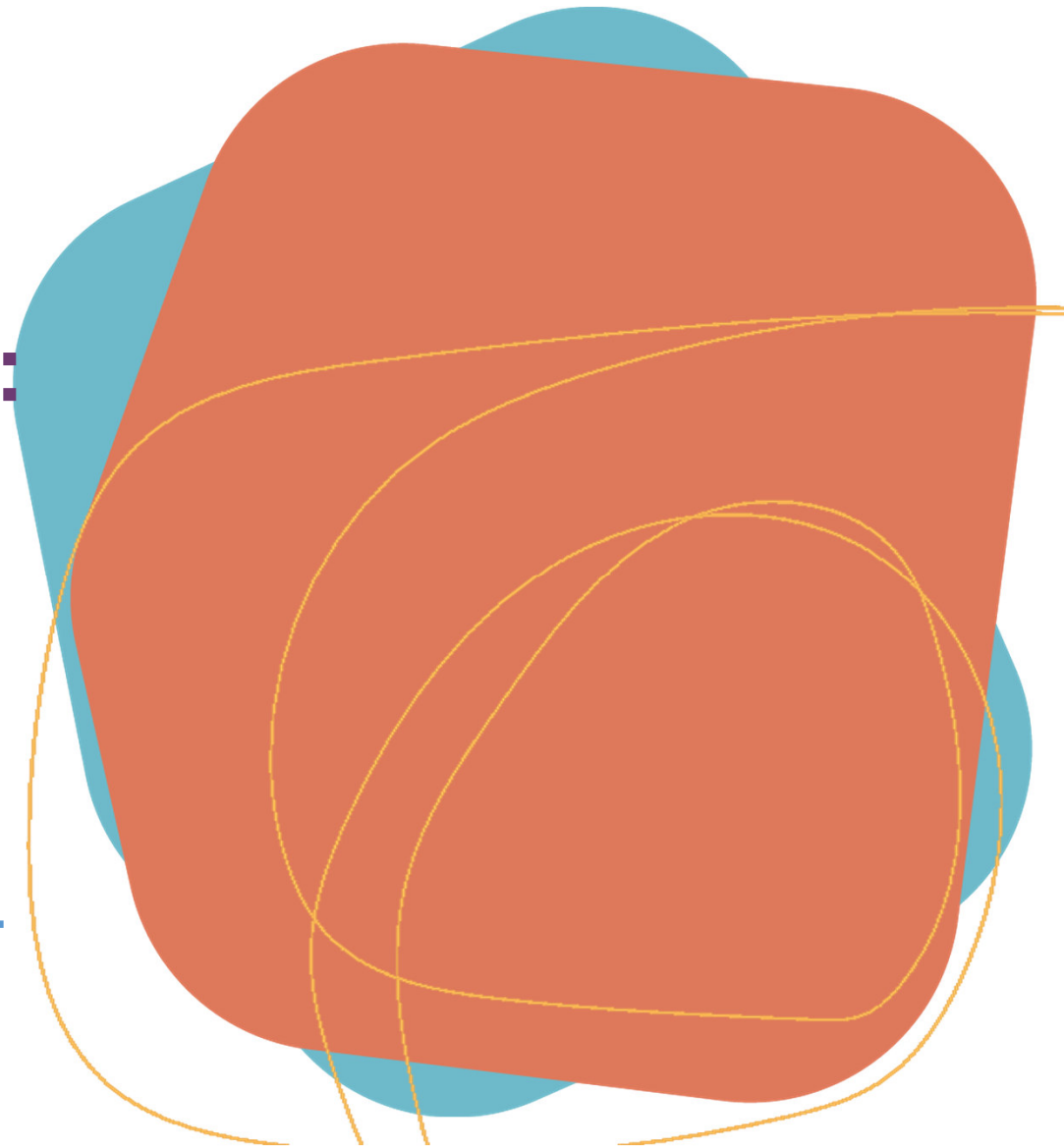


# Guiding Professional Reasoning And Embodied Reflection:

Enhancing Trauma Interventions Through Individualised, Child-led, Sensory-Motor Play

Lisa M. Porter, PhD, OTD, OTR/L  
Breanne E. Kearney, PhD, MSOT  
Cara Sheekey, MOT



# The Role of Play in Healthy Brain Development

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**Motivational driver:** propels healthy neurodevelopment

**Dynamic integration:** Facilitates the complex interplay between:

- Sensorimotor processing
- Cognitive processing
- Social-emotional processing

**Foundation for growth:** Creates optimal conditions for neural development



# Sensory-Motor Development & Trauma

---

- Alters brain development in areas responsible for movement planning and sensorimotor processing (sensorimotor network and cerebellum)
- Creates a disconnect between the child and their own body
  - Seeking high intensity input to 'feel something'
  - Difficulty maintaining stability
  - Poor coordination and motor planning
- Creates ripple effects that influence how children interact socially

# Sensory input has a direct influence on arousal: Reticular Activating System

Vestibular (movement) and somatosensory (body) input influences activation of Reticular Activating System → Arousal

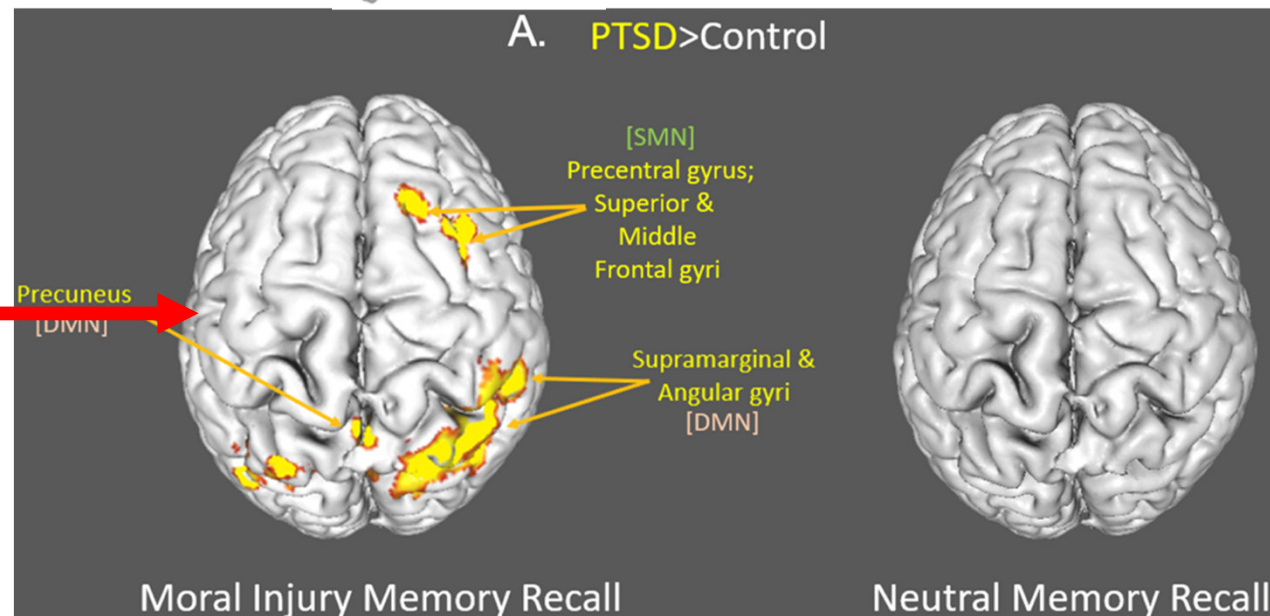
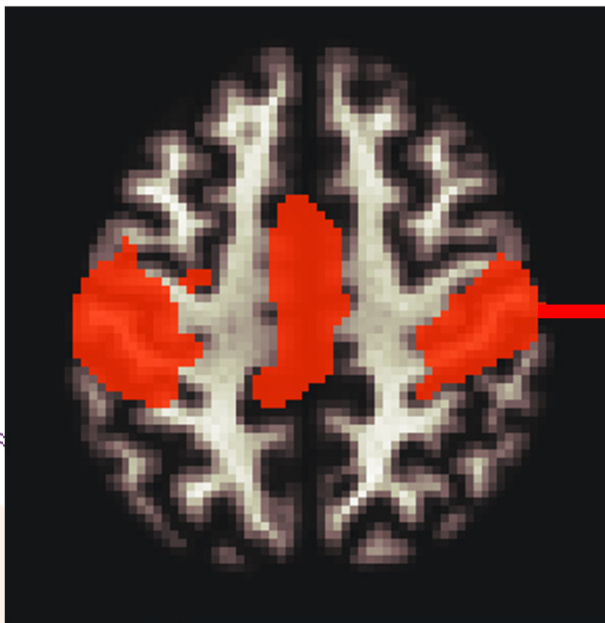
**Arousal meets Affect at level of Midbrain**

Sensorimotor experiences with a safe attachment figure is the foundation for relational safety



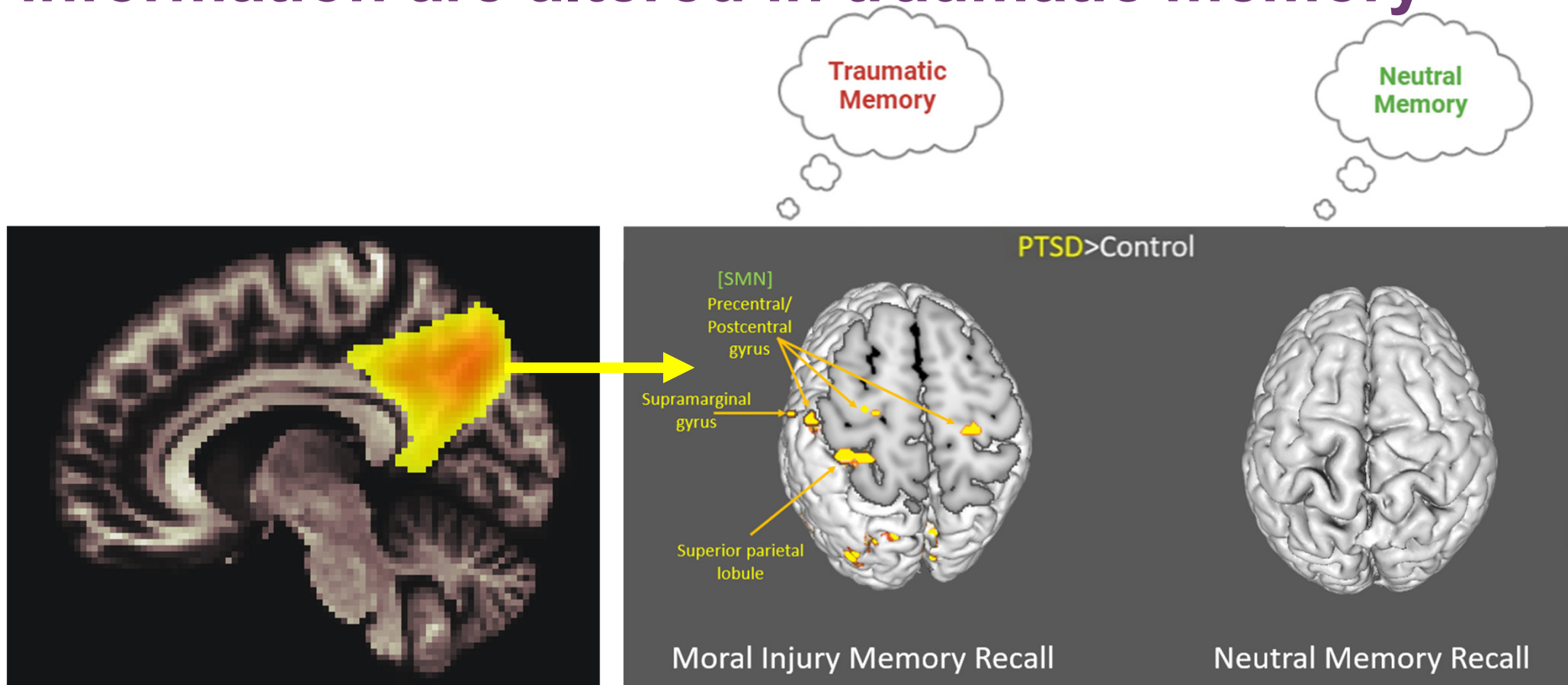
# Brain areas processing bodily information are altered in traumatic memory

**Sensorimotor Network:**  
*processing somatosensory input,  
readying to execute motor action*



Kearney et al., 2023 NeuroImage: Clinical

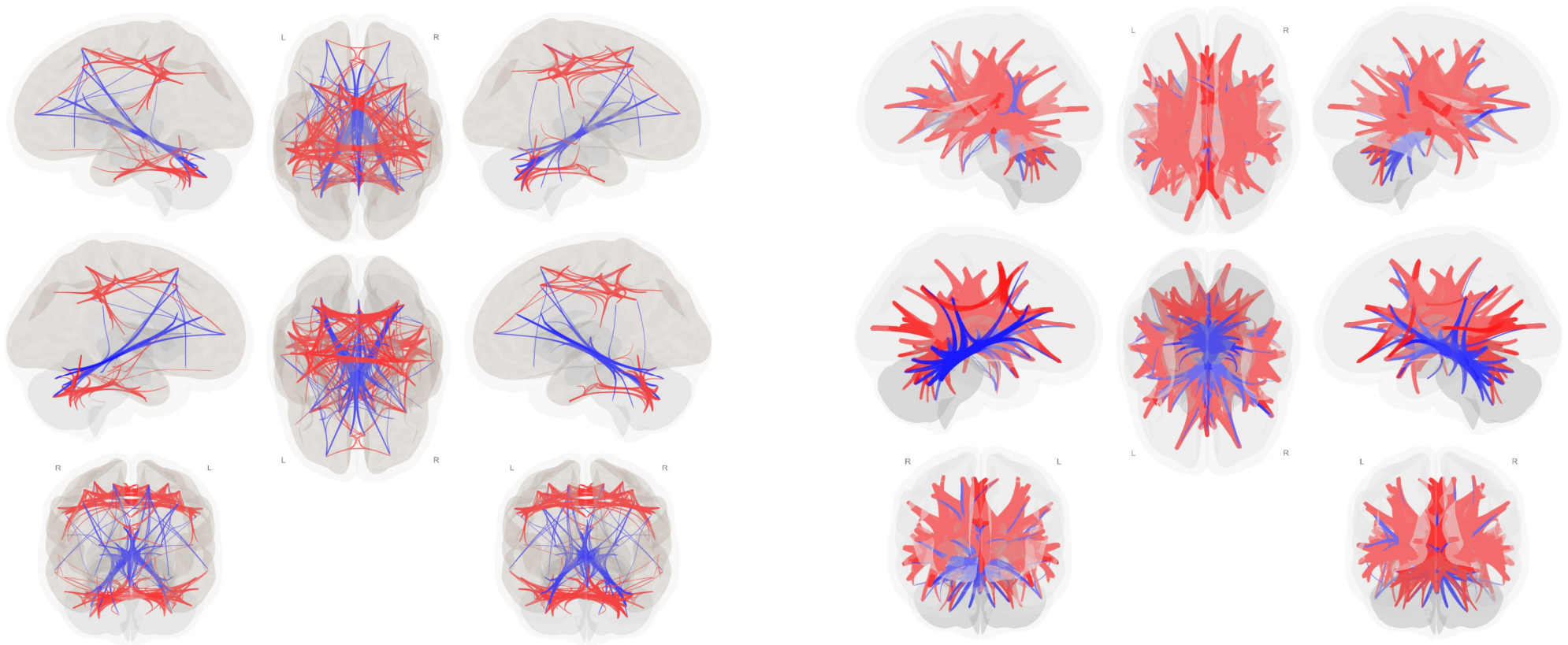
# Brain areas processing bodily information are altered in traumatic memory



Kearney et al., 2023 NeuroImage: Clinical



# ***Sensorimotor processing affects Whole Brain function: PTSD during traumatic memory recall***



Kearney et al., 2025 *Nature Mental Health*



**Professional Reasoning and  
Reflection on Observation:  
An Organizational  
Framework**





# Need for framework

- While play therapy has long been used for trauma treatment, it often overlooks the contribution of sensorimotor engagement to safety
- Without attention to sensory safety, children often struggle to stay present and connected during therapy
- **Implementation gap** - Limited guidance on how to engage in clinical reasoning and reflection when using play-based approaches
- Practitioners benefit from structured approaches to integrate sensorimotor principles into practice

## Professional Reasoning

Identify child's  
interests, areas of  
strength, & supports  
for success



Determine just-right  
embodied play to  
support engagement  
& meaning

## Self-Reflection

Guide therapist to  
reflect on  
embodied  
experiences in play



Recognize role of  
sensory differences



## Professional Reasoning

Identify child's interests, areas of strength, & supports for success



Determine just-right embodied play to support engagement & meaning

## Self-Reflection

Guide therapist to reflect on embodied experiences in play



Recognize role of sensory differences

## Embodied Reflection

Thoughts & experiences of the whole body



Reflection revealed through action & bodily awareness





Professional reasoning and Reflection on  
Observation: an Organizational Framework

## Record and Reflection Sheet

Name:

Date of Birth:

Therapist:

Parent/Caregiver:

Age:

Date:

### Embodied Play Observations:



Notes:

Refining - Embodied Symbolic Play Schemes

Organizing Sensory Motor - Embodied Representational Play

Organizing Sensory Motor - Novel Ideas & Actions

Exploring Sensory Motor - Goal Directed Actions

Exploring Sensory Motor - Environment

Exploring Sensory Motor - Body

### Domain Observations:

#### Praxis



Notes:

Refining Organization & Planning for Unfamiliar Environments

Organizing & Planning in Familiar Environment

Organizing & Planning Through Visual Space

Exploring Environment within Reach

Exploring Body/Boundaries of Self

#### Posture



Notes:

Refining Movement with Sensory Demands

Organizing Movement with Anticipation & Rhythmicity

Organizing Core Stability with Movement

Exploring Rotation

Exploring Stability

Exploring Relationship with Gravity

#### Social Emotional



Notes:

Refining Emotional Understanding

Organizing Emotions & Symbolic Meaning

Organizing Social Meaning & Sense of Self

Exploring Reciprocity

Exploring Engagement

Exploring Regulation



Professional reasoning and Reflection on  
Observation: an Organizational Framework

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#### Praxis



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Refining Organization & Planning for Unfamiliar Environments

Organizing & Planning in Familiar Environment

Domain Observations:		
<b>Praxis</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Notes:
Refining Organization & Planning for Unfamiliar Environments		
Organizing & Planning in Familiar Environment		
Organizing & Planning Through Visual Space		
Exploring Environment within Reach		
Exploring Body/Boundaries of Self		
<b>Posture</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Notes:
Refining Movement with Sensory Demands		
Organizing Movement with Anticipation & Rhythmicity		
Organizing Core Stability with Movement		
Exploring Rotation		
Exploring Stability		
Exploring Relationship with Gravity		
<b>Social Emotional</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Notes:
Refining Emotional Understanding		
Organizing Emotions & Symbolic Meaning		
Organizing Social Meaning & Sense of Self		
Exploring Reciprocity		
Exploring Engagement		
Exploring Regulation		





Domain Observations:		
Praxis	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Notes:
Refining Organization & Planning for Unfamiliar Environments		
Organizing & Planning in Familiar Environment		
Organizing & Planning Through Visual Space		
Exploring Environment within Reach		
Exploring Body/Boundaries of Self		
Posture	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Refining Movement with Sensory Demands		
Organizing Movement with Anticipation & Rhythmicity		
Organizing Movement		
Exploring Rotation		
Exploring		
Exploring		
Social Emotional	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Notes:
Refining		
Organizing Emotions & Symbolic Meaning		
Organizing Social Meaning & Sense of Self		
Exploring Reciprocity		
Exploring Engagement		
Exploring Regulation		

## What is Praxis?

- The ability to sequence movement: planning, sequencing, and executing actions, and evaluating the outcome

- Children with dyspraxia may appear clumsy, struggle with balance, and have trouble judging where their body is in space



Domain Observations:		
Praxis	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Notes:
Refining Organization & Planning for Unfamiliar Environments		
Organizing & Planning in Familiar Environment		
Organizing & Planning Through Visual Space		
Exploring Environment within Reach		
Exploring Body/Boundaries of Self		
Posture	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Refining Movement with Sensory Demands		
Organizing Movement with Anticipation & Rhythmicity		
Exploring Rotation		
Exploring Reciprocity		
Exploring Engagement		
Exploring Regulation		
Social Emotional	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Notes:
Refining Emotions & Symbolic Meaning		
Organizing Emotions & Symbolic Meaning		
Exploring Reciprocity		
Exploring Engagement		
Exploring Regulation		
Exploring Regulation		

## How Does Trauma Impact Praxis?

- Childhood trauma disrupts brain development in key areas responsible for movement planning and control - pre frontal cortex and cerebellum
- This creates a disconnect with the body, making it harder to plan and organise movements effectively. In turn making it harder to establish the foundational skills needed for the development of praxis

Domain Observations:		
<b>Praxis</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Notes:
Refining Organization & Planning for Unfamiliar Environments	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Organizing & Planning in Familiar Environment	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Organizing & Planning Through Visual Space	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Exploring Environment within Reach	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Exploring Body/Boundaries of Self	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<b>Posture</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Notes:
Refining Movement with Sensory Demands	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Organizing Movement with Anticipation & Rhythmicity	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Organizing Core Stability with Movement	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Exploring Rotation	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Exploring Stability	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Exploring Relationship with Gravity	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<b>Social Emotional</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Notes:
Refining Emotional Understanding	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Organizing Emotions & Symbolic Meaning	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Organizing Social Meaning & Sense of Self	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Exploring Reciprocity	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Exploring Engagement	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Exploring Regulation	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Refining Organization & Planning for Unfamiliar Environments		
Organizing & Planning in Familiar Environment		
Organizing & Planning Through Visual Space		
Exploring Environment within Reach		
Exploring Body/Boundaries of Self		
<b>Posture</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Notes:
Refining Movement with Sensory Demands		
Organizing Movement with Anticipation & Rhythmicity		
Organizing Core Stability with Movement		
Exploring Rotation		
Exploring Stability		
Exploring Relationship with Gravity		
<b>What is Postural Control?</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Notes:
Refining Emotional Understanding		
Organizing Emotions & Symbolic Meaning		
Organizing Social Meaning & Sense of Self		
Exploring Empathy		
Exploring Engagement		
Exploring		

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- Allows sustained muscle activation and maintenance of upright positions against gravity
- Essential for completing daily activities like sitting at a desk or standing in line
- Challenges in postural control lead to excessive effort being required to maintain upright posture



Exploring Body/Boundaries of Self		
<b>Posture</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Notes:
Refining Movement with Sensory Demands		
Organizing Movement with Anticipation & Rhythmicity		
Organizing Core Stability with Movement		
Exploring Rotation		
Exploring Stability		
Exploring Relationship with Gravity		
<b>Social Emotional</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Notes:
Refining Emotional Understanding		
Organizing Emotions & Symbolic Meaning		
Organizing Social Meaning & Sense of Self		
Exploring Reciprocity		
Exploring Engagement		
Exploring Regulation		



Professional reasoning and Reflection on  
Observation: an Organizational Framework

## Integration of Observations



Play	Praxis	Posture	Social Emotional
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### Clients Strengths

### Sensory Presentation

#### Sensory Modulation

Hypothesized sensory modulation differences (SUR, SOR, sensory systems)

#### Sensory Discrimination

Hypothesized areas of sensory discrimination differences

### Therapist's Self-Reflection: Reflect on your sensory experiences in play

At what moment were YOU having the most fun? When did you feel the most connected?

Did you notice changes in your own arousal? What changes did you notice in your own body? At what point in the session did they occur?

Body changes: smiling, laughing, feeling of joy, losing track of time, feeling present, magic moments, heart rate, breathing, sweating, fatigue, yawning, shut down, decreased coordination. Cognitive changes: distraction, inattention, slow problem solving or decision making, word finding, inability to reflect-in-action

What moments were the most challenging? How did you respond? What did you notice about the client's response?

### Follow-Up Questions



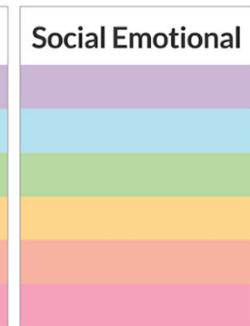


Professional reasoning and Reflection on  
Observation: an Organizational Framework

## Integration of Observations



**PROOF**  
Lens on Play



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## Follow-Up Questions



What moments were the most challenging? How did you respond? What did you notice about the client's response?

### Follow-Up Questions

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Professional reasoning and Reflection on  
Observation: an Organizational Framework

## Record and Reflection Sheet

Name: **Kyle** Date of Birth: **23 February, 2014** Therapist: **Karina**  
Parent/Caregiver: **T- - -** Age: **9 years, 2 months** Date: **April 2023**

Embodied Play Observations:	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Notes:
Refining - Embodied Symbolic Play Schemes		<b>Prefers sedentary play. Participating, but not actively exploring.</b>  <b>Exploration of body seen at end of session on ball.</b>
Organizing Sensory Motor - Embodied Representational Play		
Organizing Sensory Motor - Novel Ideas & Actions		
Exploring Sensory Motor - Goal Directed Actions		
Exploring Sensory Motor - Environment		
Exploring Sensory Motor - Body	<b>X</b>	

Domain Observations:		
Praxis	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Notes:
Refining Organization & Planning for Unfamiliar Environments		<b>No exploration observed with higher praxis demands of "obstacle course"</b>
Organizing & Planning in Familiar Environment		
Organizing & Planning Through Visual Space		
Exploring Environment within Reach		<b>Most engaged in exploring his body and</b>



Domain Observations:		
<b>Praxis</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Notes:
Refining Organization & Planning for Unfamiliar Environments		No exploration observed with higher praxis demands of “obstacle course”
Organizing & Planning in Familiar Environment		
Organizing & Planning Through Visual Space		
Exploring Environment within Reach		Most engaged in exploring his body and the ball
Exploring Body/Boundaries of Self	✗	
<b>Posture</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Notes:
Refining Movement with Sensory Demands		Using extremities to balance
Organizing Movement with Anticipation & Rhythmicity		
Organizing Core Stability with Movement		Beginning to explore at end of session on ball
Exploring Rotation		
Exploring Stability		
Exploring Relationship with Gravity	✗	
<b>Social Emotional</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Notes:
Refining Emotional Understanding		Limited engagement with complex play demands
Organizing Emotions & Symbolic Meaning		
Organizing Social Meaning & Sense of Self		Beginning to see some reciprocity at the end, when body demands were just right
Exploring Reciprocity		
Exploring Engagement	✗	
Exploring Regulation		



Professional reasoning and Reflection on  
Observation: an Organizational Framework

## Integration of Observations



### Clients Strengths

*Kyle is social and appears to enjoy interactions with therapist and family. He joins in therapist-directed play.*

### Sensory Presentation

#### Sensory Modulation

Hypothesized sensory modulation differences (SUR, SOR, sensory systems)

*Sensory under-responsive -  
prop, vestibular, tactile, visual*

#### Sensory Discrimination

Hypothesized areas of sensory discrimination differences

*Poor somatosensory discrimination*

### Therapist's Self-Reflection: Reflect on your sensory experiences in play

At what moment were YOU having the most fun? When did you feel the most connected?

- I felt a shift when Kyle was prone on the ball*
- I felt more connected and that we were playing together*
- I was not connected prior to that and may have also needed the input*

Did you notice changes in your own arousal? What changes did you notice in your own body? At what point in the session did they occur?

Body changes: smiling, laughing, feeling of joy, losing track of time, feeling present, magic moments, heart rate, breathing, sweating, fatigue, yawning, shut down, decreased coordination. Cognitive changes: distraction, inattention, slow problem solving or decision making, word finding, inability to reflect-in-action

- My arousal was high earlier in the session, I knew it wasn't going well*
- I was feeling anxious, having trouble planning in the moment*
- When he smiled and laughed on the ball I felt relief; noticed I was less tense*

What moments were the most challenging? How did you respond? What did you notice about the client's response?

- The whole session before the ball was challenging*
- I had a plan, but it didn't feel successful*
- I could tell the "play" wasn't meaningful to him - or to me*

### Follow-Up Questions

- Did sensory motor play support increased engagement and participation?*
- Will Kyle's engagement and participation continue to improve with an emphasis on embodied play?*



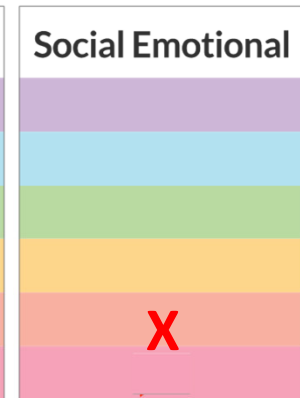
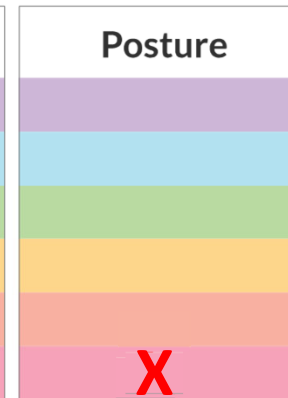
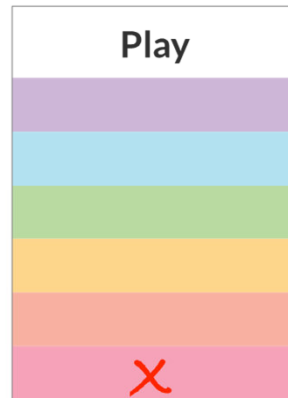


Professional reasoning and Reflection on  
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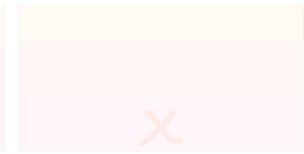
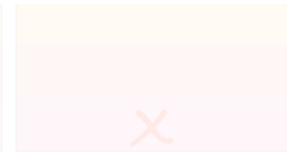
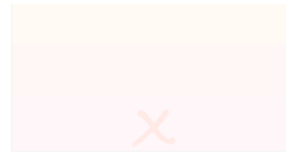
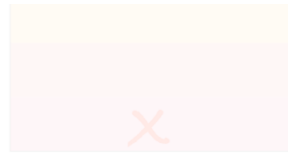
**PROOF**  
Lens on Play



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Sensory Presentation



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Professional reasoning and Reflection on  
Observation: an Organizational Framework

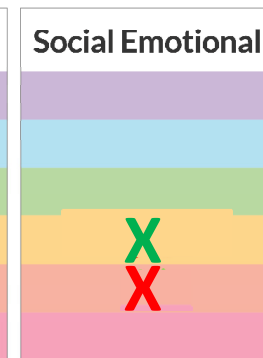
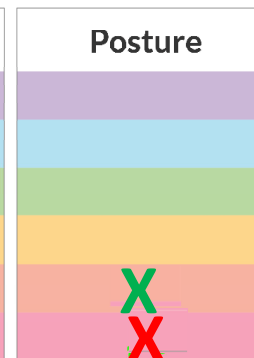
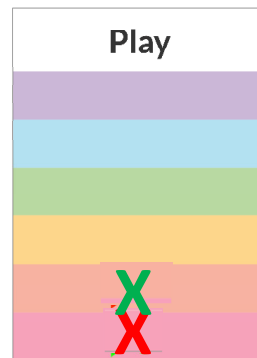
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## Integration of Observations

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**PROOF**  
Lens on Play



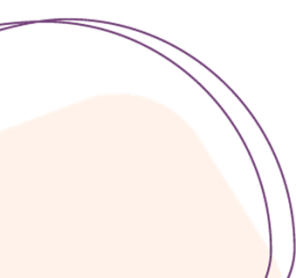


## Emphasis on Sensory-motor Play

- Provides somatosensory and vestibular input needed for body awareness
  - Supports arousal at the brainstem level and fosters safety and connection
  - Foundation for brain development, promoting emotional well-being and social engagement
- 

# Conclusion



- PROOF provides structured guidance
  - Embodied reflection enhances therapeutic connection
  - Sensorimotor play serves as a foundation for healing
  - Individual differences matter
- 

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