Fostering Play and Friendship Skills in Children with Autism in Inclusive Settings

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Learning Objectives

• Promote play, social-interaction and friendship skills in children with autism in inclusive settings:
  – Learn how to set up the environment (social and physical) to support positive social interactions.
  – Learn how to use classroom routines and activities as opportunities to facilitate friendship and social skills.
  – Learn strategies to increase peer social interactions.
Challenges

Children with autism face difficulties in learning how to play and socialize with peers:

• Social-emotional reciprocity
  – Joint attention
  – Spontaneous imitation

• Seeking out peers spontaneously to share joy and interest

• Developing peer relationships - conveying and interpreting social-communication cues.

• Pursuing varied, imaginative play appropriate for developmental level.
What does play and friendship do for children?

- Play and friendships promote:
  - Cognitive Development
  - Emotional-Affective Development
  - Social Competence
  - Communication / Language Development
  - Literacy (Reading & Writing)
  - Sensory Motor Development
  - Creative-Artistic Expression

by Pamela J. Wolfberg & Therese O'Connor, CEC presentation, 2006
Benefits of Play with Peers

• Play helps children to acquire many interrelated skills for social competence and forming meaningful friendships:
  • Learn to communicate effectively
  • Solve problems
  • Negotiate and compromise
  • Understand the feelings and perspectives of others
  • Work out emotional conflicts

Autism Institute on Peer Relations and Play by Pamela J. Wolfberg & Therese O'Connor, 2005
Positive Results

• Based on research, with planned and systematic opportunities:
  – Children on the autism spectrum disorders can be taught the appropriate skills necessary to initiate positive interactions and build friendships.
  – Willing and accepting peers to practice the skills with will facilitate the process.
  – Embedding lots of social interactions throughout the day to practice the targeted skills.

• Improved social competence is likely to yield many other benefits for children with autism.
Interventions to Promote Social Interactions

- Set up the environment to increase social interaction skills.
- Provide group social skills coaching:
  - Teach all children social interaction skills in the context of activities or play themes that attract children’s attention.
- Teach, children with autism, skills needed to play and interact with the other children.
- Involve peers (without disabilities) in peer-mediated interventions
  - Teach socially competent peers the skills needed to initiate interactions with those with limited social skills (Odom and colleagues 1999).
Setting up the Environment

- Preplan for environmental changes and adaptations to maximize and promote positive peer interactions.
- Look at your:
  - Classroom activities that are open and available.
  - Classroom materials that are available.
  - Group composition.
  - Make sure children with good social skills are grouped with children less skilled socially.
Environmental Strategies

• Limit the number of centers available.
  – Increase the number of children at each center to improve the likelihood of positive social interactions.

• Keep (target) children near competent peers.
  – Encourage close contact by planning activities that are meaningful and fun for all children.
  – Give time and attention and time to children when they are playing together.
  – Positioning children to encourage interaction – (e.g., facing each other at a water/sand table).
Environmental Strategies (continued)

• Keep toys and materials novel and interesting.
  – Include toys and materials of interest to target children.

• Use toys and materials with high social value – promoting cooperation and sharing.
  – Replace toys and materials made for individual use with toys and materials made for cooperative use to help increase the opportunities for positive social interactions.

(For example: Replace Sit and Spin, small puzzles, painting easels with rocking boat, giant floor puzzles, mural painting requiring cooperative use.)
Using Classroom Activities and Routines

• Plan or Design Activities that Support Peer Interactions.
  – Examine daily routines and activities to identify jobs or tasks that adults are doing that children could do.
    • Assist with snack
    • Gather book bags with a peer
    • Distribute art materials
  – Add steps to activities that would support peer interactions, if needed.
    • Pair students during a music or music-movement activity
    • Play follow the leader through an obstacle course
    • Invite a friend to play during center time
Using Classroom Activities and Routines (continued)

• Support Peer Interactions during naturally occurring routines.
  – Arrivals: Ask a child to greet friends and ask them a question.
  – Transition times: Ask a child to invite another child to go to an activity.
  – Circle and story times: Ask a child to pass out and collect materials.
  – Snack time: Ask a child to pass out plates, cups, napkins, and snacks/juice.

Key Social Interaction Skills

What are key skills useful for interacting with peers and building social relationships?

- Skills for play entry
- Skills for maintaining play and forming friendships
- Skills for sharing and cooperating
Group Coaching of Social Skills

- Teach children how to initiate positive interactions during group activities – circle or story time:
  - Getting a friend’s attention
  - Sharing toys and materials
  - Asking peers to share objects
  - Providing a play idea to a peer
  - Saying something nice to a peer
Group Coaching…

- Use role play and rehearsal during circle time and story time to teach the skills:
  - Explain the skill
  - Demonstrate the correct way to use it
  - Demonstrate an incorrect way and let the children figure out the missing step
  - Have children practice a skill with an adult
  - Let a child practice with another child
  - Provide positive feedback and attention on use of the skills
Peer-mediated Interventions

- Teach socially competent children to use incidental teaching strategies with peers (with social skills difficulties) - Odom and colleagues, 1999.
- Let these children keep track of interactions (e.g., chart with checks or stickers).
- Train several peers to use incidental teaching.
- Assign children buddies during centers and teach them to stay and play with and talk to their buddy.
  - Change buddy assignments frequently.
  
  (Laushey and Heflin, 2000)
Monitoring for Success

- Monitor playtime for naturally occurring positive peer social interactions.
- Provide cueing by reminding children to:
  - Play together
  - Share with their friends
  - Be persistent
  - Use scaffolding techniques
- Embed social interactions throughout the day by providing additional opportunities for learning.
• Provide additional assistance to children as needed to ensure that peer social interactions are successful. For example:
  – Modeling
  – Specific verbal cues (e.g., Remember to tap him on the shoulder)
  – Physical assistance
• Provide specific positive feedback and attention to children who are playing together and engaging in positive social interactions.
Prompting Strategies

• Prompt children to engage in positive social interactions throughout the day. Specific prompting strategies include:

  – **Behavioral Momentum:**

    • Using several easy requests or tasks to build the child’s confidence and increase the likelihood that he or she will respond to the more difficult task. (E.g., “Carl, Touch your nose, Touch your mouth”, etc.)

    • Follow with a more difficult request (e.g., “Carl, come here and play with Robert.”)
Prompting Strategies (continued)

- **Priming:**
  - Provide the children with ideas of how to participate in social activities before the child begins the play situation (e.g., “Carl, who are you going to ask to play with at center time?” or “Bobby, can you ask Ahmad to play with you?”).

- **Correspondence Training:**
  - Interact with the child before he enters into a play situation and ask what he will do instead of prompting or cuing the child. (e.g., “Ahmad, what are you going to do with Carl when you go to the art center?”)
  - Follow up with the child to see whether he did in fact do what he said he would once the activity is completed.
Scripted Stories

- Use scripted stories - brief descriptive stories that provide information regarding a social situation - to support children in social situations:
  - Help children understand social interactions, situations, expectations, social cues, the script of unfamiliar activities, and/or social rules.
Guidelines for Scripted Stories

• A Scripted Story should have 3 to 5 descriptive and perspective sentences for each directive sentence.
• Avoid using too many directive sentences.
• Write in first person and on the child’s developmental skill level.
• Note that you can use real photographs with the line drawings for children that need this level of support to supplement text.
Example of a Scripted Story

- I like to play with the big blocks at the block center.
- Sometimes I feel like pushing the others and grabbing the blocks.
- When I push others or grab the blocks, I hurt the other children.
- I can use my pictures and words to ask if I can play with the blocks.
- Everyone is happy when I use my pictures and words to ask to play.
Guidelines - Implementing Interventions

• Focus on children with social interaction difficulties without singling them out.
• Teach peers to be supportive and willing partners.
• Focus on specific behaviors key to social interactions.
• Gather data on peer interactions by careful observation.
• Use a team approach in identifying target behaviors.
• Monitor interventions and make changes as needed.
• Try one intervention at a time and try interventions in multiple locations to help with generalization (classroom, playground, etc.)
• Get the team involved in implementing interventions.
**Additional Resources**

- Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning website: (http://csefel.uiuc.edu)
- Integrated Play Group (IPG) model (Guided participation in IPG) by Pamela Wolfberg Autism Institute on Peer Groups and Play (www.autisminstitute.com)
- Friend to Friend (F2F) Models: Programs for peers including the focus child (www.friend2friendsociety.org)
  - Presentations to peers on autism using puppets and simulation games
Let us empower young children with autism to be successful partners in play and build friendships!

Thank You!

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