

Episode: 6**Title:****Hosts: Mahek Bansal & Larissa Ferrari****Transcript:****Mahek Bansal**

Hi, everyone. Welcome back to the New PossibilOTs podcast. We're so excited to have you join us again. Last episode we talked about building rapport in paediatric occupational therapy. So for this episode, we wanted to, I guess, delve into keeping a child's engagement and the importance of engagement throughout the OT process. And Larissa and I are going to share some tips and strategies of what we use to support a child's engagement and how we can constantly reflect throughout our practice because we feel that engagement is the foundation to be able to work on our goals and execute our plans and support the child and the family.

Larissa Ferrari

So maybe we could start just by talking about what engagement might look like in a session. So, for example, I consider engagement being that back and forth interaction. So even though we might not be looking at each other, we might not be with our body in the group, there's still some back and forth interaction. So you could still try to bring that child back to the group or to the session. It's just when you can realize that the child's still there with you somehow. So when you're giving verbal prompts, you get a response back. When you go to the child's level, you get the child either looking at you or at least bringing your body to you. So you have a little bit of that response. What else could you add to that? Mahek, I agree.

Mahek Bansal

I think there is some element of interaction, depending on what that interaction looks like is different, but some sort of interaction. I think there's also a sense of a common goal, whether that's a common goal in terms of an activity that you're engaged in or your interaction or exploring an environment. But there is some sort of, I guess, commonality in what you as a therapist and the client are doing or engaged in. I think that's how I can see engagement as well. But, yeah, I agree, it's even a step back from attention or regulation and things like that. It's that you've got an interaction and a common goal, I'd say.

Larissa Ferrari

And I would say that there is somehow a common motivation. So, of course, because we are occupational therapists, we want the goals to be meaningful for the child, as we spoke before. But there is also a level of motivation, even though you need to adapt for the child to be able to perform. But there is a little bit of an understanding and motivation for that to happen in the session. And I guess from there, just by explaining what engagement might look to us, then I feel like in a practical way, to me that's like a dance. So it's almost like I give an instruction, a verbal prompt or say something or I do something and then I get something back and then I play my action to return to another thing and there is like this dance. So, whenever I'm doing something and I think that nothing's coming back and even when you give some time because the child might be organizing their response, you actually feel that you lost that common goal or that interaction or that you've got some distraction in there.

Larissa Ferrari

So then I have to adjust my behaviour or my strategy so I can get the engagement back and

Episode: 6**Title:****Hosts: Mahek Bansal & Larissa Ferrari**

then move on to the activity. So that's in simple words how I would see that happening in a session. Would you agree? What do you think?

Mahek Bansal

Yeah, definitely. I think there is those different components of engagement. Someone can be engaged with you as a person, someone can be engaged in an activity, someone can be engaged in an environment and I think that you can be engaged in different ways and I think it's also going back to as a therapist, your clinical reasoning and your goals, that what type of engagement you are requiring. Of course, an engaged child is probably a child that's engaged in multiple of those aspects, but maybe that's not also relevant to your goals or not within the child's strengths. And so I think we need to understand what type of engagement we want to support the child with so that then we can ascertain what that looks like.

Larissa Ferrari

Yeah, I can see that happening in the session and you're right, there's so many different ways a child can show engagement and you've said something really important. When we want to work on a common goal with a child, we are working in that multiple engagement side of things because we have the interaction between me and my client, the interaction of my child and the activity, and that triad. So my engagement with the child and the activity and it's a back-and-forth thing for us to observe. So, I'm assuming there are a few things that we should look for when we're working with engagement. So, what aspects or how can we promote engagement in a session even when that looks like giving one step back when we don't have that engagement? Like what are the things we should work on or should pay attention to promote that engagement.

Mahek Bansal

I think the first step is feeling confident to take that step back. So, I think sometimes it can feel like if you've been working towards a goal for a really long time. You're really taking lots of steps forward and then something happens or whatever the circumstance is, and the child or the client isn't as engaged or is having difficulties with engagement, then that can feel like, you have to take this, you know, you're starting a few steps back. And it can feel hard as a therapist, but I think it's having that confidence to say that it's not a step back. It's almost a different path. It's just like an alternative route that we just need to go on this route for now so that we can get back to where we were at and feeling confident to know that's what's important to support the child, to continue to take steps forward.

Mahek Bansal

And I think that I've had that questioned as well, not just internally like myself, questioning my clinical reasoning, but by others, by parents, by other health professionals to say this child was doing all of these things and now you're stepping back, why are you doing that? So, I think we need to have that confidence to say and to express and communicate to others as well that it's not a step back. It's just that in order for us to continue going forward, we need to put that engagement as the priority because otherwise we're not anyways going to see the outcomes that we're hoping for.

Larissa Ferrari

Yeah. I would also say that it sometimes can mean to readapt our activities. So I would

Episode: 6**Title:****Hosts: Mahek Bansal & Larissa Ferrari**

consider, for example, how the child's presenting on that day, because we are all different on different days of our life. Some days we are more active, some days we're more tired than usual. So considering that level of arousal of the child and if whatever you've planned on doing on that day is appropriate to meet the child's level of arousal - and I guess that can also be explained to parents and carers because that happens everywhere. So it happens at home, at school. So when you require a child to do something, or if you plan to do something with a child, but the child doesn't seem to be that engaged with you, or when you give one step back, like you're saying, and you observe where the child's at, that's when I kind of ask myself, do I need to adapt to this activity?

Larissa Ferrari

Is that activity appropriate for this child level of arousal? So, should I work on the level of arousal or then should I adapt the activity? What's going to promote a better engagement first, so then we can meet our goal or perform our activity or continue working on whatever we had planned before.

Mahek Bansal

And I think you've brought up a really good point with the level of arousal. I think that is a really important factor that can impact engagement on a day-to-day basis and can impact engagement on a small level, but also on a big level. If a child is coming in tired and lethargic, then no, they're not going to show the same level of engagement. So, what can we do that is going to promote them to have their level of arousal in a space that matches the environment and matches the task and matches the level of engagement that we need? And so while we talk about engagement, it can sound like doing these big things to step back and work on the engagement, but in fact, it can be really small changes, too. Whether it's starting with a movement break so that we can get some energy into the body and wake our nervous system up a little bit more, or whether that's adding just movement into our activity.

Mahek Bansal

If we're going to do handwriting, then instead of doing it sitting at the table, can we do it standing against the wall or just making small adaptations throughout the session, and to our plan and keeping our plan flexible, I think will really support that level of arousal, which is a really important factor for engagement that we probably see most on a regular basis with our clients.

Larissa Ferrari

Yeah, or even trying to give one step back, for example, with our handwriting ones, because they sometimes experience so many frustrations or they're just too tired after a long day at school. What can we do that could work on similar goals, but it would be more motivational for the child and that could improve the level of engagement with the task at that stage. And then you can slowly do a transition for a more complex activity, but with a better engagement and with a better motivation to the task, which is a little bit of a combination of both in that situation.

Mahek Bansal

I mean, Larissa, how do you know then? I guess you come up with a plan for your session and then you have you know, and you think of all these activities that are going to work towards your goals. And then as you meet the client or the child and you notice that their

Episode: 6**Title:****Hosts: Mahek Bansal & Larissa Ferrari**

level of arousal isn't going to foster engagement. You know that you need to change something or you need to support this level of arousal. But how do you, on the spot, come up with new ideas or changes that you know are going to meet this child's need?

Larissa Ferrari

That is a very interesting question because I think there's so many things we can do. But I'll start with the ones I do most commonly in my practice. So, number one, I try to predict if I know the client or even if I do not. As we spoke before, we always have somehow some previous information before our first sessions. So even though after building the rapport, you still try to figure it out, how to engage that child in activities. So I just try to have a big picture before and plan ahead a few different possibilities I could have for that activity, depending on what's happening. So I could have these sets or these tools with me already. So for example, I'll keep using the handwriting example. I'm not only taking a pencil and a paper, I'm also taking for example a fidget or theraputty, or playdough.

Larissa Ferrari

I might bring a wobble cushion. I might bring these few different tools with me just because if that particular handwriting activity didn't work well, I do have some other things I could do with that child. But the other thing I could do once I'm, as you said, on the spot and I need to come up with few ideas, I guess the first thing would be looking at what's the level of arousal of that child is it more like of a tiredness lethargic? Is it more like a hyperexcitement? Is the child seeking a lot of input in the environment? Is the child showing some refusal for the handwriting activity itself? And then after, when we're not doing that, when we're engaging on a conversation, things are more fluid, then that will help me to make a smart guess, as we would say in OT. So then, if the child's too tired, I'll try to bring the arousal up and then as you said, a movement break.

Larissa Ferrari

If the child is too excited or movement seeking that we can try to ground ourselves first. That could be for example, doing a funny drawing while we're lying on our tummy. So there's so many things we can do. But I think that observation of where we're at, what our body might need, how we can prepare ourselves and let's say the handwriting itself didn't work at all. But what are the goals behind the handwriting? Like, are the main goal related to motivation? Are the goal related to pencil grasp, if that makes sense. If you break up the activity, you can find ways to work on your goals but with a better engagement.

Mahek Bansal

So I guess I feel like what I'm hearing from you is that maybe we need to change our approach. So instead of using that top-down approach and doing handwriting practice and child's not engaged in that, maybe we need to think about that bottom-up approach to think about what are the skills involved and how can I incorporate the child's interests and motivation by working on the skills rather than the handwriting practice, as that might not be engaging for them right now.

Larissa Ferrari

That's an option, but we can still use the top down approach. For example, if I play silly and I put the paper under the table and say oh, we are so tired, let's just lie on our back and do an

Episode: 6**Title:****Hosts: Mahek Bansal & Larissa Ferrari**

upside-down handwriting, I might just get the child engaged just as much. So again, I must say that as paediatric occupational therapists we have to be very creative and sometimes it's hard for us too. We also get tired. But I guess it's when we connect to others that we keep borrowing someone else's ideas to help us as well.

Mahek Bansal

And I guess that it also comes down to that time that you spend building rapport. It's not only building a trust relationship, it's also getting to know the child. And as a therapist, so that when you do have times where there's difficulty with engagement, you can use what you know of the child and what you've tried with the child to support their engagement. So what I mean by that is in those first few sessions, we talked about in our last episode, how we can use ourselves therapeutically and do we become silly and really playful and will that get the child's engagement or do they need soothing or calming voices and tones because that's going to support their engagement. And I guess having that information will then know when they're disengaged, okay, I need to be really playful and change it up and maybe make this activity a bit silly because that's what's going to bring their engagement back to me.

Mahek Bansal

And then also using those first few sessions to try those different, I guess, regulation activities to know movement breaks are really supportive for this child, or some deep pressure wall pushes and things like that are really supportive for this child. And I use that rapport building stage as well as a bit of a trial and error to keep adding tools in my own clinical reasoning that I know I can use when I need to work on engagement on the spot. So, using what you know in their strength and interest, I think also can help you be flexible in that moment to find what you might try when you need to change your plan.

Larissa Ferrari

Yes, and I'll add something to it that is my point of view. I would say that sometimes some people, could be parents carers or other therapists, might question ourselves if the child's not using this lack of engagement on purpose to refuse or not to engage in one specific activity. And what I usually try to think is that should be motivating if it was easy or if it was simple, or if everyone else around is doing there's so many ways a child can do an activity even though it's not their favourite. So, what is behind the refusal? What is behind that behaviour of 'I'm not doing this', 'I don't want to do this', or 'I'll disengage once you present that to me', the child must be communicating something. And when we have that rapport and engagement, it's almost like we can try to unfold what's behind and then facilitate to a more positive experience.

Larissa Ferrari

And sometimes when I'm talking to the parents about this, I sometimes say, oh, OTs has a magic power of making hard things become fun things. And it's just because I want the parents to understand and the child understand that something that is difficult for us to do can become something somehow enjoyable. Like if I'm not good at handwriting, it's not that I'm going to love handwriting, but I can somehow make it fun and have some pleasure while doing that activity because it is part of my life. So, I always like to look at the disengaging as

Episode: 6**Title:****Hosts: Mahek Bansal & Larissa Ferrari**

something else is behind that. What is it? Let's figure it out. Does that make sense to you? I don't know. It's just my way of seeing it.

Mahek Bansal

Yes, and I completely agree. I definitely come from the perspective that all behaviour is communication. If we're doing something, we're doing it for a reason and we're trying to communicate something. And I think we see that in children more because where they're still developing and growing, they're also still developing the capacity to effectively communicate their own feelings or the reasons why they're engaging in different ways and so they're just using what they know to try and communicate that to us. So I think a big part of engagement and any sort of interaction with a child is trying to understand, we need to be the detective to figure out and problem solve what this behaviour is trying to communicate. Is it that, yes, this task is too hard? Is it that it's boring? Is it because we are not feeling well and so we can't get our body to do it?

Mahek Bansal

What are we trying to communicate? Because then we can effectively support this child. And I guess that our organization of behaviour can have a big impact on engagement but the vice versa as well. Being disengaged can also have a really big impact on the way that we organize our behaviour. So I guess when we think about engagement, we can, I guess ascertain that a child is disengaged by thinking about the behaviours they're presenting to us. But then being disengaged can also mean that a child is having difficulty organizing their behaviour because they're just not engaged in the environment, they're not engaged with you, they're not engaged with the task. So I think it's almost like this loop in itself.

Larissa Ferrari

Yeah. And I guess maybe these are topics for future episodes like the relationship of engagement with level of attention, with sensory regulation, with organization of behaviour, with social communication difficulties. Because even though I see them as different things, they might be confusing on a practice. Like when you're working with a child and you are not very familiar with paediatrics or if you're not familiar with child development, when is it lack of engagement or a lack of attention? When is regulation affecting engagement? Because these things, as we said in, I think our first episode, and in paediatrics, we see people as a whole so they all might be affected or some parts of it might be affected and it is part of our detective skills, as you said before.

Mahek Bansal

So I think the most important thing about engagement is remembering that engagement is this continuous process that it doesn't just start and then is always there. It doesn't just stop and never come back. It's a continuous cycle. And it means for us as therapists, we need to be continuously observing the child, our interactions, the environment, the activities and using that to be on the spot, reflecting on the level of engagement so that we can make these adjustments as necessary. Whether these adjustments are right then and there in the session, but then also for our clinical reasoning when we plan the next session. Because then, now that we know that our engagement is impacted, then we can pre plan for the next time as well. I guess that's on us to be that sort of detective and reflector so that we can continuously support engagement throughout the OT process.

Episode: 6**Title:****Hosts: Mahek Bansal & Larissa Ferrari****Mahek Bansal**

And engagement happens with children, but it also happens with parents and carers. We want parents and carers to be engaged with us and to be engaged with our intervention and our process because that's how we see outcomes as well. If a child is coming to intervention 1 hour a week in our clinic, and then the parents are not necessarily as engaged with the intervention as well, then the child's just going to go home. There's not going to be any translation of the things that are being brought up in intervention, and so we're not going to be really working towards those outcomes. So, yes, we talk about child engagement, but we also need to support parents and the people, the community around this child to be engaged as well with us and with the service, so that we can all sort of work together towards these outcomes.

Larissa Ferrari

Maybe for everyone involved in the child's community to learn, as well the importance of engaging with the child, which is an amazing thing. But I would love to hear what other people have to say about engagement and what else they want us to talk about so maybe they could connect with us on our social media and website. And I'm looking forward for our next episode, Mahek.

Mahek Bansal

I am too. So thank you everyone for joining us and we will be with you again soon. Bye.