



Principles of Group Theraplay for Classrooms, Camps, Sibling Sets

Learning Objectives

- Apply Theraplay principles to group programming
- Develop skills in using the group rules and group techniques through practice
- Problem solve in adapting the use of Group Theraplay with various populations





A Theraplay Experience

Introductions

- Trainer leads a group activity
- Participants
 - Name
 - Where you work? / Who you work with?
 - Have you seen Theraplay before? Tried it?
 - What other programs or curricula do you use to support social/emotional needs?
 - How do you play?





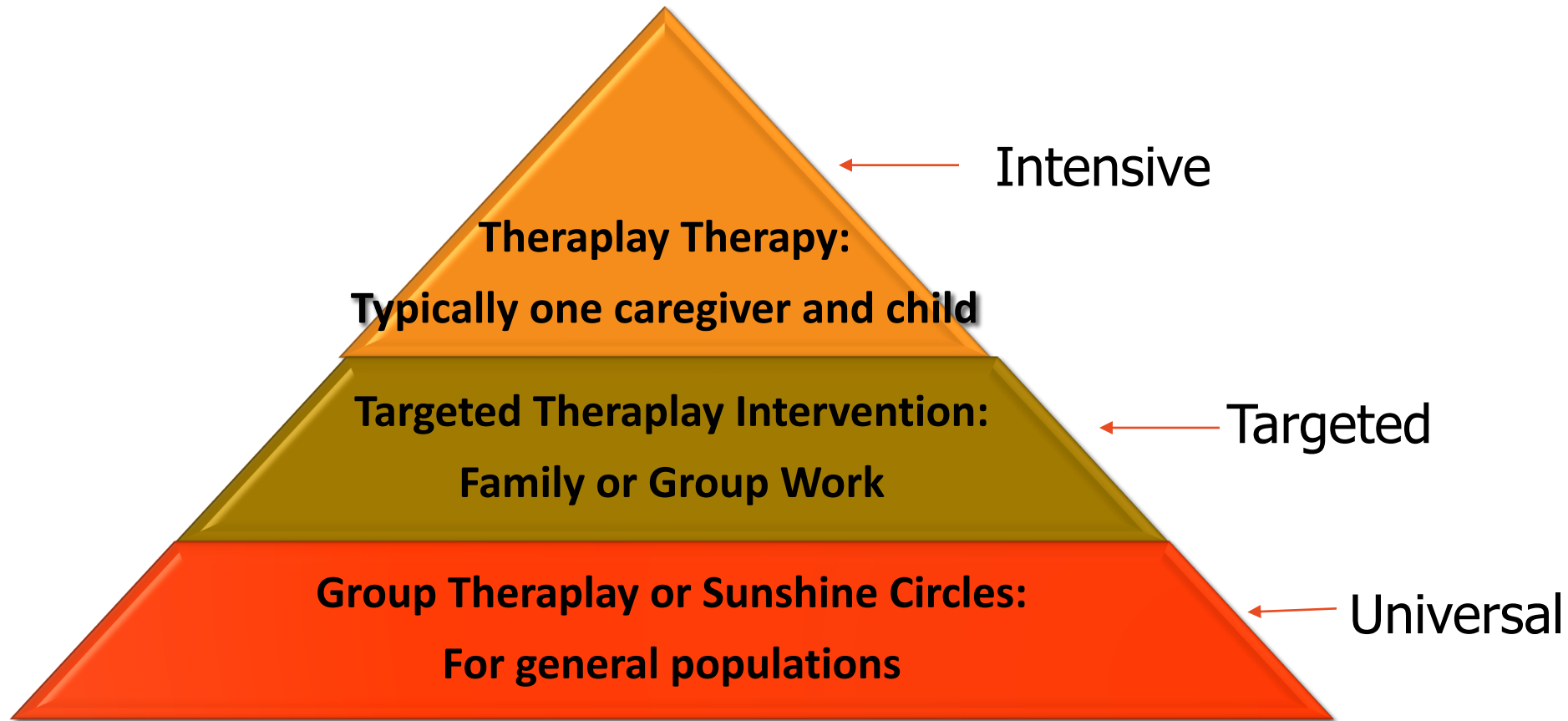
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Group Theraplay Video

What is Group Theraplay?

- Play groups adapted from Theraplay[®]
- Play groups are 99% interactive, 1% talking
 - Adult directed and structured
 - Support positive mental health: self-esteem, trust, positive sense of self, self-regulation
 - Teach pro-social skills for successful social interactions: attention, cooperation, turn-taking, waiting, sharing, etc.
 - Build positive relationships and communities
 - Improve group functioning and individual learning

Three Types of Theraplay Intervention



Where can Group Theraplay be used?

- Residential settings
- Schools
- Family education programs
- Caregiver education programs
- Before and after school programs
- Summer camps
- Children and adults with special needs

Anywhere that building relationships through having fun would help!



Goals of Group Theraplay

Stimulate the emotional
brain through Theraplay
activities

Structure
Engagement
Nurture
Challenge



=

- Felt safety
- Arousal regulation
- Appropriate social interactions
- Healthy sense of self
- Emotional connection and shared joy
- A more positive inner working model
- A more secure attachment

Group Theraplay Experience

- Welcome song
- Rules
- Check-ups
- Bean Bag Pass
- Feather Blow
- Patty Cake in group, then in pairs/small groups
- Row Row Row Your Boat in pairs/small groups
- Paper Punch in small groups
- Food Share
- Goodbye song “The More We Get Together”
- Transition



Theoretical Foundations for Group Theraplay





Healthy Attachment

“The parent-child relationship is the most powerful and influential element for change.” www.theraplay.org



Key Points of Attachment Theory

- A theory of child development
- Normal healthy development occurs in the context of a relationship
- The caregiver is experienced as essential for survival
- Attachment behavior is an instinctive biological drive. The goal of which is to secure the return of the caregiver
- Children will only play and explore when distress levels are low



Attachment Model

Caregiver's Behavior Toward Child



Positive and
Loving

Unloving and
Rejecting

Angry and
Confused

Atypical



Child's Inner Working Model of Self



Secure

Avoidant

Resistant

Disorganized

Attunement

- Sensitive parent/teacher/coach/counselor notices, understands and reflects back the level and tone of child's emotion, that is, how much and positive/negative tone rather than a specific feeling
- Child further learns about self by seeing feelings mirrored in the adult's face



Co-Regulation

- Parent/teacher/coach/counselor responds to the child's level of physical/emotional arousal and modulates it in ways that maintain/return to a comfortable level (also known as the child's "window of tolerance")
 - Up-regulating to engage
 - Down-regulating to calm
- Repeated experiences of this interactive process of co-regulation lead to the capacity for self-regulation



Connectedness is Dependent on Felt Safety



“Feeling safe is a necessary prerequisite before strong social relationships can be established and before social support can be effective in healing physical and mental illness.”

-Stephen Porges, Ph.D. (2015)

Neuroception of Safety

Environment

Behaviors

Life Threat

Shut Down

Danger

Fight or Flight

Safe

Social
Engagement



Healthy Interactions Trigger Neuroception of Safety



Face to face social engagement

- Facial expression and gaze
- Prosodic features of vocalizations

Reciprocity

- Facial expression
- Vocalizing and listening



The Dimensions of Theraplay



Theraplay Dimensions: Aspects of Responsive Caregiving

Structure: We organize the child's world to so that it feels safe and predictable

Engagement: We connect emotionally so the child feels seen and heard

Nurture: We make child feel physically/emotionally cared for

Challenge: We make sure child succeeds and feels capable and competent



Structure in Group Theraplay

- Play activities provide structure with sequence and rhythm
- Interactions are consistent and predictable
- Focus is on all participants being recognized and noticed
- Leaders provide co-regulation as needed
- Leaders manage and facilitate transitions
- Co-leaders plan and coordinate ahead of time to ensure smooth facilitation

**“You are my buffer.
You protect me from all the
newness.”**



Hatkoff, Amy. *You Are My World: How a Parent's Love Shapes a Baby's Mind*. New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 2007.

“When I can lean on you, I learn to stand on my own.”



Hatkoff, Amy. *You Are My World: How a Parent's Love Shapes a Baby's Mind*. New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 2007.

Engagement in Group Theraplay

- Activities are synced with children, drawing them in to the play and letting them know they are fun to be with
- Attention is provided to each child individually and in group experiences
- Leader used their SES to engage and attune to each child and the group's needs



Nurture in Group Theraplay

- Activities *provide comfort and* attend to the child's hurts
- Touch utilized to stay connected and provide regulation
- Food share/Feeding provides reassurance to children that their needs are seen and will be cared for
- Looks for and provides opportunities for caring for each other



“Your touch is like magic, it helps me develop in every way.”



Hatkoff, Amy. *You Are My World: How a Parent's Love Shapes a Baby's Mind*. New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 2007.

Challenge in Group Theraplay

- With support from adults, children have success with mildly challenging activities
- Children learn they are competent which encourages them to try new things and take developmentally appropriate risks
- Provides opportunities for scaffolding to occur in a safe and fun environment
- Share in the joint attention of accomplishing activities as a group

Partner Practice

Structure: Peanut Butter & Jelly

Engagement: Pop Cheeks

Nurture: Finding shapes in hands

Challenge: Bubble Tennis



Play

Play gives the child experiences of shared joy

Play is a “neural exercise” that enables the co-regulation of the body and nervous system to create neurophysiological states that support mental and physical health.

-Stephen Porges,
2015



The Importance of Play

“Play is the way children participate and learn. The playful activities provide the structure, challenge and nurturing that support the child’s ability to engage. Play keeps children in the here and now so that they can experience joy.”

P. 40. Henig, R. M. “Taking Play Seriously.” The New York Times Magazine, February 17, 2008



Touch in Group Theraplay

Touch is used to

- Structure
- Engage
- Nurture



Touch is essential to co-regulate children

Resources on touch:

- Frances Carlson, 2006, *Essential Touch: Meeting the Needs of Young Children*, New York: NAEYC.
- Healthy Touch DVD, www.child.TCU.edu

Group Discussion

What is your school or agency's policy on healthy touch?



How Group Theraplay Can Help

- Engage and co-regulate children in play
- Help children return to normal, predictable routines
- Create joyful experiences
- Help children trust adults
- Help children interact positively with peers
- Build positive internal working model
- Give children a sense of belonging to a community



Description

- The group is seated together in a circle
- The leader and co-leaders are seated among the children and participate equally in the fun (not just observers or directors)
- Activities involve combinations of structure, engagement, challenge, touch, eye contact, and FUN!!!
- Conventional classroom rules for behavior are suspended so that children's needs can emerge



Potential Behavioral Impact of Trauma

- Separation anxiety
- Clinginess or pseudo-independence
- Lack of self-control, resistance/opposition
- Hopelessness, pessimism
- Speech and language problems
- Angry outbursts, decreased attention, withdrawal
- Hypervigilance
- Over- or under-reacting to physical contact, bright lighting, sudden movements, or loud sounds
- Anxiety, fear, and worry about safety of self and others

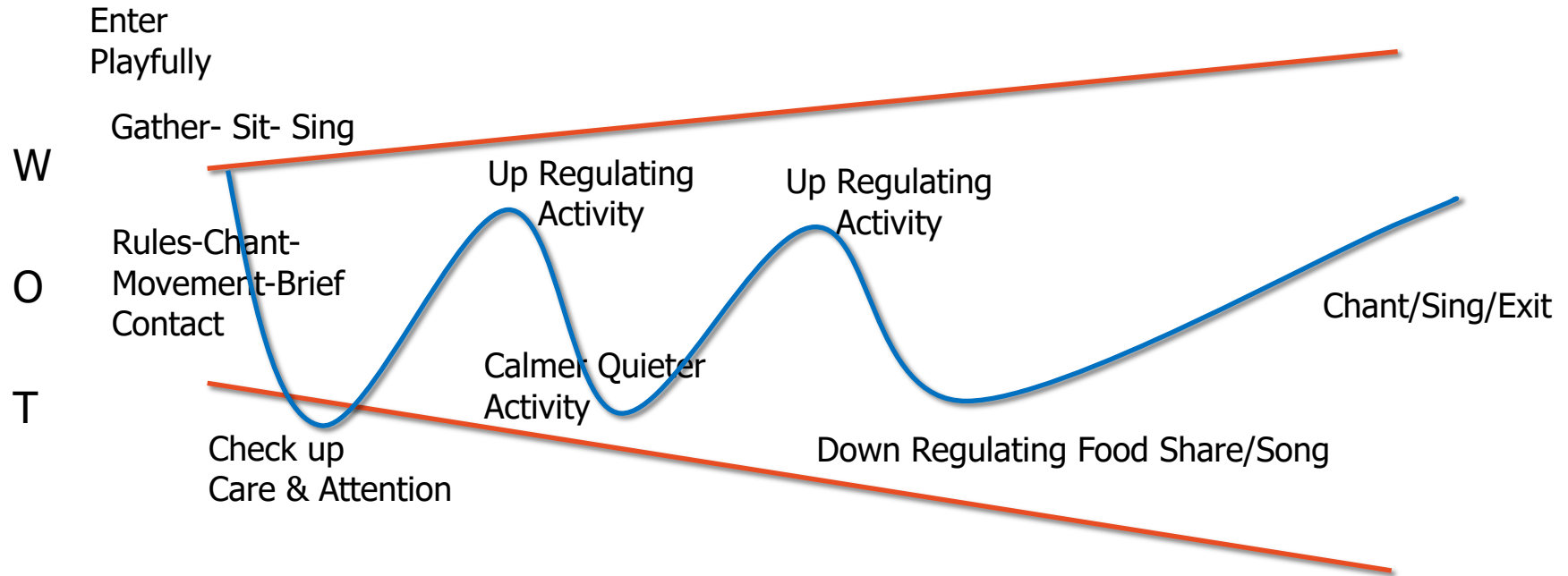


Group Session Sequence

Hyperarousal

Fight: Physiological arousal → Aggression, Irritability, Hyperactivity, Silliness, Trouble Concentrating

Flight: Withdrawal & Escape → Social Isolation, Avoiding Others, Running Away



Hypoarousal

Freeze: Stilling and Constricting Constricted emotional expression/Stilling of behavior/
Overcompliance or denial of needs*

Blue: Theraplay process

* Fight/Flight/Freeze descriptors from ARC

Rituals of Theraplay Groups

Rules

- No Hurts
- Stick Together
- Have Fun!

Check-ups

- Welcomes the children
- Each child gets a moment in the spotlight without having to ask or act out for it

Food Share

- Feeding is the most basic form of nurturing
- Children learn to receive and later to give

Beginnings & Endings

- Consistent activity or song to mark these transitions



Creating the Theraplay Atmosphere

- The leader is up-beat
- The leader is engaging
- The leader doesn't invoke punishments or consequences
- The leader actively uses positive language to engage and redirect



Becoming a Playful Leader

- Think creatively: accept all behaviors that occur except hurting; use them positively, when possible
- Think cooperatively, not competitively
- Allow children the space to be themselves



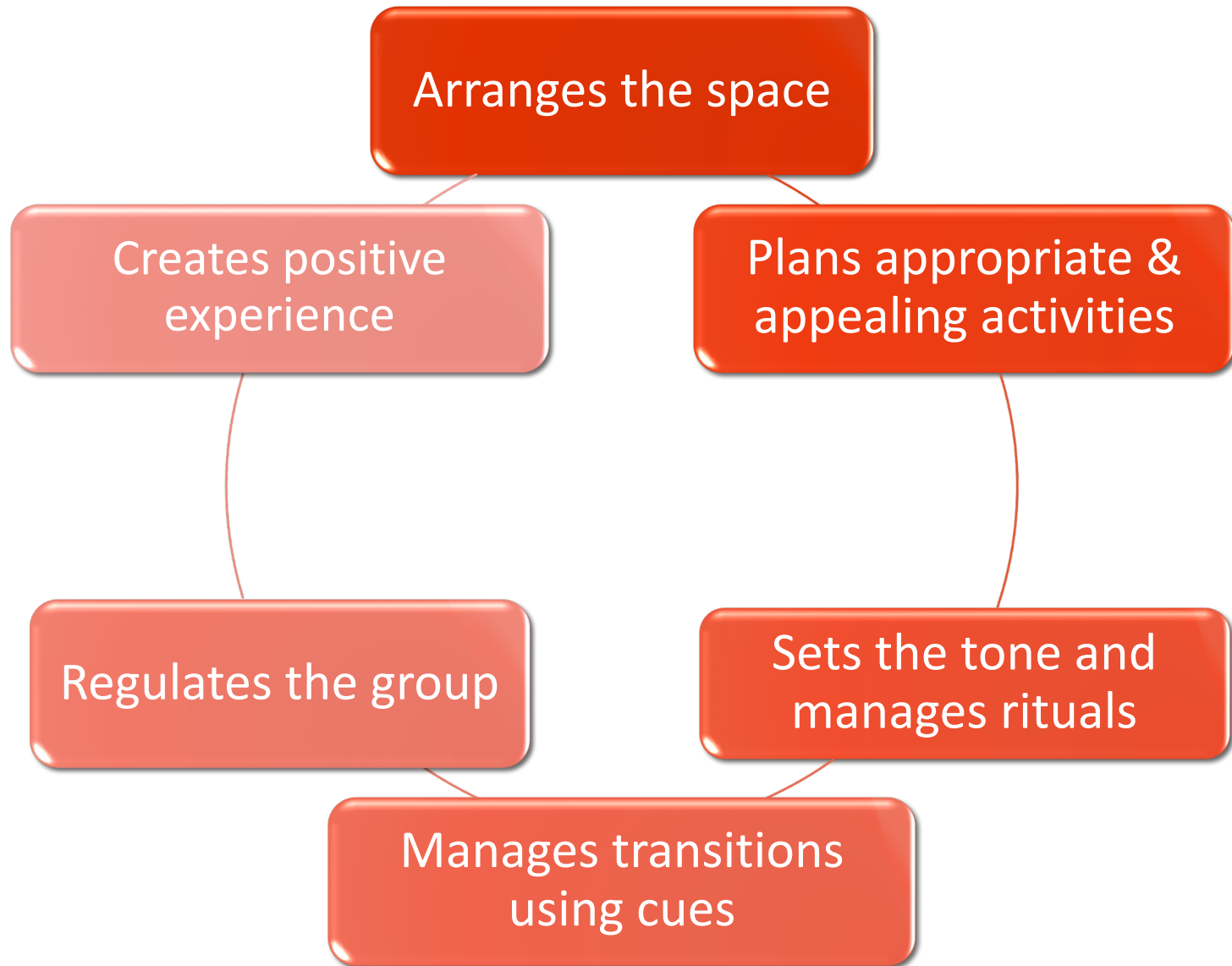
The Rules

The Adult is in Charge (Unspoken)

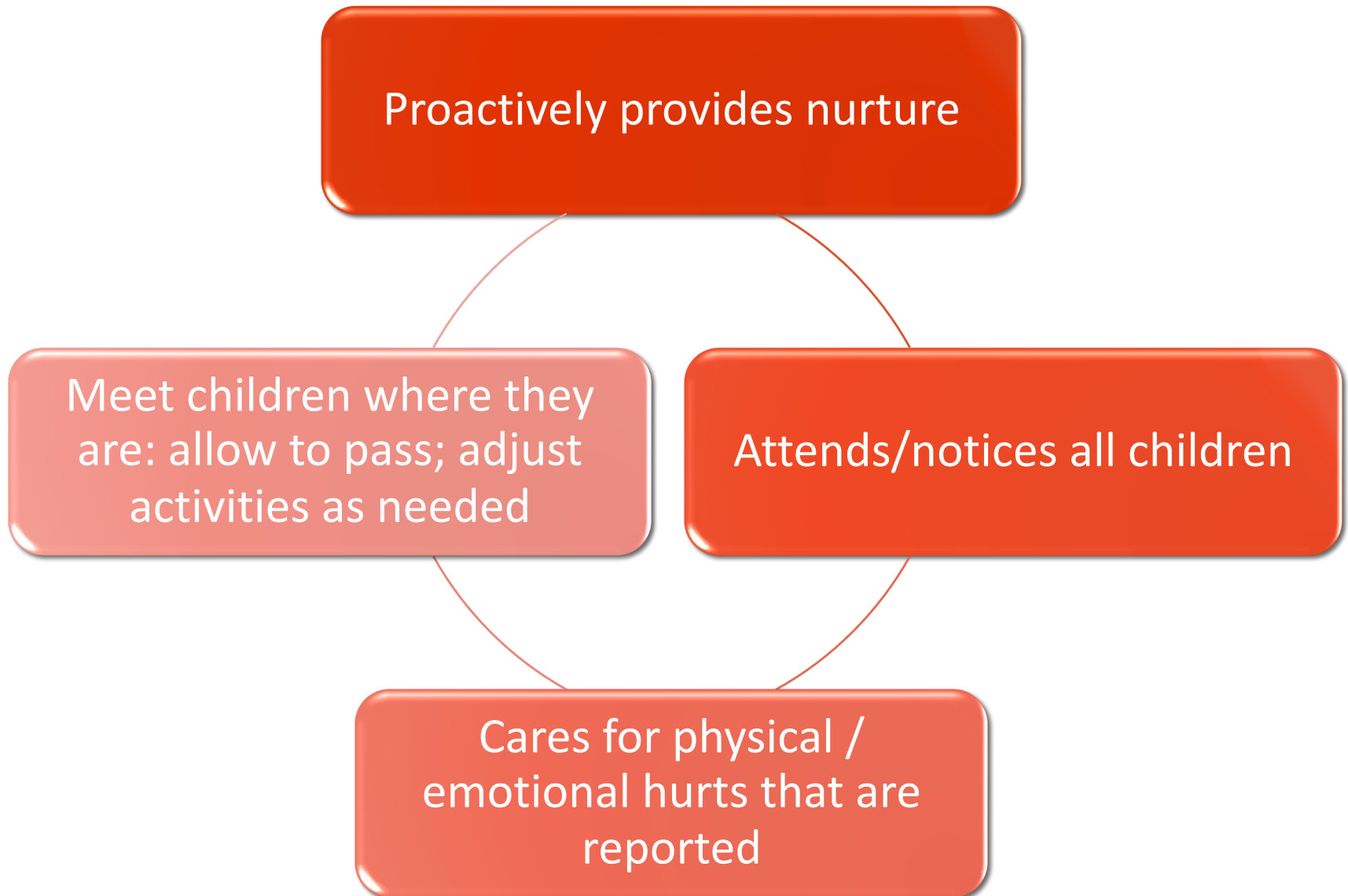
1. No Hurts
2. Stick Together
3. Have Fun



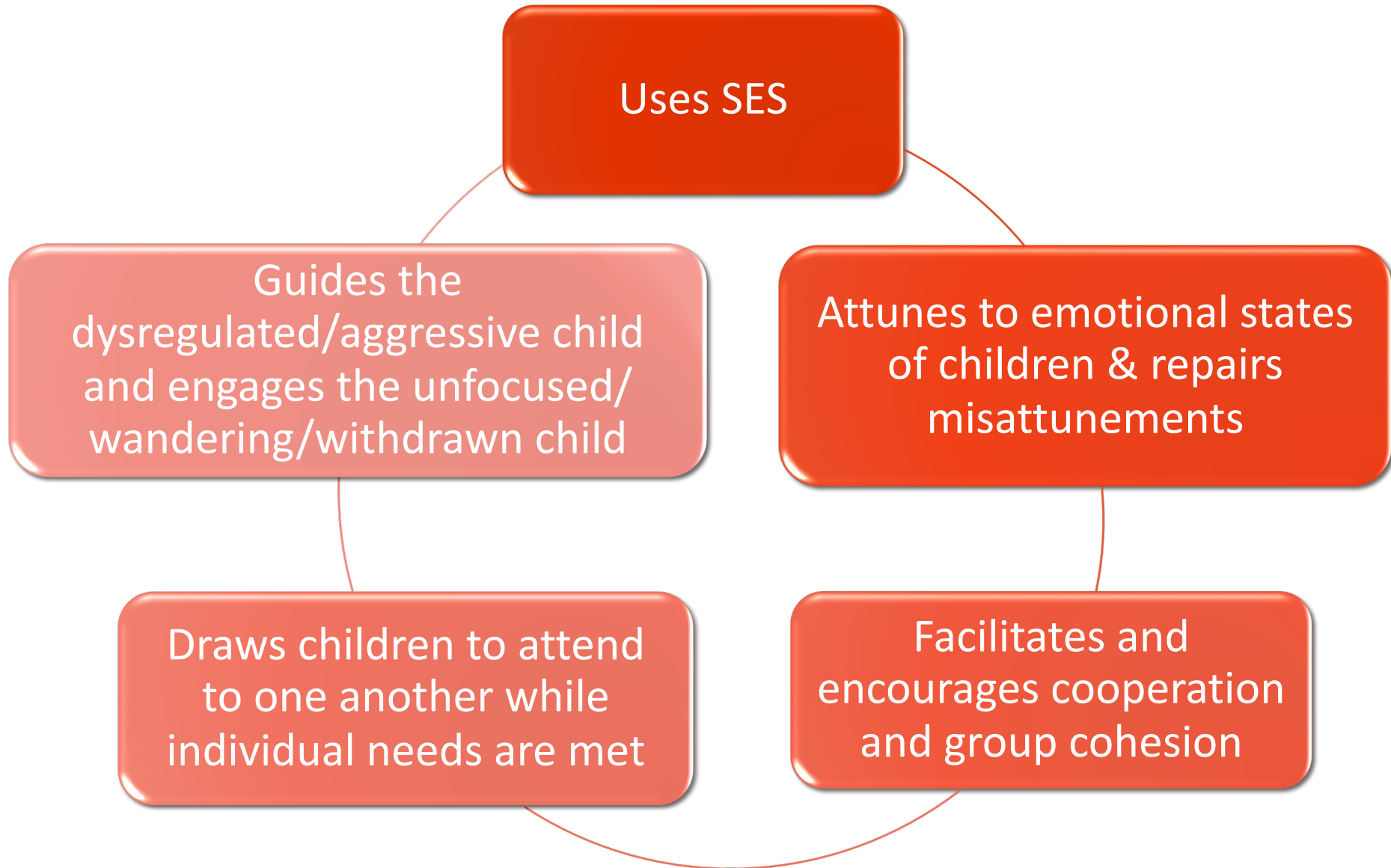
The Adult is in Charge



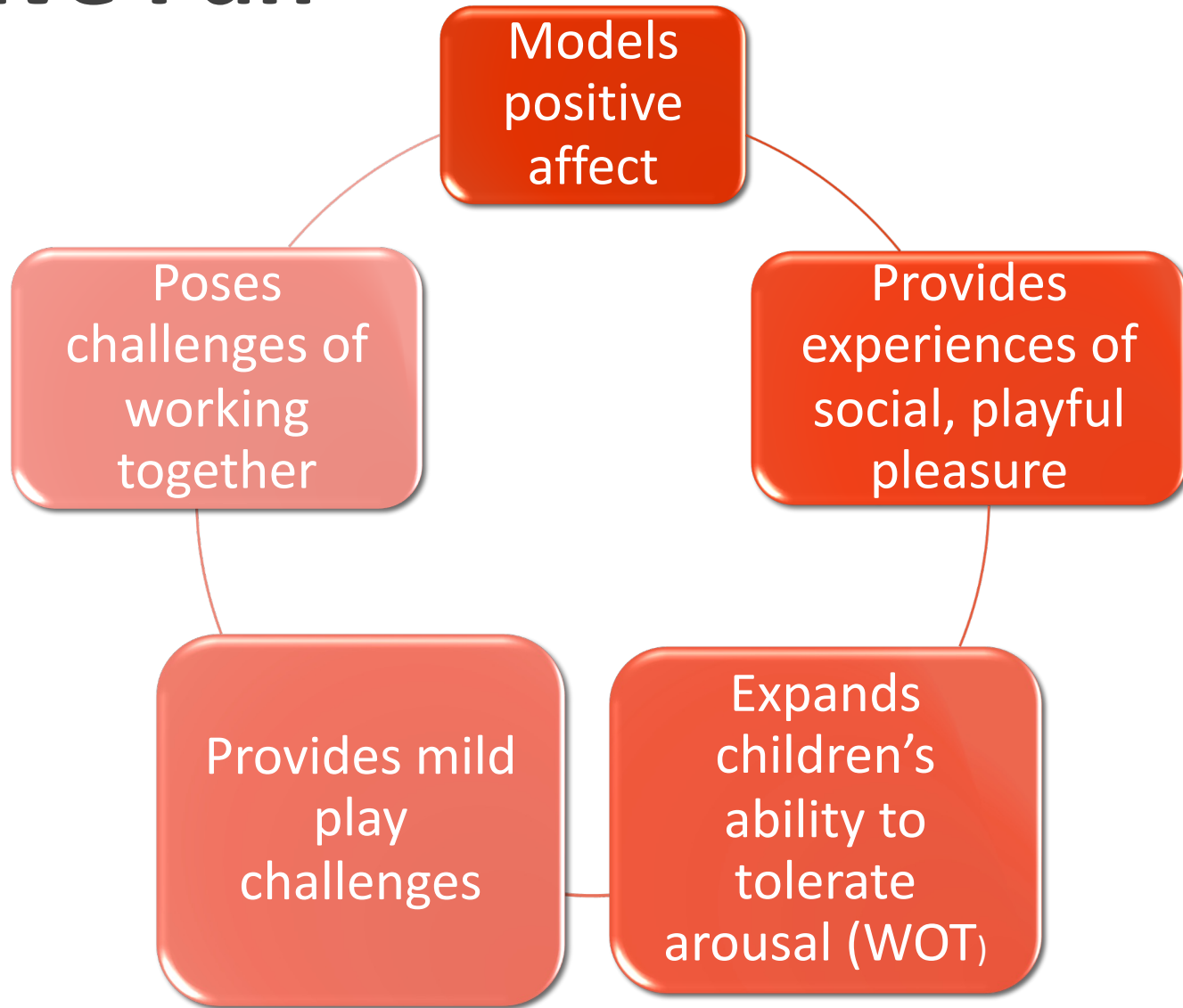
No Hurts



Stick Together



Have Fun



Leader Skills to Practice – “DO’S”

- **Be attuned to children**
 - Make eye contact
 - Notice and respond to individual children
- **Use No Hurts rule to nurture**
 - When a child has a hurt (example: bumping during play) leader stops the play to attend to the child.
- **Use rules to structure activities**
 - Use rules Stick Together, No Hurts and Have Fun to stop and re-structure activities if needed
 - Start and stop activities with as few words as possible





Planning and practice

Starting Your Group

Short, sweet, and successful!

First sessions

- Choose group name, teach welcome song
- Check-ups
- Quick, fun activity
- Treat
- Closing song



Starting Your Group

Gradually add

- middle activities that are well structured
- more stimulation
- challenging activities

Plan sessions to have some active and some calming activities

Always have calm activities at the end



Decisions

- Group size
- Location
- Parent Involvement
- Food
- Check-ups



Practice – Plan and Lead a Playgroup

As a group, plan a playgroup. Choose each component of the group. Choose who will lead each activity during the role play

Practice leading a group using the plan devised by the group



Example

- Welcome Song – Sunshine song
- Rules with gestures – No hurts, stick together, have fun
- Check-ups – cotton balls
- Pass a smile
- Body Bump
- Measure muscles
- Food share
- Goodbye song – “Goodbye Lisa, Ellie and Stephen, Goodbye Lisa, Ellie and Stephen, we’re glad you came to play.”
- Transition



Opening Song	
Rules	
Check up	
1 st Activity	
2 nd Activity	
3 Activity	
Food Share	
Closing Song	

Discussion:

- What is your action plan to start playgroups in your setting?
- What do you want your groups to look like?
- What steps need to be taken to move toward your vision?
- Consider some of the issues on the following slides



Resources for Planning for Special Populations



Groups for Traumatized Children



Groups with Children with Autism



Groups with Children with Autism



Groups with Adolescents



Groups with Adolescents



Caution!!

- Best laid plans ... Stay Flexible!
- Guide a child with predictable challenging behavior so that child can be successful or generously take over for an impulsive or shy child
- Remember that if you aren't having fun, then no one is and you've broken the rules!
- Teachers: put aside your "teacher" role



Helpful Hints



Now Practice in Your Setting!

Trainings for educators in Group Theraplay is called Sunshine Circles and is available from The Theraplay Institute.

For more information contact:

The Theraplay® Institute
1840 Oak Ave., Suite 320
Evanston, IL 60201

Phone: 847-256-7334 x101
Fax: 847-256-7370

email: info@Theraplay.org

www.Theraplay.org



Questions? What's Next?



Goodbye Games

