The Power of PLAY for Young Autistic Children

Laurie A. Stephens, Ph.D.
Senior Director of Autism Services
The Help Group
November 15, 2024



According to Wolfberg (2000):

- Play is pleasurable
- Play requires active engagement
- Play is voluntary and intrinsically motivated
- Play involves attention to means over ends
- Play is flexible and changing
- Play has a non-literal orientation (symbolic)

What is PLAY?



- Play is the foundation for development in many areas (fine, gross, language, sensorimotor)
- A child's understanding of the function/ relationship of objects, and early explorative play lays the foundation for cognitive development
- Play generates flexibility and creativity in behavior and thinking
- Pretend play is related to the development of memory, logical thinking, and abstract thinking

Why is PLAY Important?



The Power of PLAY



- •Play lets children explore relationships and interaction skills
- •Play develops negotiation skills, ability to compromise/resolve conflicts
- •Early physical play develops gross motor skills
- •Research show that play and language development are correlated

Play develops in a universal fashion

- First stage is sensory exploration
- Second stage is cause and effect
- Third stage is functional, imitative play
- Fourth stage is symbolic play & pretend play based on experiences (house)
- Fifth stage is imaginative play (fantasy)

Typical PLAY Development



MYTHS & TRUTHS ABOUT AUTISTIC PLAY

Myths

- Don't play/ don't play "correctly"
- Need to learn "typical" play to have friends
- Perseveration, "stimming" isn't play
- Only engage in solitary or parallel play
- Important to break up routines

Truths

- Repetitive, limited, "unusual" play
- NT children need to learn to play with autistic children
- May show delayed imitation, joint attention and mentalizing (TOM) skills
- Prefers structure, routine

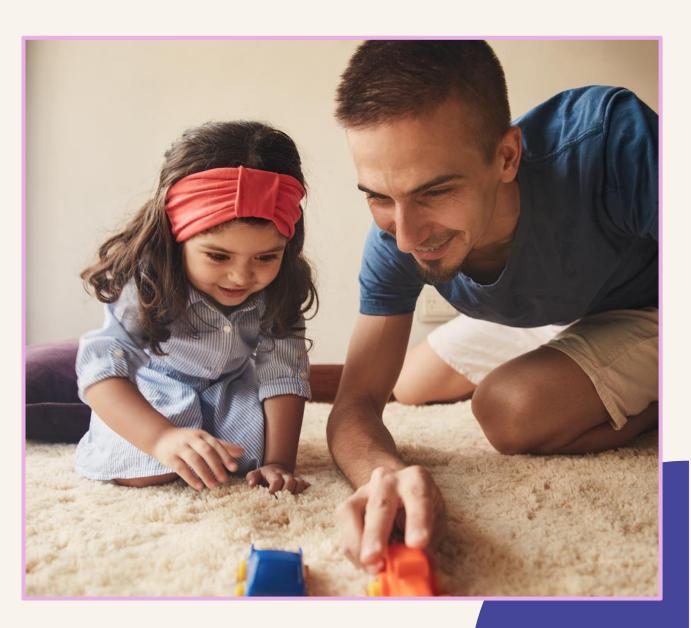
Intervention Methods



- Behavioral (Compliance-based)
 - Discrete Trail Training
 - Pivotal Response Training (PRT)
- Emotional-Relational (Structured)
 - Floor time
 - Relationship Development Inventory
- Play Therapy (Unstructured)
 - Traditional/Psychoanalytical
 - Naturalistic



Keys to Facilitating PLAY



- Everyone should play; anything can be a game
- Parents/therapists should engage in child-led, non-goal directed play development
- Expansion of routines, sensory play is key
- Do not give up if child doesn't respond initially;
 try new way or new game
- Go with the child's interests to provide natural motivation
- There are no RULES!

Keys to Facilitating PLAY

- Narrate your own play, or child's play, to allow for beginning understanding of desires
- Be silly! Be into it! Be uninhibited! Be reinforcing!









Expanding PLAY Repertoire Case Study

- Danny: 3 years, 6 months at start of therapy
- 90 min sessions; 2x week
- Interests:
 - Swirling water
 - Spinning objects
 - Naming objects (animals)



Expanding PLAY Repertoire

- Flicking lights on and off
 - When lights are off... "Oh, I'm scared... it's dark"
 - When they are on... "Oh thanks... now I'm happy"
- Pop-up toy
 - "Hello/Goodbye"
 - Silly, different voices
 - Stop... wait for indication they want you to do it again

Flipping through pages of a book

- Quickly describe action in book
- Use short, emotive sentences: "Green eggs and a mouse!?! Yikes!"



Expanding PLAY Repertoire

Toy Play

- Buy the toys/items the child likes
- If child visually inspects, describe what they may be seeing
- Then add action suggestion (sleeping)
- Use props (drinking from cups; box for garage)
- Expand repertoire to pretend using modeling and applying meaning to child's actions

- Play is FUN!!
- If it isn't reinforcing to the childit isn't play!
 - Anything can be a game
- There is no "right" way to play!

The Final Word on PLAY





The Help Group is one of the nation's leading

nonprofits dedicated to serving children, adolescents, and adults with autism spectrum disorder, learning disabilities, ADHD, developmental delays, abuse, and emotional challenges.

Laurie A. Stephens, Ph.D. **Senior Director of Autism Services**

www.thehelpgroup.org

Thank You.