

Facilitating Play in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

A look into play theory, development, and the importance of promoting play in children with autism.

Why is Play Important in Early Childhood Special Education ?



Why is Play Important in Early Childhood Special Education?

- ▶ Children served through early intervention and early childhood special education usually have delays in play
- ▶ Play skills increase opportunities for placement in less restrictive, more inclusive settings
- ▶ Play provides a context for natural environment teaching and assessment
- ▶ Play skills are predictors for communication and social skills.



Why is Play Important in Early Childhood Special Education?

- ▶ Play intervention for young children with ASD is associated with positive outcomes, including:
 - ▶ Increased rates and complexity of play
 - ▶ Improvements in expressive language skills
 - ▶ Decrease in challenging behavior
 - ▶ Decrease in repetitive behaviors



Why Do Children Play?



Why Do Children Play?

▶ Philosopher Karl Groos

- ▶ Play had to serve an adaptive purpose for it to persist in various species.
- ▶ The period of “childhood” existed so the organism might play.
 - ▶ The length of this play period varies depending on the complexity of the organism: The more complex the organism, the longer they play.
- ▶ More complex species have a wider range of and more complex adaptive skills. Longer childhood allows for practice, elaboration, and perfection of these adaptive skills that are necessary in adulthood.



Why Do Children Play?

- ▶ **Karl Goos cont.**

- ▶ Children are concerned with the process of play over the product: Not actually concerned with feeding the baby or cooking dinner, but with the processes involved in carrying out those tasks.



Why Do Children Play?

▶ G. Stanley Hall

- ▶ Play is cathartic in nature: play serves to weaken childhood tensions, anxieties, and aggressive impulses.
- ▶ These aggressive impulses are a result of survival instincts left over from primitive ancestors. Play is needed so that these instincts can be “played out” thus “allowing the development of more complex forms of activity typical of modern civilizations” (Parvin, p. 10).
 - ▶ This is in reference to rough and tumble play seen more often in boys



Why Do Children Play?

▶ Freud

- ▶ Play acts are a projection of the child's emotional life.
 - ▶ Serve to satisfy drives, resolve inner conflicts, and cope with anxiety
- ▶ Children master the traumatic events of their life through the repetition of these experiences. If mastery of these traumatic events does not occur, children could be at risk for adult psychopathology.



Why Do Children Play?

- ▶ **Jean Piaget, psychologist**

- ▶ Children acquire knowledge through interacting with the physical environment

- ▶ Cognitive development occurs through the process of developing schema by assimilation and accommodation.

- ▶ Schema: Categories of knowledge that help us interpret and understand the world

- Example of schema: If all you know of horses is large horses, that is your schema on horses. If you then learn about ponies, you have to expand your schema on horses to include ponies.



Why Do Children Play?

- ▶ **Jean Piaget, psychologist**

- ▶ Cognitive development occurs through the process of developing schema by assimilation and accommodation.
 - ▶ **Assimilation:** The process of taking new information into our previously existing schema
 - Example: I see a pony and learn that a pony is a type of horse.
 - ▶ **Accommodation:** Changing or altering our existing schema to accommodate new information. Schemas are expanded and/or altered in this process.
 - After learning that a pony is a type of horse, I alter my schema on horses to include ponies and large horses.



Why Do Children Play?

- ▶ **Jean Piaget, psychologist**

- ▶ Play provides children with opportunities to interact with physical aspects of the environment thereby allowing them to reorganize, expand, and further conceptualize their schemas.



Why Do Children Play?

- ▶ **Lev Vygotsky, psychologist**

- ▶ When children use objects to represent other objects in play, they set the stage for symbolic thought
 - ▶ Play allows children to understand that an object (telephone) can be represented by another object (banana), thereby separating the actual physical object from its meaning.
 - ▶ Children can then take the step of thinking in the absence of any object
 - Once the child has developed symbolic representational abilities in play, they can then use those abilities to symbolize in other contexts.



Why Do Children Play?

▶ Other Theories

- ▶ Play is the means through which we come to understand symbolic thought
- ▶ The same mechanism by which we understand symbolic thought in pretend play is responsible for our ability to have theory of mind
- ▶ Play is a direct factor in the development of joint attention and language



What Does Typical Play Development Look Like?



What Does Typical Play Development Look Like?

▶ Sensorimotor Exploration

- ▶ In early development play consists of sensory exploration of objects. This begins as undifferentiated actions performed on objects and evolves into more organized play sequences.
 - ▶ Mouthing, reaching, banging
 - ▶ Pulling, twisting, turning,
 - ▶ Combining and using toys as containers to explore relational properties
 - ▶ Stacking cups, puzzles, ring-stacker, blocks,



What Does Typical Play Development Look Like?

- ▶ **Emergence of Joint Attention**
 - ▶ At this point joint attention in its “truer form” emerges
 - ▶ Social referencing
 - ▶ Imitative learning (acting on objects for their conventional use)
 - ▶ Gaze/point following
 - ▶ Pointing out objects/events
 - ▶ This is when the ability for “meeting of the minds” develops



What Does Typical Play Development Look Like?

▶ Symbolic Play

▶ Step 1: Knowledge of the functional use of objects

- ▶ This step emerges right after sensorimotor play and exploration
- ▶ 9-12 months of age
- ▶ When a child is able to perform a conventional act on an object and use the object appropriately, she has demonstrated knowledge of how that object is meant to be used.



What Does Typical Play Development Look Like?

▶ Symbolic Play

▶ Knowledge of the functional use of objects

- ▶ At this level the child is not using the object for play, but is using the object for its true purpose, i.e. using a cup to drink, a fork to eat, a comb to comb hair, etc.
- ▶ Later on, being able to pretend depends on this ability to understand objects' functional uses. If you don't understand what an object is used for, you can't engage in pretend with it.
 - This continues to develop as the child gets older and is exposed to more and more. As she learns more, she is able to incorporate more into her play.



What Does Typical Play Development Look Like?

▶ Symbolic Play

- ▶ Step 2: Using objects conventionally for the purpose of play
 - ▶ Emerges around 12 months of age
 - ▶ Children demonstrate the conventional use of an object for the purpose of play, not necessarily for the object's functional purpose.
 - ▶ At this level a child can both drink fluid from a cup, and make drinking motions and sound effects on an empty cup, for example.



What Does Typical Play Development Look Like?

▶ Symbolic Play

- ▶ Step 2: Using objects conventionally for the purpose of play
 - ▶ At this level only actions that the child experiences in her daily routine such as eating, drinking, toileting and sleeping are carried out in play, and actions are directed only to the self, not towards others such as a parent or a doll.
 - ▶ ***This is the stage at which children begin to *symbolize* (thus the term symbolic play). When engaged in play, an object is no longer being used for its functional intention. Instead, the play scheme and objects are now *symbolizing* their actual purpose and outcome: the purpose in playing with the cup is not to drink and quench thirst, the purpose is now to put the cup to the mouth and “drink”. The emphasis is now the *process*, not the product.



What Does Typical Play Development Look Like?

▶ Symbolic Play

▶ Step 3: More abstract play

▶ 12-18 months of age

▶ At this level play schemes become more abstract

- The child can now direct play actions towards others (feed a baby, change a baby's diaper, give mommy a "drink").
- The child can also engage in play acts that are not a part of her own daily routines. Now she can imitate an adult cleaning, using the telephone, etc.

▶ Play actions are still limited to one act at a time.

- At this level children only do one play scheme at a time without stringing multiple together. For example, a child might feed a baby doll, but does not incorporate that scheme into a sequence such as feed baby, change baby, put baby to bed.
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What Does Typical Play Development Look Like?

▶ Symbolic Play

▶ Step 4a: Combining players

- ▶ At this level the child can carry out a single play action on multiple players at a time. For example the child might take a drink from a cup and then extend the cup to the doll and then to Mommy. The act is the same, but it has been sequenced to multiple players

▶ Step 4b: Combining play actions

- ▶ At this level children can also combine multiple actions into a play scheme: feed baby, change baby, then put baby to bed.



What Does Typical Play Development Look Like?

▶ Symbolic Play

▶ Step 5: Internally Generated Play

▶ Emerges around 24 months of age

□ Note: At previous levels play was centered around objects and actions that were present in the child's immediate environment (I see a broom so I will sweep, I see Mommy sweeping so I will sweep).

▶ At this level objects and events do not have to be present for the child to begin a play scheme. Play can be generated mentally, and then necessary props are sought out to use in the play activity.



What Does Typical Play Development Look Like?

▶ Symbolic Play

▶ Step 5: Internally generated Play cont.

- ▶ This level of play is also characterized by more complex symbols. Instead of just symbolizing the conventional use of objects by using them for play instead of what they are functionally intended for (as in the first four levels), at this level we take symbolism in play to a new complexity.
 - Ability to substitute one object for another (banana for a phone, stick for a horse)
 - Treating inanimate objects as if they were animate (pretending the baby can sit up by herself, feed herself, instead of just carrying the action out ON the baby).



What Does Typical Play Development Look Like?

▶ Symbolic Play

▶ Step 6: Advanced abstract symbolic play

- ▶ 3-4 years of age
- ▶ Once a child begins to internally generate play without the presence of related objects or actions, can substitute objects, pretend that objects are animate, etc., play becomes continually abstract and symbolic as the child develops.
 - Play relies less on the use of props and more on language to narrate play scripts.
 - Ability to transform selves into different play roles (“let’s pretend I am a dog and you are the baby”)
 - Integrate multiple play scripts to engage in elaborate drama with evolving play episodes.



Remember...

- ▶ Play skills are **ADDITIVE** in nature...they build upon each other and at any point in time may display each stage of development
- ▶ If a child does not know **HOW** to play with a material (i.e., know what a material is used for), you may see them using it in a way that is not functional or expected for age: mouthing, spinning, throwing, etc.



What Does Typical Play Development Look Like?

▶ Joint Attention Revisited

- ▶ Why is the emergence of joint attention important once the child prepares to move beyond the sensorimotor stage of play?
 - ▶ Revisiting skills encompassed by joint attention:
 - Gaze following
 - Social referencing (read emotions on adult's face and react to an object or event based on this emotion).
 - Imitative learning (imitating the conventional use of objects such as fork to mouth).



What Does Typical Play Development Look Like?

▶ Joint Attention Revisited

- ▶ Why is the emergence of joint attention important once the child prepares to move beyond the sensorimotor stage of play?
- ▶ Joint attention allows a child to move from sensorimotor play to level one of symbolic play.
 - Without joint attention there would not be an understanding of the conventional use of objects
 - Without knowledge of the conventional use of objects, play cannot progress.



What Does Typical Play Development Look Like?

Joint Attention Development	Play Development
Look at People (0-4 mos.)	Sensorimotor
Look at objects (4-6 mos.)	Sensorimotor
Shift gaze between people and objects (6-9 mos.)	Sensorimotor
“True” joint attention: Social referencing, imitative learning, gaze following, pointing,	Step 1
Understanding others’ intentions	Step 2
Imitating others’ intentions	Steps 3 and 4
Theory of Mind	Steps 5 and 6

Note: Research does not yet suggest that the phases of joint attention are necessarily correlated with the development of more advanced play, i.e. the development of one is not necessarily needed for the development of the other. However both abilities do advance along the same time line.



What Does Play Development Look Like in Children with Autism?



What Does Play Development Look Like in Children with Autism

▶ Sensorimotor play

- ▶ Level at which children with autism tend to get “stuck”
- ▶ Tendency to manipulate items in a stereotyped fashion
- ▶ Engage in manipulation of objects over functional or pretend play
- ▶ Stereotyped play ranges from banging, shaking, etc. to stacking or lining up objects according to physical attributes.



What Does Play Development Look Like In Children with Autism?

▶ Symbolic Play: Functional (Steps 1-4)

- ▶ Children with autism are less likely to engage in functional play spontaneously, although functional play is sometimes observed through conventional use of objects and object association.
- ▶ Functional play is less diverse, with fewer different play acts, and fewer play acts put into a sequence.
- ▶ Less play directed towards dolls or other people; when it does occur, functional play tends to be self-directed.



What Does Play Development Look Like in Children with Autism?

▶ Symbolic Play: Pretend (Steps 5 and 6)

- ▶ Children with autism rarely display this type of behavior
- ▶ When this behavior is displayed it looks different from that of typical peers
 - ▶ Less advanced pretend play such as object substitution, treating inanimate objects as animate, and inventing objects that are not real or present.
 - ▶ Generate fewer novel play acts. When they do engage in pretend play, acts tend to be repetitive.



What Does Play Development Look Like in Children with Autism?

▶ Symbolic Play: Pretend (Steps 5 and 6)

- ▶ Some evidence that higher functioning children on the spectrum can engage in advanced pretend play when it is carried out in a structured environment.
 - ▶ However, this play is less integrated, varied, and flexible compared to typical peers
- ▶ Difficulty spontaneously generating play schemes without context or available props.
- ▶ Play schemes are typically based on highly structured scripts and are evoked by familiar contexts and predictable situations.



Why Don't Children With Autism Develop Play Skills?



Why Don't Children with Autism Develop Play Skills?

▶ Lack of Joint Attention

- ▶ Children on the spectrum do not always learn the conventional use of objects unless explicitly taught.
 - ▶ Lack of gaze/point following (children do not readily learn the names of objects)
 - ▶ Imitative learning (children do not readily learn the appropriate way to use an object)
 - ▶ Without social referencing children do not learn appropriate ways to interact with objects
 - Without knowledge of objects' conventional uses, play does not progress



Why Don't Children with Autism Develop Play Skills?

▶ Information Processing

▶ Local vs. global information processing in typical development

- ▶ Global processing in typical development refers to the ability to integrate information (visual or verbal) into a coherent whole.
 - Example: When looking at a person's face, global processing allows a person to put all the facial features together to get a "whole" picture of what a person looks like.
 - Example: When listening to music, global processing allows a person to listen to the piece of music as a whole to understand the entire piece and extract meaning from its collective parts.
 - It is through global processing that typically developing children develop their schemas as conceptualized by Piaget.



Why Don't Children with Autism Develop Play Skills?

▶ Information Processing

▶ Local vs. global information processing in typical development cont.

▶ Local processing in typical development refers to the ability to process details and ignore the gestalt or “big picture”.

- Example: When looking at a person's face, local processing allows a person to notice details in their features such as eye color, nose shape, wrinkles, etc.
- Example: When listening to a piece of music, local processing allows a person to pick out specific notes or sections of notes and analyze those separately from the whole.



Why Don't Children with Autism Develop Play Skills?

▶ Information Processing

▶ Local vs. global information processing in typical development cont.

▶ Evidence suggests that in typical development local and global processing are two separate capabilities that develop independent of one another.

- Infants up to 6 weeks-3 months appear to process information at the local level, but then begin to process more globally as the skill develops
- Local processing becomes fully developed more quickly than global processing (around 5 years of age)
- Global processing takes longer to fully develop (around 8 years of age)



Why Don't Children with Autism Develop Play Skills?

▶ Information Processing

- ▶ Local vs. global information processing in typical development cont.

- ▶ Evidence also suggests that typically developing children are able to use local processing, global processing, or both, depending on what is needed for the task.

- This ability to attend to details, process globally, and switch back and forth as needed may be controlled by executive function, a group of skills responsible for the efficiency of working memory, planning, processing, and shifting focus and thoughts, among others.



Why Don't Children with Autism Develop Play Skills?

▶ Information Processing in ASD

- ▶ Unlike typical children, children with ASD have a difficult time seeing the “big picture” and developing schema
- ▶ Local and global processing in ASD: differing theories
 - ▶ Weak Central Coherence Theory
 - Suggests that people on the spectrum have difficulty integrating information into a whole and have weakened general processing
 - People with ASD are able to pay attention to details, but do not integrate those details to make sense of the big picture.



Why Don't Children with Autism Develop Play Skills?

▶ Information Processing

▶ Local and Global Processing in ASD: differing theories

▶ Local Processing Bias

- Suggests that people on the spectrum do not have an inability or difficulty with global processing per se, but have a local processing *bias*.
- Unlike in typical development in which the default processing system seems to be for “big picture” understanding, in people with ASD, local processing may be the stronger of the two processes. Default processing in ASD may be at the local level instead.



Why Don't Children with Autism Develop Play Skills?

▶ Information Processing

▶ Local and Global Processing in ASD: differing theories

▶ Executive Dysfunction

- It is widely researched and acknowledged that children on the spectrum have deficits in executive functioning skills
- The theory of executive function as it relates to global processing suggests that children with ASD lack the executive functions necessary for switching back and forth between local and global processing as needed depending on the demands of a task.



Why Don't Children with Autism Develop Play Skills?

▶ Information Processing

- ▶ What does information processing have to do with play difficulty in ASD?
 - ▶ Regardless of the reason for their difficulty with “big picture” understanding and schema development, if children with ASD do not develop schemas, they have no schemas to expand, practice, and master through play.



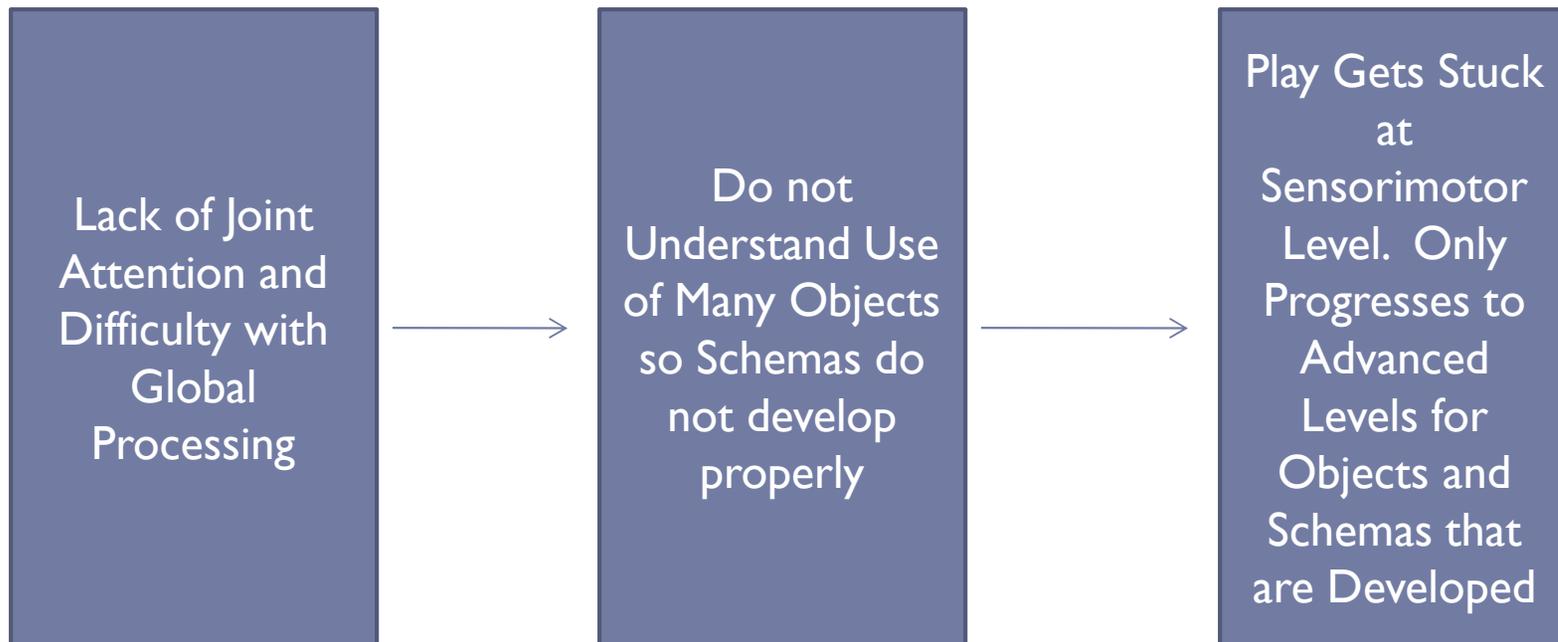
Why Don't Children with Autism Develop Play Skills?

▶ Information Processing

- ▶ Going back to steps one and two of play development:
 - ▶ If you aren't able to develop schema about an object and understand its conventional use, you can't use it in play.
 - ▶ Looking at this more closely: Consider a child's developing schema for a broom. At level one of play it is not enough to just know that a broom is something you brush across the floor (this would just be simple imitation). Children have to employ their joint attention and global processing abilities to understand the *purpose* of a broom. A broom is used to clean up dirt which is done because dirt carries germs, which we want to get rid of because germs make us sick.
 - This is not to say that a two year old will be able to conceptualize all of this right away, but their joint attention and global processing skills allow them to put this big picture together over time, and practice it through play.



Why Don't Children with Autism Develop Play Skills?



How Does Symbolic Play Intervention Benefit Children with ASD?



How Does Symbolic Play Intervention Benefit Children with ASD?

▶ Play as Symbolism: Importance of Step 2

▶ What is unique about play as compared to other activities?

- ▶ Play is symbolic: when engaged in play children develop their capacity for symbolic thought.
- ▶ Play is process-focused: children play to practice or add to their already developed schemas.



How Does Symbolic Play Intervention Benefit Children with ASD?

▶ Play to Develop Schema

- ▶ FACILITATED symbolic play helps children with ASD develop schema
 - ▶ Interact with a wide range of materials representing a wide range of themes.
 - A lot of the play themes practiced during facilitated play involve materials that children on the spectrum come across in their daily lives. Their brains just do not process it correctly. Facilitated play allows them to practice and put those themes together correctly.
 - ▶ Emphasis on PROCESS not product so themes can be practiced



How Does Symbolic Play Intervention Benefit Children with ASD?

▶ Play to Develop Symbolism

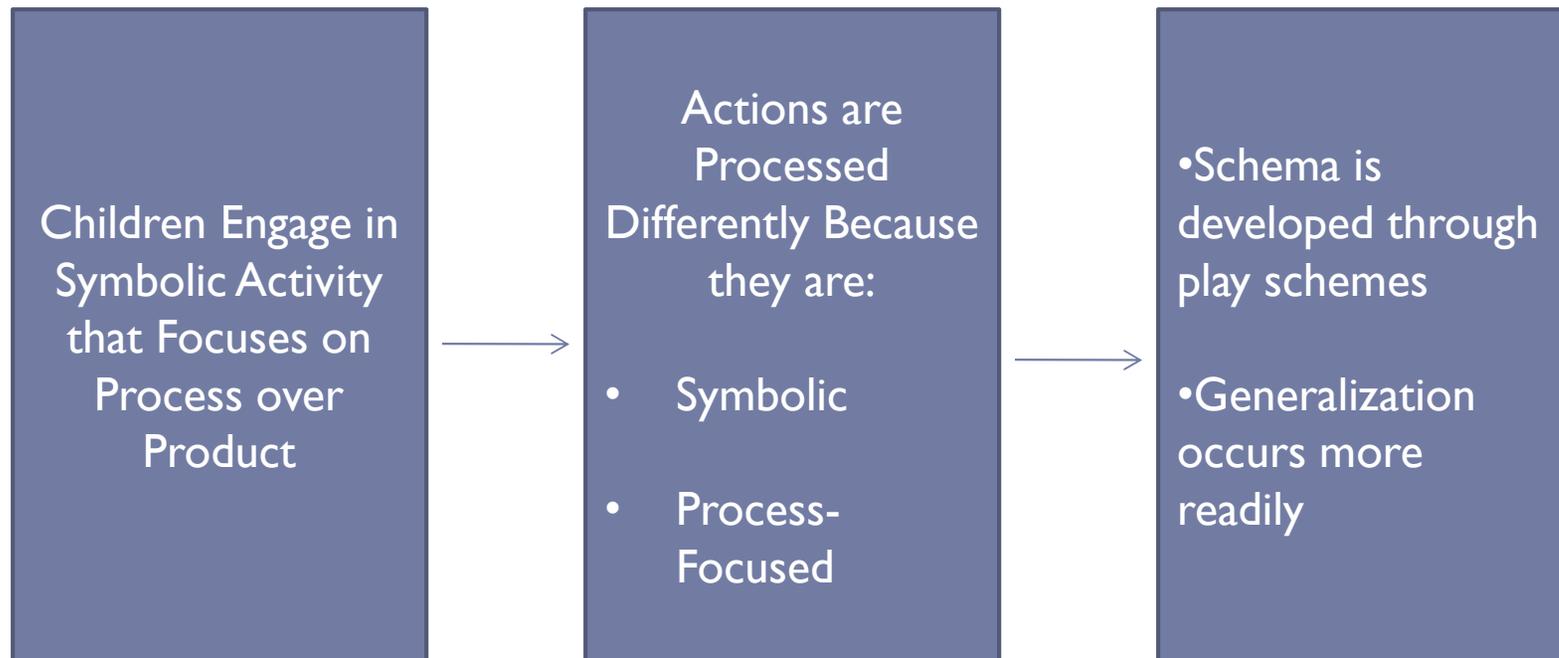
- ▶ Because of its symbolic quality, play helps with generalization and “big picture” processing

▶ Example: Teaching a person to go grocery shopping

- Can take a person to one store, but chances are they will not generalize those skills to a different store: In this scenario the emphasis is still on the product
- When acting out the grocery store process in play, you involve symbolic thought. This, combined with the process-focused nature of play, allows for generalization.



How Does Symbolic Play Intervention Benefit Children with ASD?



Hierarchy of Goals for Play Intervention



Hierarchy of Goals for Play Intervention

- ▶ Activating contingency toys (cause and effect)
 - ▶ Responsive toys-they do something when the child acts on them (sound, light up, movement)
 - ▶ Child taught to note the contingency and attempt to reactivate it.
 - ▶ Examples: Battery operated toys, bubbles, noisy toys, spin tops, pop up toys, etc.
 - ▶ More toys are better
 - ▶ More different movements for activation are better
 - ▶ More interesting effects are better



Hierarchy of Goals for Play Intervention

- ▶ **Increasing the Duration of play**
 - ▶ Child taught to play with toys for longer periods of time-sustained play
 - ▶ Independently
 - ▶ Adult proximity and support
 - ▶ Ideally expect at least 5 minutes
 - ▶ *The complexity of play and the type of toy are not the main concern at this point*



Hierarchy of Goals for Play Intervention

- ▶ **Increasing the variety of toys**
 - ▶ Looking for diversity in play
 - ▶ Playing with more, different toys
 - ▶ *This is an important skill for more advanced types of play, for more sustained play, and for using play as intervention for other goals.*
- ▶ **Increasing the variety of actions on the same toys**
 - ▶ Playing in multiple ways with same toy (ex: pig on top of barn, in mud, in pig pen, in the tractor, etc.)
 - ▶ Shoot for 30-40 actions on one toy in a 5 minute play period (same action can be repeated).



Hierarchy of Goals for Play Intervention

- ▶ Increasing the complexity and frequency of use of pretense in play
 - ▶ Sensorimotor Play
 - ▶ Shaving cream, paint, musical instruments, beans or rice buckets, water, etc.
 - ▶ Stacking cups, puzzles, ring stacker, blocks, legos, etc.
 - ▶ Symbolic play
 - ▶ Pretending with multiple objects as they are intended to be used.
 - ▶ Multiple actions on the same toy
 - ▶ Using multiple objects to represent other objects (banana for phone)
 - ▶ Assigning absent attributes (teapot has tea in it, baby saying “wah wah”)
 - ▶ Sequencing play acts



Hierarchy of Goals for Play Intervention

- ▶ Increasing social exchanges in play
 - ▶ Turn-taking games
 - ▶ Involving others in play acts
 - ▶ Playing cooperatively (building with blocks, blowing bubbles, carrying out a pretend play scheme collaboratively, etc.)



Role of the Adult: At the Early Childhood Level in PAT setting:

- ▶ Ideally, typical peers are present to model and help facilitate appropriate play. When that is not possible...
 - ▶ When available, involve typically developing siblings during play sessions
- ▶ FACILITATE play
 - ▶ Coplayer: Joins in the play by taking on a role and following the child's lead
 - ▶ Play leader-active participant: Suggest themes, introduce props, re-energize play when interest wanes, introduce novel toys/activities



How to Guide Play

- ▶ Recognize, respond to, and interpret play initiations
- ▶ Children learn language when engaged in joint attention with others. If a child is attending to a particular toy or play scheme, it is important to respond to and engage in that activity and pair it with language
- ▶ Assign roles in play scheme
- ▶ Script actions and dialogue (loosely)



How to Set up Play Groups for Children with ASD



How to Set up Play Groups for Children with Autism

- ▶ How Should Play be Taught to Children with Autism?
 - ▶ Specific time set aside for FACILITATED play groups
 - ▶ Approximately one to two 45 minute sessions every week
 - ▶ Groups must include peers



How to Set up Play Groups for Children with ASD

▶ Play Group Members

▶ Who should be included in play groups?

- ▶ Any child on the autism spectrum regardless of ability
 - Fluently verbal students: HF autism and Asperger's.
 - Play was not an intervention discussed during the high functioning intervention segment, however these students have some of the same issues with joint attention and global processing as children with more “classic” autism.
 - Non-verbal children with limited or zero imitation and joint attention
- ▶ Typically Developing Peers
 - Typical Peers are a critical component of play groups for children with ASD.
 - Remember: peers are an integral part in developing social and play skills. Without peers play groups will be ineffective.



How to Set up Play Groups for Children with ASD

▶ Play Group Members

▶ Group Member Components

- ▶ 3-6 members

- ▶ There should always be more (or at the very least an equal number of) typical peers than children with ASD

- In a group of three there should be 2 typical peers and one child with ASD.

- In a group of five, there should be three typical peers and two children with ASD



How to Set up Play Groups for Children with ASD

▶ Play Group Members

▶ Group Member Characteristics

- ▶ When choosing peers it is important to consider the age and ability level of the children with ASD
 - When possible, choosing peers of similar age is best. However, have to consider developmental level of students with ASD
 - If one of the group members is nine years old but is still only able to engage in Step 2 play, it may be helpful to use either peers who are younger or a mixture of same-age peers and more developmentally appropriate peers.



How to Set up Play Groups for Children with ASD

▶ Play Group Members

▶ Group Member Characteristics

▶ Consider interests and gender of children with ASD

- Peers with similar interests
- Mix of boys and girls in the group: having both will allow for a broader range of play.
- Maturity level of peers
 - Mature for their age, respectful, open-minded
 - “Mother hens” are not always the best option



How to Set up Play Groups for Children with ASD

▶ Play Group Members

▶ Where to find peers

- ▶ In a typical public school setting peers are normally taken from general education classrooms
- ▶ When getting permission from principal and general education classroom teacher, it is helpful to suggest times that are not very academic-focused
 - Recess
 - Whole school Rtl sessions
 - Centers



How to Set up Play Groups for Children with ASD

▶ Play Group Members

▶ Where to find peers

- ▶ When choosing peers it is also important to get parent permission to remove their child from the general education environment.
 - Send home a permission letter and slip for parents to sign
 - Explain what their child will be participating in
 - Be careful not to give the names of the students with ASD who are participating, and do not mention that they have ASD or are in special education.



How to Set up Play Groups for Children with ASD

▶ Play Group Members

▶ Before starting play groups

- ▶ Meet with typically developing peers at least once before groups start
 - Explain the purpose of the group (to develop play, socialization and language in the children with ASD)
 - Explain their roles as peer models (to help the children with ASD to learn to play more effectively)
 - Explain that you as the adult will be present to help with the play, answer questions, etc.

- ▶ Allow the children to spend some time in the play setting

- ▶ With all members, explain the Who, What, Where, When of the play group
 - With less verbal students you might present this information visually or in a social story



How to Set up Play Groups for Children with ASD

▶ Play Group Setting

- ▶ Special education classroom
 - ▶ SLP office
 - ▶ OT office
 - ▶ Counselor's office
-
- ▶ Regardless of where the play group is held, it should be done in the same area every time to maintain consistency and predictability.
 - ▶ Toys should remain in the same accessible area and play should take place in the same designated “play group” spot.



How to Set up Play Groups for Children with Autism

▶ Play Group Facilitators

- ▶ SPED teacher
- ▶ SLP
- ▶ OT
- ▶ Counselor
- ▶ Focus Facilitator
- ▶ Para educator
- ▶ Anyone who knows how and makes time



▶ **Play Group Toys/Materials**

- ▶ Kitchen items
- ▶ Grocery shopping
- ▶ Dolls and doll props
- ▶ Doctor kits
- ▶ Stuffed animals
- ▶ Cars, trains and tracks
- ▶ Dress up clothes
- ▶ Board games and puzzles
- ▶ Blocks, legos,
- ▶ Marble runs
- ▶ Art supplies
- ▶ Figurines
 - ▶ Animals,
 - ▶ Superheros
 - ▶ GI Joes
- ▶ Play Doh
- ▶ Bubbles
- ▶ Balls



How to Set up Play Groups for Children with Autism

▶ Play Group Logistics

▶ At first meeting

- ▶ Introductions
- ▶ Establish Play Group Rules
- ▶ Decide on a Play Group Name
- ▶ Design Play Group Logo/ Chant
- ▶ Allow some time for playing and getting familiar with the toys and time for an ending activity such as snack



How to Set up Play Groups for Children with ASD

▶ Play Group Agenda

▶ Predictable schedule to be followed each session

▶ Start with Group meeting

- Greeting game/Hello Song (if age appropriate)
- Discuss what the children would like to play that day (this does not have to be hard and fast, it just gives some structure around which the play can get started).
- Assign roles as needed depending on what games/play activities are chosen
- Review play group rules

▶ Play

▶ Clean up

▶ End with snack or some other closing activity

- This Schedule can be presented visually



How to Set up Play Groups for Children with ASD

▶ How to Guide Play

▶ Roles of the Adult: Highest Level of Support

- ▶ Recognize and help peer models respond to/interpret play initiations from students with ASD
 - Children learn language when engaged in joint attention with others. If a child with ASD is attending to a particular toy or play scheme it is important to respond and engage in that activity.

- ▶ Assigning roles in play schemes

- ▶ Scripting actions and dialogue

- ▶ Partnering peer models and students with ASD



How to Set up Play Groups for Children with ASD

▶ How to Guide Play

▶ Roles of the Adult: Medium Level of Support

▶ Offering suggestions

▶ Posing Leading Questions

- Look at what ____ is doing. What do you think s/he wants to play?
- What could you do to get ____ involved?
- What roles do you all have?
- What role do you think ____ want to play?

▶ Commenting on the play

- The store is losing its shoppers
- The cashier is waiting for the shoppers to check out

▶ Redirecting and reframing the play scheme



How to Set up Play Groups for Children with ASD

▶ How to Guide Play

▶ Role of the Adult: Lowest Level of Support

- ▶ Stepping back and watching
- ▶ Being ready to step in as needed.

- ▶ At this level of support it sometimes feels as if you are doing nothing. But, if play is flowing, it is best to let the peer models take the lead!



How to Set up Play Groups for Children with ASD

▶ Assessing Play Skills

▶ What skills should be assessed

▶ Depending on the ability level of the student,

- Joint Attention (refer to the levels of joint attention as it progresses)
- Language Development
- Play initiations (this will look different in every student depending on their abilities)
- Initiations (verbal and play)
- Reciprocal interactions (verbal and play)
- Types of play (parallel play, imitation, joint focus, joint action, role enactment, role playing)
- Turn-taking
- Other IEP goals on language/social skills



How to Set Up Play Groups for Children with Autism

- ▶ **Assessing Play Skills**
 - ▶ Assessments to Use
 - ▶ SCERTS
 - ▶ Do-Watch-Listen-Say
 - ▶ Peer Play and the Autism Spectrum
 - ▶ VB-MAPP
 - ▶ ABLLS

