Doll Therapy in Dementia Care
Indication for use of this therapy:

Doll therapy is often used as a non pharmacological intervention which can help in reducing behavioural and psychological symptoms of dementia this can have a significant improvement in the behaviour of residents with dementia when the dolls are introduced as a choice. These include:

- Social withdrawal
- Restlessness
- Wandering and intrusion
- Apathy
- Aggressive Behaviour
- Vocalising

When using doll therapy we aim to achieve therapeutic goals such as:

To provide a sense of validation, role and purpose by taking care of the baby doll

To provide an opportunity for people with dementia to express their emotions and feelings this is a key area when using this therapy

To provide an opportunity for past experiences with children and reminiscence

To provide meaningful communication opportunities through interaction with and talking about the baby doll including tactile and sensory experiences

The success of the therapy is largely due to how the therapy is introduced and the approach indeed will differ for each individual. (See guidelines for introducing doll therapy)

It is important that we evaluate and document the impact of this therapy for the individual; this should be ongoing enabling other carers to replicate.
This evaluation should include:

- The best times to apply the therapy in terms of the person and their known triggers

- The best strategies known for the individual in introducing and engaging with the doll along with making sure we have safe removal of the doll

- An evaluation of the impact of this therapy with each individual

Special note:

It is important to remember that not every individual will respond to doll therapy, this depends on the individual’s background, beliefs, and interactions with children. If a person has never liked children throughout their life it is possible that they will not interact with the doll.

It is very important that we know as much as possible about the individuals background so you can assess as to the possible benefit of this therapy.

Individuals who are most likely to benefit from this form of doll therapy:

- Individuals who have moderate to severe dementia or a mixed dementia are more likely to perceive the doll as being a baby

- Individuals who have perhaps previously enjoyed being involved with children and babies

- This therapy can be used for both male and females depending upon their level of interest

Note: research shows that it is possible for individuals with earlier stages of dementia to express an interest or indeed enjoy holding the doll but are less likely to perceive them as real.
Guidelines for the use of Doll Therapy

Some families and colleagues perceive this therapy as being patronising toward the person with dementia so it is recommended that all family members and carers are involved with the person are informed of the purpose of the therapy. It is important for the carer to understand the therapeutic value of the therapy and to have a clear idea of how to interact with not just the person with dementia but others that may interact with the doll.

Doll therapy is not for everyone and in some cases you may have a male who perhaps would prefer an animal or bear of some kind.

Introducing the Doll:
It is important how the doll is introduced this key to the success of the therapy and it is essential to remember that the approach will differ for each individual. It is preferable that you use as much as possible a lifelike doll sometimes the connection with the doll may not be made straightway but once the connection has been made the rest is self administering. Some suggested approaches when starting with this therapy include:

- Leave the doll sitting in a chair or next to the table where it can be found
- The care setting may have a Moses basket or pram to place the doll in this is a good environment for residents to opportunistically respond to.
- You can enter an area or persons room whilst cradling the doll and then sit down with them. (Observe how the person responds to the doll in your arms).
- Observe how the person interacts with the doll are they identifying it as a real baby or a doll at this stage.
- Make some general comments about the doll being careful not to identify it as either a doll or a baby at this stage.
Interaction Techniques:

- Place the doll in a basket or pram or somewhere appropriate near the person when they are not using it. This allows for the person to pick it up when the opportunity arises.

- Reassure the person that they can place it in a basket/bed etc if they get tired.

- Try to mirror the person’s response in responding to how they interact if they believe it is a real baby then you can.

- Always ask if they would like to look after the baby whilst you have to do other duties and always reassure that you will return to pick the baby up.

- Always try to monitor the success of the intervention. Does it provide the person with pleasure and meaningful activity?

- Try to determine the best times to use this form of therapy in terms of patterns of the person’s Behavioral and Psychological Symptoms of Dementia (BPSD).

- There will be times when it is necessary to remove the doll from the person i.e. for mealtimes/bathing etc. This needs some consideration on how best so as not to upset the person. Some individuals may feel threatened that the doll is being taken away. Use the technique of offering to put the baby down for a nap or to change its nappy and always make sure that you explain to the person that you will bring the child/doll back.

- It is important to monitor the person’s engagement with the doll and that all carers document how the intervention is working for that person and the best strategy used for that person.
Notes & Precautions:

Doll therapy should never be forced on any individual with dementia.

Dolls are not a cure for BPSD but have been shown in many research papers that this therapy can help to diminish the severity and frequency of BPSD in some individuals with dementia when used in an appropriate way (James et al, 2006).

It is important not to handle the doll inappropriately i.e. throwing it in a corner with other items, handling it carelessly handle the doll as you would a child.

Cleaning:
Wash hands before and after using the doll to help with infection control concerns, the doll can be wiped over with bacterial wipes. Wash the clothes on a regular basis.

Further reading/References:


(Understanding Dementia, the Man with the Worried Eyes, Cheston and Bender, 200

Doll Therapy in dementia – NHS Evidence Search
https://www.evidence.nhs.uk/search?q=doll%20therapy%20in%20dementia
Care homes use doll therapy for residents with dementia.
Doll Therapy Evidence Form

Resident:........................................................................................................

Date:.....................................................

Carer............................................................................................................... 

Purpose of using doll therapy with the above resident:

How the doll was introduced to the resident:

Outcome/benefit of doll therapy for the resident: