It is a reality that COVID-19 has changed our lives and the way we do things. Most of us know that well in our personal lives. It is not different at work! I have been challenged to rethink the work we do in order to keep treatment significant for the child and parent, keep our children and parents engaged and instill hope during these challenging times.

I came up with the idea to deliver “therapeutic brown bags” because I wanted to be supportive to the children and parents I work with, especially those that need more structure, lack resources or are too tired to plan ahead for a session. Also, it is another way to let them know that I keep them in my mind.

I try to incorporate in my activities, as appropriate, concepts such a mutual delight, sharing, kindness/gratitude, waiting, feelings identification, calming strategies and nurturing. I keep in mind positive representations of the child/parent and their relationship, and of the parent’s representation as bigger, stronger, wiser and kinder. I bought all my materials at the dollar store: toys, one package of brown paper bags, etc. I keep the child’s needs in mind when picking items, for example, is it a choking hazard? Or, if child likes to throw things, I make sure that what I provide is not going to cause damage or harm if thrown. I discuss the purpose and outcome of the activities with child and parent. The activities do not need to be completed or perfect. I focus on the process with the child and parent.

Some sessions are more successful than others. I am compassionate with myself by admitting that this is new for me and stressful, but also notice the little things, like how just by providing support to a parent makes the difference for both the parent and the child.

-- Ivette Negron, Child First Clinician
Bridgeport Hospital, Bridgeport, CT

The following pages describe creative activities that you can use to engage families. The best part is that they cost little to nothing to implement! Please make sure you scroll to the end to see photos of Ivette’s creative work.
**Body tracing** - Help the child and the parent to identify and verbalize feelings. Use craft paper roll and markers of different colors. This exercise was used to have the parent trace the child’s body and have the child show the parent, by using different color markers, where in the body s/he feels love, happy, mad and sad. I began with happy and love.

This exercise encourages closeness, collaboration, mutual delight, and positive representation of child and parent. In one of my cases it was powerful for the child to see how tall he was and mother was able to make positive comments about how tall and strong child was, putting a big smile on child’s face. Mother also remembered him as a little baby.

**A piece of noisy paper** (brown bag) to create a story. When the child crumples the paper it can create different sounds: rain, strange noises from the forest, etc. This can create many ports of entry to encourage mutual delight, cooperation and trauma work. The therapist can begin by creating a story (sample), then the mother and lastly the child unless s/he is ready to tell a story.

**Story telling** - The therapist, child and parent can create a story together. Example, therapist says “Once upon a time there was a little rabbit or boy....then it’s the child and mother’s turn to add a line. You can have several rounds depending on how the story develops and the theme that you want to use.

**Hand tracing older kids** - What do you feel about your loved one? - Strengthen the family relationship. (I got this from a YouTube video and I don’t remember the author)- Child and mother trace their hands-they can trace each others. Mother answers the questions first. Begin with questions/statements to be completed from left to right. What I love about you, The ways you help me, What I wish we do more of, One time I was really proud of you, How we work together. Some children enjoy hearing their parent’s answers.

Clinician; 
- What was like tracing your hands? 
- What was like thinking about ________? 
- What was like to hear what s/he wrote about you? 
- One thing you can practice this week? E.g., I want mom to play with me more; I want mom to read a book at bedtime.

**Feather exercise** - Mutual delight. You need one light feather and 2 light cushions. Have the child and parent hold a light cushion each and stand about two feet from each other (depending on the child’s age and skills). Have the parent blow the feather to the child. The goal is to catch the feather with the cushion and not allow it to touch the floor.

**Balloons** - Mutual delight- Fill up a balloon. Throw it to each other. Don’t let the balloon touch the floor!
Relaxing – Lotion and rolling massager. The parent should ask for permission to touch the child and vice versa to encourage respect of personal space for each other. Put the lotion on each others hands and massage it gently (mother begins with child). Use the massager to gently massage each others hands. If child allows, have the mother massage the child’s arms, neck or back. Suggest that they can practice this during child’s bath time.

Caught you doing something nice-fun labels-during the week place a label on child whenever you catch s/he following directions, using his words, being kind, etc.

Play Doh and cutters- younger children. Mutual delight, parent teach child how to use the Play Doh cutters. Present parent as bigger, stronger and kinder.

Cookies-Little bag of cookies in some of the bags to end an exercise and encourage nurturing. Mom feeds the child or they feed each other!

Surprise-lets find out what’s inside the bag!

Bubbles-Mommy blows the bubbles and child pops them with his index finger. How many bubbles can you pop?

Magnetic board - There are different ways to share your feelings! “You can draw a heart when you feel loving or happy feelings, sad or mad face if you are having these feelings.” Use it during the session (in the moment), as another way to help with feeling identification and conversations about them. I keep one on my desk to use it with them as well.

Let’s be silly and pretend- hats, moustache, necklaces, and fun sunglasses. You can pair them up or use them individually. A little boy used the Hawaiian necklaces for him and his mother and wore the sunglasses. He was fascinated by seeing things in a different color and invited his mother to go to the window to look at different colors.

Stress balls for child and parent-When I notice tension I suggest that we all squeeze the ball hard and take deep breaths.

Heart- Talking about feelings -paper and markers or use the magnetic board. Child and parent draw a heart and can talk about how many people they love and the child can name them; how much love the heart can hold. This is a good exercise for all but particularly for adoptive and foster children who often experience loyalty issues and feel divided, not belonging.
SPOTLIGHT ON PRACTICE
Creative Ideas to Engage Families

6/30/20

Bubbles
Mommy blows the bubbles & Michael
Jumps them with his index finger.
How many bubbles
can you pop?

Me gusta cuando...

Let’s see what’s inside?

Mummy & Amy
Lotion each other’s hands
(flash for permission first)
“Can I lotion your hands?”

@ Mommy & Amy
Feed each other.

Use this piece of noisy paper
to create a story.
Use your imagination!

Let’s build a silly frog.

Hats
Note for all