

# Beyond four walls

**Kate Beckwith shares her passion for working therapeutically with children in a place where nature, art and play converge**

**K**ate's Garden, my nature-based psychodynamic psychotherapy practice, is a world where nature, art and play converge to create a therapeutic space for children. This is the story of how it began. After taking a degree in fine art, I became immersed in the world of arts education where I witnessed the profound impact of arts programmes on children and families. I got a front-row seat to the unfolding of something incredibly important. Every time a child proudly held up their artwork, they were saying, 'Look at this! Look at me!' I understood the significance of these formative years and the importance of arts events for families, yet I knew I could do more to support children, and my own childhood dream of owning a farm quietly simmered.

I embarked on an MA in psychodynamic counselling, at the same time that my partner and I purchased a modest, somewhat outdated, bungalow, perched on two-and-a-half acres of untamed land. We laboured from dawn until dusk, transforming the once wild expanse into a safe, secure haven. We made various dens and hideouts, a treehouse, installed a sunken trampoline, cut paths and stepping stones, added swings, climbing frames and even a hobbit house. Enter 2020, a year when a global pandemic cast its long shadow. As the world descended into turmoil, I realised the profound significance of the sanctuary we had built. This was no longer just a place to live; it was something we could share that could become an extension of my therapeutic work.

My vision was clear: to create a psychodynamic psychotherapy practice that incorporated the outdoors, nature, animals, art and play for children, adolescents and families. At Kate's Garden, clients are not confined within four walls, and can instead follow their instincts, explore their interests, and express their emotions in a manner that feels most natural to them. My therapeutic model is rooted in psychodynamic principles, a foundational approach that seeks to explore the unconscious mind and how it influences behaviour, emotions and wellbeing. The principles that underpin my practice include freedom of expression, exploration and self-discovery, flexibility and adaptability, and empowerment and healing.

## **A unique blend**

While Kate's Garden shares some elements of other therapeutic modalities (for example, ecotherapy, play therapy, walk and talk therapy, art therapy, and animal-assisted therapy), it is the psychodynamic principles, coupled with the freedom and choice offered to children, that are at its core. There are no preconceived expectations or constraints. Children can choose to be outdoors or in, to engage in an array of activities, to be calm or physically active. While the confinements of a room disappear to create endless possibilities for exploration and expression, safety remains a priority through risk assessment, continual monitoring of the environment and interactions with animals, and personalised safety plans.

## **Animals and nature**

Working in the natural environment presents unique opportunities for children (and me!) to engage all the senses. Within the confines of an indoor setting, sight often dominates, while outdoors we become attuned to the sounds, smells and textures of nature,

heightening sensory awareness. This helps me to pick up on my countertransference feelings, and helps me to help my clients notice more of what is going on around them externally, and how, in parallel, this makes them feel internally.

At Kate's Garden, there are ponies, pigs, goats, guinea pigs and chickens; many are related which provides opportunities to discuss family relationships. Animals also provide a special sensory opportunity – touch – which helps clients regulate their emotions. The instant connection with the animal helps the feeling of safety and trust, which may, in turn be transferred to me as the therapist. Stroking animals can help form a safe attachment, which is perhaps something the client has never experienced before. Once they feel they have a safe attachment, they can explore more readily.

Animals can provide brilliant opportunities. Sometimes they might not want too much attention, which can provide an opportunity to discuss how it might feel to be intruded upon. What does it feel like to be wanted too much or not enough? We can use these opportunities to discuss how the client might feel about their relationships.

As children interact with the animals, so they communicate with me. They also observe my relationship with the animals and can learn a lot about me and my intentions through that process, witnessing my maternal side.

Being outside benefits our wellbeing and is soothing and grounding, a fact that became abundantly clear during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Nature is the ultimate container: somewhere children can process their emotions, memories and experiences. The setting is primed for introspection, reflection and therapeutic breakthroughs. It offers a sense of calmness, relaxation, freedom, space, opportunities for movement, exploration and engagement, all allowing children to express themselves in varied ways, stimulating the senses through rich sensory experiences.

Although the therapeutic benefits of nature on mental health have long been recognised, clinical applications are relatively novel. Recent studies have shed light on the impact of nature on cognitive and emotional wellbeing.

For example, one study found that spending just three days in nature could boost performance on a creative problem-solving test by 50%,<sup>1</sup> while another found that children who engaged in outdoor activities experienced a significant improvement in their personal wellbeing and overall health.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, other research has demonstrated a direct link between increased exposure to nature and enhanced happiness and health.<sup>3</sup> Nature's positive influence extends to the physical body. Inflammation, which is associated with a wide range of illnesses, including autoimmune disorders, inflammatory bowel disease, depression and cancer, was found to be lower in individuals who spent time in forested environments.<sup>4</sup> The Nature Fix,<sup>5</sup> delves into the science behind these profound effects, revealing how nature makes us feel better, both

subjectively and measurably, by calming our fight or flight response. In essence, nature prepares the client, and the therapist, for the psychodynamic journey by helping them achieve the optimal state of mind.

## **Empowering children through choice**

Though central to my work, it is not all about nature/the outdoors. The use of the word 'garden' in the name of my practice signifies the connection to an indoor space of equal importance. The most

distinctive aspect is the freedom for clients to choose, explore and express themselves without judgment or constraints. Children can navigate their unique therapeutic journey, unhindered by external expectations, rules, restrictions or predefined paths. By observing my clients' process, I aim to build a robust evidence base supporting the enhanced advantages of my therapeutic approach. As a burgeoning field, there is limited research in this area, and I am keen to illustrate how allowing children freedom of choice helps to establish a strong connection between therapist and child, and offers diverse opportunities.

I have observed a range of responses from the children I work with. Some initially seek the freedom of the outdoors, perhaps creating distance between us, while others might form instant bonds with the animals, using them as a bridge to connect with me. Some children prefer

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### Sam's journey of self-exploration

When we first met, Sam ran straight into the garden, creating a distance between us that seemed to help him feel safe. We were off to a great start: he instantly made use of the setting and within seconds I picked up on his need for his own space. His expectations and perception of me (as with all clients) were influenced by his own experiences and perceptions of others, particularly his main caregivers. This affected his behaviour towards me as his therapist. Sam worked on the negative transference, criticising and competing with me. This was clear during one session when he expressed his anger and resentment through his strong dislike for the colour blue (the colour of my coat), and the pointlessness of hats and scarves (which I was wearing). Sam's mother proved elusive, wrapped in her own defences, just like I had been wrapped in my outdoor clothes. I think my clothes represented the barriers Sam had experienced, preventing access to his mother in his early infancy. To me, it seemed as if I represented an inaccessible mother who would leave him feeling either disappointed and isolated, or intruded upon.

In one session, Sam moved between indoor and outdoor spaces frequently. Being inside felt wrong, but being outside felt wrong too. Sam was effectively harnessing the choice of the different therapeutic spaces to express and explore his profound emotional distress. I understood this as a struggle in settling and an expression of his difficulty relating to me.

After a planned break, Sam returned to therapy expressing his feelings of exclusion. He went inside and shut the therapy room door on me, so I was left outside in the cold. In doing so, he gave me first-hand experience of how it had felt for him to be shut out by the break. Later that session, Sam accused me of never having introduced him to the guinea pigs. It was as if he believed I had withheld something from him. I gently addressed his sadness and anger around his feelings of rejection during the break. The therapy had been progressing steadily and the break seemed to have triggered a significant emotion which he was able to show me through his behaviour. Sam's newfound awareness of the environment and fresh perspective allowed him to see certain elements as if they had never existed before, reminding me of the way an infant begins to notice people and objects around weaning age. It was as though something entirely new had entered Sam's view. We made significant progress from this point as we continued to explore Sam's feelings and views. The negative transference waned, and moments of beautiful connection began to take its place.

to remain solely outside or solely inside for the entire session, while others transition between the indoor and outdoor spaces during each session or as the work progresses over time. This movement between the two environments has revealed its own unique therapeutic value, which I illustrate in the composite case study.

### The future of child psychotherapy

I continue to learn from and be inspired by each and every one of my clients and the work we do together. I hope that by sharing these insights, we can collectively shift the paradigm of child psychotherapy. In the future, I would love children to be able to access therapeutic spaces that mirror the vastness of their inner worlds, where nature serves as the ultimate container, guiding them, with the help of the therapist, toward self-discovery and healing.

Kate's Garden is a testament to the transformative power of nature, animals, art, play and choice. I challenge the traditional boundaries of indoor settings and invite us all to consider the limitations of confining therapy to clinical rooms. In a world where the therapeutic landscape is evolving, I offer a creative approach which encourages personal growth for both children and therapists. We must respond to the evolving needs of children and reimagine traditional therapy spaces so that we nurture growth and exploration. ■

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