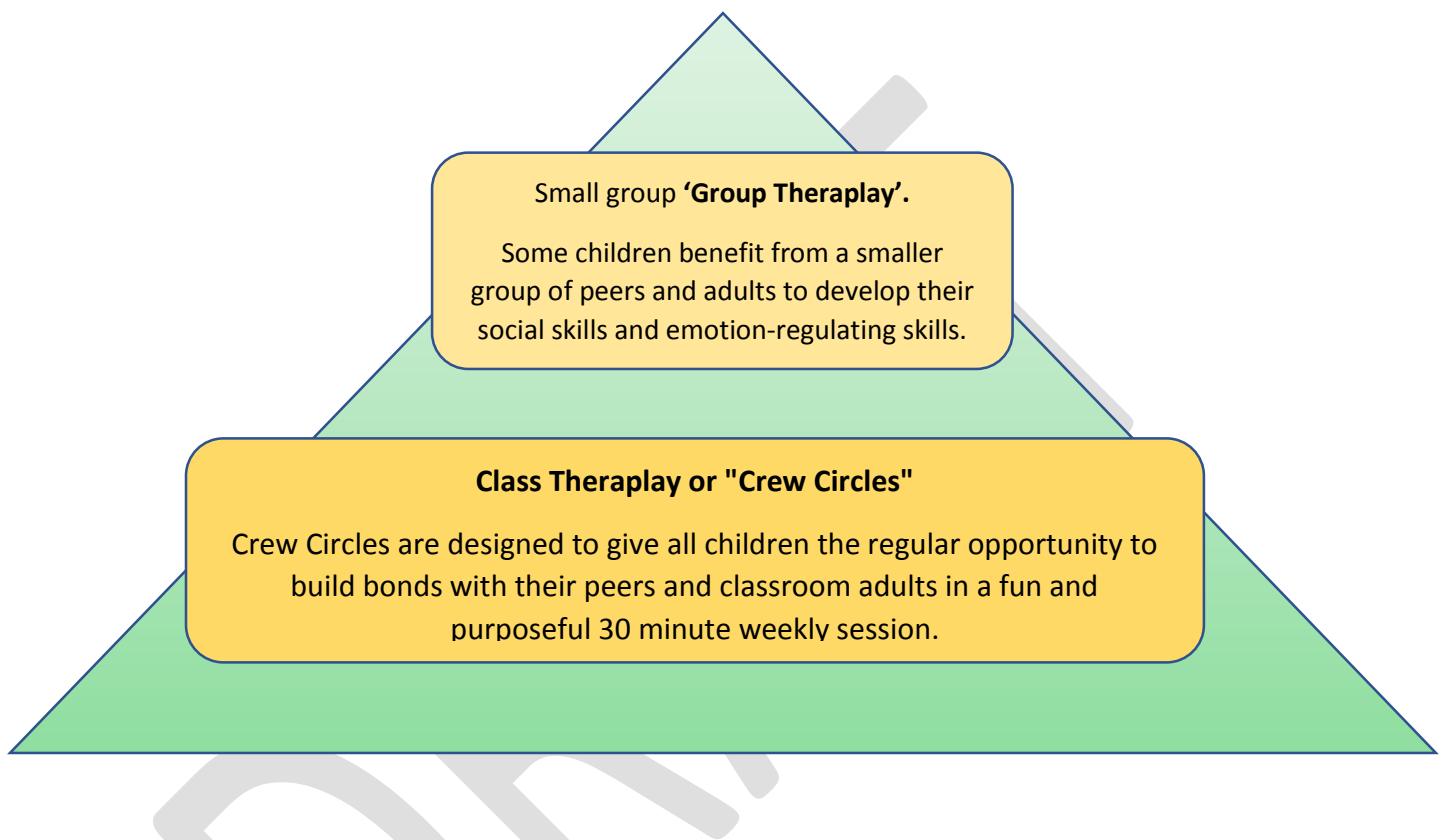
While beneficial to all children, Group Theraplay is particularly helpful to those who struggle to manage their feelings and settle into positive classroom behaviour.

### Our rationale

- ✓ Crew Circles help children build strong relationships with peers and adults and develop social and emotional competence.
- ✓ They are significant part of our PSHE Curriculum. Crew Circles cover goals in the ‘Relationships’ core theme. These are:
  - *How to develop and maintain a variety of healthy relationships, within a range of social/cultural contexts.*
  - *How to recognise and manage emotions within a range of relationships.*
  - *how to respect equality and diversity in relationships*
- ✓ Circle Crews contribute to our duty under the Children Act 2004 to promote children’s “physical and mental health, and emotional well-being” (2004 Act, part 2)
- ✓ Crew Circles help children become self-aware and be well-regulated, a key factor in them becoming resilient and resourceful when tackling a wide range of challenges, including ones in their learning.
- ✓ Crew circles help children learn to be accepting and respectful of others’ differences.

## Key Statements

1. Theraplay involves lots of playful activities. It is based on the natural patterns of healthy interaction between a caring adults and children. It is fun! Carefully chosen activities are used to work towards the social and emotional goals.
2. Crew Circles are our 'Quality First Teaching' offer as part of the PSHE curriculum to develop the 'emotional literacy' of our children. Small groups are used as an intervention for children who need additional support.



## The Importance of Play and Positive Physical Contact for Children's Emotional Literacy

3. Appropriate physical contact is important to reinforce children's understanding of healthy relationships, emotional literacy, social and emotional competence.
4. Our guidelines take into account the extensive neurobiological research and studies relating to attachment theory and child development that identify safe touch as a positive contribution to brain development, mental health and the development of social skills (Porges, 2015).

At Becket School, we use physical contact to:

- a) Reinforce verbal comfort to a hurt child
- b) Help reinforce calming of a child (co-regulating emotions)
- c) Reinforce verbal messages of celebration or success (self-esteem)
- d) Reinforce verbal messages of belonging and connection.

Examples of healthy positive contact includes:

- a. Briefly holding children's hands to build a stack of hands as a group, or keep a feather still on a palm, or point out a mark, palm-line.
- b. Holding a tape measure against the child's head, hands, arms or feet.
- c. Placing or wiping a feather or piece of cotton wool on a child's arm (as part of a guessing game)
- d. Drawing a shape on a child back so that the action is passed around the circle.

5. While advocating healthy, appropriate physical contact, we have explicit guidelines to avoid acting in ways that:

- Harm a child
- Open a member of staff to accusations of harming a child.
- Lead a child to misunderstand what is a healthy level of physical contact with staff.
- Do damage to our reputation as a school.
- Cause parental misunderstanding about Crew Circles.
- Leave staff feeling uncomfortable with interactions.

### **The Framework of the Law**

6. The Children Act 2004 provides the legal guidelines for agencies such as schools '*having regard to the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.*' (Children Act 2004, section 11).
7. Firstly, healthy 'primary carer / child' relationships and 'teacher / child' relationships are different. It would not be appropriate for school adults to use the same level of intimacy. Our physical contact is designed to meet the children's "physical and mental health, and emotional well-being" (Children Act 2004, part 2) in ways that are appropriate for school staff.

8. We follow the principles from the **Guidance for Safer Working Practice for Adults who work with Children and Young People in Education** (DfE, 2016). These are:

*“Many jobs within the children and Young People’s workforce require physical contact with children and young people as part of their role... It is crucial that in all circumstances, adult should only touch children and young people in ways which are appropriate to their professional or agreed role and responsibilities.” (Section 15)*

The principles within section 15 include:

- *Any physical contact is in response to a child’s needs at the time*
- *Is of limited duration*
- *Is appropriate to, for example, the age or developmental stage of a child.*
- *Adults should use professional judgement to observe a child’s reaction or feelings and use a level of contact, which is acceptable to the child and for the minimum time necessary.*

9. School staff teach children the appropriate social boundaries of the physical contact and care that is given in school (and the wider world) compared to home.
10. Our personal experiences, and individual and cultural views on what is appropriate physical contact vary. We all have varying degrees of comfort or discomfort towards physical contact. We take this into account.
11. We actively build in mutual monitoring and feedback between colleagues to safeguard children and ourselves.

### **Small Group Theraplay**

Theraplay in small groups can benefit children who struggle more at school. These children might:

- Find it difficult to settle to learn for a variety of reasons.
- Find interactions with peers are stressful -they might become withdrawn or overly controlling.
- Struggle to turn to adults for help or reassurance or accept the structure offered by adults.

### **The Goals for These Groups**

These are the same as for the class groups - namely to strengthen relationships and build social and emotional competence.

These children may need a smaller setting in which to experience and practice social and emotional skills with others.

### **Key Additions**

In group work we provide more nurturing experiences with more support through higher adult to child ratios. In small groups we are able to play some games that are not suitable for whole classes, such as “sticker” activity (where one person places sticker on their partner and their partner then mirrors this) All small group activities follow the principles of physical contact that are set out below.

## **The Guidelines for Physical Contact within Crew Circles and Group Therapy**

1. Adults always explain a game and activities and the contact that is going to happen in an age-appropriate manner.(e.g. when drawing letters on each other's backs)
2. Adults always attune to children's responses to physical contact and adapt to reduce discomfort accordingly. Children are invited to participate and there is no disappointment if a child declines to join in. (If we spot a pattern of refusal, staff discuss this together and with the SENCo and plan accordingly)
3. Physical contact during activities are of benefit to children if they are fun. If an activity stops being fun for a child, the activity is stopped. Children can choose to 'just watch' until they are ready to participate.
4. We use physical contact to 'structure' the experience for the children (e.g. briefly placing our hands over theirs to reinforce the skill of waiting before they blow on the feather), share a moment of fun or offer 'nurture'(e.g. the hand-to-hand contact in the 'mirror game')
5. The physical contact within the games will change from the youngest to oldest classrooms. The intensity and duration of physical contact decreases (E.g. younger children will hold hands in the circle in ways that older children prefer not to).
6. The activities we play require adults and children to use physical contact with each other's hands (e.g. for holding out hands to catch feathers), arms (e.g. to guess where the cotton wool touched) and back (e.g. when drawing a letter on each other's back with fingers).
7. A snack is an important part of Crew Circles because it shows taking care of basic needs. We use biscuits, raisins, pretzels and fruit among others. Snack items are put into the children's hands, who then eat them in the circle.
8. The thoughts and feelings of staff also taken into account. Staff leading sessions regularly plan and debrief to make adjustments to games that meet the needs of children and reflect adults' views on what is developmentally appropriate.
9. We have an open invitation policy to class Crew Circles. Other school staff are always welcome to watch class groups without needing to ask in advance.
10. All class groups have two or more adults (4 is usually optimal). Small groups are led by at least two members of school staff.

## **Other Guidelines for Sessions**

11. We run Group Theraplay sessions in 'always accessible' rooms.
12. Other school staff are always welcome to watch class Circles without needing to ask in advance.

Small groups are often designed to support children with greater difficulties. With these groups, it is best practice to discuss in advance how an additional adult may observe (so, for example, the children can be prepared)

- All class groups have two or more adults (4 is usually optimal), and small groups will be led by the Lead Teacher and a member of school staff.

### The Names we use for the Sessions

Class Theraplay sessions are known as “Crew Circles”.

Smaller Group Theraplay sessions are known as Theraplay Groups

### The Groups of Games

There are four distinct dimensions of games within Group Theraplay, and each has a slightly different emphasis (The Theraplay Institute 2013, 2016)

Group	Key themes of these games	The Purpose of This Group of Games
<b>Structure</b>	Safety Regulation	In Group Theraplay, these activities provide structure with sequence and rhythm. These activities give children the opportunity to experience safety and fun following the adults lead or control.
<b>Engagement</b>	Connection Attunement Regulation	These activities draw the children into ‘shared moments’ with an adult-of fun, waiting or success. Helps child regulate their emotional state and ‘know that they are fun to be with.’
<b>Nurture</b>	Needs met- security regulatory worthiness	These activities help children develop the expectation ‘people will take care of me’. The contact in these games is calming, quieting and more soothing. An example of this is “cotton wool ball touch”. The child closes their eyes and the adult touches/rubs the cotton wool onto their arm-can the child tell where it was? Food such as biscuits is also shared.
<b>Challenge</b>	Growth and competence and confidence	With support from adults, children have success with mildly challenging activities and learn they are competent to try new things.

### References

Booth, P (2006) *Outline of the Role of Touch in Child Development*, Dr J Makela

DfE (2016) *Guidance For Safer Working Practice For Those Working With Children And Young People In Education Settings*. DfE

DfE (2004) Children Act 2004

Porges, S (2015) *Play As a Neural Exercise: Insights from Poly Vagal Theory*. Global Association for Interpersonal Neurobiology Studies.

The Theraplay Institute (2013, 2016) *Group Theraplay Training Materials*. Evanston, Illinois

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# Practical Guidelines

## Planning a Session

- Always start with a song or Check-In activity.
- You might plan for 2-4 games.
- Plan to modulate between low and high intensity and back to help children practice regulation skills.
- Starting with a Structure activity is often more settling
- Theraplay always recommends a food activity because of its strong connection to early nurturing experiences. A food activity (eg breaking and sharing biscuits) often brings powerful calmness.

## Adult Helpers

- For a class (of around 30) aim to have 3 adults. 4 gives even greater ability to pay attention to children's responses, and having only 2 adults is more challenging.
- Some games are for a whole class, but many are better when broken into smaller group led by an adult.

## Running a session

- Opening song/ritual
- Rules
  - i. The Adult Is In Charge (don't speak this one out)
  - ii. Stick Together (*link fingers*)
  - iii. No Hurts (*both palms outward*)
  - iv. Have Fun (*jazz hands*)
- Welcomes and check-in
- Games (2-3?)
- Food activity
- closing activity/song
- Transition to 'normal classroom activity'



## Top Hints

- 99% activity, 1% talking. We are aiming for experience-based learning rather than language-based.
- Become a **playful leader** (try not to 'buy in' to a task-orientated philosophy; be 'laid-back' about how correctly the game is played; 'give to' your group rather than ask them to 'perform' for you)
- Try to avoid seeing your role as 'teaching social or emotion skills'. It's about coaching them - noticing, labelling, co-regulating.
- Try to avoid a 'question asking' approach (which engages the frontal cortex. We want to engage the limbic, mid brain, where emotions are drivers)
- Behaviour Management: try not to control or suppress 'wrong' behaviours (except hurtful ones). The child's behaviour is telling you something about their internal tension trying to manage the experience. Comment on the 'level of managing' you see and give support.
- Can you ignore resistant behaviours before giving negative consequences?

## Goals for Your Class

- Setting a goal gives you a specific aim, and helps you think about whether you were getting there.
- Plan the particular focus for your next set of sessions?

It could be for the children:

- To share joyful experiences
- To trust each other
- To trust adults' structure
- To allow adults to regulate their excitement
- to self-regulate
- To accept challenges (bravely)
- To talk/give to each other calmly and confidently
- to be able to give eye contact
- To touch other children appropriately
- To show care towards others
- To accept soothing/comfort from an adult
- To experience reassurance or comfort from adults or peers as a positive.
- Take turns willingly
- to access help from an appropriate model