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Healing Spaces

by Theresa Fraser

Healing Spaces is an ongoing article in Playground. If you would like your playroom featured please contact theresafraser@rogers.com. Theresa is particularly interested in hearing from therapists from other provinces since previous articles have focused on Ontario and Manitoba. This edition of Healing Spaces is focused on Tammy Reis from the Yukon.

Tammy Reis first heard about the CACPT Play Therapy Certificate Program in 2000 from a fellow student when she attended her M.S.W. program at Wilfred Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario.

A year after graduate school she moved to the Yukon. She grew up in Southern Ontario but wanted the experience of working with a First Nation's Community. She also loved the outdoors so the Yukon became the place for her to explore and work as a child protection social worker for the Yukon Government (YTG) and later as a counsellor for Child Abuse Treatment Services (another unit of YTG's Health and Social Services Department).

Tammy believes that PLAY is one of the best ways possible to build relationships with and connect with children and youth and has dedicated her life to the field of child welfare and working with children, youth, and families that have experienced child maltreatment and trauma.

Child Abuse Treatment Services provides individual, group, and family counselling to children, youth, and families that have experienced child maltreatment (physical, sexual, emotional abuse, witness to family violence, and neglect) throughout the Yukon Territory. Tammy and her team work with children, youth, and their families until they reach the age of 19. Some children live with their biological families, while others are living in foster home or group care settings. Tammy's home base is in the Yukon capital, Whitehorse. However a couple of times a month she travels to three remote Northern communities.

In these areas she often works with First Nation families who have suffered the negative consequences of Canada's assimilation policies. Any service providers who work with this population need to understand this history and how it impacts their work with

children, youth, and families. For travelling clinicians, they need to be willing and able to drive long distances and reside in hotels far away from home. The climate in the Yukon is also cold and winters are long and dark.

Yukon clinicians have access to fewer resources than in other provinces and in urban centres. It is therefore harder to attend training/workshops because travel is expensive and it takes a lot of time to get to training or workshop destinations. That said, the Yukon can attract some great speakers because people do want to travel to the Yukon!

Tammy works within a multidisciplinary team hence there are clinicians with various Masters Degrees including Social Work, Family and Couples counselling, Psychology, and Counselling. Tammy shared that when she first became employed at Child Abuse Treatment Services she began looking for training opportunities that would enhance her ability to work in this setting with her client group. She found the CACPT web site and began her certification journey as a Child Psychotherapist and Play Therapist.

Tammy attended the Play Therapy Certificate levels in London and while working with her clientele gained distance supervision from CACPT supervisor Liana Lowenstein. Tammy identified that her supervision experience exposed her to up to date practice and research as well as individualized mentorship and encouragement.

Tammy is also grateful for the support she received from her supervisors at Child Abuse Treatment Services. She was encouraged to pursue her Play Therapy Certification and supported in obtaining outside supervision. Tammy was able to utilize the play therapy skills she was gaining with her caseload at Child Abuse Treatment Services.



Note: the orange backpack “office” in the corner.

Tammy has also participated in additional training with Dr. Evangeline Munns in order to hone her skills in filial and non-directive play therapy approaches. Tammy has also trained with APT and CACPT Supervisor Marie-Jose Dhase.

New interns will appreciate Tammy’s recommendation that they research the writings of Dr. Gary Landreth, Dr. Charles Schaefer, and Dr. Eliana Gil. Dr. Gary Landreth’s book, *The Art of Relationship* was the first play therapy book that she found. Once read, Tammy knew that Play Therapy was the direction she wanted her career to go in. Dr. Eliana Gil’s book on working with children and trauma has also been very important to her practice.

Tammy has been working towards certification since September 2005. She states that her theoretical underpinnings have remained much the same, however her practice has changed in that time as she has also developed skills in different approaches/techniques such as sand tray, filial, etc. Clearly as her knowledge base and skills have developed, she states that she feels more relaxed and also feels more creative in her work with children and youth. Ongoing training and supervision have provided her with more personal and professional resources to draw from.

Theoretical models that most impact her practice include attachment theory, trauma theory, the neurosciences (especially Dr. Bruce Perry’s Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics), cognitive behavioural therapy, systems theory and person centred approaches to working with children, teens and their families.

Tammy has built up her play therapy room gradually over the last five years. She shared that she sets aside a certain amount of money a year towards new toys, games, figures, etc. However she used the basics list found in the *Art of Play Therapy* (Landreth, 2002) as her starting point. She identified early that she wanted quality toys for the children and youth to use. Taking her time, prioritizing her purchases and spreading her wish list out over the last five years has allowed her to set up a great play room without feeling like she has burdened herself financially. Nieces and nephews have also shared previously loved items.

Tammy enjoys her collection of children’s books. She likes to go through them and choose just the right story for a specific child that she is working with. She also enjoys her sand tray figures collection (as do the children) and uses these figures for so much more than

sandtray. Adults can’t keep their eyes off the figures when they first come into her office. The same is true for the children.

Given Tammy is a travelling therapist, she packs up her toys in a big orange backpack. Once in the communities she works in, she sets up a counselling space in the school, health centre, or social service office by spreading out a large blanket and organizing the toys, games, art supplies around the blanket. She enjoys creating this healing space for the children in the remote communities who might not otherwise be able to access Play Therapy.

She tries to take as many toys/games/figures etc to allow for children in the remote communities to have access to the same therapeutic toys the children in Whitehorse have access to. It’s a heavy back pack.

Tammy has these recommendations for new Interns:

- (1) Take your time.** Sometimes it is daunting, thinking of all the clinical and supervision hours that you have to accumulate. Enjoy the process and learn as much as you can along the way. Eventually the criteria will be met and all hard work will have paid off. It is worth the long haul!
- (2) Take as much training as you can from as many different people as possible.** This can expose you to different approaches and styles of play therapy and help you to determine what works best for you and those you work with.
- (3) Build on your strengths.** Tammy has always liked playing games and reading stories. She likes to use games and bibliotherapy in her work because it feels the most natural.
- (4) Lastly, learn as much as you can** about the impact of trauma so you can support traumatized children and youth in best way possible.

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About the author

Theresa is now a fully certified Child Psychotherapist and Play Therapist and practices in Ontario. She is a Part Time Professor at Mohawk College and in 2009 her book Billy had to move: a foster care story was published.

She is the new President of our Association and most proud of being the mother of six boys. She would like to hear from therapists from other provinces for future Healing Spaces articles.