

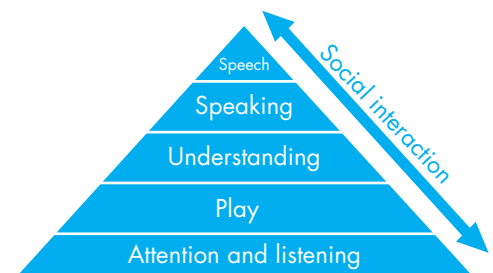
Teaching play

After years of working in special education, Kay Smith shares her experience of helping children with autism learn how to play



It is often assumed that all children know how to play and that it comes naturally to them. However, for some children this is not the case. For children who have communication, interaction and social impairments, 'play' is far from a natural process.

Getting the skills in place



As shown in this communication pyramid, play is also part of the foundation of language development. The skills at the bottom of the pyramid have to be in place before the skills at the top can develop.

When you look at this there is no wonder that children who find play a difficult concept have impairments in their social development. Having worked within the early years with children who have a diagnosis of autism for many years I have observed that these children's play differs from their mainstream peers. In her book, *Play & imagination in children with autism*, Pamela Wolfberg explains that 'children with autism gravitate to repetitive play activity, ranging from manipulating objects and enacting elaborate routines to pursuing obsessive and narrowly focused interests'. On a typical observation, one child may be sitting spinning the wheel of the truck continually while another is running up and down the room from one corner to the other. Although this could be seen as children exploring particular schemas, the child with autism would find it hard to move on from this. Play then becomes stuck in the same form, making it difficult to extend and develop it into the next stage.

So how do we as practitioners begin to help such children to develop their play skills? In reading around this subject I began to understand that children with autism need to be taught *how* to play, rather than expected to learn *through* play. There are many different

'Learning through play' is a phrase that is often used during the early years. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) is underpinned by children using play as a tool for their learning and development. Children are encouraged to 'play' from a very young age; we buy children a variety of different toys to help encourage them to play in different ways. There is also extensive evidence which highlights the importance of 'play' in a child's early years.

Many theorists past and present have shown us the significance that play has to a child's development. Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852) believed that 'Play is the highest expression of human development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in a child's soul.' He was one of the first people who recognised that young children were capable of learning social and intellectual skills through their play. The work of Jean Piaget (1896–1980) then linked play to a child's cognitive development. He stated that 'play is the answer to how anything new comes about'.

The idea that play is of great importance is still being explored by more recent pioneers such as Tina Bruce, who believes that play takes children into 'one of the highest forms of learning'. As an early years' practitioner and a mother I have seen first hand how play supports children's development and learning, as I'm sure many others have too.

strategies that are recommended to use when working with children with autism. One strategy is 'intensive interaction', an approach used to encourage communication and interaction for people who have difficulties in this area. The learning outcomes associated with intensive interaction are reflected by parent-infant interactions, in creating simple turn-taking sequences with the adult mirroring the child's actions and sounds. Research has shown how this strategy enables children to become engaged in interactions with adults, especially when the adults are able to allow the children to take control. I knew that this was an important strategy when considering how I was going to begin to help 'teach play'.

A step-by-step approach

Psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) talked about a child's 'zone of proximal development'. This refers to the difference between what a child knows and can do independently and what they can then do with some support. So as practitioners we need to know how we can scaffold the child's learning and play to achieve the next level. It was this knowledge together with the intensive interaction principles that helped me to devise a way to 'teach play' to the children with autism with whom I have worked.

This is a simple step-by-step approach that I believe can help to support children's learning of 'how to play'. It is best done with a group of children, as we often forget what children can learn from each other.

- ▶ Position yourself carefully – you need to be able to see all the children's faces and it is best that everyone can see each other.
- ▶ Start with a clear table – this will allow you to introduce the toys at an appropriate pace. All the toys will need to be near you but not in sight of the children.
- ▶ Introduce the toys one at a time, for example when using building blocks, place one brick in the centre of the table. You could count the bricks but what you are essentially doing is building a tower. The key here is to allow the children to process what you are doing, so a slow pace in between each brick placing will allow this.
- ▶ Respond to any of the children's involvement and interactions by mirroring and praising. Allow the children to express themselves freely; there is no right or wrong way. This session is about allowing the children to take the lead, with you scaffolding what they already can do.
- ▶ Remember that, inevitably, the tower will be knocked over. This is a positive action so be prepared to start again.
- ▶ As the children get involved, hand each child a toy one at a time – using the brick

example again, hand each child a brick one at a time before you start the next tower.

- ▶ Interact with the child by encouraging and mirroring, ie put another brick on the tower after they do. Some children may want to build individual towers, and this is fine too.
- ▶ Allow the children to lead the session – this will occur, with your encouragement, once an understanding is established by the group as to what is going to happen next.
- ▶ Extend play by introducing different toys at the same time, for instance when using bricks introduce animals, cars, trains, people, cups and saucepans. This will help keep the children's interest and allow for creativity. For example, you could build a bridge, which the children can copy, for a car to go under.
- ▶ Keep adult language limited to simple key words. Remember, the children are the leaders, with the adults becoming facilitators.

I have used this basic principle to introduce children to a variety of toys such as dolls, farm and zoo play, tea parties, puzzle play, the list is endless. The outcomes have been promising, with most of the children engaging for a considerable amount of time during the sessions. The children show skills that are not observed during the free-flow play sessions. It has also created a platform for a child to show creativity and where the adult can extend and praise a child's play without the confusion of other factors that an autistic child can find a hindrance, such as the loud noises often experienced during free-flow play sessions.

We have also observed that some children transfer their newly learnt skills from the sessions to the more general learning environment of the classroom. Giving children with autism the tools to understand the principles of play will help them to become more independent in their learning. One particular girl was observed building big bricks after one of the sessions – it is hard to determine whether this was because of the group session but the girl had not showed us this before.

I hope this article has shown the importance that play can have in the classroom. We can get tied up in the core subjects that we are expected to teach, but it is good to reflect on the 'extras' that we need to be able to offer, especially when working with children with autism who need the opportunity to foster what are often thought of as naturally developing skills.

Kay Smith worked as an early years practitioner, nursery nurse and outreach worker at Whitefield Academy Trust for 20 years and has recently started working for Hertfordshire as an inclusion development worker (area SENCO).



'This session is about allowing the children to take the lead'