

## Play Matters:

Exploring neurodiversity-affirming principles in children's play

**EXPRESSIONS OF INTEREST SOUGHT**

**ONLINE**

**(over 2 x 3 hour sessions – with break)**

**Semester 1, 2026**

Play is more than fun — it is a powerful developmental process that builds the foundation for learning, communication, social engagement, and emotional regulation. Pretend play is a form of play that can improve joint attention, emotional understanding, and flexibility in thinking; and can serve as a primary bridge to a greater sense of awareness of self and others and provide opportunities for connection through building relationships.

Many neurodivergent children engage in pretend play, in a way that is meaningful and enjoyable to them. This play may show preferences for repetition and sensory-focused activities. These natural preferences can sometimes be misunderstood as deficits, rather than seen as important expressions of identity, interest and neurological diversity.

When understood and supported through a neurodiversity-affirming lens, play becomes a gateway to connection, communication, and emotional wellbeing for neurodivergent children. Research consistently demonstrates that high-quality play experiences can support:

- Development of symbolic thinking, which underpins language and academic skills.
- Social reciprocity and interaction, by providing a shared focus and emotional exchange within the preferences of the child.
- Self-regulation, through co-regulation and meaningful interactions through attunement and responding to the child.
- Confidence and autonomy, by allowing children to explore ideas their way.
- Flexibility in thinking, as imaginative play encourages trying new actions and perspectives.

This workshop explores how therapists can use play to affirm the strengths and support the unique profiles of neurodivergent children, fostering meaningful joyful connections and developmentally attuned support strategies.

### **Workshop Aims/Objectives:**

- Use a neurodiversity-affirming lens to observe, interpret, and support play.
- Learn how to embed play into therapy sessions as a medium for connection and learning.
- Identify strategies to support shared attention, flexible thinking, imaginative engagement, and sensory regulation through play.
- Discover ways to build caregiver and educator capacity to support play in natural environments.
- Consider support planning for common goals including social engagement, symbolic play, and emotional regulation.

This workshop will be practical with case studies and video analysis used to illustrate examples of how play can be understood and the child's strengths identified during assessment.

This workshop is suitable for both occupational therapists and speech pathologists.

### Workshop Delivery

Participants will be expected to complete the workshop requirements via an integrated system of pre-workshop reading material and interactive online sessions. The online sessions will use a mixture of information presentation, case studies and practical small group activities. Participants will be responsible for having access to the Internet for some or all of the workshop content.

- **Self-study** - Participants will need to allocate **1 -1.5 hours** prior to each of the online group sessions (including between Session 1 and 2 of the individual modules) to complete pre-reading, case study preparation and self-reflection tasks.
- **Workshop Manuals** participants will be mailed a hard copy of the workshop manual/s which will include
  - some pre-reading to assist with consolidating knowledge with regard to the importance of play
  - presentation notes, covering the online presentation content as well as the case studies used in the self-study and interactive components of the presentation sessions.
- **On line presentation** – using Zoom videoconferencing, participants will have the opportunity to link into two presentation sessions (with 30 min break mid-session). Sessions will also include interactive components (ie group discussions, case studies and Q&A sessions) to assist with integrating participants newly acquired knowledge and skills. Participants will be emailed the link (including password) to the workshop presentation sessions.

### Workshop Recording

Please note to safeguard the copyright of material presented, maintain the confidentiality of case discussions and the privacy of participants, **this workshop WILL NOT be recorded.**

### About the Presenter



**Dr Siobhan Casey** - is a paediatric occupational therapist and Masters qualified play therapist. Siobhan has worked in the school of Health and Social Development at Deakin University in the capacity of both Occupational Therapy and Play Therapy as a Lecturer and Clinical Supervisor. Siobhan's research revolves around understanding the developmental processes of regulation and play capacities in supporting the capacity of resilience in children and families. Her attainment of a Doctor of Philosophy degree from Deakin in 2018 underscores her commitment to advancing knowledge in this field. Her research not only enriches the academic discourse but also informs her clinical practice across various settings.

Siobhan's clinical experience involved working closely in community based and mainstream school settings, taking the time to understand the culture and experiences of teachers, families and children within the education system. Identifying gaps in knowledge and maintaining a passion for play in education, Siobhan completed the Master of Child Play Therapy and continued to work in the space of consulting education and allied health therapies in applying principles related to play development theory and relationship development.

She continues to speak to a wide variety of audiences across Australia on the topic of resilience in play and has a particular interest in advancing public scholarship through media releases. Siobhan's continuing research interests include translating play and play therapy theory to education and family systems to support the holistic development of the child.

**Expressions of Interest** for this workshop are now being sought. Register your interest by contacting Zi Mei Events on [info@zimei.com.au](mailto:info@zimei.com.au)