

Forest Bathing as a Therapeutic Activity

'Tree Babies'

SET Outdoors, ABC PIPS & Barnardo's in association with

Rise & Shine Wellbeing

Introduction

Research has demonstrated the positive influence that not only nature, but specifically forests and woodland can have on psychological health, physical health and child development (Box and Harrison [1993], Bingley and Milligan [2004]). Lee et al [2011]).

Forest bathing is a traditional Japanese practice of immersing oneself in nature by mindfully using all five senses. This practice is facilitated by a trained forest bathing guide who focuses the participants' attention with meditative concentration on sensory experiences, engaging sight, sound, touch, smell, and sometimes taste to explore the surrounding forest (Farrow and Washburn, 2019). During the 1980s, forest bathing surfaced in Japan as a pivotal part of preventive health care. Research has demonstrated improvements in immune system function, cardiovascular, respiratory and mental health (Hansen et al, 2017).





SET Outdoors

The aim of SET Outdoors is to support Children’s Services working in the South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust (SEHSCT) area to help improve the health, wellbeing and quality of life of vulnerable young people (aged 0-18*) via engagement in purposeful, outdoor activities and/or outdoor therapy.

*0-24 if Looked After Child/Prison Healthcare



The SEHSCT is an organisational member (level 3) of The Institute for Outdoor Learning (IOL). SET Outdoors operates in accordance with the Outdoor Mental Health Interventions Model (Richards, Hardie and Anderson 2019). This programme was a Zone 2 Intervention.

Attachment Bonding Communication Parent Infant Partnership (ABC PIP)

The ABC PIP team work to promote infant wellbeing through systems change and direct service delivery. The service is available for parents during pregnancy and for families with babies up to 24 months old. Parents are provided with space to talk through any difficulties or challenging emotions they may be experiencing around parenting their baby. Families can access therapeutic support with the emotional challenges of parenting or becoming a parent, as well as help to better understand their baby’s social and emotional development.



Rise & Shine Wellbeing

Tree Babies classes are designed to introduce parents and babies to forest bathing and mindfulness practices. Sessions include somatic movement, creativity, utilising senses to experience nature, baby yoga principles and a chance to connect with other parents. The classes are designed to be inclusive and baby led.



'Tree Babies' sessions were co-facilitated by:

- Victoria Croft (Infant Mental Health Keyworker)
- Lindsay Murray (BA Hons in Social Anthropology, Baby Massage & Yoga Instructor, Children's Yoga Instructor, Connected Kids Meditation Teacher, Infant (0-5) Reflexology Instructor (for parents), Story Massage Instructor, Tree Babies Certified guide).

Sessions were facilitated for 8 family groups on a Wednesday morning (10.30-12.30) for 6 sessions commencing 30/6/21. Inclusion criteria stated that the infant should be aged between 0-12 months. One family dropped out of the programme due to travel difficulties.

'Tree Babies' Objectives:

- To allow parents the opportunity to engage with their baby in a safe, therapeutic environment within a group setting of their peers thus providing opportunities to promote attachment, attunement and play skills, alongside developing care-giver social skills, confidence and peer relationships within a nature-rich, motivating environment.
- To promote the mental health and emotional wellbeing of infants and their parents via symptom reduction.



Outcome Measurement

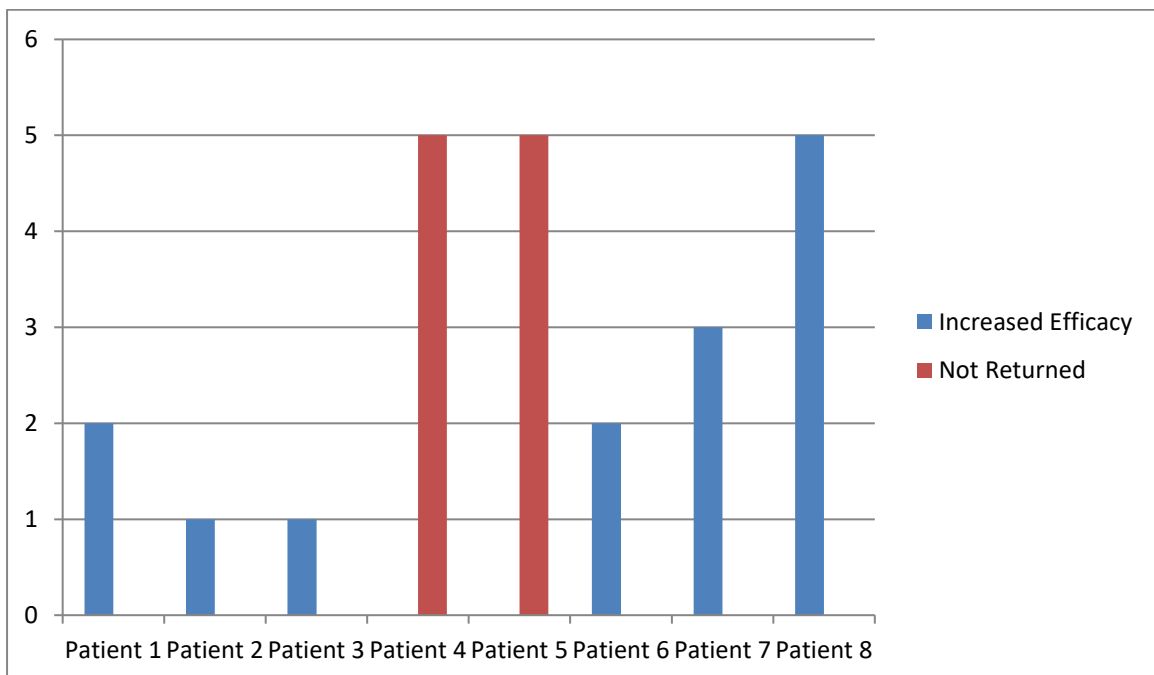
Outcome measures were completed before and after the group programme. 1/8 patient dropped out of the programme, 2/8 patients did not return their post group outcome measures.

Brief Parental Self-Efficacy Scale (BPSES)

The BPSES is a five item scale that assesses a parent’s belief that he/she can effectively perform or manage tasks related to parenting (DDPI, 2017).

Each parent who attended the Tree Babies Programme reported an increased in Parental Self-Efficacy on at least one of the five tasks related to parenting.

Graph 1: Number of Items on BPSES Indicating an Improvement in Self-Efficacy

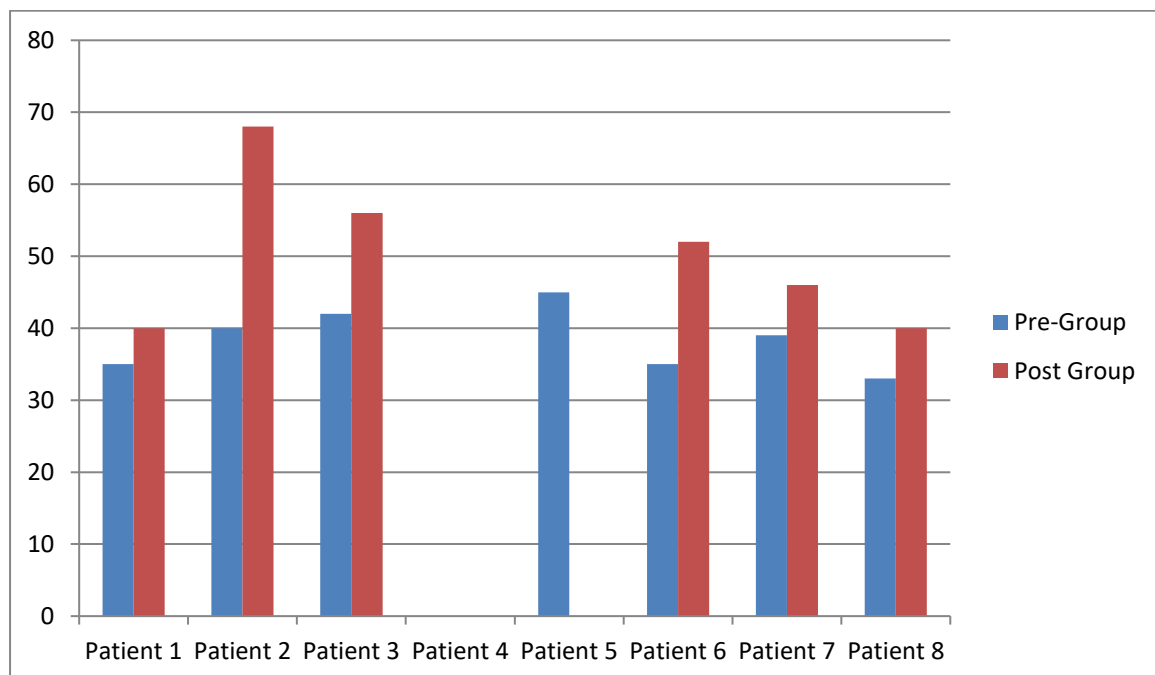


The Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS)

The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scales were developed to enable the measuring of mental wellbeing in the general population and the evaluation of programmes which aim to improve mental wellbeing. The 14-item scale WEMWBS has 5 response categories, summed to provide a single score. The items are all worded positively and cover both feeling and functioning aspects of mental wellbeing. The scale has been widely used nationally and internationally for monitoring, evaluating projects and programmes and investigating the determinants of mental wellbeing

The 14-item WEMWBS has been shown to be responsive to change at the individual level and some practitioners are using the scales to help clients and patients think about ways in which their mental health is changing. A change in score (between 3-8 points) suggests levels of change in wellbeing (Warwick Medical School, 2020).

Graph 2: Pre and Post Group Wellbeing Scores as Measured by WEMWBS



All of the patients who completed post-group outcome measures demonstrated improvements in wellbeing well beyond the 3-8 point threshold. Patient 4 did not return either pre or post group outcome measures. Patient 5 did not return post group outcome measures as they did not complete the programme.



Parent Feedback

"Tree babies has been the turning point in my perinatal mental health, I still meet up with the girls I met at it.

"Tree babies has literally changed my life. I was feeling really low and wasn't well at all. I felt so alone and that I wasn't a good mum but coming here and meeting new mums and you guys (staff), has been a life saver. I'm so happy that I tried this because I was scared, but I couldn't be happier, thank you guys so much."

"When I first started my baby wasn't settled at all and I wanted to give up, but I am so happy I persevered. I've made such wonderful friends and learnt so much about myself and my baby. I am in a much happier and healthier place."

"I feel so relaxed every week to come here and when I leave, I feel this huge weight has been lifted. The energy from the group is so healing and I come away every week feeling rejuvenated. I look forward to having this time to bond with my baby and to stop and slow down my busy life so I can just be with her without any other thoughts but what's happening in the moment."

Tree babies has allowed me to build a great support system with other mums with babies around my sons age. I don't have this normally, so it's been so nice to talk to others about issues I've had with breast feeding or sleeping, or just being tired.

Staff Feedback

Staff feedback has been gathered from a range of SET Outdoors commissioned programmes. 84.6% of staff who responded to the survey reported that they felt that having the opportunity to work with service users outdoors had enriched their service delivery. 100% of staff reported that they enjoyed seeing service users participate in and enjoy the outdoor activity.

Victoria, who co-facilitated this Tree Babies programme stated:

"What a joy to create, collaborate and deliver Tree Babies"



References:

Bingley A Milligan C (2004). *Climbing trees and building dens: mental health and well-being in young adults and the long-term effects of childhood play experience*. Report to the Forestry Commission, Lancaster University.

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