

Embracing Play for ALL Children

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Play for ALL children: Challenges for Research



- Meaningful inclusion for children with severe disabilities
- Teaching “play” concurrent to teaching in play
- Supporting peers as play partners
- Personnel preparation for playful learning
- Measurement of outcomes and play development



- Play perspectives
 - School: work vs. play
 - Parent values
 - Time is critical – no time for fun
 - Must “catch up” to typical
 - Therapy = adult directed trials
- Play opportunities
 - Reward for work or recess
 - Primarily object play, skills based
 - Lesser focus on symbolic, pretend, or social with friends





Early EC special education research- Summary

- Play outcomes are generally secondary to questions measured by changes in IQ or DQ and Language
- Play is vehicle for teaching cognitive, language, motor skills
- Research limitations due to pre-post group designs, inappropriate control groups, Single subject
- Measures/scales developed by Fewell et al; Westby, Lifter – DPA based on normal development without adaptations for larger sample
- Descriptive studies looked at specific disabilities, e.g. Down syndrome, Autism or program evaluation
- Generalization limited due to small N and wide age ranges

More recent initiatives



Expand opportunities for children and research



- Parents, siblings, peers as play partners
- Play based assessments and curriculum for ECSE
- Professional development needs
 - Progression of play
- Beyond object play....
 - Facilitating generative play

Supporting Play with Peers



Children with disabilities engage in more solitary play, are likely to exhibit challenging behaviors without structure or supports, do not initiate or initiate inappropriately interactions with other children.



Fun and Friendships



Teaching classroom personnel and peers how to support play increases interactions and engagement while decreasing challenging behavior



Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)



Why we need more research on play

- Increasing incidence
- Highly variable characteristics
- Early identification leads to earlier intervention – 18 mo rather than 4 years





Core deficits in ASD

- Children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) display core deficits in:
 - **Symbolic play**
 - Social interaction
 - Language (DSM-IV-TR; APA, 2000)
- Generally agreed that 1 or more types of play delayed (e.g. symbolic, imaginative)



Early Intervention in ASD: Multiple high quality studies

- Outcomes
 - Increased SP and JA skills post play intervention
 - Generalized skills across persons
 - Increased vocabulary
 - Active engagement
 - Initiations of communication
- Limitations
 - Variable use of standardized measures
 - More clinic based than classroom
 - Families or teachers not interventionist
 - Short term with little follow up



What happens if play is independent variable? One example to consider...

Symbolic Play Intervention

- Multiple baseline design across participants
- Setting: Children's ECSE classrooms
- 4 days/week, 18 min/session, 8-12 weeks total duration
- Measures:
 - Play (symbolic and nonsymbolic)
 - Language



Play environments

- On floor, near pretend play area in classroom
- 10 min/child (5 explicit, 5 supported)
- During free-play time (observation)
- Toys in all environments comparable and matched to developmental level and child interests



Key findings

- Children increased rates and levels/complexity of play (from NSP to SP)
- Children increased total expressive language scores from baseline to intervention
- Possible relation between language and play observed
- Repetitive behaviors decreased in similar trend to increases in play signifying a possible relation
- Independent play was observed in group times and areas



So what?

- Professional development.... Play can be in classroom... doesn't have to be reward
- Doesn't need intensive special toys, times
- Promotes competence and independence in key learning domains
- Engaged parents and teachers in perspective changing...

What is next for the fields of EI and ECSE?



What do we need to know about play for children with ASD and other disabilities?

- Theory that accounts for the underlying play differences
- Types/categories of play deficits (it would help if we had consistent terminology)
- Relationships between play, language, social interaction and repetitive behaviors
- Processes of play such as flexibility and diversity
- Interventions including those that support parent and peer participation



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