



The Big Tree

Therapeutic Dolls



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.

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

Beginnings



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.

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.

Morten Monster



Ollie Monkey



Susan Kitten



Ellen Caterpillar



Morten Monster



Ollie Monkey



Susan Kitten



Ellen Caterpillar



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.



Children, Play & Trauma

- Trauma can interrupt play's important role in development by demanding much of a child's energy and focus.
- When in survival mode a child's capacity to freely explore and grow through play may be compromised as their nervous systems are busily engaged in risk detection and their energies are directed towards self preservation.

We need to help children who have experienced trauma detect more features of safety in their environment.



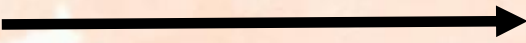
Detecting Safety with our Social Engagement System



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

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

Mobilization in safety.....danger

Access to Social Engagement System



No access to Social Engagement System



Play



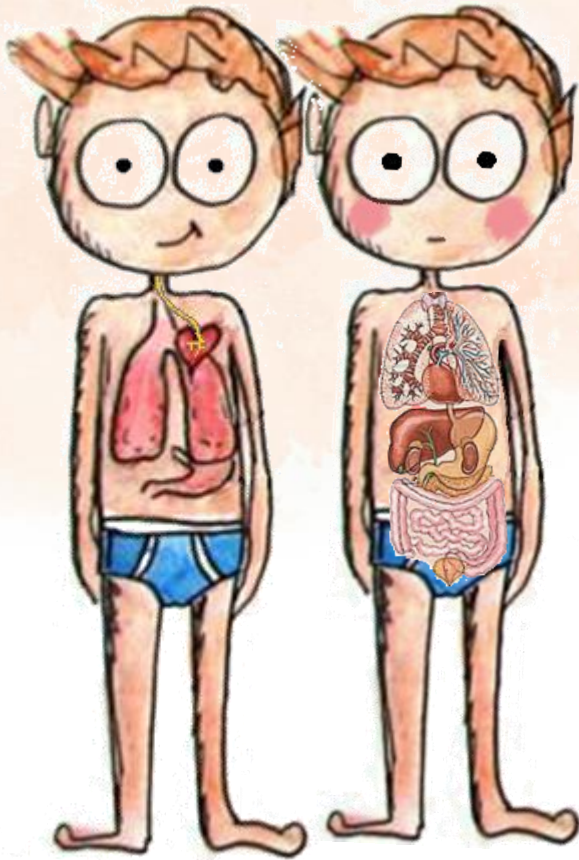
Fight or Flight or Active Freeze

Neuroception of Safety



Neuroception of Danger

Play and our Nervous System



Social
Engagement
& System

&

Mobilized
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

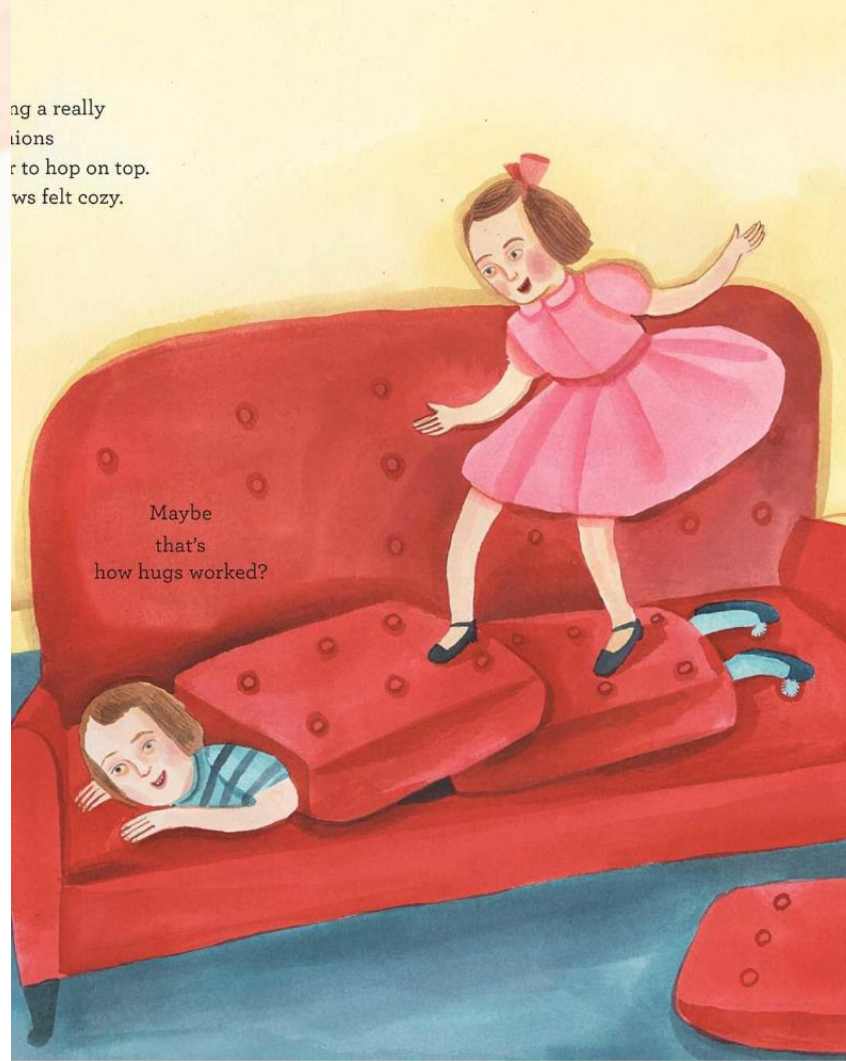
Detecting Safety with the Big Tree Dolls

- There are a range of ways into calming our neural defence systems and returning us to detecting features of safety in our environment.
- Some are **relational**, some are **environmental**, and some can be achieved by **working with the body**.
- Our Big Tree dolls have been designed as accessible, relatable companions for the children we work with and we have found them helpful on a variety of levels, for children who need less activated defence systems and a more consolidated sense of safety.

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.

Regulation and Sensory Processing



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.

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 the 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.







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.

Dad's who play Barbies

“Time spent in
her imaginary
world is an
investment in her
real world.”



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



Who are the Big Tree Dolls?



Morten Monster

Key Conceptual Themes:
Exploring Identity & Emotional
Expression



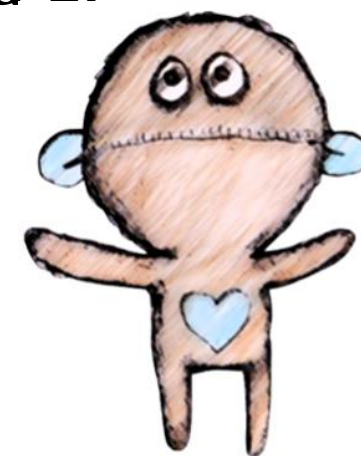


Morten Monster

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 unused 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.

Ollie Monkey

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



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.



Susan Kitten

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



Susan Kitten



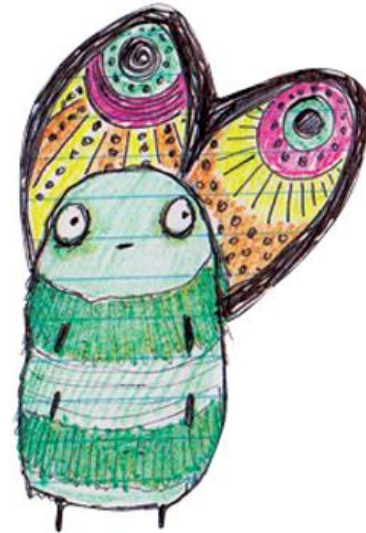
Susan is a soft, lovable kitten with a lot on her mind. Her head is often full of ideas and feelings, many of which worry and scare her. You can look into Susan's mind by opening a pocket in the top of her head and pulling out the concertinaed book with velcroed images that show you exactly what is going 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.

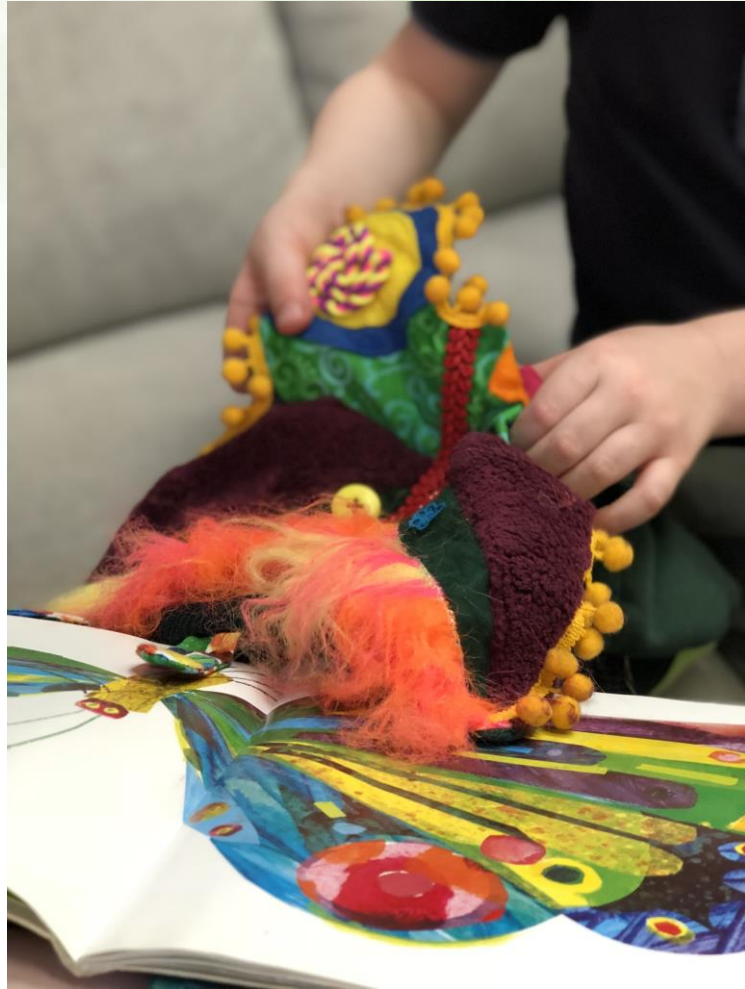


Ellen Caterpillar

Key Conceptual Themes:
Transformation & Increasing
Adaptability



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.

How caterpillars keep safe . . .



hide



sting



taste bad



smell bad



look like a snake



spit

Ellen can help us better understand some of the protective behaviours children who have experienced trauma can show us?

Therapeutic Ideas for working with the BTF

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



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.



Evoked 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.



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.



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.



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.



Morten & COVID 19

- Morten has lots of friends that are sitting in front windows and yards of neighbourhood houses at the moment. Maybe at your place too? Have you seen any toys when you go for walks? How does it feel when you spot one of Morten's friends? If these soft toys could speak to you what might they say?
- If you stomp really hard like Morten monster I bet you could almost feel like you are stomping on those rotten virus bugs.
- Do you have a favourite soft toy at your place? What's their name? Morten would love to meet your toy. Maybe you could go and grab your toy so they could have a chat? I wonder how your toy has been going with the coronavirus being around?



Morten & COVID 19

- Morten feels a lot. I wonder if he might be able to understand how you are feeling at the moment? Would you like him to guess a bit?
- In Morten's story, a helpful snail came to visit him when he felt stuck in his house. Is there anyone you wish could come and visit you right now? Whose place would you like to visit if you could right now?
- Maybe you could tell Morten some of your feelings at the moment? We could write them down and put them in Morten's back pocket to talk about next time? Morten will keep them safe.





Teddy's big
adventure



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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