

Back to school

Anita James has worked with young children in schools and nurseries for many years. She highlights the positive role aromatherapy can play in supporting children with additional needs



In 2008 I gave a presentation at the IFPA Annual Conference on using aromatherapy and massage with young children in schools and nurseries. The children I was working with could never remember my name but they did notice that I always had a box of aromatherapy oils with me, so they gave me the nickname 'Smell Woman'. (If you would like

to read an article based on that presentation you can find it in *In Essence* Vol.8 No.4 Spring 2010.)

As many of you know, 'Smell Woman' was scheduled to share her further adventures at the IFPA Annual General Meeting last May. However, she was unable to attend due to illness (a very nasty chest infection which crept up on me unnoticed!). So *In Essence* editor Pat Herbert asked me to write an update for the journal, outlining what has happened since that 2008 conference presentation.

This article will take you through an intervention (case study) I have been involved with in one of the schools where I provide aromatherapy and massage support for their Positive Play programme.

First, some background: at the time of the IFPA's 2008 conference 'Smell Woman' was a fledgling project with a number of initiatives running in local primary schools, working with children aged three to seven years.

That situation changed when I was asked if I would support the Positive Play programme running in a large number of Derbyshire County Council schools and implement aromatherapy and massage as part of their ongoing programme. Of course, I accepted the offer and a new chapter opened in the adventures of 'Smell Woman'.

POSITIVE PLAY PROGRAMME

The founder of Positive Play, who had a son with additional needs, created the programme, to be used alongside mainstream education, to address his needs and focus on a positive way of working through his issues.

The programme, which has now been running for over 13 years, offers extra help for children and young people in one-to-one sessions through structured activities in a sensory environment.

It can be adjusted to suit many different school environments. In terms of facilities, for example, some schools have no special area in which to run the Positive Play programme while others have a set of rooms, including snoozelum-type rooms. The programme aims to help children feel special, express and communicate their feelings and ultimately feel good about themselves. It raises their self-esteem and helps to improve their social skills in a reliable, safe and supportive environment.

As an integral part of the Positive Play programme I was now visiting more schools and the age range of the children was wider, so it was no longer possible for me to work individually with every child who needed support.

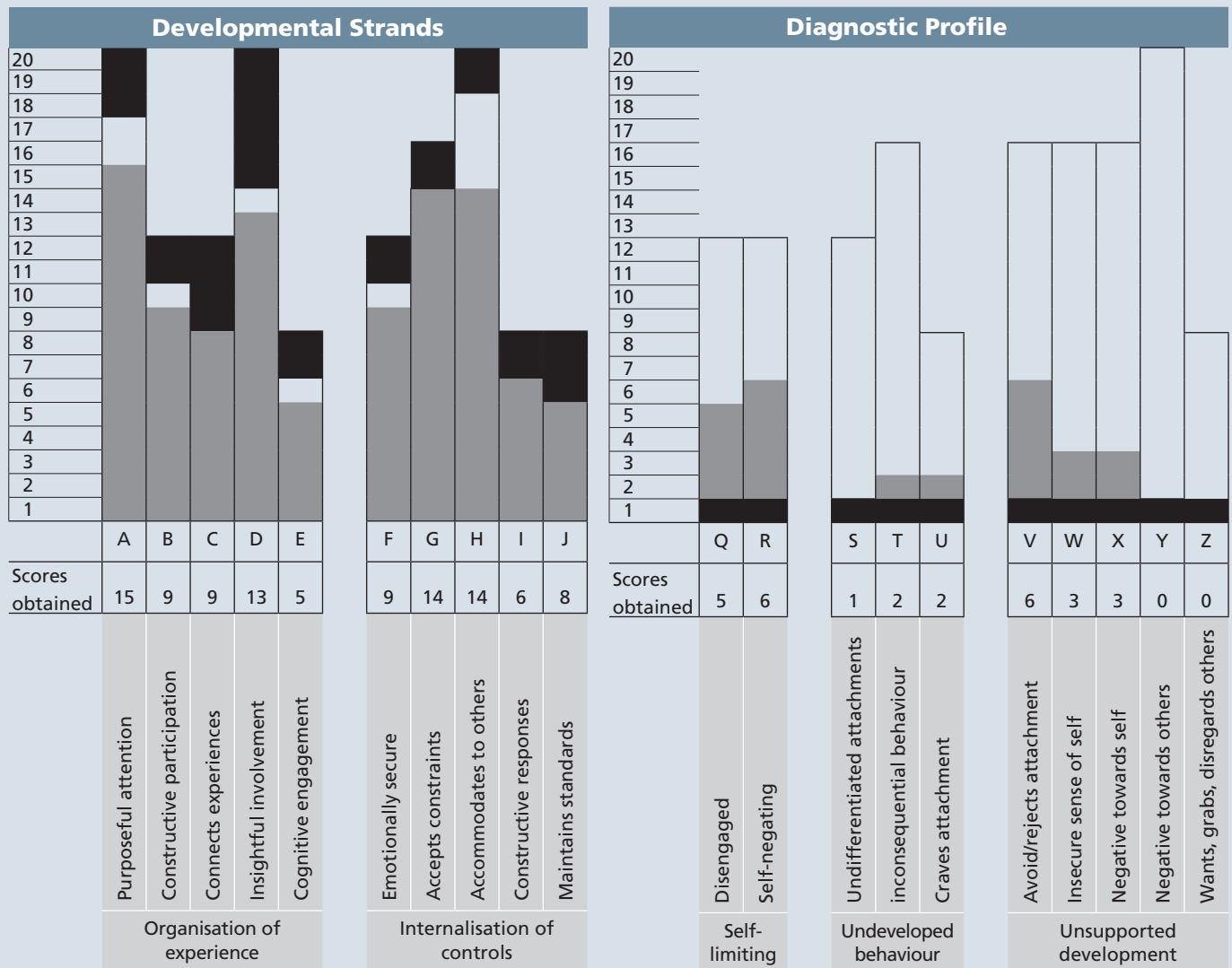
To make aromatherapy and massage accessible I devised a training programme teaching hand massage and safe use of aromatherapy to complement the Positive Play training and accreditation. With the help of some of the Positive Play staff, coordinators in the schools, and the children themselves, I devised a set of generic blends that could be made available for all the staff to use in their own settings. We started with seven blends and now use 15, each of which is formulated for specific emotions or events eg calming, to aid concentration, bereavement.

CASE STUDY

I would like to share a case study which was carried out in one of the primary schools I work with. The child is a girl who was 10 years old at the time of writing this case study. She will be known as Child B.

Child B had come to the school as a late entry to Year 3. She had previously lived in another area in a safe house and then in a women's refuge with her mother and younger brothers. They had entered the safe house as a result of domestic violence towards the mother from the father of the child's younger brothers. This man is not her father and there is no contact with him.

Child B presented as being very timid, withdrawn and suffering with high levels of anxiety. There is a possibility of abuse from the mother's former partner but no full disclosure has ever been given. She had issues with toileting and would often soil herself. She was frightened to go to the toilet and showed high levels of anxiety at times. She



subsequently had a medical diagnosis of a lack of bowel control due to the muscles being stretched. She now takes regular medication to help control this problem.

In class, Child B was very hunched, keeping her arms and head tight to her body as if she was waiting for something to happen. She would get very upset if there were any unexplained noises or movements. Her anxiety levels were always high and she seemed to be in a constant state of readiness to take flight. She did not value herself or see any benefit in what she could achieve. Her self-esteem and confidence were low and at times almost non-existent.

Assessment

The initial Boxall Profile taken in March 2014 provided a starting point. It showed that areas causing concern were low self-esteem, behaving in a distant manner, and attachment issues. She often seemed to be in a daydream.

Key focus areas for Child B within the Positive Play programme were to work on building relationships and engaging with her peers and teachers. She had three 30-minute sessions of Positive Play per week. These usually comprised one Magic (sensory) room session and two sessions where she had specific exercises and activities aimed at the key areas for work.

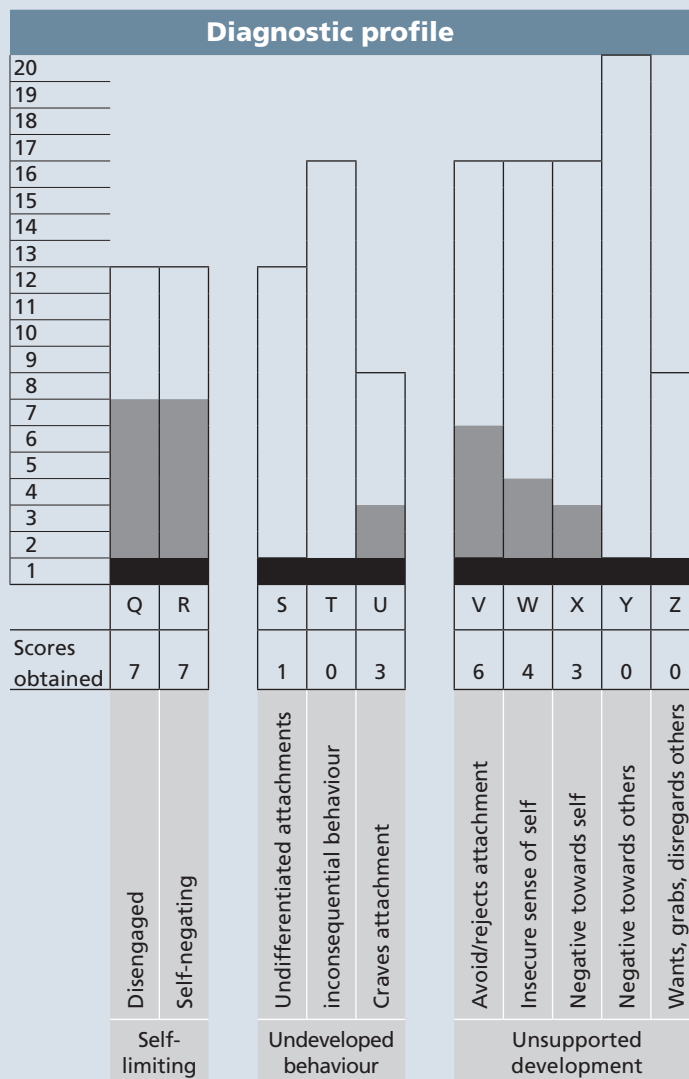
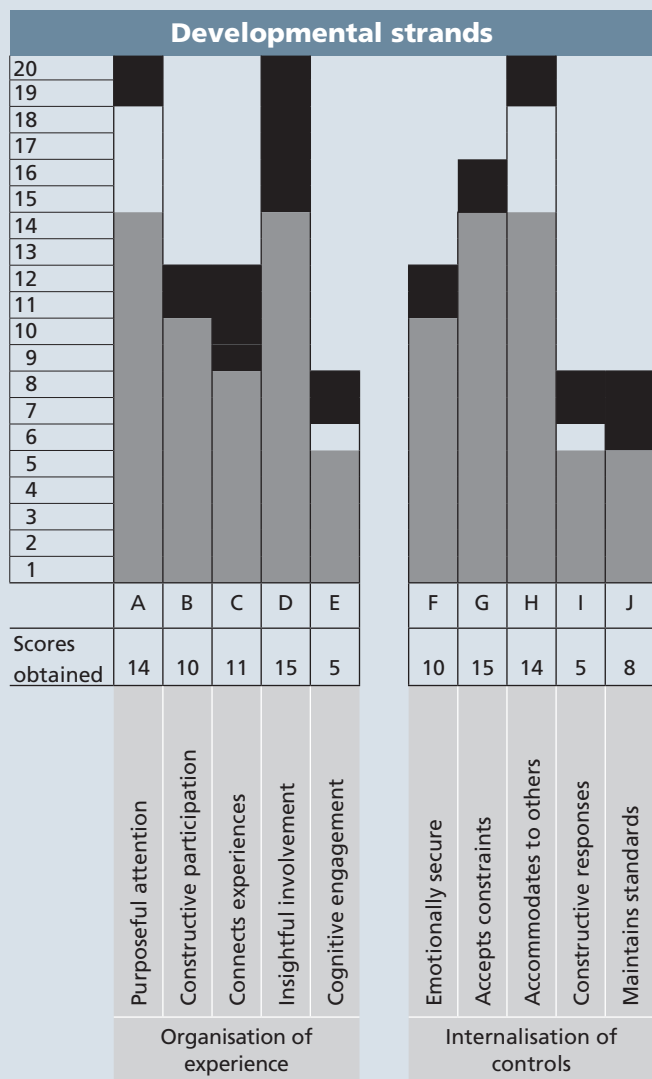
Boxall profile charts (see above and following pages) are interpreted as follows:

- the developmental strands on the left side should have full columns if the child is fully functioning at their age level
- the diagnostic profile columns to the right of the page should be empty if they are achieving their age-related levels.

The Nurture Groups Network website (<https://nurture-groups.org>) explains the rationale for and use of Boxall profiles: "The Boxall Profile provides a framework for the precise assessment of children who have social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) and are failing at school. It helps teachers to plan focused intervention for those children whose behaviour seems to make no sense. The profile provides the teacher with insights and suggests points of entry into the child's world — it makes people think about what lies behind the behaviour."

Boxall profile 2

After three months a second Boxall Profile was completed with Child B to check for progress (see opposite). This showed a negative change in some areas with a slight positive change in a couple of areas.



Around this time she was suffering significant anxiety due to changes at home. Her mother's ex-partner (father to Child B's step brothers) was in evidence. He had formed a relationship with Child B's aunt and she was expecting a child. He had also been granted permission to see his sons.

These changes caused Child B much anxiety and fear. She needed considerable emotional support as she did not want to see him. Strategies were put into place so that she did not have any contact with him.

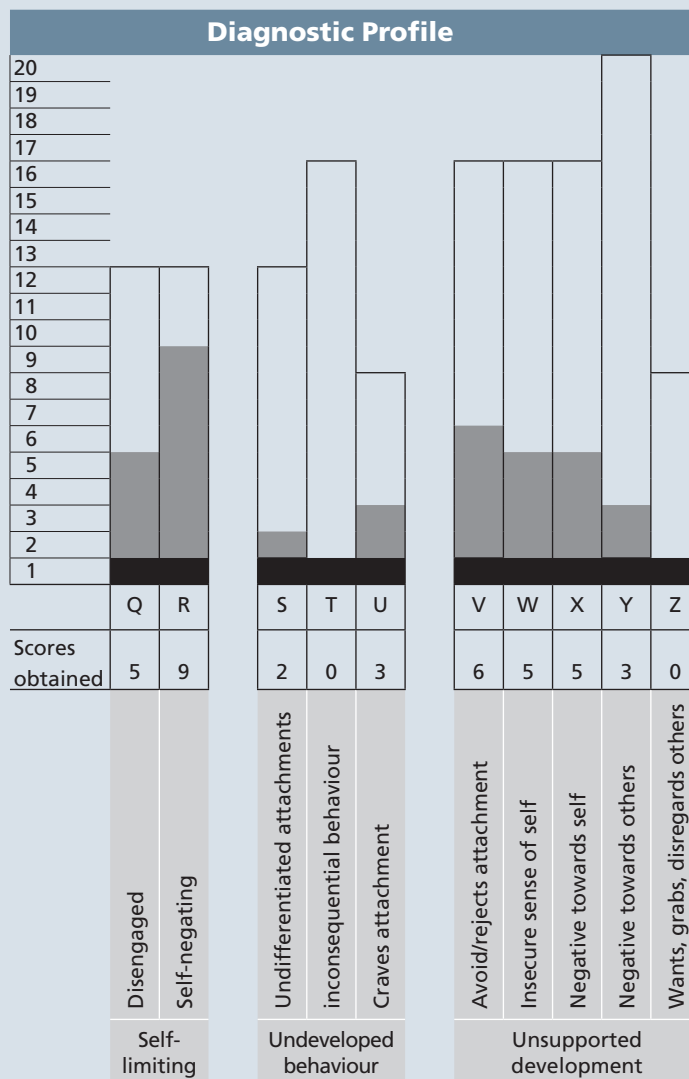
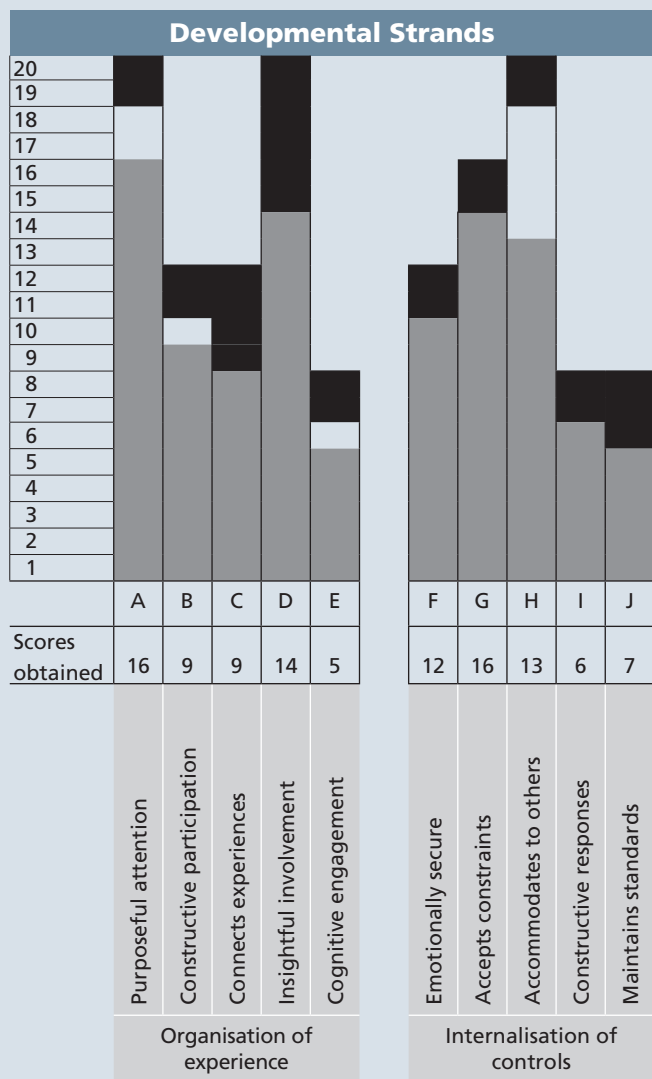
Strategy review

The Positive Play strategies were reviewed and it was decided that Child B should be offered massage and aromatherapy as part of her Positive Play sessions. The hand massage was integrated into a maximum of two sessions per week and always at her request. She was allowed to choose her preferred blend. Initially, she chose the Calming blend which contains Roman chamomile (*Chamaemelum nobile*), Lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*) and Mandarin (*Citrus reticulata*) essential oils.

Sometimes she chose the Positive Play blend containing Lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*), Geranium (*Pelargonium graveolens*) and Sandalwood (*Santalum*



Photo: Juni - https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pelargonium_graveolens.jpg
Geranium was used successfully in the Positive Play, Anxiety and Attachment blends for Child B



austro-caledonicum). From almost the first session she enjoyed the massage.

At the start of each session she was tense and tight, holding a slightly withdrawn, protecting posture. While the first hand was being massaged she would visibly relax and start to let go, her shoulders would drop and her chest would open and lift. By the time the massage of the second hand was completed Child B's face had visibly let go of strain and she was often smiling.

As she became more used to the sessions and her confidence and trust increased she began to chat, sharing her fears and things that worried her. These were usually relating to her family situation and things that had happened in the past. Occasionally she would choose the Anxiety blend which contains Juniper (*Juniperus communis*), Pine (*Pinus sylvestris*), Frankincense (*Boswellia carterii*), Geranium (*Pelargonium graveolens*) and Grapefruit (*Citrus paradisi*).

Boxall profile 3

Child B's Boxall profile from March 2015 (see above) still showed issues but there was a definite improvement in how she was engaging during school time. However, her self-esteem was still low.

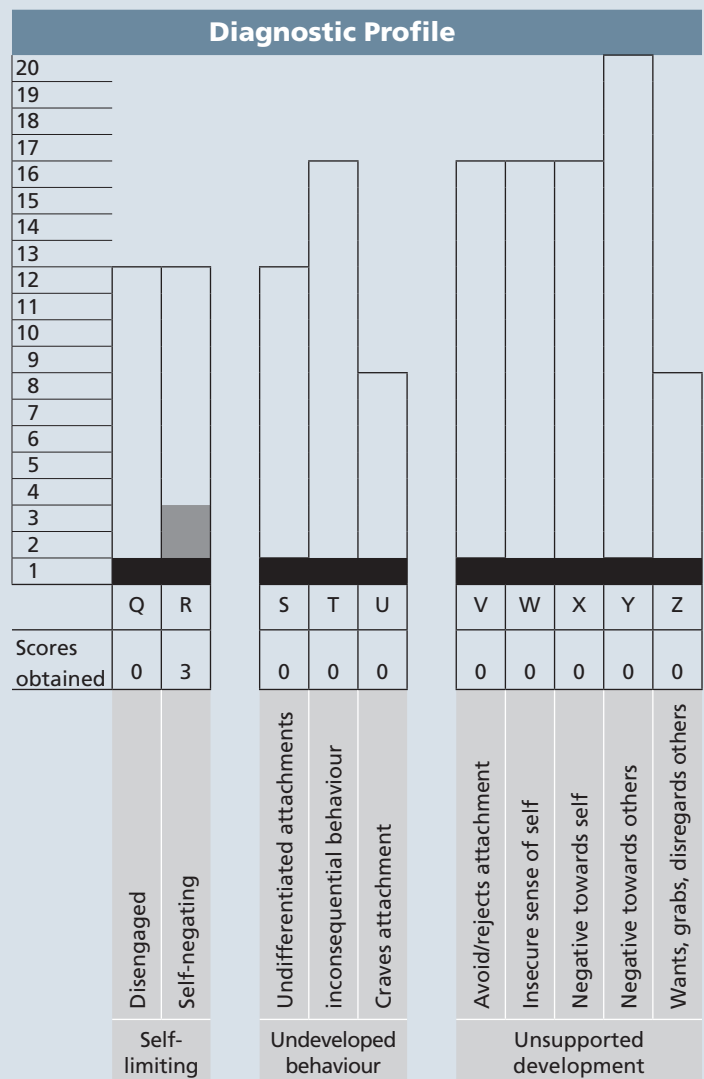
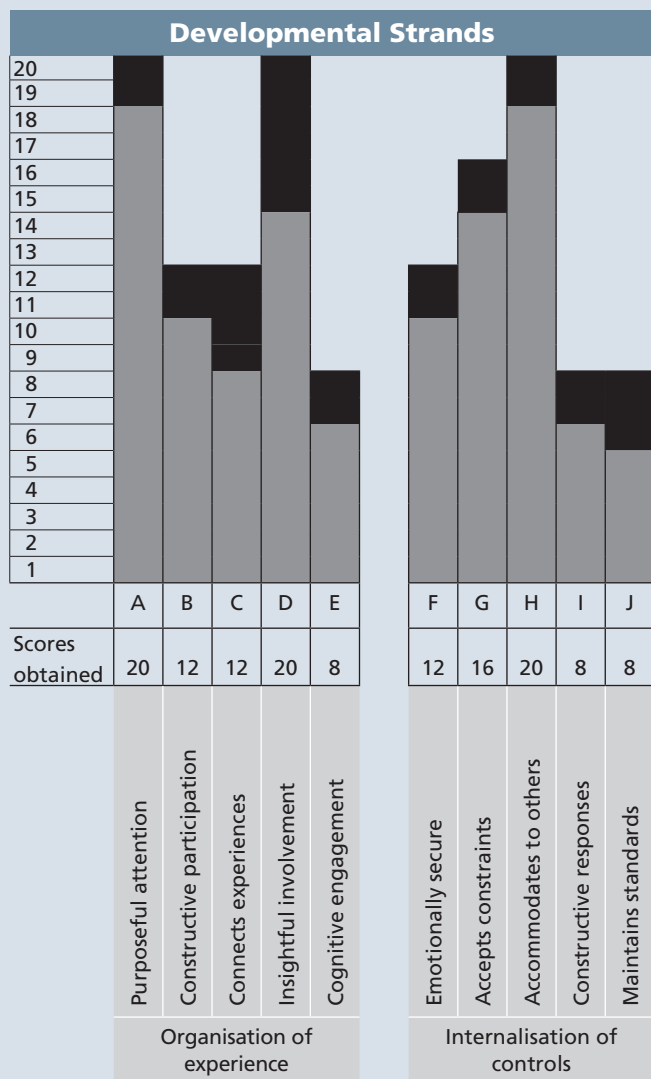
At this point I had formulated some new blends and we decided to try the Attachment blend with her. This blend of Geranium (*Pelargonium graveolens*) and Roman chamomile (*Chamaemelum nobile*) really seemed to signal a huge shift in her emotional wellbeing. The blend was used for the massage and she had smell bottles for use at home which contained the Anxiety blend. Her mother has commented that she also finds the smell bottle useful during stressful times.

Positive results and ongoing support

Since around the time that the third Boxall profile was completed Child B has become more accepting of her family situation. She understands that the man who is her stepbrothers' father is probably always going to be around in the family situation but he can no longer hurt her. As part of this she has become more tolerant of her brothers. When a situation arises where she comes into contact with the man she is less scared and tearful.

Boxall profile 4 (see opposite)

Child B stills receives hand massage during one of her Positive Play sessions. The other sessions are focused on activities to raise her self-esteem. After the massage she



is relaxed and happy to return to the classroom and staff report that she is always more focused after a massage session. She is on regular medication for her toileting issues. This has helped the situation and she is happy to go to the toilet provided that a friend goes with her and she takes her smell bottle.

Child B now has some friends whom she trusts and they are willing to support her when she questions their friendship. On the whole she is more accepting of praise from the staff and her peers. She is a bright child with much to offer. Sadly, it has taken her a long time to realise and accept this.

In Child B's school there is the phenomenon of the 'warm fuzzy'! These are multi-coloured pompoms that have had the Positive Play essential oil added to them. Everyone loves them and they are much sought-after by the pupils. Child B loves these and they are often her reward for having achieved one of her aims or goals.

When I was preparing this case study the Positive Play co-ordinator concluded that Child B no longer seemed to have attachment issues and was much more positive about herself. She can now say positive things about herself and accept them from others. She is able to maintain standards within school and has a group of friends. At home she is

less angry and more accepting of her brothers. Whilst she does not like the situation with their father she is tolerant of it and it does not seem to create huge anxieties.

While we were discussing the progress of this case study the co-ordinator said that it was only when the aromatherapy and massage were introduced that the positive changes started to take place.

Comments like this make me very grateful to the essential oils and methodology I have to pass on which can help to change people's lives for the better.

SOURCES

- Positive Play: www.rompa.com/positive-play (accessed 13 January 2016)
- Positive Play: www.derbyshire.gov.uk/education/schools/attendance_behaviour_welfare_support/positive_play/default.asp (accessed 13 January 2016)
- Nurture Group Network: <https://nurturegroups.org/> (accessed 13 January 2016)

Aromatherapist and holistic practitioner Anita James runs her own practice and an IFPA-accredited school in Derbyshire and has a special interest in working with aromatherapy and essential oils in a range of educational settings. She has served several terms of office on the IFPA Council.