SAFE PLACE: A Collaborative Sensory Integration-Based Approach to Treating Trauma

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SAFE PLACE is a collaborative treatment program among occupational therapists, psychotherapists, and parents for children with sensory processing disorder (SPD) and complex trauma-attachment concerns. It is both a theoretical model explicating the relationship between sensory processing, disrupted attachment and complex developmental trauma concerns in children and a specific 12 week collaborative interdisciplinary sensory integration-based trauma-informed intervention program for treating these concerns.

Many adopted/fostered children present with trauma-attachment concerns and SPD. SAFE PLACE provides a therapeutic framework for service providers and parents which emphasizes development of body-based regulatory and adaptive functions with co-regulation and intersubjective experiences, deepening of attachment bonds and security, and processing and healing of traumatic experiences in the context of a sensory integration intervention process.

Occupational therapists providing Ayres Sensory Integration® intervention (Smith Roley, Mailloux, Miller-Kuhanec, & Glennon, 2007) routinely address problems in self-care, sensory regulation and motor performance in children with Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD). Sensory Processing Disorder is a problem with processing and integrating sensory inputs which results in deficits in making appropriate responses to sensorimotor demands. These problems impact children’s ability to learn, be self-sufficient, and engage in meaningful lives. Sensory processing disorder not only impact the children’s lives but those of their families as well (Dunn, 1997). Occupational therapists with sensory integration training are increasingly asked to treat children, many of whom are adopted or fostered, with SPD who also have complex trauma and attachment disorders. Similarly, psychotherapists frequently treat children with trauma histories who also present with sensory sensitivities characteristic of SPD that appear secondary to the trauma. Knowledge of and some expertise in addressing the problems of the other’s discipline is needed for both occupational and psychotherapists in order to best meet the needs of these most complex children.

The clear compatibility of sensory integration and trauma and attachment theories and interventions led Jane Koomar, PhD and Daniel Hughes, PhD to hypothesize that each intervention approach could support the other to work more effectively to help children with SPD and co-morbid complex trauma histories heal and develop effectively. This perspective suggested the need for a collaborative theoretical model and intervention program that acknowledged the necessity of regulation and discrimination of sensations, adaptation of motor demands, and regulation of emotions, affect, and behavior in order for these children to learn and grow. Koomar and Hughes subsequently developed the SAFE PLACE model and intervention program as a trauma-informed, integrative, collaborative mental health and occupational therapy intervention for children who experience both SPD symptomatology and complex trauma and attachment concerns.

This poster describes the key characteristics, principles and components of the SAFE PLACE intervention model.