

# UK Theraplay® Camp:

## Respite and Relationship-Building for Adoptive Families



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In June 2017, The Family Place (a therapy organization based in Wales UK) hosted the first UK Theraplay Camp. It was a joyful, exhausting and heartwarming experience. This article summarizes the camp, the thinking behind it and an evaluation from the perspective of the families attending. The photos do not include the families due to confidentiality.

The Theraplay Camp was collaboratively planned by The Family Place Team (led by Viv Norris) and delivered by a highly qualified group of Theraplay Practitioners from around the UK. There were nine team members providing therapy and support to six different adoptive families (each with one, two or three children - total eleven parents, twelve children, age range 3-12 years). The criteria for the families applying for the camp was that they were adoptive families, the children had lived within the family for at least six months and there was a primary school age focus. There was an initial screening process, a follow up telephone discussion with a practitioner prior to the camp and summary reports written after the camp. Most of the families had prior experience of Theraplay, and relevant reports were shared. Where this was the first Theraplay experience, an MIM was undertaken at the start of the camp.

All of those delivering the sessions were minimum Foundational Level Theraplay Practitioners, most were fully Certified, with two trainers and supervisors in the team. All practitioners held additional core qualifications in related professions, including Clinical Psychology (4 people), Music Therapy (2 people), Play Therapy (1 person), Social Work (2 people), additional training in DDP (4 people) and sensory regulation (2 people).

In the planning, there was a great deal of attention given to the practical and emotional atmosphere we wanted to create for the families. The core Theraplay dimensions of Structure, Engagement, Nurture and Challenge ran through the overall context, as well as within the Theraplay sessions themselves. We decided that the camp would need to be:

- Well-structured and organized so that parents and children knew what to expect and could relax, knowing that they were in safe hands

- Enticing for the children and parents with multiple opportunities for the family members and workers to connect and get to know each individual personally

- Highly nurturing (especially for tired parents) through offering nourishing and delicious food, a comfortable and relaxing environment and giving a lot of attention to the supportive atmosphere

- Appropriately challenging throughout its activities, being very mindful of the sensitivity and often young emotional age of each child

Within this camp setting there was a tangible sense of the team around the family, both therapeutically and practically supporting the families

Within the UK, there are few residential break opportunities available for vulnerable adoptive families. Some 'respite' options may be available, but these are generally difficult to achieve funding for and child 'respite' or activity breaks can create a rupture in parent-child connection rather than a deepening, which is what most parents would wish for. Theraplay provides a framework within which this kind of 'family respite' provision can be delivered. Our vision was to provide residential family respite where the whole family could experience care and nurture alongside therapy support. This model mirrors the therapy provision model being provided by The Family Place, which provides whole family intensive interventions.

Deciding upon appropriate accommodation was the first challenge. Given the unpredictable UK weather, it may have seemed unwise to choose actual tents, however we felt strongly that an outdoors and very beautiful landscape would provide a level of nurture and nourishment not possible in a built up context. The Family Place too is a rural based organization which places high value on aesthetic quality. We therefore decided upon a rural setting, on a hill, with lovely views, animals (attached farm), organic high quality food provision, potential for outdoor activities and warm and supportive hosts. The accommodation comprised a group of 'glamping' tents (very posh canvas tents, more akin to a lodge than a tent), with proper comfortable beds and a sitting area, two cottages, separate and private family bathroom facilities and a large communal barn for meals and joint activities.

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There was a playground on site, a field in front of the tents, and woodland nearby. Separate accommodation for each family felt essential and one family specifically requested a cottage rather than a tent which was possible within this

context. We also needed some staff member presence overnight on site in case of emergencies so one of the cottages became the staff accommodation house (at a short walk from the main site). All food was included and prepared on site, and the families had free access to the surrounding area, which had no nearby traffic. There were some hazards on site which were carefully managed. These included an uncovered pond, farm machinery, and knives and cooking facilities within the tents. There was also an 'honesty shop' within the main barn with an array of food items. We removed all alcoholic drinks and informed parents in advance that the camp would be alcohol free.

Our aim overall was that each child would be provided with a series of dyadic Theraplay sessions with a parent and a consistent practitioner at regular intervals throughout the camp. This was a vulnerable and traumatized group of children and we were unsure how group Theraplay would go, but had the capacity to provide this if it felt possible. There were many logistical issues to be thought through. The families had different configurations: one parent and two children, two parents and three children, two parents and one child. Questions about how to occupy children not involved in sessions and how to provide some adult only time needed to be answered and built into the structure.

We decided upon dyadic Theraplay sessions (one parent and child) as the core intervention, with Music Therapy and art projects running alongside so that children and parents not involved in the Theraplay had a clear focus. We also organized structured group activities through the day and evening and a range of craft and play activities to engage children whenever needed. The large group activities were focused on outdoor and emotionally connecting activities including: daily farm walks to feed animals, drumming, pizza making, fire pit, den building in groups, camp fire.

It would clearly be impossible for the practitioners to provide all of this activity so we organized the roles as follows:

**Camp leader:** The camp had a lead person (Viv) who provided oversight, supervision, took decisions, led group Theraplay activities when appropriate, kept the programme running and assisted in any way whenever needed. Viv led the parent only meetings.

**Theraplay Practitioners:** The six Theraplay practitioners facilitated their Theraplay sessions at the scheduled times, wrote notes on these, and for the rest of the time joined in the group activities and provided whatever practical and emotional support was needed.

Our **Music Therapist** held a separate role, to facilitate the small group Music Therapy sessions in parallel to the Theraplay sessions.

**Volunteer helper:** We had one volunteer helper (also Theraplay trained) who assisted in many ways throughout.

**Host staff:** the host venue was staffed by two adults who did the cooking and helped organize the site. They also led the daily farm walks and had prior experience in working with children. These two adults became naturally involved in the camp and their skill and openness in engaging in a therapeutic manner was key.

The designated roles provided the framework, and alongside this everyone lent a hand wherever they could. There were multiple situations which required a high level of practical therapeutic skills and flexible responses; disagreements between children, someone running off or having a major meltdown, a smearing incident in a pop up tent, a child having an accident etc. The team involved in the camp needed to be both skilled practitioners and also enthusiastic and willing people, happy to work very long hours and engage in any task needed.

Following is a summary of the overall structure:

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Day 1	
2:00	Families arrive
3:00	Tea & Cakes Welcome
4:00 - 5:00	Theraplay Session Other adults and children Music Therapy session
6:00	Pizza making & Fire Bowl
Day 2	
8:00	Breakfast
9:00 - 10:30	Adult session for parents Children and helpers - farm walk & feeding the animals
10:30 - 11:30	Theraplay session Other adults and children Music Therapy session
12:30	Communal lunch
1:30	Den building
4:00 - 5:00	Theraplay session Other adults and children Music Therapy session
6:30	BBQ
7:30	Camp fire on the hill
Day 3	
8:00	Breakfast
9:00 - 10:30	Adult session for parents Children and helpers - farm walk & feeding the animals
10:30 - 11:30	Theraplay session Other adults and children Music Therapy session
12:30	Simple lunch & 'goodbye'
1:00	Camp ends

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Each Theraplay practitioner was allocated two children to work with for the duration of the camp and the parent-child dyads were negotiated with parents so that each parent was involved. This meant that for the two hour Theraplay slots, the practitioners were delivering two Theraplay sessions to different parent-child dyads.



### Arrival at the camp

What became clear, almost immediately, was that the parents were universally exhausted and the children were excited, anxious, quite dysregulated, and most needed a period of high energy exploration with several jumping in the nearby pond within the first few minutes! We drew the group together quite quickly, played some clapping group Theraplay activities as way of introduction and learning names and moved into the first dyadic sessions. From this point, we followed the planned structure.

A range of issues arose but the overall structure worked well, and by the second day the group felt coherent with a high level of mutual support between the families. We found

that the program was sufficiently full, and we integrated only a small amount of structured group Theraplay at the start and end of the camp.

### Issues

The weather was extremely hot, so much so that it was impossible to be in the tents during the daytime (we had planned to run Theraplay sessions in the lounge areas of the tents). This meant that Theraplay sessions mainly happened outside, in shady areas under trees. We kept consistency of therapy space and layout but there were many unique features that arose from doing sessions outdoors. These included chickens joining sessions (it turns out they enjoy being nurtured), a hammock for swinging, and using the natural environment within activities, for example, leaping over a brook. An interesting observation was that the children who may have routinely tried to leave the therapy room or retreat from activities in a traditional situation seemed to find the open nature of the view helpful. We wondered whether having an open vista, as well as a clearly marked space in which to do the session, helped soothe the need to try and get away. Like a baby who can gaze away when overwhelmed, the wide view seemed to allow children to do this without having to physically 'escape'.

The adult session held each morning was extremely important in helping the parents connect. This was a facilitated session which needed care to ensure that different parents' issues and vulnerabilities could be shared and experienced as helpful to the group. We structured this lightly by showing a typical Theraplay session video at the start as a way to generate discussion. This seemed highly effective (the video was of a quite tricky child with whom parents quickly identified). It was clear that the parents could easily have talked for much longer than the allocated time. The practical issues around how to keep their 12 children occupied and safe, (while separated from their parents in a new environment) was a logistical challenge. Feeding the animals, with a high number of adult helpers, worked well and we kept to this routine for the second day.

This camp was held during the week (Mon-Wed) in the school summer term due to the availability of the campsite. This excluded some children (e.g. those who were unable to miss school) and parents (e.g. teachers), but the need for sole use of the site for the camp meant this was the only option and we still had more interest than we could fulfill. The other limiting factor for attending was securing funding.



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In terms of staffing the camp, it was obvious that this context required experienced therapeutic workers, and this team had a very high level of skills and qualifications. In addition, practitioners needed to feel confident in assisting in direct 'hands on parenting' (e.g. having to scoop children up, carry them, set clear boundaries) as the need for this practical help was very clear immediately.

Having a lead worker who did not have a role in facilitating the ongoing Theraplay sessions was important as she was available to provide informal supervisory support and she also became involved in two sessions with a particularly challenging child. The whole team worked extremely hard



in varied and unusual scenarios, and in the future we would involve one or two additional helpers for general support during the larger group activities.

The combination of needing a high quality environment and staff team inevitably raises issues about funding. During this camp, families were funded via the Adoption Support Fund (a fund available for adopters based in England) and attending the camp came out of their therapy provision for the year. The issue of funding for families is a significant one, to enable fair access to all and to ensure financial viability of the camp. This pilot camp was viable due to the dedication of the team and financial risk taken by the host organization.

### Evaluation

The overall feedback from the camp was very positive. Ten parents gave extremely positive feedback. One parent had misunderstood the nature of the camp and was less involved in the group experience. All of the twelve children who attended the camp said that they enjoyed the camp, that it was fun and they would tell other children to come.

Many of the children said that they loved the activities between Theraplay sessions.

### The opportunity to relax through being nurtured and understood

A striking experience shared by the parents who attended the camp was an experience of freedom. They felt everyone at the camp understood them and their children and they did not feel judged:



*"This is the first place I have been where I have just been able to give them the freedom and I know that if something goes wrong then people aren't gonna jump on you and go 'you're terrible parents, what are you doing?'" — Parent*

This experience was also observed to be felt by the children as they interacted with other children, in the nature of their conversations and their acceptance of each other, communicating a sense that they are not alone. Parents recognized the value of their children being able to connect with other children who had similar experiences and difficulties in relationships:

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*“because there’s a lot of children of the same ilk shall we say, they are starting to feel that they are not alone..... they can run around and be as they are without us feeling guilty about what it’s like. That for me was really what was really nice.” — Parent*

In fact, many of the children identified one of the things they enjoyed most about the camp was connecting to other children.

Parents consistently identified that experiencing a sense of being totally accepted, nurtured and supported by the team as one of the most helpful aspects of the camp.

*“Theraplay, freedom, other ‘similar’ children, understanding parents and staff all around, reduced sense of (child) feeling different and relaxed parents all contributed (to a positive experience of the camp).” — Parents*

### **The Theraplay sessions: Deepening the relationships**

The Theraplay Camp offered an intensive therapeutic intervention over several days. Both parents and practitioners felt this provided an opportunity to deepen the attachment relationships and experiences within the sessions, which led to a faster pace of change to their other experiences of therapy. For some, the camp provided an opportunity to engage more in the therapeutic process as it allowed them to relax into it, not having to worry about getting there and getting home.

*“I don’t think the children would have responded as they have if it was just a one off therapy session, having several sessions in quick succession meant the relationship deepened” — Parent.*

*“We had so many breakthroughs with (both children).” — Parent*

Many of the children also spoke about how they enjoyed the Theraplay sessions. Within this was a sense of connection the children felt with their parents. This deepening of connection was also recognized within the group Music Therapy sessions.

*“It was interesting to see the parents with their children..... to see that interaction and to see how that changed over time. So (child and parent) .... really changed loads from the first day when child was trying to cuddle Mum (and it*

*wasn’t going well)..... and on the last day Mum was really singing and vocalizing and sharing things with (child). That was lovely. And seeing other parents really seem to enjoy their connection with their child.” — Music Therapist.*

### **Parenting Support**

Parents really valued joining together with other parents within the group therapeutic parenting support sessions. However, several felt that they would have liked to have met as a parent group earlier in the camp (e.g. the first evening).

*“(It would have been good to get) .. to know the families earlier – everyone starts off a bit shy”*

Although recognizing the parents’ desire to meet as a group earlier in the camp, there was a difficulty in balancing this with the needs of the children at these early stages.

*“The children were quite dysregulated for the first few hours they arrived which is why we didn’t build in the adult slot. So the need for the adults to have this chance at the beginning is there, but we need to think about how we set it up.” — Clinical Psychologist, Theraplay Practitioner*

One of the parents who attended the camp wrote this review for her local adoption newsletter.

### **A Lamb Walks into a Theraplay Session...**

The therapy session in question was a part of a Theraplay Camp at Drover’s Rest Campsite near Hay-on-Wye. We had seen an announcement in this newsletter about the 3-day camp run by The Family Place in June and jumped at the chance. Our eldest daughter (10) has been having Theraplay sessions for a year and we had really seen how it had helped her with her attachment to me. The camp would give us a chance to work together as a family but to also include our 9 year old daughter. It would also be a chance to meet and spend time with other adopters. We applied for the Adoption Fund which covered all the costs.

We travelled up a long windy road away from Hay and away from our day-to-day lives, arriving at a cluster of picturesque cottages and barns. We were given a warm welcome by Vivien Norris and her team of therapists and shown our accommodation - for the next three days were going to be staying in a Safari Tent.

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Most of our holidays involve camping, but camping, as we knew it, this was not. My youngest walked into their bedroom wide-eyed (there were wrought iron beds with fluffy duvets and cushions) and announced that she would like to live here permanently. We were given our own luxury bathroom in the main block, which adjoined a lovely spacious converted barn where we all met up, had meals and welcomed lambs into therapy sessions.

There were five other families and the children very quickly made friends around the ping pong table and among the bean bags. We were there for two half days and one whole day. We were given timetables for the next 3 days which consisted of one morning and one afternoon Theraplay session for each child (1 parent with 1 child) and music therapy sessions (4 in total). Almost every hour of the day was accounted for which was very reassuring for the children - when there weren't therapy sessions, there were activities laid on (den building in teams/pizza making/feeding the numerous animals). On each of the two mornings the parents had a meeting in the farmhouse living room which was very relaxed and gave us a chance to get to know each other and learn more about the theory behind Theraplay. And while we were at our meeting, the therapists whisked the children off to feed animals. My youngest was a bit nervous on the first morning and didn't want to be separated from me but a lovely therapist sprang into action and went to look after her... it didn't take long before she was having a lovely time feeding goats and chickens with the other children.

All the parents agreed that it was very relaxing being amongst other adopters who got the behavior of the other children. We could all look out for each others children and not bat an eyelid if one of them was having a difficult moment. The structure of the 3 days meant that they had very little free time but it also meant they were busy and happy. Which of course made us extremely chilled and happy.

Before we went there, we thought it would be all about the therapy for the children, whereas in fact it was therapy for the adults too. The weather contributed to the laid back atmosphere, but it was also the fact that we didn't have to think about preparing food, planning activities, making sure the children felt safe... it was all taken care of. I honestly can't think of the last time I felt that relaxed.

One of our hopes before we went was that my youngest would bond more with my husband. She has always had

a better attachment to me and so we purposefully set it up so that she and he would do the sessions together. My happiest moment was at an evening workshop. They had brought someone in to lead a drumming session and he'd brought along huge plastic containers with home-made drumsticks. It was a joy to see my husband and daughter sitting round a huge drum together, bashing away, in time, grinning from ear to ear.

### Conclusion

Spending such an intense few days with the families was a real insight into the level of almost constant energy this group of parents are providing to maintain some sense of coherence for their children. On our last evening, we suggested the idea of a walk to a nearby hill to build a fire and cook marshmallows (assuming everyone would be too tired following the den building) and were amazed at the enthusiasm as the whole group took off up the hill!

The team involved in this camp found it a very rich and humbling experience, and were left with a huge sense of admiration and empathy for all of the parents and children involved. The Family Place plans to run a second Theraplay Camp at the same venue in the summer of 2018. The team will use the insights gained from the pilot experience to inform changes, though we anticipate new and unexpected factors will arise with each group of families.

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