

Theraplay with a Sensitive Toddler Born Prematurely
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Aaron was born premature at the 29th week of pregnancy, 35.5 cm (14 inches) tall and 1060 grams (2.5 lbs). Pregnancy had been difficult all along and his mother had been admitted to the hospital weeks before he was born. Aaron spent his first 9 days in a respirator, and was intubated again at the age of 2 weeks and 4 weeks. At the age of 4 weeks he went through a surgery and later on another, and all of this was very traumatic to him and his parents.

From the beginning Aaron was very sensitive to sounds, which made everyday life difficult. For example, he couldn't stand sounds of vacuuming, ironing or other babies. As he got older, going to big stores or shopping malls wasn't possible since Aaron clung to his parents, cried or more likely froze completely. Aaron didn't enjoy the company of other children and when outdoors in the park he never went far from his mother or father. The family rarely visited other families or invited people to their home since these situations were very stressful for Aaron. At worst Aaron fell asleep when a situation made him feel anxious. The parents also worried because Aaron didn't seem to react appropriately to pain. He didn't cry if he hurt himself. On the other hand Aaron was very sensitive if someone touched his hands and didn't like it at all. Aaron was hospitalized quite often when a normal flu gave him respiratory problems. He had frequent check ups and on some occasions his breathing had stopped at the check ups. He was diagnosed with reflux and asthma.

Aaron was 18 months old when a decision was made to start Theraplay. I was asked to work together with a social worker, Inger, who had been in contact with the family since Aaron was 3 months old.

In the MIMs both parents were very sensitive and caring towards Aaron. They had some difficulty directing him or asking him to do something he didn't want to. Both parents were aware of this and said themselves that they were afraid to be demanding of Aaron for the fear of upsetting him; Aaron's life had been so fragile in the beginning.

Theraplay was set to take place at the family home but one of the goals was that in the end the sessions would take place in a clinical office setting. Aaron's father wasn't able to attend all the sessions but agreed that he would join whenever he could. Inger was to be the parents' therapist and I was to be Aaron's. The treatment goals were:

- to help Aaron engage with people other than his parents
- to help the parents to challenge Aaron
- to ease Aaron's sensitivity towards touch and sounds

We had 15 Theraplay sessions in the springtime and 4 sessions the next fall.

First session:

Aaron flies with me to Mom's arms as she is sitting on a sofa with Inger. I put lotion in his hands and use quite a lot of pressure as Aaron is oversensitive to light touch. We play slippery hands and Aaron enjoys this; he smiles, first just a little, then as we play along he relaxes and smiles even more. I sing a finger counting song and suddenly Aaron pulls his

hand away. "Oops, slippery" I comment and Aaron grins. Then I ask him to push his hand between mine and then pull the hand away. Inger puts lotion on Mom's hands and Aaron pushes Inger's hand, "Oops, Mommy's hand is slippery too!". Inger takes Mom's both hands and Aaron helps Mom to pull her hands from Inger.

Aaron becomes a little restless and tries to get away from Mom's lap. I take hold of him and say "you're uncomfortable, let's put you in a better position" and Aaron relaxes. I count Aaron's toes and play peek-a-boo behind them. Aaron enjoys this and touches my hands. We compare our hands and then we compare Aaron's and Mom's, "Aaron's fist fits perfectly into Mom's!"

I take out soap bubbles, blow them and catch one. I take Aaron's hand, count to three and we break the bubble. Aaron doesn't like the wetness in his hands; I comment on that, and then continue playing. I take Aaron to my arms and ask Mom to close her eyes. I hide a cotton ball on Aaron and tell Mom to find it. As she finds it Aaron takes the ball and throws it. I put Aaron back into Mom's lap and they throw the cotton ball into my hands. All this time Inger is very supportive towards Mom and there is a lot of praising, laughing and admiring going on. We end the session by rocking Aaron in a blanket as we sing.

Aaron's sensory difficulties were apparent in Theraplay from the beginning. Aaron was especially sensitive to sounds; he always noticed before others an airplane overhead or a motorbike passing his house. As the Theraplay process advanced, he started to notice these things less, and at the end of treatment he ignored them completely, concentrating on our interaction and activities. Aaron's tolerance towards touch also developed quickly as he began to learn that not all touching was uncomfortable. It was important that his negative reactions to touch were noticed but instead of quitting, an effort was made to find an alternate way of touching that he could tolerate.

During therapy, we worked with his strong sensory reactions. For example, once I blew air into a huge balloon. At first Aaron pressed himself tightly into his mother's lap, raised his hands and froze. He didn't want to touch the balloon, but with a little help kicked it. I let the balloon go and it flew hissing across the room. As I blew the balloon again Aaron's aversion was less, and as we continued with the game, he was able to touch the balloon by himself. Working with Aaron in such an active, supporting and appropriately challenging way, enabled him to work through his initial negative reactions and experience success. His parents were able to support his efforts and experience the successful interactions with him.

During the spring Aaron's father was able to attend many of the Theraplay sessions. This was very important for the whole family, and Aaron started to seek comfort and support from his father as well as his mother. He showed separation anxiety for his father for the first time: as Aaron and his Mom were heading to the park and Dad to work, Aaron clung to his father and wanted to get into the car with him. Aaron's mother felt that this was an important outcome of the therapy. She had wanted for so long for Aaron and Dad to get closer to each other.

Towards the end of Theraplay treatment we had a few sessions in the Jorvi hospital Theraplay room. There, we were able to do some activities that were not so easy to do in a home setting. But more importantly, Aaron had progressed enough to be able to tolerate Theraplay sessions outside of his home.

We accomplished one of our original goals, and left the family with positive associations of the hospital setting which had been so negative and unpleasant for them all.

Last session at Jorvi Hospital, 9 months after starting Theraplay:

Aaron comes with both parents. He sits in his mother's lap while his father puts lotion on his hands. After that, mom brushes his hair. Mom has a cut on her finger, and Inger puts a bandage on it. Aaron watches carefully and looks worried. Mom assures him that she is alright and Aaron relaxes. Aaron points to the basket and says "goodies in basket" and we all admire his memory and use of words.

I start to blow a balloon and Aaron watches from his father's lap and hits the balloon as I count to 3. Balloon flies and we all laugh. "Balloon, oops" says Aaron. I blow the balloon again and Aaron says "One, two, three", I ask him to kick the balloon this time. He enjoys the game and shows no fear or anxiety. We continue with the balloon now full: adults are in a circle and Aaron is in the middle. We throw the balloon to him and he throws it to us. Aaron makes sure he throws the balloon to everybody. The atmosphere is relaxed and joyful. Then we have a cotton ball war, the family against us therapists. Aaron participates and the cheering and laughing is very loud. Then Aaron is rocked in a blanket while we sing. After that he sits in his mother's lap and his father feeds him chips.

Theraplay was very successful with Aaron and his family. It was a chance to experience new things in a safe environment with his parents. The parents trusted us therapists, and that allowed us to challenge Aaron in areas that were difficult to him such as touch, sounds and sudden changes. It also gave the parents a chance to enjoy Aaron even for a moment without worry and anxiety. I also found that psychologically nurturing the visible and invisible scars from the time in the ICU was very important for all of them.

Aaron's development has taken huge step, and he has now started daycare and is able to separate from his parents during the day. He is still sensitive to sounds, but is able to cope better. Over the winter he had occupational therapy, and at his current age of three years ten months, he speaks very well and has friends of his own age.

Aaron's Mother's thoughts about Theraplay

Aaron was a very expected and wanted addition to our family. He is our firstborn and he will be our only child. The whole pregnancy was difficult; after the morning sickness in the first trimester began other difficulties in the pregnancy. Before Aaron was born I had to stay in hospital for 4 weeks. Aaron was born on 29th week of pregnancy. He had suffered vasculatory disorder of umbilicalcord, so he weighed less than he was supposed to. He spent his first 8 weeks in ICU and the next 4 weeks in childrens ward. He was released from hospital on the day he was meant to be born.

As Aaron came home, we got a lot of special instructions and medication to be given daily. At first we had checkups weekly. Due to Aaron being very infection prone we weren't allowed to take him out very much.

Soon I realized my tiredness and the amount of worry concerning Aaron's wellbeing. I cried easily. A nurse, who had taken care of Aaron at the hospital, recommended a

meeting with a family worker. I first met Inger at the hospital, and we arranged to meet at our home in the future. For the first year we met every week. I shared my concerns about Aaron's development with her. As Aaron grew and was closer to the age of one, I started noticing more worrying things about his development. Aaron was afraid of other children, especially their voices. He was also afraid of various sounds at home and paid special attention to sounds in his surroundings. He didn't cry when he fell and hurt himself, he didn't want his hands to be touched. After sharing all this with Inger, she recommended Theraplay.

We began Theraplay when Aaron was 18 months. I didn't know about it beforehand, and we had an open mind going into this process. When Hanna came to our home to do Theraplay, Aaron trusted her from the beginning. Aaron seemed to enjoy Theraplay although it was challenging for him and sometimes he disliked the activities. We did a lot of activities together. We parents noticed that we could do things with Aaron even if he didn't enjoy all of them. Lots of activities were useful in our everyday life. Very soon Aaron started to tolerate more stimuli, and his progress was a pleasure to watch. Aaron still has sensory integration issues but he has made great progress. He can better tolerate the surrounding noise, and he can interact with other children. Aaron started daycare in a special group this fall and he has made friends there. He is still afraid of children younger than him and is frightened by unexpected sounds. I believe that if we hadn't started Theraplay at such a young age our life would be much more challenging. We still sing and play some of the songs and activities we learned at Theraplay and Aaron enjoys this with us.