

Five top tips for designing a therapeutic space in your school

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AfC Virtual School

1. GO BACK TO BASICS

Try to remove everything that you can from the space to allow its full potential to reveal itself. If you're working in a large room, mark out an area where focussed work, such as ELSA or counselling, will take place and clear that area completely.

Now take a couple of minutes to sit on the floor in the empty space. How does it **feel** to be there? Listen to the noises inside and outside the room. What can you hear? Is it dark or light? What are the textures of the flooring underneath your fingers? Is the room well-ventilated or stuffy and is it cold or warm? Does the space smell good?

This is a good time to make a note of the qualities that you value in the space and those that you might want to change.

2. TAKE A SEAT (or two)

Bring a couple of chairs and place them in the room. Where do you feel most comfortable, near the door? Next to the window? How far apart would you like the chairs to be? Take some time to sit in both seats.

Now, think about the chairs themselves. Are they the same size? Is one more comfortable or higher than the other? Do you need chairs at all? Would a sofa fit into the room? Or beanbags (think of your back!)?

Seating that is non-institutional and non-standard can signal to students that they will be taken care of in this room and can feel relaxed. For a child with attachment needs, a comfortable seating arrangement can symbolise a place for respite, a space for creative thinking and feeling rather than somewhere to learn.

Is it important for you to be at the same height when seated as a student? And will they be able to select where they sit themselves? Can they move their seating so they can be closer to a door if that makes them feel safer or further away from the door, if that makes them more at ease?

For inspiration, look at design magazines (available in libraries) e.g. Living Etc., Elle Decoration. Freecycle is a good source of free furniture.

3. SOUND DESIGN

The sound inside and outside the room is one of the most important aspects of therapeutic design for attachment awareness. Noise can be difficult to control but is far easier to manage if you are aware of the types of noises that reach you and when they occur during the day. Are the noises that come from outside the room constant or intermittent? What happens when you open the window? Is the room too quiet? Do you need to create a background noise, e.g. bring music into the space?

If the room is large and reverberant, use softer textures to absorb as much noise as possible. Soft chairs, rugs, cushions, a bookcase full of books, plants and beanbags can all help. Sound-absorbing screens can also help to some extent.

Children who have experienced trauma can be hypervigilant with respect to sound as well as what they see happening around them. When students can hear distinct voices coming from outside the room, they might feel that they can also be overheard when they are talking. They may also be distracted by loud interruptions.

4. CREATE A PROTECTED SPACE FOR EVERYONE WHO USES IT

Consider how to protect access to the room so that when an ELSA or counselling session is taking place, no one will interrupt. Many care-experienced children have had times in their lives when they haven't had a safe, protected space, (both physically and psychologically). This space will give them the opportunity to talk about difficult feelings openly with a trusted adult without fear of being overheard or judged by others.

Putting a timetable or sign on the door can help to prevent unwanted interruptions. A more powerful way to protect the space is to take every opportunity to communicate the value of the work that is done in this room to support the emotional and mental health of students and the investment that has been made in doing this work.

5. DESIGNING WITH THOSE WHO USE THE ROOM

Designing with students can be part of the therapeutic process. When we view students as experts in their own lives and develop a trusting relationship with them, we can approach the design of a therapeutic space with more confidence together. Giving them the agency to choose how they use the room e.g. how and where they choose to sit can help to boost a feeling of belonging. It is also important that they feel comfortable in the space and secure in the space.

For more resources about therapeutic design for schools by Emma Dyer visit preciousspaces.org