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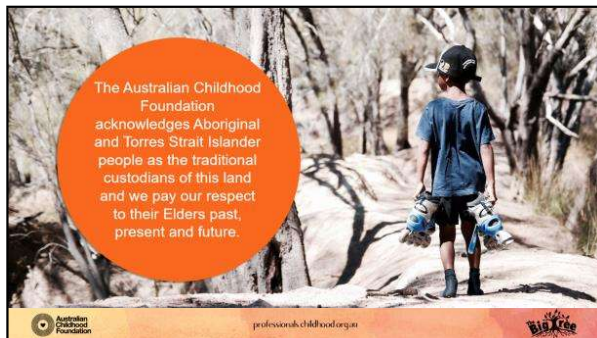
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The Australian Childhood Foundation acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the traditional custodians of this land and we pay our respect to their Elders past, present and future.

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Share a story of a doll or toy that has had special meaning in your life

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## Outline of Today's Session

- Conceptual Origins
- Get to know the Big Tree dolls- their stories and their key themes
- Engage with the Big Tree toys through 5 different therapeutic lenses:
  - ❖ \* Explore
  - ❖ \* Evoke new narratives
  - ❖ \* Embody
  - ❖ \* Emotionally connect
  - ❖ \* Enhance relationships



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## Beginnings



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## Beginnings

- In 2012, ACF entered into a partnership with Gucci with a view to creating a range of toys that could help children who have experienced trauma.
- The Foundation collaborated with designer and maker, Harriet Godden to create four weighted soft toy characters for children who have experienced trauma. These became the Big Tree dolls.



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## Beginnings

- The Big Tree dolls are four colourful, texturally rich dolls, designed to help children who have experienced trauma.
- The toys are conceived of as children themselves who have experienced their own share of troubles. These four folk have worked out ways to cope and recover from their tough times and in this way have lots to offer other children who could be facing similar challenges.



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Morten Monster



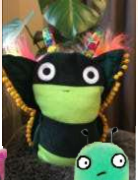
Ollie Monkey



Susan Kitten



Ellen



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## Origins, Children and Play

- Play is the predominant language of childhood, and is integral to children's development.
- "Play is an activity that is intrinsically motivated, entails active engagement, and results in joyful discovery." Yogman, et al. 2018
- Toys, be they teddy bears or balls, or sticks, are children's instruments of play.



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Peek a boo – a neural exercise



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### Children, Play & Trauma

- "Play and stress are closely linked. High amounts of play are associated with low levels of cortisol, suggesting either that play reduces stress or that unstressed animals play more." Wang & Aamodt, 2011
- "In the presence of childhood adversity, the role of play becomes even more important in that the mutual joy and shared attunement that parents and children can experience during play downregulates the body's stress response." Yogman, et al. 2018



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- "The removal of threat is not the same as the presence of safety" (Porges, 2014)
- We need to help children who have experienced trauma detect more features of safety in their environment.



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### How our nervous system protects us, according to Porges

**Social Engagement System**

- Our Social Engagement System is engaged with the neuroception\* of safety
- Facial expression, vocalization, listening
- Fosters calm behavioural states by inhibiting the influence of the sympathetic nervous system on the

**Mobilization**

- Fight or Flight
- Active Freeze
- Activated in moderate to extreme danger

**Immobilization**

- Collapse or submission
- Death feigning, behavioral shutdown
- Increased pain threshold
- Conserves metabolic resources
- Activated in life threatening situations

\* Neuroception = the way our neural circuits, rapidly and implicitly, distinguish if situations or people are safe or dangerous

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### Detecting Safety – The Social Engagement System

#### A face, voice, heart connection



- Our middle ear muscles are working to hear talking above background noise.
- Our facial muscles allow us to express emotion.
- Our muscles of mastication can help us ingest.
- Our laryngeal and pharyngeal muscles allow us vocalisation and language.
- Our head turning muscles allow us to make social gestures and orient towards others.
- Our eyelids are open allowing us to see.
- Our heart rate is slowed and our blood pressure is regulated allowing us to grow and restore our neurophysiological systems.

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### Detecting Safety with our Social Engagement System






- We feel safe together in this state.
- This is a calm behavioural state.
- Often characterized by mirroring and reciprocity.
- Tell tale signs—people are orientated towards one another with engaged faces

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### Immobilization in safety.....danger

Access to Social Engagement System → No access to Social Engagement System



Inhibiting movement for pro-social reasons eg. Childbirth, nursing, reproductive behaviours, and the establishment of social bonds eg. being hugged.  
Finding pleasure in stillness.

Submission or Collapse

Neuroception of Safety → Neuroception of Danger

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### Mobilization in safety.....danger

Access to Social Engagement System → No access to Social Engagement System



Play

Fight or flight or Active Freeze

Neuroception of Safety → Neuroception of Danger

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'Angry Monster'  
Mobilization

'Friend Bear'  
Socially Engaged

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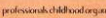

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**Play as a neural exercise**

Play requires reciprocal and synchronous interactions using the social engagement system as a "regulator" of mobilization behaviour (eg: fight/flight).

Dr Stephen Porges


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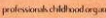

**Play and our Nervous System**

According to Porges, play is largely a blend of the social engagement system and a mobilized nervous system activated in the absence of danger.

When a child plays she/he is engaging in useful neural exercises that is shaping her/his nervous system.

"Play and stress are closely linked. High amounts of play are associated with low levels of cortisol, suggesting either that play reduces stress or that unstressed animals play more." Wang & Aamodt, 2011

Social Engagement System & Mobilized Nervous System


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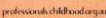
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**Play and our Nervous System**

Porges characterizes play through the lens of his theory in the following way: (2011, p. 277)

- Detection of safety that allows rapid recruitment of the social engagement system (to contain potential aggressive or defensive behaviours)
- Turn taking in expressive motor movements
- Reciprocal receptive inhibition of activity
- Concern for the wellbeing of others
- Activation of a mobilized nervous system followed by re-engagement of the vagal brake of the social engagement system (to restrain mobilization)
- Face to face engagement to assess intentionality



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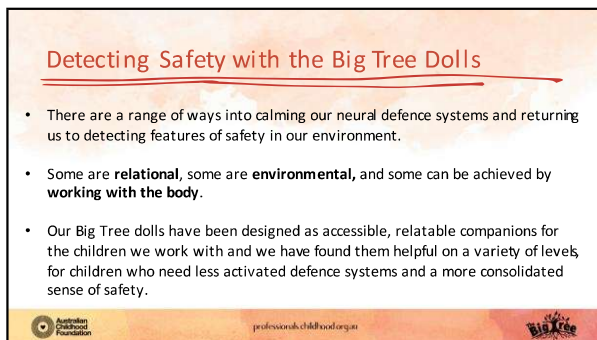
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### Regulation and Sensory Processing

- The Big Tree dolls have weighted filling allowing them to conform to whomever they rest on. For many this offers a sense of containment and security. Grandin (1992) has written about the benefits of deep pressure touch noting that while very light touch alerts the nervous system, deep pressure touch is relaxing and calming.
- Deep pressure touch has been found to have beneficial effects in a variety of clinical settings. It has also been used to reduce tactile defensiveness in children who cannot tolerate being touched.

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### Regulation and Sensory Processing



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### Big Tree Dolls, Regulation & Sensory Processing

- The tactile nature of the Big Tree dolls, made from soft, cuddly fabrics are intended to promote sensory engagement. Their designs are textually rich, using fabrics like velvet, corduroy, jersey, and faux fur which confer a comforting, soothing experience.
- The tactile and visual nature of the Big Tree dolls encourages enriched sensory exploration and processing experiences. The basic sensory nature of these interactions will always underlie any more conceptual engagement a child has with the toys.

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### An enduring, safe connection

"I smelt him and I knew exactly who it was"

- 40 per cent of Americans have their favourite stuffed animal by their side when they go to bed. More than half of those polled say they've owned their stuffed animal for more than 20 years. More than 70 percent of those respondents said they were never going to get rid of their fluffy friend. (Atomik Research Group, Sept. 5, 2017)



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### Big Tree Dolls, A Safe Relational Object

- The Big Tree dolls can help in our establishment of a safe relational context for children.
- Children can project onto these dolls, secure, non-judgemental acceptance of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs and desires.
- The Big Tree dolls can be useful relatable objects for children who haven't found person to person relationships easy or beneficial in the past.



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*The Velveteen Rabbit*  
MARGERY WILLIAMS • Illustrations by DONNA GREEN



**A saferelational object**

- "What is real?" asked the Rabbit one day. "Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you when a child loves you for a long, long time. By the time you are Real, you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."
- "Fancy all that fuss for a toy!" said Nana. "You mustn't say that", the boy said. "He isn't a toy. He's REAL."

Written in 1922



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### What love can look like

When everything was unknown, they were there.  
Where anything could happen, they were there.  
These repositories of hugs, of fears, of hopes, of tears,  
of snots and smears.

Alone at night, they were the comforters, when  
monsters lurked in darkened corners, when raised  
voices muffled through floors and walls.

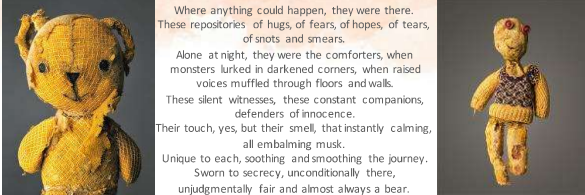
These silent witnesses, these constant companions,  
defenders of innocence.

Their touch, yes, but their smell, that instantly calming,  
all embalming musk.

Unique to each, soothing and smoothing the journey.  
Sworn to secrecy, unconditionally there,  
unjudgmentally fair and almost always a bear.

Mark Nixon

<https://www.marknixon.com/much-loved>



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### Connecting through the Big Tree Dolls

- The Big Tree dolls offer an opening for children to connect again with imagination and play. They extend the simple chance for children to explore and create new narratives in the here and now.
- Playing with children can help us to join with them in a language they understand and are familiar with.
- Our play with children can be validating and connecting. It demonstrates to them that they are important and that their play is worthwhile.



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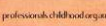


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### Dad's who play Barbies

"Time spent in her imaginary world is an investment in her real world."



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### Big Tree Dolls, processing trauma

Our research and practice has shown us that accessing children's experience through toys and games can help in trauma processing.

The way children use toys can tell us a lot about:

- Their needs, met and unmet
- Their self conception
- Their relational templates
- Their regulative capacity
- Their trauma narrative



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### Who are the Big Tree Dolls?



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### Morten Monster

**Key Conceptual Themes:**  
Exploring Identity & Emotional Expression



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**Morten Monster**

Morten is a friendly, sensitive monster. He has many feelings he shows through the various facial features he displays on his front. He carries all of his un-used facial features with him in a pouch in his back, so they are always there to change around if he starts to feel differently. Morten is a very expressive monster that just wants to be accepted. He has trouble sometimes going for walks or to the shops because he feels like people are scared of him. They don't really know Morten and can sometimes have the wrong idea about monsters like him. He is working on ways to feel better about himself and to feel like he fits in with those around him.

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**Ollie Monkey**

**Key Conceptual Themes:**  
Nurture & Nourishment, Being heard & finding voice.



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**Ollie Monkey**



The first thing most people notice about Ollie is his big mouth. It is often full of delicious foods that he loves sharing with those around him. Ollie is a very caring monkey that loves hugs, smiles and being with friends. There is a brightness and richness to Ollie that people like to be around, and his sense of wonder and mischievousness makes him always curious about the world around him. What a lot of people don't know about Ollie is that he is a brilliant listener with his big blue and white spotty ears. His friends know that he is easy to talk with because of his good listening skills and because the zip on his mouth means he will keep safe any idea that they tell him until they are ready for him to open up and share it. He is a very trustworthy monkey.

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Ollie's food

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**Susan Kitten**

**Key Conceptual Themes:**  
Practicing Relaxation & Calm.  
Exploring self narratives.

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**Susan Kitten**

Susan is a soft, lovable kitten with a lot on her mind. Her head is often full of ideas and feelings, many of which worry and scare her. You can look into Susan's mind by opening a pocket in the top of her head and pulling out the concertinaed book with velcroed images that show you exactly what is going on in there. Susan particularly struggles with bedtime and sleep. Luckily, she is a very smart kitten who is learning about ways to relax and find calm. Once relaxed, Susan can cast more hopeful and positive imagery into the book she keeps in her mind. Then, as she shuts her big wide eyes she can look forward to sleep and take her book of beautiful imaginings and hopes with her to help weave some lovely dreams.

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### Susan's Symbols




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### Ellen Caterpillar

**Key Conceptual Themes:**  
Transformation & Increasing  
Adaptability




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### Ellen Caterpillar



Ellen is a curious, hopeful caterpillar; with feelers always looking out for useful information. She lives on her own in the Big Tree and can come across as shy when you meet her, mainly because she doesn't talk much about herself. Ellen is trying to work out who and what she wants to be as she grows up. She can't seem to shake the feeling that she doesn't measure up and isn't sure where she belongs. Ellen looks to others to help her. She weaves a cocoon for some time on her own to curl up and knit some ideas together. After a time she emerges transformed. Now she can fly and see the world in a way she never dreamed of, and the beauty that she always held inside becomes written on her wings for everyone to see.

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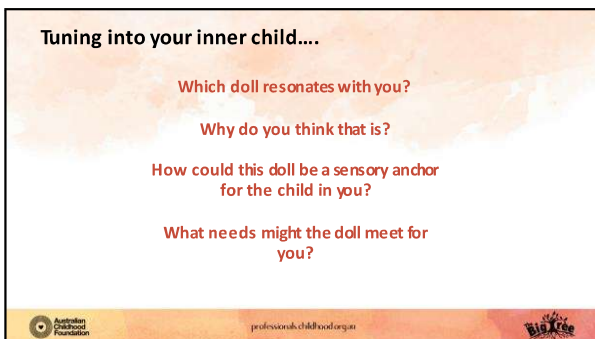
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### Therapeutic Ideas for working with the B.T. Dolls

Ways of working with the dolls are endless. Following are 5 organising lenses central to ACF's approach to working with traumatised children that are offered as guidelines and prompts to help you get the most out of the Big Tree Therapeutic Dolls.

- Explore
- Evoke new narratives
- Embody
- Emotionally Connect
- Enhance Relationships



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### Explore

The overwhelming and occupying nature of trauma can interrupt a child from engaging in the important developmental process of play. While activated in survival mode a child's capacity to freely explore and grow through play can be undermined. This lens is about noticing the way children spontaneously orientate, approach, and physically interact with their doll. It is about how children position themselves with their doll and how they go about being with their doll in a physical sense.



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### Evoke New Narratives

Each doll has its own story scaffolded around themes. These are stories offering movement from places of insecurity and limitation to more empowered and adaptive ways of being in the world. The dolls and their stories were constructed to have resonance for traumatised children as many of the struggles encountered throughout their stories resemble aspects of the lives of children who have experienced trauma. These folk know what it is like to make their way out of troubled times and may be helpful companions for children who feel lost or unable to see much light in their story ahead.



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Draw the rest of Morten Monster's Family



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**Embody**

Trauma can limit the way children engage with and inhabit their bodies. It can influence the shape of them in a physical sense and limit their ability to access or make meaning out of the way they move through the world. The Big Tree dolls offer opportunities for children to embody aspects of the character's stories and self. In this way children can experiment with shifting ways of being in their body and try on new or unfamiliar ways of moving and posturing. Walking in the shoes of the Big Tree dolls offers children a gentle and safe opportunity to shift how they inhabit their bodies and grow in confidence in connecting with their bodies and the world around them.



Australian Childhood Foundation | professionals.childhood.org.au | Big Tree

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**Emotionally Connect**

Children who have experienced trauma can live in a very disconnected way to their feelings. They can find it difficult to recognise shifting feelings in others and struggle to reflect on their own emotional states. The Big Tree dolls provide an aid to these processes with the opportunity for learning about feelings through the tools and symbols built into the dolls. The faces of the four folk are animated and almost cartoon like conferring amplified emotional content and the encouragement to be playful and have fun with their emotional exploration. Each of the character's stories have emotional content to engage with and children can be offered opportunities to relate with the character's emotional struggles and eventual triumphs.



Australian Childhood Foundation | professionals.childhood.org.au | Big Tree

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### Enhance Relationships

Helping children who have experienced trauma to feel safe and connected with those around them can often feel unfamiliar and untrusted for our children. The Big Tree dolls can play an important role in helping children to rebuild trust and connection with important people around them by linking the safe connection they build with their doll in therapeutic spaces into their broader life. Given their capacity to be taken home and easily transported around by children, the dolls can act as a bridge between therapeutic spaces and everyday life.

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### Other therapeutic ideas...

- Hold the doll in your lap – how does it feel? Soft, smooth, fuzzy, rough?
- Which way is it facing?
- I wonder what feelings its holding?
- What do you think it needs?
- What do you think it wants to say?
- Does it feel safe enough to say it?



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**Morten Monster** Key Themes: Exploring Identity & \ Emotional Expression



**Ollie Monkey** Key Themes: Nurture & Nourishment, Being heard & finding voice.



**Susan Kitten** Key Themes: Practicing Relaxation & Calm. Exploring self narratives.



**Ellen Caterpillar** Key Themes: Transformation & Increasing Adaptability



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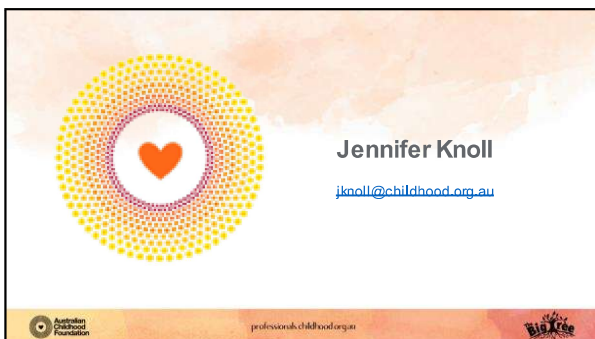
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