

The Power of Play: Using the Integrated Play Group Model to Enhance Motor and Social Skills for Learners with Autism

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Introduction:

Teacher Inquiry Question: How can we use the Integrated Play Group model (IPG) to enhance the gross motor and social skill development of our Primary and Junior Autism Community Classroom learners?

Rationale

Our action research team consisted of teachers who all had preparation coverage in our school's Primary and Junior Autism Community Classes and the home room teacher of the Junior Autism Class. Faced with the challenge of working in a classroom where we had a wide range of experience, it gave us the opportunity to collaborate and embark on our action research journey. We saw a gap in the inclusion of our Community Class learners into our overall Healthy Active Living school initiative. A school community can be judged on its inclusivity based on how its most vulnerable members are treated and integrated. We decided that this was an area that needed some improvement. Our learners could develop their motor skills but at the same time develop their social skills, which was an important goal for us. Our goal was three-fold. First, we wanted to create a playgroup model that allowed our Autism Community Class learners to interact with mainstream peers their own age while developing their gross motor skills. We saw that the majority of interaction that our Autism Community Class learners had was with teachers and educational assistants. We wanted to get learners playing with other kids their own age. Second, it was our hope that this model would give our mainstream learners the opportunity to enhance their own social skills and empathy. And finally, we wanted to build confidence in preparation coverage teachers to deliver a structured program that would address the gaps in our autism learners' gross motor and social skills.

Methodology

To meet our goal of increasing the gross motor skills of our autism Community Class learners, we implemented the FUNdamentals program from Special Olympics, (which is based upon Canadian Sport for Life (CS4L) and Long Term Athlete Development's (LTAD) FUNdamentals second stage of athletic skill acquisition). Special Olympic's FUNdamentals is a 12 week program which covers basic motor skill development such as throwing and kicking a ball. Each session is designed keeping differing abilities in mind. We thought that this program was structured enough to implement into our Community Classrooms.

To address our goal of increasing the social connections of the learners in our Community Classrooms, we included peers from mainstream classrooms to be play partners. In choosing our play partners, we looked for learners who demonstrated qualities of leadership, responsibility and empathy. After choosing our play partners, two for each division, they were educated with the Autism Acceptance Program to help them develop an understanding of our participants. It was our hope that our sessions would move from being teacher-directed to play-partner directed. Throughout the program, we used checklists, anecdotal observations, videotaping and conferencing to assess our successes.

Literature Review

There is much data to support the benefits of play in the social development of children. We decided to look for research that incorporated the use of play as a fundamental component for student learning. It was our belief that learners learn best while playing. Applying a play model to our Autism Community Classes would require a well-structured approach to meet our goals. When developing play models for children with autism, the evidence promotes two approaches: "a) using typical peers as models or directors of intervention and b) employing interventions in natural settings to promote children's generalization of social skills." (Goldstein et al as quoted in Lantz, Nelson and Loftin, 2004) Based on Vygotsky's social constructivist theory, the Integrated Play Group model (IPG) as developed by Pamela Wolfberg, has as its primary objective, "to

improve the social and symbolic play skills of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders between the ages of 3 and 11.” (Wolfberg as quoted in Lantz et al, 2004) “In addition to addressing difficulties with play, this model emphasizes developing children’s intrinsic desire to play and interact with others (Wolfberg as quoted in Lantz et al, 2004)

According to Wolfberg, “the mission of IPG is to “provide a haven for children with diverse abilities to create genuine play worlds together where they may reach their social and imaginative potential, as well as have fun and make friends” (Lantz et al, 2004).

Similarly, Bass and Mulick (2007), promote the use of peers as intervention agents in the social play skill enhancement of children with autism. They go much further in presenting siblings as intervention agents as well.

In her research, Sonia Mastrangelo concludes that “play is crucial in preparing children for adult life. Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders can begin to develop positive play experiences if we take into account their level of development and make appropriate social contexts available to them. The overall goal is to ensure that children on the autism spectrum generalize the many skills they learn during play experiences to a variety of contexts and people.” (Mastrangelo, 2009)

Analysis and Findings

Perhaps the most gratifying moment in our Action Research occurred just days before our presentation. A boy from the Primary Autism Community Class picked up a ball and threw it toward a classmate. His classmate responded in kind. For a good fifteen minutes they *created a genuine play world together* and appeared like any couple of kids anywhere just playing ball, (we were fortunate enough to have had a video camera available).

During the course of our Action Research, we experienced much success with our learners. Most of our learners had much to gain from this experience. While some of our learners with autism moved forward in terms of their skill development, typically the higher functioning learners, we did have some learners who did not benefit as much. Enhanced dialogue between play partners and our Community Class learners took place. Having the opportunity to play with peers their own age was important. A drawback to our experience was that we lacked the appropriate setting to create a culture of play for

all our participants. Most of our sessions took place in the classroom or in the hallways as the gym was unavailable at the times we were conducting our research. Space is necessary for active play to occur and we did not have the right amount of it for our learners to get the most out of this experience.

We found that the experience was just as beneficial for our play partners in enhancing their social empathy and giving them a unique opportunity to interact with the Autism Community Class learners. A hurdle we came across however was that the process of picking our play partners required careful selection. Our play partners in the junior classroom were much more capable of leadership and demonstrated the ideal qualities we looked for while our primary classroom play partners required a little more coaching and prompting to interact with the Community Class learners.

Our action research team gained confidence in creating an active and authentic learning experience for our participants. Some of us had no or very little previous experience working in a Community Class, and started off the year quite nervous and unsure of what to expect and how to create the classroom structure that was necessary for an optimal learning environment for our learners with autism. Collaboration amongst us was a valuable learning experience. We believe that the successes of this program can be duplicated in other Community Classrooms in other schools and other districts. We have already inspired interest in other schools that wish to implement the FUNdamentals program in their Community Classes as well.

Bibliography

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