

## **Theraplay with Deaf Children and Hearing Parents**

Alexis Greeves, LPC, RPT-S, Washington, DC

It was Valentine's Day and I was busy setting up activity stations in various areas of the room to be used for that evening's family bonding event. As the school counselor at a school for deaf students in Washington, D.C., I had been looking forward to this evening for a while, but my excitement wasn't anywhere near that of the third, fourth, and fifth grade children who would soon be crowding in with their parents. My co-facilitator had made beautiful heart-shaped invitations for the students to bring home to their parents, inviting them to share in this fun-filled evening; two weeks prior we had sent out fliers to the parents about an evening of playful activities for them to learn new ways to enjoy spending time with their children. On this night, parents would lead their children through games and experiences that encouraged closeness and positive parent-child interaction.

Once everyone had arrived and had their fill of the pizza and soda we provided, I explained how the evening was going to work. Each family (or parent-child dyad) was to progress through the various activity stations and to carry out the activity described at each.

At the start, the anxiety amongst some of the parents was evident. Many of these parents know minimal American Sign Language (ASL), the primary language of their children and of the school, and they struggle to understand their children. To have this struggle become apparent in a public setting such as this can result in feelings of anxiety and even shame. However, once the Theraplay<sup>®</sup> activities were underway and parents found that they were simple and not verbally focused, it was evident that their anxieties lessened. Everyone started to have a great deal of fun.

At the Mummy Wrap station, a father slowly wound toilet paper around his daughter, who looked at him with a big smile on her face. I encouraged the father to make eye contact when possible. Not only is eye contact critical in building attachment, but it's a necessity for deaf children who rely on eye contact for communication. As the father approached her hands, I told him to show her that she had the option of either having her arms wrapped by her side or keeping them free so that she could communicate. She decided to hold her arms overhead while her father, smiling and nodding to show his pride in her, continued to wind the paper around her. When he finished, we told the child that when her father signed "chocolate" she could break out of the paper. I stood behind the child as her father signed, "Vanilla...Strawberry...CHOCOLATE!" and out she burst. Her father gave her a big hug, communicating to her that she was fun to be with and that he was pleased she was his daughter.

At the Cotton Ball Touch station, chairs were set across from one another, with parents seated on one side facing their child. Parents were encouraged to take cotton balls and gently trace shapes along their child's face while the child kept his or her eyes closed. (Some deaf children don't like to close their eyes unless they feel very safe so they were given the option of keeping their eyes open.) I noted that the children stiffened at first but

after a few minutes of receiving this nurturing touch, their bodies leaned forward toward their parents as if wanting to drink in more and more of their care. As a child leaned forward, I encouraged the parents to place an arm around him or her as they continued to touch their child with the cotton balls.

Over at the Hand Tracing station, parents and children were invited to create Valentine's Day cards for each other. Parents traced their child's hand and wrote a note within the outlined handshape. Some of the parent-child dyads made *I love you* handshapes (common within Deaf Culture). In this handshape, the letters "I," "L," and "Y" are held up together. This activity is not only a structuring activity, but at the same time acknowledges that hands are a valuable part of the child's language. As they traced around the child's hand, we would say to the parents (and someone would sign to the child), "What strong hands your child has! I bet she says very important things all day long with those hands of hers!" The parents would respond by signing, "Yes!"

As the evening's event wrapped up and parents were heading out, one parent approached me and said, "Thank you. Thank you for giving me permission to touch my son tonight. I didn't realize that I hadn't touched him in this way since he was a little boy. He's such a big kid for the fifth grade that I forget that he still needs his mommy to touch him. So thank you for making that possible." I realized then that in creating this space we were giving permission for parents to provide structure and nurturing, to challenge and connect with their children.

This was a one-time event with these families, but the parents were encouraged to find additional opportunities to be playful with their children.

These same children may have been familiar with some of these activities from groups that we had run for children in the kindergarten, first, and second grades using Theraplay techniques. One class in particular—comprised of deaf and hard of hearing students that had additional cognitive delays—had enjoyed these group meetings throughout the school year. A social work intern and I had weekly group meetings with these students where we reviewed the rules:

- No Hurts (signed in ASL as "Hurts? NOTHING!")
- Stick Together (signed in ASL as "We are linked together.")
- Have Fun! (signed in ASL as "We have fun!")

Because group Theraplay techniques are not dependent on a high level of language but on simple cooperative interactions, these students could fully participate. We could often be seen passing beach balls over our heads and between our knees in a long line or playing "Toesies" with partners rolling down the hallway together while touching toes, being careful not to break the "toe-hold". The children delighted in these fun, team-building activities. The students' favorite was Duck, Duck, Goose, or Tap, Tap, Tap-Tap as we called it using signs in ASL to describe how the students would indicate a "duck" or a "goose." The students would tap once for "duck" and twice to let the "goose" know to get up. Then students would race around the circle toward each other and finally meet in a

great big hug while the rest of us cheered by waving our hands in the air—a Deaf Culture version of applause.

After leaving my job as a school counselor, I opened a practice seeing children and families for counseling. Because of my tie to the school, many of my referrals were parents of deaf children. In my assessments of these families, it was apparent to me that most of them could benefit from using Theraplay techniques to increase bonding and attachment. Most of the children with a hearing loss used ASL as their primary language of communication. The parents of these children were hearing and, while many of them had attempted to learn ASL after discovering their child was deaf or hard of hearing, they struggled to have clear and easy dialogue. This difficulty in connecting through language resulted in serious frustration, and as a result many of the children had started acting out.

What first attracted me to Theraplay was the lack of demand for spoken language. Instead, more emphasis is placed on eye contact, tactile-focused interactions, and the parent taking charge. Many parents feel guilty for their child's hearing loss and can feel anxious when it comes to figuring out how best to parent their deaf child. Theraplay offers a time and an experience during which parents can enjoy their child and celebrate all that is wonderful about him or her, including the child's deafness and language.

Having been trained in Theraplay, I had the unique challenge of figuring out how to adapt some of these activities to work with deaf, signing children. For example, the activity called Zoom-Erk! is designed as a talking (quickly) game. Each member of the group passes along the "Zoom!" by looking to his or her left, for example, and saying, "Zoom!" until someone responds by saying, "Erk!" and then sends the "Zoom!" in the opposite direction. I modified this with families to have each member sign, "Take off quickly!" to the person on his or her left until someone responds by doing the sign for a car braking suddenly and then taking off in the other direction.

Other activities, such as singing a song, were adapted to become signing a song to the child. I taught parents to sign "twinkle twinkle" in a special way that engaged their children in the song. Whereas normally the sign might be similar to "glitter" or "glow," with the handshape and movement coming from the sky, I would demonstrate to the parents having the sign placed near their child's eyes as if to indicate that the child's very eyes were glowing and then continue on to sign "little star." The song (which in ASL is closer to the format of a poem) continues to indicate that the child is very special to the parents. Rather than the parents normally placing their signs on their own face or body, they instead transposed the sign to their child's face or body, thus painting a picture of the poem with the child as the canvas. Children have responded so beautifully to this acknowledgement of their language.

As with any population, the power of using Theraplay techniques with deaf children and their hearing parents is evident. Eye contact is normalized and the tactile nature of the activities "speaks" to the children that their parents are loving, caring, and able to take care of their needs.

The author is a play therapist in Washington, DC: [www.GreevesCounseling.com](http://www.GreevesCounseling.com)  
She has completed Introductory Theraplay/MIM and Introductory Group Theraplay training.