

The Power of PLAY for Young Autistic Children

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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 shows that play and language development are correlated

Typical PLAY Development

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)**



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



The Final Word on PLAY

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





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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.

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Thank You.