Objectives:

1. Understand how to facilitate aggressive play in the play therapy process without increasing or promoting aggression

2. Learn 4 techniques to enhance your sword fighting and bog bag play in your play therapy sessions

3. Learn how to keep yourself regulated in the midst of intense play/trauma play and death in the play room

*If the child perceives the therapist to be in-tune with them, they will allow their traumatic experiences and protection patterns to begin to emerge into conscious awareness. As the therapist and the child resonate together, the activation will amplify and, if the therapist’s window of tolerance is broad enough to contain this energy and information, the child will also experience a widening of his or her window. These moments of autonomic synchrony are experienced as empathetically rich interpersonal joining. Research shows that within sessions, their nervous systems will flow into, out of, and back into synchrony many times. This rhythm is parallel to the dance of mother and infant as they move from attunment to rupture and back to repair over and over, laying down a strong foundation for the autonomic nervous system to be able to regulate effectively (Badenoch, 2011).*

Concerns about aggression in the playroom:
**Aggression and Death- what is the purpose?**

- Review Neuro-Biology and Nervous System symptoms

**Regulation:** NEED TO REGULATE!!!!!!

- If the therapist does not regulate during intense play, they risk increasing the intensity in the play (in a dys-regulated way)
- If the therapist does not regulate during intense play, they risk experiencing “vicarious trauma” and “compassion fatigue”
- The therapist’s ability to stay present is the “container” when intense play arises
- If the therapist is not present/grounded/authentic, the child will increase the intensity until the therapist has no choice but to “show up!”

- Allan Shore (2008) says that we use the relationship to allow our patients “to re-experience dys-regulating affects in affectively tolerable doses in the context of a safe environment, so that overwhelming traumatic feelings (fight, flight, freeze, fall-asleep) can be regulated and integrated into the patient’s emotional life” We are constantly working with our clients window of tolerance to expand their ability to hold strong emotions of all kinds.
Boundaries and Limits:

- The only reason a limit or boundary needs to be set is to help the therapist stay present
- Never say “no”, empathize and re-direct
- Try not to power trip the child, this will increase their desire to test you and not stay engaged in the play

Regulate through Hyper-arousal/Aggression:

- Breathe! (especially in between hits, shots, swings, etc.)
- Be vocal! This is not the time to be quiet.
- Ground the energy
- Match the intensity- how would you really respond if this were really happening to you?
- Be authentic! Don't pretend or fake it.

- Daniel Siegel (2010) Emotional Communication- Caregivers share their emotional states with their children; they don’t just mirror them. The caregivers actually experience these feeling states inside of themselves and then they can help the child regulate his or her emotional state. When a caregiver names their emotional state, they model to the child that they can learn to soothe themselves not by running away from those states, but actually by going toward them and then helping themselves feel calm and soothed. (Siegel,
Regulate through Hypo-arousal/Death:

- Breathe, breathe, breathe!
- Wiggle your toes
- Bilateral input
- Imagine filling the room with your energy- get as big as the room (don’t let yourself disappear energetically)
- Contemplative practices- your mind will wander, you will get sleepy, you will want to check out- notice and come back to your body/breath

Dying:

- Stay Dead!
- Dead people can’t talk 😊
- Talking exception: If the child is young and a lot of time goes by, you can remind them that they are in charge and can make you come alive when they want you to.
- Talking exception: Hold them accountable to the time – still give time warnings for the session ending
- Fall facing the room in fetal position
- Cover your head
- Don’t fully close your eyes (if possible) or find a way to peek
Sword Fighting:

- Don’t win, lose your power slowly
- Don’t be “too good”
- Don’t hit the child on purpose (unless instructed to do so)
- If instructed to hit the child, go very carefully and have the child dictate what you are suppose to do
- Get backed into a corner
- Add in bi-lateral play wherever possible

Bop Bag:

- See article

The Developing Mind ©2010 Daniel J. Siegel
The Mindful Therapist ©2010 Daniel J. Siegel
Being a Brain Wise Therapist ©2008 Bonnie Badenoch
Affect Regulation and the Repair of the Self ©2003 Allan Shore
BOP BAG

There are many perspectives in the field of play therapy regarding the use of bop bags in the play therapy process. Some therapists believe that the use of bop bags promotes aggression in children, while others believe that it is an essential toy in the play room allowing the child to express himself fully and thus encouraging empowerment.

This article attempts to bridge both opinions by outlining ways to avoid promoting aggression while encouraging the child to understand his or her need to express him or herself in an aggressive way. Please note that the examples of reflections listed below are just examples. There are many possibilities of reflections that are effective for deepening the child's awareness of themselves when they use a bop bag. Follow your intuition and trust your experience.

It is also important to note that the bop bag is a versatile toy and is not limited to one type of use in the play room. Although most children will use the bop bag as a way to project their feelings of disempowerment or empowerment, other children will use it as a source of comfort, leaning and resting on it for support or as a sensory toy bouncing and rolling on it to help regulate their nervous system (these are just two examples of other ways a bop bag can be used).

When a child chooses to use the bop bag, here are a few key principals to help guide your reflections:

1. Do not assume that you know who or what the child is wanting the bop bag to represent. It is also not important for you to know.

2. Unless you know the intended gender of the bop bag, it is best to refer to the bop bag as “it” or the gender of the child.

3. When making reflections, make reflections that address the underlying feelings that the child is attempting to project onto the bop bag. Example: Child picks up the bop bag and starts throwing it around the room, turning it upside down and making it spin fast. You are having to get out of the way to protect yourself.

- Voice the bop bag- “If I were it/him/her, I would be thinking: Ouch, ouch. I am spinning out of control. My world is upside down.”

- Voice what it is like to be the observer- “I am scared and nervous watching this. I have to protect myself. I am starting to feel out of control”
• Voice your observation of the bop bag: “His world is turned upside and he has no control”

• Voice your observation of the child’s interaction with the bop bag: “You want him to know what it feels like to have everything upside down. He has no control and is helpless.”

4. It is important to avoid reflections that encourage aggression as much as possible. Examples of reflections that encourage aggression are: “Get him”, “You are so strong”, “Show him how mad you are”, “Hit him again”, etc.

5. If the child chooses to use it for support or a way to regulate, providing reflections that enhance the child’s awareness of what they are doing is encouraged. Example: The child has been running around the room in an anxious/frantic way going from toy to toy. He finds the bop bag and lays on top of it struggling to gain his balance.

• Voice your observation of the bop bag: “He keeps moving. It is hard for it/him/her to keep steady and support you.”

• Voice your observation of the child’s interaction with the bop bag: “You are trying so hard to make him stop moving so that you can relax on top. It is so hard to find a way to relax when things just keeps moving.”

7. Match the intensity of the play. The child will keep turning the play up until the therapist embodies/names the intensity.

6. The most important principal to be aware of when the child works with the bop bag in an aggressive way is that your ability to stay present and connected to yourself and to the child during the high level of intensity is the most healing aspect of the experience. If the child becomes highly dys-regulated and his aggression escalates, it is your ability to stay regulated and emotionally/energetically present that grounds the child.

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### Synergetic Play Therapy™ - Nervous System Symptoms of Regulation and Dys-regulation

All symptoms of dys-regulation arise out of mis-perceptions of the events in our lives. When we change our perceptions, we change the symptoms in our nervous system. It is wise to master the art of how to change our perceptions and how to manage the symptoms that arise in our bodies to help return us to a more regulated state.

<table>
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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helplessness</td>
<td>Think logically</td>
<td>Increased heart rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inability to set boundaries</td>
<td>Think clearly</td>
<td>“Pounding” sensation in the head</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tired</td>
<td>Able to make conscious choices</td>
<td>Overwhelmed, Disorganized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automatic obedience</td>
<td>Able to make eye contact</td>
<td>Habitual defensiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appear life-less</td>
<td>Display a wide range of emotional expression</td>
<td>Aggression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-expressive</td>
<td>Feel “grounded”</td>
<td>Hyper-alertness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numbing</td>
<td>Able to notice breath</td>
<td>Hyper-vigilance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of motivation</td>
<td>Sleep Cycles Stable</td>
<td>Excessive Motoric Activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lethargic</td>
<td>Poised</td>
<td>Uncontrollable bouts of rage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dulled capacity to feel significant events</td>
<td>Internal awareness of both mind and body</td>
<td>Highly irritable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional constriction</td>
<td>“In the body”</td>
<td>Overwhelms others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolation/Depression</td>
<td>Able to communicate verbally in a clear manner</td>
<td>Anxious</td>
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Synergetic Play Therapy™ - Regulation Activities

Listed below are just some examples of activities that can be used to help regulate a dys-regulated nervous system. It is wise to do these activities pro-actively, as well as in moments of dys-regulation. It is also important to follow the body’s innate wisdom back to a regulated state.

- Run, jump, spin, dance with pauses to take deep breaths- you can make a game and have child jump high to touch something high on a wall or in a door frame
- Run, jump, etc and crash into something soft (i.e jump on a bed and crash repeatedly)
- Bounce on a yoga ball
- Roll across the floor back and forth
- Sit in a chair and push up with your arms (as if trying to get out of the chair)...keep some resistance
- Massages
- Deep pressure on arms and legs (you can slowly apply pressure down arms and legs in a long stroking motion)
- Eat (particularly something crunchy)
- Drink through a straw
- Take a bath or shower
- Wrap up in a blanket and snuggle (a little tightly for some pressure)- of course, do this safely.
- March or sing during transitions
- Play Mozart music in the background during challenging times of the day if in hyper-arousal
- Play Hard Rock/Fast/Bass music if in hypo-arousal
- Carry heavy things or push heavy things around
- Do isometrics (wall pushups or push hands together (looks like you are praying))
- Walk quickly
- Run up and down steps
- Shake head quickly
- Hang upside down off of a bed or couch
- Play sports
- ”Doodle” on paper (this one can be a bit more distracting, but sometimes works)
- Hold or fidget a Koosh ball, rubber band, straw, clay
- Rub gently or vigorously on your skin or clothing
- Put a cold or hot wash cloth on face
- Dim the lights if in hyper-arousal
- Turn on the lights if in hypo-arousal
- Read a book
- Swing
- Learn about “Brain Gym”-tons of ideas
- Yoga
- Snuggle
- Dance
- Move, move, move- any way that it feels good to your body
- Describe what is happening in your body out loud- “My tummy is going in circles”, “My legs feel heavy”, etc...
- Breathe, breathe, breathe- make sure that your inhalation is the same length as your exhalation