

# Reflexology therapy supporting emotional wellbeing

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An invitation from Fred and Lorraine to enjoy a little playfulness and relaxation during reflexology therapy supporting emotional wellbeing.

**B**eing anxious can bring many difficulties that impact how a person copes throughout the day. The enjoyable sensory experience and specific delivery of the positive touch of reflexology may reduce both physical and mental difficulties attributed to anxiety. It may also help with wellbeing, with regulation and with coping better during the school day and beyond.

## Meet Fred

Fred doesn't use words, he communicates with sounds, with objects, with his movements, noises and gestures. Even his stillness has a valuable meaning. It is so important isn't it that we allow him the opportunity to have his say and goodness, he has a lot to say!



## Supporting emotional wellbeing

Some communication challenges and health difficulties also bring frustration, fear, anxiety, anger, and sadness. Here at Harlow Fields School, I am privileged to invite young people to receive the positive touch of reflexology therapy. Although I may address some specific

highlighted health issues through my therapy sessions, the main intention is to support emotional wellbeing, hopeful that using purposeful touch and having fun in the therapy room will reduce stress, ease tension and anxiety that may have an impact of how a person manages within the classroom environment.

I have used my experiences and training as a Reflexology Therapist and as a teacher supporting young people of all ages with diverse and complex needs, to create a supportive framework and a unique method of delivery of touch for reflexologists to use in 1:1 timetabled therapy sessions during the school day. I share my work and framework through an accredited training course for reflexologists who are looking to develop their therapy work in this area; along with supporting staff, with the Functional Reflex Therapy (FRT) Rainbow Programme. The Programme introduces a simple structured relaxation reflexology activity through the colours of the rainbow for staff to use within the classroom. This training does not replace the valuable work of a qualified reflexologist but supports staff through providing skills for them to use in the classroom at a time that is right for them and their pupils and supports the role of the qualified reflexologist.



## Nurturing touch

All nurturing touch has an important role to play in connecting us with ourselves and to other people and the world around us. Such a sensitive sensory form of communication, when delivered with kindness, can calm,

reassure, lower stress and ease anxiety. We offer much of this already through our positive touch activities in the classroom.

## Why reflexology?

What is reflexology? Is there a difference to other lovely touch activities and why does it have many benefits during the school day? Reflexology works on the principles that certain areas of the feet and lower leg, hands and forearm, face and ears correspond to zones, areas, organs of the body. Reflexologists apply skilful techniques and movements with varying pressure to encourage a change within and throughout the body within specific systems and/or organs and/or areas of the body. The techniques are delivered with real purpose and can address many issues. My sessions may include a small amount of support for issues highlighted by parents which are often digestive and sleep issues, but reflexology can be accessed at any time, evenings weekends etc. So why offer it during the school day? Young people are invited to receive reflexology therapy with the intention of encouraging relaxation to help them feel good and be in a better frame of mind for learning and to cope with the activities throughout the day.

## Repetition and rhythm, allowing time, brings reassurance

The method of delivery of my reflexology – the sensory experience - is always repetitive and rhythmical. Through receiving movement to specific areas and receiving something nice, as the body relaxes it is encouraged to release many supportive happy hormones. Of course all hormones are important but for me the delivery of reflexology during the school day is important as the release of oxytocin helps the body to calm. It may also help a person to regulate their emotions, to be able to focus and concentrate on the activities within the classroom. It is important that everyone participating in the session feels relaxed but also that they remember the session as being enjoyable and they have had some fun.

I use a variety of reflexology techniques depending on how Fred presents on the day. These are delivered to different parts of the foot and/or hand. I am mindful that different areas of the skin can be sensitive and I gather information from my touch in different ways, but as already mentioned, the 'method' of delivery is important. Mechanoreceptors react to any movement on the surface of the skin and there are slow and quick acting receptors. There are differences depending on whether it is non-hairy skin (found on the palms of hands and the soles of the feet) or hairy skin (found on the forearm and lower leg), so a combination of techniques with this information in mind is very supportive. But importantly, the beginning of the therapy session and the

ending of the therapy session are always delivered in the same way to Fred to support him to be as aware as possible of the beginning to our work together and when I am bringing it to an end.

## A non-invasive positive touch activity

Sometimes socks are on, sometimes socks are off, sometimes I work just the feet, sometimes I work just the hands, sometimes I work the hands and feet one after the other, sometimes I work the hands and feet synergistically. (Synergistic reflexology is a term introduced by Lynne Booth, creator of Vertical Reflex Therapy, tutor and reflexologist. It involves working the same reflex on the hand and the foot which may accelerate the body's response to the intention).

Sometimes Fred decides he would like to receive touch on just his feet, sometimes on just his hands or sometimes he asks for both.



I use the FRT framework to support my reflexology. It is called 'functional' because it has a specific aim and purpose and considers more than just the touch of the reflexology. I carefully develop meaningful ways of using methods of communication to enhance awareness and understanding of the activity of what is going to happen and carefully watch for any response/ indication that he does not want me to continue.

The FRT tool kit for Fred contains a towel for him to feel, a little pot of balm that I can rub onto the back of his hand when I meet him in the classroom, a hand and foot model that often has some bells attached which he

enjoys shaking and banging on his tray or some textured material. He usually however responds best to my voice as I tell him it is time for reflexology and ask him if he is



ready for the sweep - using my voice to signal sweeping uuuuup and sweeping doooooown. If it brings a smile or a giggle, I feel reassured he is ready. Sometimes I need to wait a while as he thinks about it, which is important to do. We do not leave the classroom until Fred has let me know that he is ready.

Communication, respect, and the unique delivery of the touch is the key, allowing the body time to feel, to become familiar with, to bring an awareness to self, to become comfortable with (or not) and to have time to gather the information of my touch, to process and respond.

When young people are referred for reflexology, I always begin with observation in the classroom. Working alongside Fred and staff helped me to begin to understand how I could best communicate in a meaningful way. It allowed him a little time to begin to get to recognise me and my voice and for me to make sure I could involve him as much as possible in any decisions and choices. Consent to take part in this activity and to receive reflexology belongs to Fred.

I am not working with labels or names of conditions, but it is important and very helpful to have background information from the family and staff with official diagnosis of conditions and more ongoing up to date information, of medication and health issues. It may be necessary and helpful to discuss any concerns with members of the team around him and this helps me to adapt my work and/or my approach. It is also important to provide parents and carers with information about the

sessions and to receive initial consent that they would like their child to have the opportunity to attend the sessions. But ultimately, I am very mindful that consent is ongoing, and as I have mentioned, Fred has control of that.

It is surprising what the body can do for itself when general areas are encouraged to be calm, and the mind and body can begin to relax. Perhaps reduce discomfort, ease pain, ease digestive difficulties, reduce spasm, calm the mind, and increase the feel-good factor.

#### Key points

- Being respectful, of consent and preference, offering an invitation to receive touch
- Making my communication meaningful
- Using multisensory stimulation at transitions to help support Fred's understanding of what is happening next
- Allowing time to prepare and to feel the touch
- Raise awareness through touch to be more aware of limbs and increase his sense of self
- Supporting him to make choices
- Give him a little responsibility and place consent within his control
- Raising self-esteem
- Having fun and saying thank you and sometimes if I am lucky, along with giggles and smiles I get a nice hug too.

Thank you for allowing us to share a little snippet of our fun and smiles with a combination of structure, repetition, and rhythm of relaxation reflexology therapy on the timetable during the school day.

Along with all the other very valuable therapies and activities that we should have available for and accessible to our young people, how amazing it would be if ALL schools had a qualified reflexology therapist as part of their multidisciplinary team using the Functional Reflex Therapy Framework to bring a consistency and recognisable professional package through reflexology to support emotional wellbeing (and much, much more).

#### Contact Details

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