

The Big Tree

Therapeutic Dolls



The Australian Childhood Foundation acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the traditional custodians of the lands upon which we meet. We pay our respect to their Elders, past, present and emerging.

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. They are for therapeutic use.
- 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



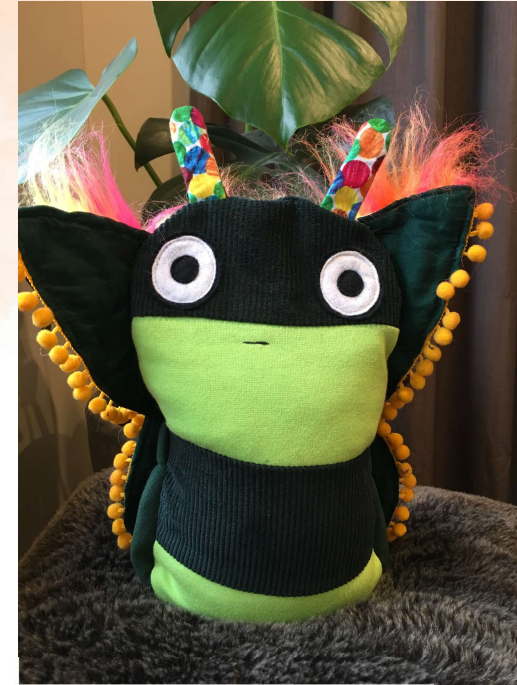
Ollie Monkey



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 reciprocity.
- 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

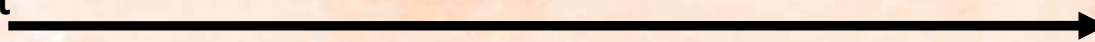
Neuroception of Safety



Neuroception of Danger

Mobilization in safety.....danger

Access to Social Engagement System



No access to Social Engagement System



Play



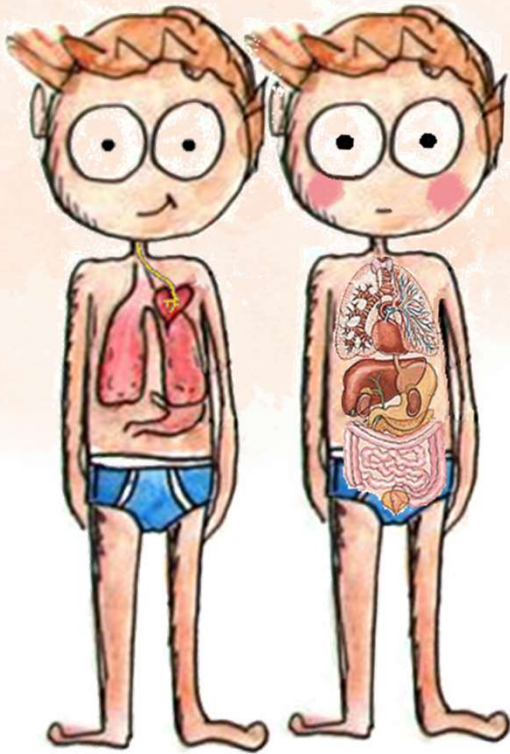
Fight or Flight or Active Freeze

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

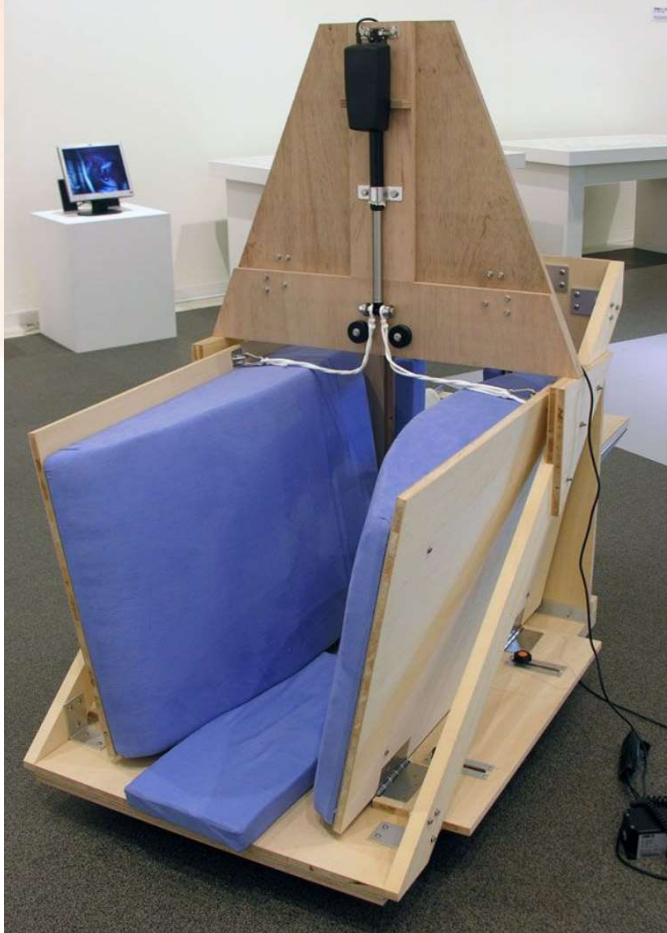
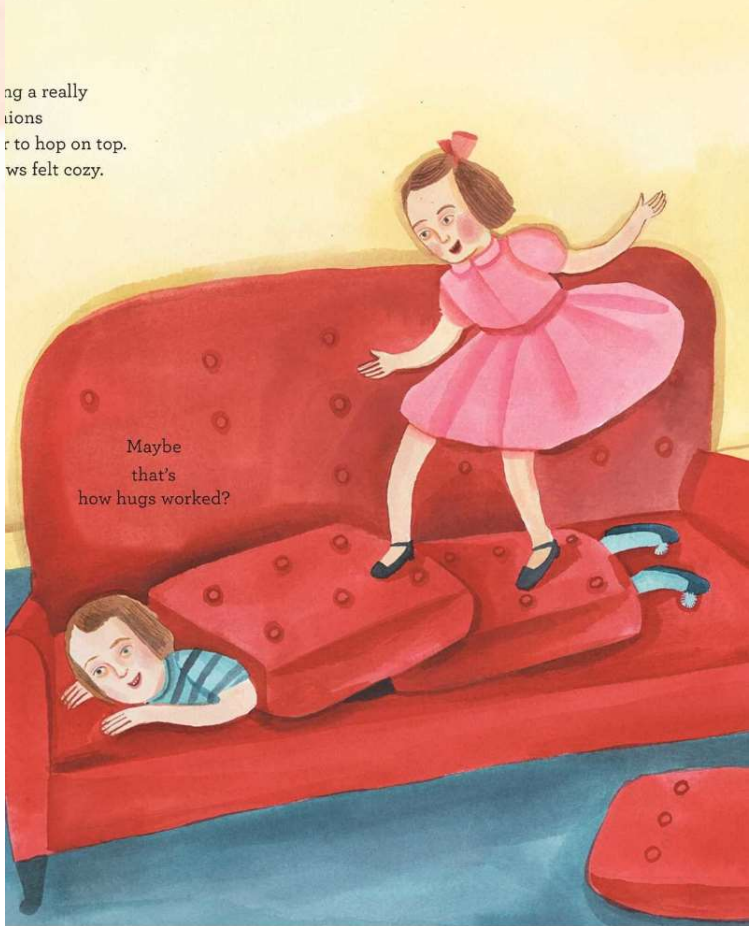
Detecting Safety with the Big Tree Dolls

- 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 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



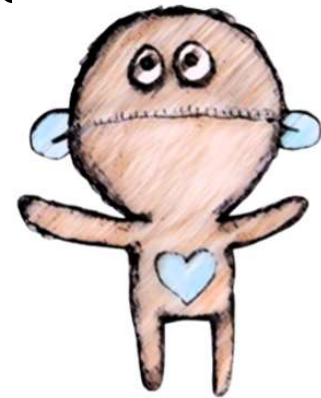


Morten Monster

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 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.

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



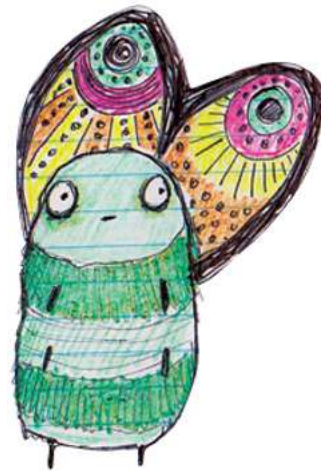
Susan is a soft, lovable kitten with a lot on her mind. Her head is often full of ideas and feelings, many of which worry and scare her. You can look into Susan's mind by opening a pocket in the top of her head and pulling out the concertinaed book with velcroed images that show you exactly what is going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

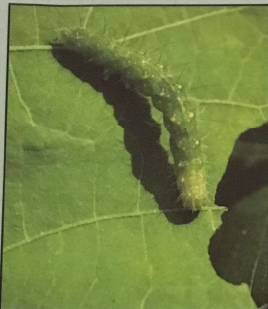


Ellen Caterpillar



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 . . .



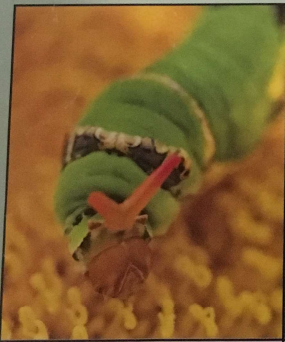
hide



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?

Implicit ideas for introducing the Dolls to children

- Place the doll/s in the room and introduce them if the child orientates towards them. The number of alternative offerings you provide in the space will influence this, along with your doll placement eg. did you put Morten on the beanbag or on a shelf alongside lots of other things, or on a chair in the room?
- Pre-set a scene with a Big Tree doll in the session space, related to the doll's themes eg. you might like to set Ollie up on a picnic blanket with picnic items around him, or Susan in a shoebox re-purposed into a bed, or put Ellen in a pot plant munching on leaves, or make a trail of Morty's facial features leading to Morty sitting in front of a mirror.

Explicit ideas for introducing the Dolls to children

- “I have a friend here that is keen to meet you. His name is Morty Monster.”
- Bring Morty with you to your first meeting with a child at school or home or in your service’s waiting room, and introduce him as your service’s friendly monster. Ask the child if she/he would like to say hello as you offer the doll to her/him?
- Introduce Morty as a friendly monster who needs some help because his face keeps falling off. Wonder out loud if the child might be able to help Morty? Offer them Morty and his facial features.

Invitations with the Dolls

- Move Morty around each week, so that he is sticking out of a drawer, or peeking out from behind a blind and encourage a game of hide and seek each week where the first part of the session is to find Morty.
- Between sessions, send snail mail written or drawn by the Big Tree Doll that the child is most familiar with. (Hand write/ draw these correspondences)
- Ask the child if they have any dolls at home that might like to meet Morty or Susan or whichever doll/s you have? Encourage the child to bring in their favourite doll in to meet a Big Tree Doll.

Themes and Lenses

- The Big Tree Dolls have been designed with individual themes related to trauma recovery sewn into them. These themes can be evoked in sessions with children and the dolls can be used as tools for related exploration and play.
- There are approaches ACF privilege in our work with children and trauma, for example the importance of relationship and embodied enquiry. All of the dolls can be used with children in keeping with five kinds of approaches presented as five organising lenses in the following slides.

Themes & Lenses



Morty

Exploring Identity &
Emotional Expression



Ollie

Nurture & Nourishment,
Being heard & finding voice.



Susan

Practicing Relaxation & Calm.
Exploring self narratives.



Ellen

Transformation &
Increasing Adaptability

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

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



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.



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.



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.





MORTY

The Day
Morty's Face
Fell Off

Morty Monster was having a bad day. His face kept falling off. Has that ever happened to you?

When Morty left his Hollow in the Big Tree that morning it had seemed like the perfect day for a walk. Then things started going wrong.

Morty ran into an enormous, empty spider web on a quiet stretch of walking trail and at that moment his face parts fell off onto the ground. Gone was his mouth, and eyes, and nose. He had to feel around for spare face parts in his back pocket to keep going. That was where he kept a collection of spare face parts useful in situations such as this. He re-arranged his face and scooped up his dusty fallen face parts that were lying on the ground.





Morty continued on until he reached an orchard beyond the bendy river. It was Autumn and the trees were bursting with delicious looking apples. He plucked one from the closest tree and took a big bite before realising a tiny grub had gotten to his apple before him. Oh, fiddle sticks thought Morty as his face parts fell off again, and once again he needed to remake his face.

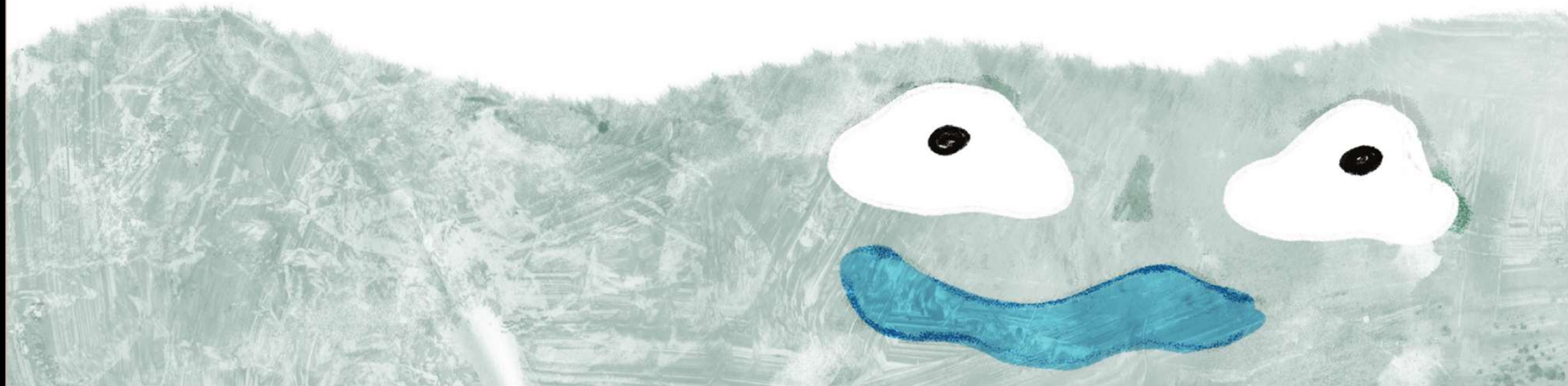


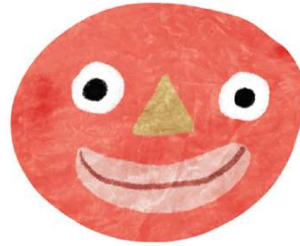
Morty was getting sick of this. He pulled out his face parts from his back pocket and held them in his hands. "Why do you keep falling off?" he shouted at them. "Why can't you just stay the way I arrange you when I get up in the morning?" He was feeling angry now.

Plonk, off they fell again.

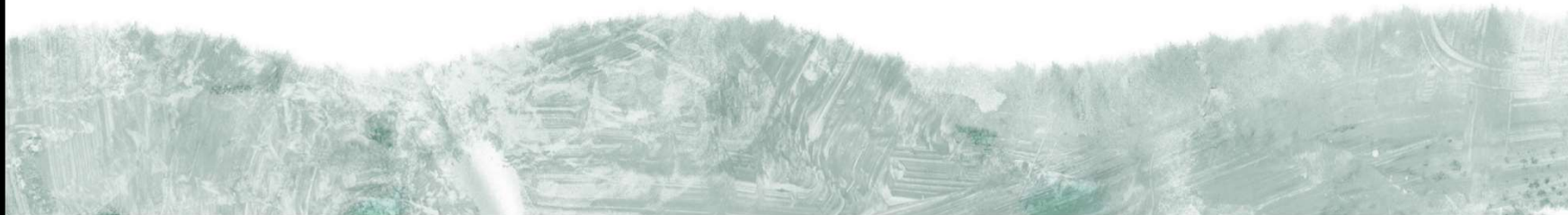


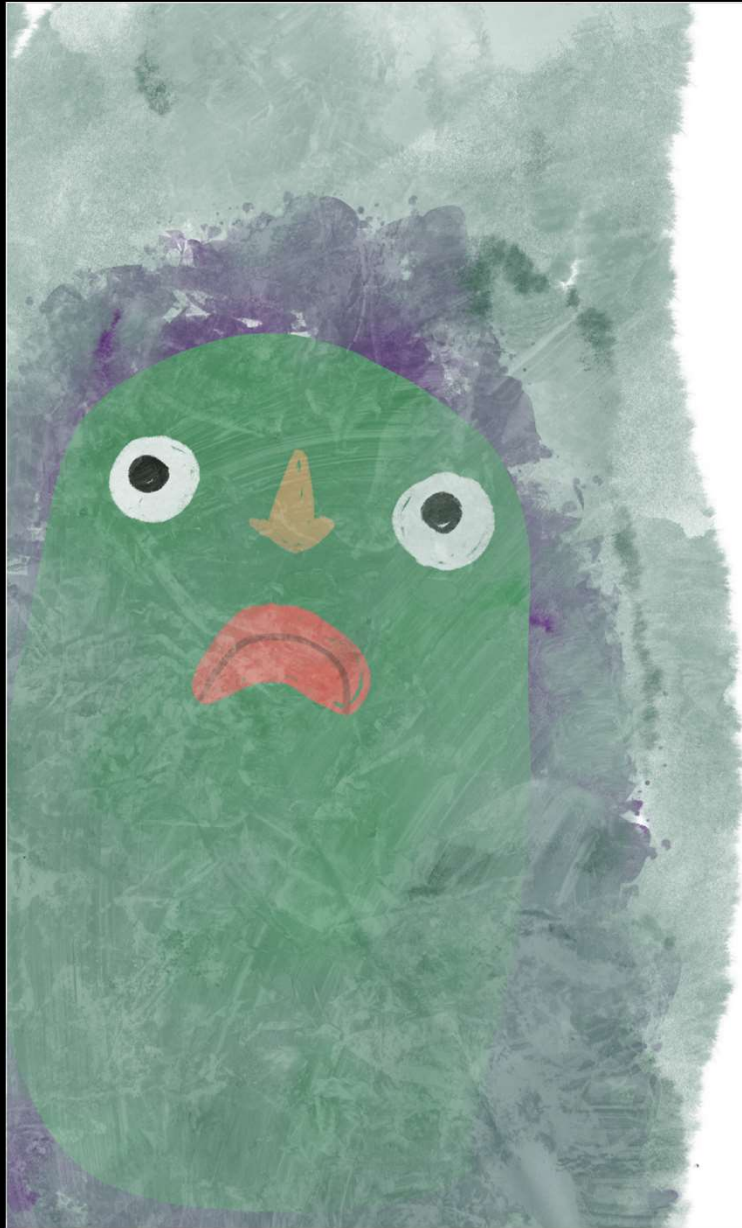
After he had put his face back together again, Morty turned to leave. He stepped onto a bridge over the bendy river, when he heard a voice below him. "Psssttt". Morty looked down, but no one was there. "Down here!" the voice called. Morty looked again and was astonished to realise that the river was talking to him. "I couldn't help but notice that you were talking to your face parts over there". Morty nodded. "I might have some answers" the river said. "I happen to have lots of experience looking at faces".



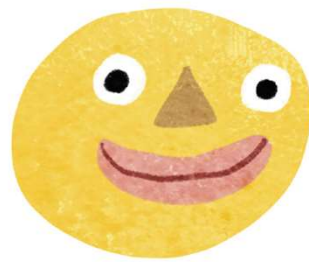


“I think your face keeps falling off because of your feelings” said the river. “I think that when your feelings change so does your face, or maybe it’s the other way around, I haven’t worked that out yet. What I do know is that different feelings seem to go with different faces. For example, scrunched up faces seem to go with feelings like anger or frustration. Big, wide, smiles and sparkly eyes go with excited or happy. There are many other combinations”.





“Why don’t you try it out for yourself?” said the river. “Use me for reflection”. Morty had a go. He thought about a happy memory and his face became arranged with a big wide smile and his sparkliest of eyes. Then he turned his smile upside down and that was enough for him to begin feeling sad.



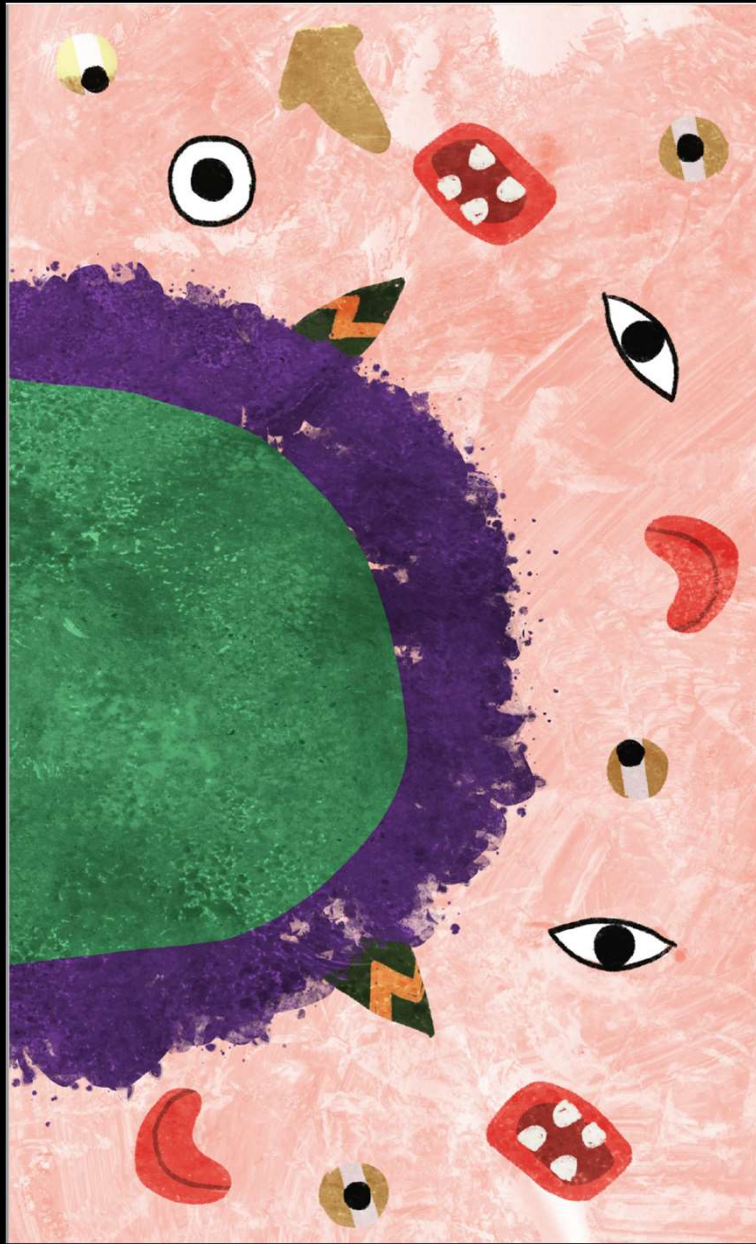
Morty thought back and tried to remember what had happened when his face had fallen off earlier that day. When he ran into the spider web he had felt shocked, and when he bit into the bad apple, he had felt disgusted. It was suddenly obvious to him, his surprises from earlier that day had led to strong feelings and that meant he needed completely new face parts- quickly. "So, that's why I have so many facial features" said Morty, "because I need them to go with my changing feelings."



Morty's mind was ticking over at one hundred miles per hour. What an amazing discovery. His shifting face suddenly felt incredible instead of a pain and his face parts felt like a gift. There was so much to feel he thought to himself. He was going to try out as many feelings as he could with his shifting face. "Thank you, River. I can't tell you how helpful you have been." Morty skipped off in the direction of the Big Tree. He was off home to experiment with feeling faces in his mirror. Morty's heart sang, and he felt a pang of joy.....

Plonk. After a quick face re-arrange, it was written all over his face.





Have you ever experimented with your feeling faces? How many do you think you might have?

How good are you at reading feelings on other people's faces?

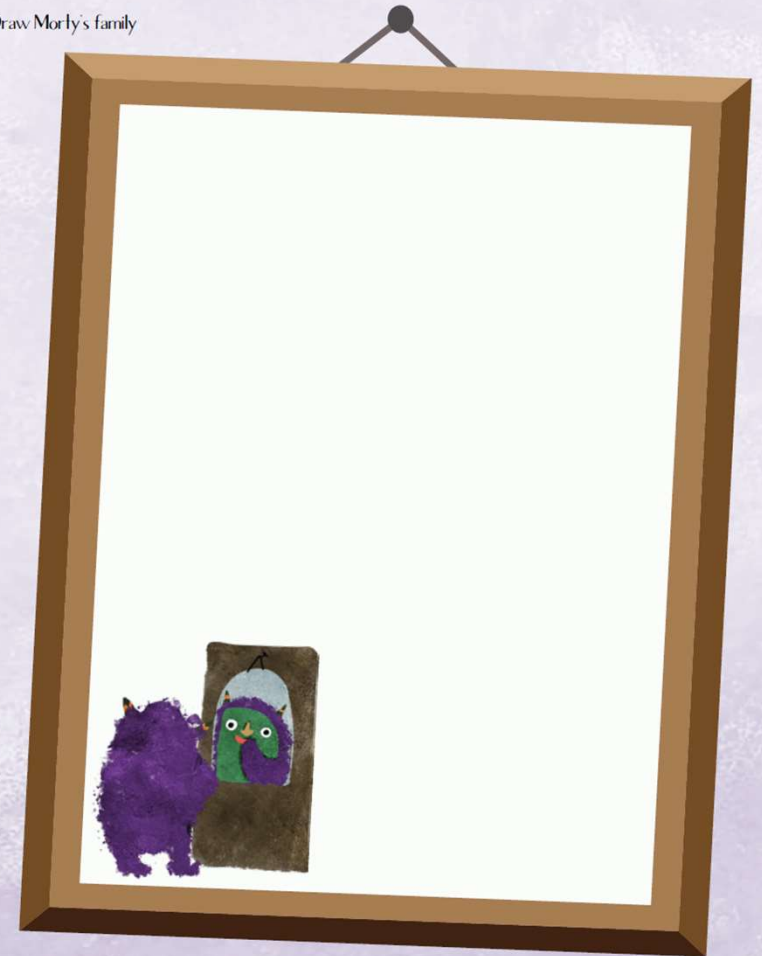
Sometimes people try to hide their feelings behind a face that doesn't match their feelings on the inside. Have you ever noticed this? What were the clues?

ACTIVITY

Morty's Family Portrait

Morty's Family Portrait

Draw Morty's family



ACTIVITY

Cocooning

A safe place for transformation

Cocoon Self-Reflection



Imagine you are readying yourself to transform. Make a list of what you might like to take into your own cocoon. What resources might you need? - books, music, movies, photos, materials, objects, people, food, ideas? What would be the most important things for you as you transform?

Where would you choose to locate your cocoon? Why?

Sketch your cocoon from the inside or the outside.



ACTIVITY

Storying with Susan's Symbols

Storying with Symbols

Tell, write or draw a story using the symbols from Susan's concertinaed book



ACTIVITY

An Ollie Inspired Restaurant

Our Family Restaurant

Ollie loves learning about new Restaurants and Cafes in his area. What if you were to open one at your house?

Does your Family Restaurant or Cafe have a name? You might like to write it down.

What will be included on your Family menu? You might like to write or draw pictures.

Additionally, you might like to make place setting cards or placemats for everyone who will be sitting around the table to eat at your family restaurant?



ACTIVITY

Swinging through the Ups and Downs



Life's Ups and Downs

Everyone's lives go up and down
Identify your lowest spot or the hardest bit of the day.
Identify two up spots or high spots of your day.
Write them down or draw them on the page under the up and down swinging Ollies.



The Big Tree Therapeutic Dolls

New Stories and Characters



Two New Big Tree Arrivals

Molly and Percy were both forced to flee their backyard home and found their way to the Big Tree. This pair of Big Tree recent arrivals allow us to explore new themes associated with re-location and sudden change. These experiences are common for children who have endured trauma.



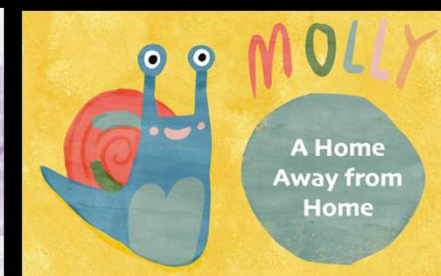
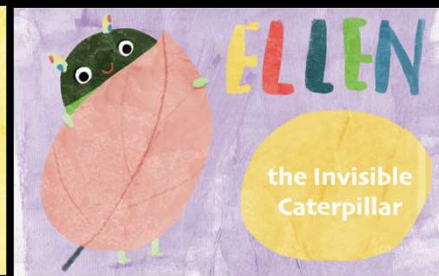
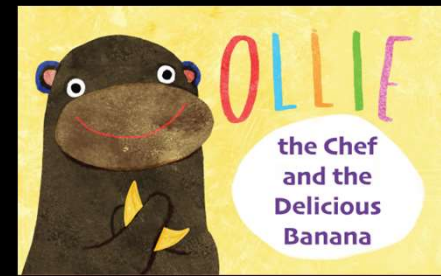
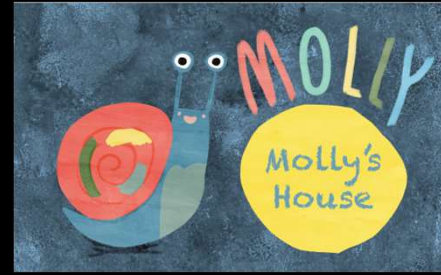
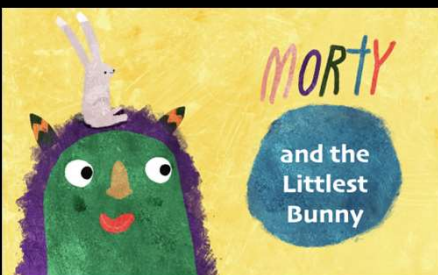
Molly Snail

Key Themes: How we Carry Home with Us & Life Story Exploration



Percy Bee

Key Theme: Orientating with love and care & Being part of a family



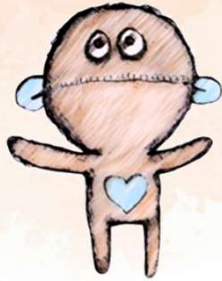
Big Tree Stories

12 stories related to the Big Tree Character's trauma recovery themes.

6 early years stories, related to Character themes.



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

