Understanding Autism & Play

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Objectives for Today

Participants will:

- Have a basic understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorders
- Receive information on the steps to building play skills for this population of individuals
- Receive information on resources
While people with autism share common characteristics - each person is unique with their own strengths and challenges.
A person with an ASD may present with the following symptoms:

- Not respond to their name by 12 months
- Not point at objects to show interest (point at an airplane flying over) by 14 months
- Not play "pretend" games (pretend to "feed" a doll) by 18 months
- Avoid eye contact and want to be alone
- Have trouble understanding other people's feelings or talking about their own feelings
- Have delayed speech and language skills
- Repeat words or phrases over and over (echolalia)
- Give unrelated answers to questions
- Get upset by minor changes
- Have obsessive interests
- Flap their hands, rock their body, or spin in circles
- Have unusual reactions to the way things sound, smell, taste, look, or feel
AUTISM AND EPIDEMIOLOGY

- Autism is considered to be an incapacitating, lifelong, neurologically based, developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life, *Best Practice Manual, California Dept. of Education and Developmental Services.*

- About 1 in 68 children has been identified with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) according to estimates from CDC's Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Network.

- ASD is almost 5 times more common among boys (1 in 42) than among girls (1 in 189).

- ASD is reported to occur in all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups.

*Centers For Disease Control and Prevention, 2015*
Genes are one risk factor:

- Studies have shown that among identical twins, if one child has ASD, then the other will be affected about 36-95% of the time. In non-identical twins, if one child has ASD, then the other is affected about 0-31% of the time.

- Parents who have a child with ASD have a 2%–18% chance of having a second child who is also affected.

- ASD tends to occur more often in people who have certain genetic or chromosomal conditions. About 10% of children with autism are also identified as having Down syndrome, fragile X syndrome, tuberous sclerosis, or other genetic and chromosomal disorders.

- Almost half (46%) of children identified with ASD has average to above average intellectual ability.

*Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015*
Autism as Behavioral Excesses, Deficits, and “Normal” Development

- Many professionals also view autism as a set of behavioral excesses and deficits

- Excesses: Echolalia, stereotypy, ritualistic behavior, tantrum behavior, and aggression toward self, others, or objects

- Deficits: Cognition, language and communication, play, socialization, self-help, fine motor (can be in any or all areas of development)

- Normal Development: Usually these children acquire these early developmental milestones within normal limits: gross motor skills and these children do not have distinguishing physical features that may identify them as having autism
## Building Play Skills: Typical Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>0-1.5 years of age:</th>
<th>1.5 years – 2.5 years of age</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Gets excited when a toy is presented</td>
<td>1. Engages in symbolic/pretend play, pretends to sleep, eat, or drink from a cup</td>
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<td>2. Shakes a rattle or other object</td>
<td>2. Imitates environmental sounds in play</td>
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<td>3. Reaches for an object and grabs it</td>
<td>3. Imitates motions of an object</td>
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<td>4. Plays peek a boo</td>
<td>4. Associates objects in play such as giving the doll a ride in a car</td>
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<td>5. Explores the environment with curiosity</td>
<td>5. Watches other children play and may attempt to join in briefly</td>
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<td>6. Plays pat a cake</td>
<td>6. Emerging parallel play: plays alone but in the presence of other children</td>
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<td>7. Plays with a variety of toys doing different activities with each</td>
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<td>8. Simple ball play, rolling ball back and forth</td>
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<td>9. Play that extends beyond self: brushes dolls hair, feeds doll</td>
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# Building Play Skills: Typical Development

## 2.5 years – 3.5 years of age

1. Uses a toy to act out a scene
2. Parallel Play: watches others play and plays near them
3. Engages in make believe play for 5 - 20 minutes
4. Plays simple group games such as ring around the rosy.
5. Emerging interactive play with adult supervision
6. Emerging turn taking

## 3.5 years – 6.0 years of age

1. Emerging cooperative play with adult assistance
2. Emerging play with games that have rules
3. Incorporation of play statements/directions in play activities
4. Takes turns
5. Plays cooperatively with one or two children for at least 15 minutes
6. Plays pretend play/role play: doctor, teacher, chef, fire fighter
7. Cooperative play with two or more children for 5-20 minutes
Levels of Social Play: Typical Development

- **Solitary/Independent Play:** Child plays alone
- **Parallel Play:** Child plays near another child, may show interest, but each doing their own activity

**Interactive Play:**
- **Associative Play:** Several children are engaged in the same play and interact with one another. They may share equipment or toys but each goes their own way
- **Cooperative Play:** Children are working together toward a common goal
Autism & Deficits in Play

- Children with autism do not develop play like their neuro-typical peers
- Instead, children with autism demonstrate the following deficits:
  - They have no or very limited toy play
  - They tend to play with toys in a stereotyped or repetitive way
  - They do not learn from observing their environment
  - They have no or very limited pretend play
Assessment of Play Skills

- Brigance Diagnostic Inventory of Early Development II; Curriculum Associates, Inc.
- Assessment of social and communication skills for children with Autism; Kathleen Quill, Kathleen Bracken, & Maria Fair (in Do-Watch-Listen-Say)
- Direct Observation
Building Play Skills: Step 1

Goal is to expand on appropriate independent play skills
-Imitation with objects:
Toy Manipulation-One and two step
Ex. One step:
Put a block/ball in bucket, put a shape in a shape sorter, shake maraca, push buttons on a cause and effect toy, push a car, hammer, etc.

Two step: put a toy person in a car and roll the car, put a toy person in a swing and push the swing, walk the horse and then have the horse eat food, block imitation (may incorporate several steps)
- Build puzzle play; start with simple to more complex puzzles
- Build other independent toy play like putting beads on a string, pegs in a peg board, etc.
- Build the length of time the child engages in independent play from a few minutes to 15 minutes
Building Play Skills: Step 2

Goal is to teach pretend play
- Imitation of pretend play with toys, e.g. feed a doll or animal/object sounds
- Use of objects for which they are intended, e.g. brush hair with a brush
- Flexible use of objects, e.g. pretend a block is a brush and use the block to brush your hair
- Pretend you are an animal/object/person/doing an action
Building Play Skills: Step 3

Goal is to begin building parallel play and tolerance for physical proximity to others

- Parallel play with an adult; approximately 6-8 minutes
- Parallel play with a peer; once the child can parallel play with an adult introduce another child; provide each child with a set of different materials slowly move to more similar materials to begin promoting interactive play
Building Play Skills: Step 4

Goal is to promote interactive play:
- Begin with basic turn taking with objects, e.g. ball play, putting puzzle pieces in, Lotto boards
- Imitates peer’s actions independently or when instructed to do so
- Follows a peer’s instruction or lead
- Will make play statements about what child and peer are doing
- Game play with more complex turn taking, rule following, and sustained play
- Work toward cooperative play where the child and peer work toward shared goal
Building Play Skills: Step 4 (continued)

- Child will initiate play with others
- Child will ask to join play activity
- Sustain social exchanges
- Emerging into more complex social skills, e.g. perspective taking, nonverbal language
Considerations

When teaching play you want to consider the following:
- Play is not usually a preferred activity for children on the Autism Spectrum; as a result their attention and focus to these tasks are low and maladaptive behavior may appear (use first/then; timer; choice boards; play schedules)
- Use toys and activities that the child is motivated by as long as they are not perseverative and rigid in nature
- Allow for breaks away from play as needed
- Use high levels of positive reinforcement when the child is engaging in play
- It will take time to build any given area of play
- Individuals on the Autism Spectrum have a tendency to play alone and need to be encouraged and taught to play with others
Questions
References

- Brigance Diagnostic Inventory of Early Development II
Resources

- Center for Disease Control & Prevention
  www.cdc.gov
- Future Horizons-Resources and Materials
  www.FutureHorizons-autism.com
- Special Needs Project-Resources and Materials
  www.specialneeds.com