**WATCH ME PLAY!**

Watch Me Play! is a way of supporting vulnerable babies and young children and their caregivers. Developed in a mental health service for children in care, the approach can be helpful in a wide range of contexts - including  post-adoption, teenage parents, supervised contact, as well as for children in intact families who have emerging but unclear difficulties, and as a first line intervention before longer-term multi-disciplinary interventions can be offered. There has been interest in Watch Me Play!  across the UK and in Europe. Produced in May 2019 with funding from the Tavistock Clinic Foundation, the manual has now been disseminated in Australia, Japan, South Africa and Scandinavia and translations are underway into Estonian, Italian, Japanese and Russian.

The approach promotes child-led play, individual attention from caregivers, and talking with children about their play. Caregivers are encouraged to provide children with age-appropriate toys and their undivided attention in a quiet environment for regular short times two or more times a week. Caregivers are also encouraged to talk with the child about their play, and to reflect with another involved adult or a professional on their observations of the child’s play and how it felt to be with the child as they played.

The approach is relatively simple to implement but potentially multi-faceted in its impact. Letting the child take the lead, as long as what they choose to do is safe, allows adults to learn from the child’s play. Receiving their caregiver’s undivided attention helps children to focus in their play and communicate. The repetition inherent in play can help to allow new thoughts and feelings to be gradually assimilated. Observing the child’s play and how it feels to be with the child while he or she plays can also help to bring together professional networks to reflect on the child’s state of mind and development, informing care planning and further support for the child. Where difficulties are more severe, Watch Me Play! can help to indicate the type of further intervention or assessment that may be needed.

**Background**

* A prevalence study of infant mental health disorder in 37 pre-school children in care indicated that 76% had a mental health or developmental difficulty, and 46% had two or more difficulties (Hillen, Gafson et al., 2012).
* A study of therapeutic support for a baby in foster care indicated that an observational approach was acceptable to a foster family and to the social care network for a baby in care (Wakelyn 2011, 2020).
* In a series of training workshops in Watch Me Play! across the UK involving 114 practitioners and adoptive parents, 95% of respondents rated the approach as useful for their current work and felt confident to try the approach. Participants in focus group discussions highlighted ways in which that the pressures of the care system can lead to the psychological experiences of infants and young children being under- recognized. Social workers highlighted the value of sharing play-based observations for a better understanding of the child and their strengths and needs.

**References**

Hillen, T., Gafson, L., Drage, L. and Conlan, L.M. (2012) ‘Assessing the prevalence of mental health disorders and needs among preschool children in care in England’, *Infant Mental Health Journal,* 33 (4): 411-420. DoI: 10.1002/imhj.21327.

Wakelyn, J. (2011) Therapeutic observation of an infant in foster care. *Journal of Child Psychotherapy,* 37, (3), 280-310.

Wakelyn, J. (2020) *Therapeutic Approaches with Babies and Young Children in Care: Observation and Attention.* Abingdon, Karnac/Routledge.