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ABSTRACT

Role play with toys was modeled to develop communicative language function in 14 visually impaired Ss (ages 8-26 years) who also were mentally retarded. Before treatment, Ss' language was non-communicating and characterized by echolalic and stereotypic verbal responses. Few questions and little narrative speech was present even in those Ss who had fully developed sentence structure. Among the findings was that the Ss acquired dialogue behavior as they learned to role-play. Communicative function was established with shared referents (play themes and toy props) and cooperative social routines (role play). Play themes which were of personal interest elicited the greatest participation. Nonverbal Ss did not develop symbolic play, but did establish communicative responses as they began to anticipate and express preference. No change was noted in the level of syntax or vocabulary development in verbal Ss. Verbal expression increased and narrative and question forms appeared. Language behavior became more communicative and meaningful as social interaction increased. (Author/DIS)

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THE PROBLEM

Introduction

> The genesis of language itself, in which the function of communication had the definite role of an essential function, presumes from the outset the existence of partners, between whom an exchange of information has taken place.
>
> (Slama-Cazacu,p.11)

Communicative competence can be defined as the achievement of a language system which has the purpose of receiving and giving information to others. The ability to participate in conversational dialogue, to anticipate and respond to the informational needs of the listener, to formulate and convey needed information, and to enjoy the reciprocity of social exchange are the components of communicative competence.

Communication is the ability to transfer meaning to another. It is a transaction, a "shared" behavior and requires that two or more persons act as partners in an exchange of dialogue. The function of communication can be realized through any expression to another person, real or imaginary. The "speech between" two or more persons is a dialogue relation. This relation begins with the simplest form of address and progresses to complex conversation. (Slama-Cazacu, 1977) Conversation is characterized by the presence of partners, direction towards the partner, alternate exchange, transfer of information and the linguistic form in which it appears. (Slama-Cazacu, 1977).

Blind multihandicapped children who have not established a "dialogue relation" do not use their language to share their feelings, thoughts, needs or desires with other people. Their language systems are devoid of these communicative functions. Their language is unrelated to the immediate context. The child may simply repeat television commercials or meaningless jargon. He may mimic adult speech without reference to meaning. He may use abusive language, which he does not understand, but which elicits immediate reaction from adults or other children. At other times, the child may appear to perseverate. For example, he may ask the same question over and over again. Speech may be infantile in pronunciation or use of immature expressions and incomplete sentences.

The language of blind multihandicapped children reflects all their problems; lack of experience, disordered perceptions, inability to organize experience, hostility, anxiety, compulsivity and immaturity. (Frampton, Kerney and Schattner, 1969) Even when there is the desire to communicate, it is as if the blind multihandicapped child does not know how to use the language he does possess. Teachers who work with these children are confronted with the problem of how to direct their language skills towards communication with other people.

The communicative functions of language establish joint or common referents and referential relationships and establish joint or cooperative social routines. (McLean,Snyder-McLean, 1978) The intention of this project was to explore the efficacy

of pretend (symbolic) play as a medium for the development of the communicative functions of language. In make-believe play, the referents (play objects) and cooperative social routines are clearly defined.

Play offers blind multihandicapped children the kind of opportunities they need to experience the sharing that is involved in communication. In order to pretend, the child must play a role as an actor in his play. He must have a plan for action or a story line, and have objects or settings which are changed or invented as needed. (Garvey, 1977) Make-believe play enables teachers to share experiences with children, respond to the interests of the children and create a dialogue relation. For these reasons, make-believe play is an ideal medium for the development of the communicative functions of language.

Make-believe play has its roots in the first stage of play described by Piaget as "sensorimotor" play. During this first stage, the child is busy acquiring control over his physical movements and learns to coordinate his gestures with the effects they produce on the environment. (Piaget, 1962) Symbolic or representational play predominates in children from about two to six years of age. In symbolic play, the child carries out with gestures and/or words his notions of the world. By pretending, the child recreates and represents the social roles of others, the symbolic uses of objects (toys) and his understanding of the relationships between events. Symbolic play

has both cognitive and communicative functions. It is with the latter that our study has been most concerned.

The purpose of this project was to develop and/or increase the communicative functions of language in multihandicapped children. It is believed that dialogue behavior and play skills need to be actively taught to children who do not demonstrate spontaneous, self-initiated play or express interest in social interaction.

Note: The children who are the subjects of this study are sometimes referred to by name in the body of the text. These are not the real names of the children.

METHODOLOGY

Fourteen children and young adults participated in the study. The subjects were chosen by the teachers and/or administrators of the programs in which they were enrolled. All combine sensory or motor and/or neurological handicaps with developmental disabilities. Nine of the subjects were blind; of these six were totally blind, three had severely restricted vision. Of the five sighted subjects, four attended a school for trainable mentally retarded children; one was severely physically disabled and not enrolled in an educational program. It was decided to include sighted subjects because of the similarity of language functioning between these children and the blind subjects.

Table I Description of Subjects

# Subjects	Language Level	Visual Ability	Age
4	no speech	2 totally blind 2 sighted	8 yrs. 10 yrs.
4	1-4 word phrases	3 sighted 1 totally blind	12-17 yrs.
4	simple sentences	2 partially sighted 2 totally blind	8-16 yrs.
2	adult speech	1 partially sighted 1 totally blind	14-15 yrs.

Table I indicates the ages, language levels and vision of the subjects.

Three blind subjects were residents of a facility serving mentally retarded persons. Three attended a school for trainable mentally retarded children, and three were enrolled in special classes in the public schools.

Two blind subjects had no functional language. Two had adult speech. Five were verbal but demonstrated grammatic and vocabulary limitations. Two sighted subjects had no functional language and three spoke in short phrases and had immature speech.

The additional handicaps among the blind subjects included mental retardation, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, metabolic disorders and emotional disturbance.

Despite the differences in age and disabilities, all the subjects demonstrated limited stereotyped responses and a failure to interact meaningfully with their peers and/or play materials or to occupy themselves without adult direction. The verbal subjects seemed to have a high degree of anxiety about interaction with their peers. They demonstrated little narrative or conversational speech, asked few questions, and their verbal expressions were stereotyped and unrelated to the activities they were doing.

Each subject received one hour of play with a teacher-model each week. The teacher-models were two graduate students,(one of whom is head teacher at a school for trainable mentally retarded children),and nine student teachers enrolled in the Diploma Program In Learning Disorders (now called the Diploma In The Visually Handicapped) at the University of British Columbia. The play sessions at the school for the mentally retarded were conducted at least two times weekly and varied in length from fifteen to forty-five minutes. At all the other settings, the play sessions took place once each week for at least one hour.

In all cases the play sessions took place in a separate room. The teacher-models kept anecdotal records and used a play progress chart. (See Appendix) In addition a videotape was made of most of the subjects.

Toy props were selected that were clearly defined by their form for use in imaginative themes. Dolls, both baby dolls and Barbie dolls, stuffed animals, hand puppets, string puppets, toy furniture and appliances were chosen. Those toys which represented the familiar were the most frequently used. The non-verbal children were most occupied with toy props that possessed novel elements and appealed to the child's sense of touch and hearing. Barbie dolls and puppets were used with the older children and young adults.

Baseline information on the play behaviors of the subjects were gathered from two sources. Initially the classroom teachers and/or ward staff were asked to describe the play of the subjects. Each subject was then involved in an informal play session. During this initial session, each child was allowed to choose from a variety of toys. The teacher encouraged exploration and interaction using such comments as "Look, here's a doll." or "What can you do with this toy?" Interaction with the toys was not modeled. These initial sessions might not accurately reflect the childrens' skills because of the newness of the situation and their lack of play experiences. Nevertheless these sessions revealed that all of the blind subjects and all but one of the sighted subjects seemed to be at a loss of

what to do with the play materials. They either handled them briefly or rejected them. One sighted subject began to play with the toys, but his play was solitary and did not involve language.

Baseline language information was gathered on all the verbal subjects. A language sample for each subject was recorded and analyzed at the beginning and end of the study. The language samples were taken during the play sessions. Each sample was analyzed according to the method and developmental sequence described by Crystal et al.(pp. 63-84)

Table II Levels of Language Development

# Subjects	Language Development
4	no speech
1	Stage I
3	Stage III
4	Stage IV
2	adult speech (Stage VII)

Table II describes the levels of language development of the subjects at the beginning of the study. One subject used only one word utterances, three subjects spoke in three element phrases, four subjects used complete sentences, but their grammatical structure was simple. Two subjects had adult speech.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participation In Play

Extent of participation is a measure of the involvement of the child in play. In order to record changes in participatory behavior, four levels of participation were used:

1. Passive Participation: the child is a spectator and indicates interest by a laugh, smile or comment.
2. Active Imitation: the child begins to imitate the action of play. He may imitate a motor action, an action with a toy prop or verbally imitate the adult.
3. Active Participation In Thematic Play: the child adds to the theme set by the teacher with his own ideas, motor behavior, verbal expression, and/or role.
4. Child Initiated Theme: the child develops his own play theme and initiates the play.

All subjects were participating in the play sessions at the end of the project. Most of the children began at the level of passive participation. The blind subjects needed a great deal of initial encouragement and experience in using the toys before they could actively participate or use the toy props in an imaginative way. All of the verbal subjects moved quickly from passive participation to active participation in a play theme. Most of the subjects did not plan their own play themes. Unless the teachers developed a theme, the children repeated the themes of the previous session. Teachers found it necessary to elaborate or change a theme in order to challenge the children to incorporate new or novel material. This was as true of those children with a high level of language skill as those who had very limited language. Children with well-developed

language skills did not generate their own ideas without a good deal of prompting and elaborating by the teachers. Nevertheless, most of the subjects reached the point of contributing their own ideas and feelings to the play sessions. These took the form of role characterization, expression of feelings, and solutions to the problems posed by the teachers.

The actual toy props became less and less important to the play sessions. The children became more willing and more expert at "pretending"situations. Barry's puppet got "pretend" ketchup all over his tie. His teacher asked him to help clean it up. Barry made the motions of wiping a stain from the puppet's "pretend" tie.

Nina's teacher told her that the dolls were fighting over some crayons. Nina solved the problem by adding more "pretend" crayons "so each doll would have her own." Dorene chased away a cow who had come to nibble on her sandwich.

When Ellie discovered she could control the lives of her dolls, she began to express real feeling. Ellie comforted her puppet Hepsibah. "If you need help, you can ask for it. You have to know when you need help." Dick who had some anxiety about an airplane trip he was to take, acted out the entire sequence of taking a trip. He called a taxi to take him to the airport, boarded an airplane, ate his dinner on the plane, landed and met his aunt at the airport.

Symbolic Behavior

Before symbolic behavior could be established, there needed to be repeated acts of exploration to establish familiarity with the toys and the purposes for which they could be used.

The most rapid progress in developing exploratory play skills was made by those children who showed greatest interest in social interaction with their teachers. This observation suggests that objects assume importance in relation to the personal satisfactions with which they are associated.

All the subjects needed to become familiar with the toy props before they could use them in a symbolic way. Few differences were noted between blind and sighted subjects in the way the toy props were used once the children became familiar with them. The sighted subjects quickly recognized familiar character dolls like Donald Duck or Mickey Mouse. But despite visual recognition of many toys, attention was fleeting and there was little appropriate use of toy props until exploratory skills were well established. Attention to the toy prop was facilitated by playing with it. Once a child knew how to act upon a toy, he began to use it more actively. Play with toys is more than simple action on an object. A toy is embellished with a notion of purpose. Random handling, whirling or other form of stereotypic response to the toys diminished as actions became purposeful.

The four non-verbal subjects, two totally blind and two sighted children, were not initially interested in toys. The initial response of these children was to throw the toys on the floor, or clench their hands and refuse to touch them. Their participation was either passive or non-existent. As this group of children became familiar with the routine of the play sessions and began to anticipate interaction with their teachers, interest in the toys developed. This observation suggests once again that social interaction is important in fostering interest in objects.

Hand over hand techniques were used to show these children how to explore and manipulate the toy props. The non-verbal children tended to treat the toys as objects to be handled for their sensory attributes rather than as a tool or representation of a real object. The way a baby doll was handled was indistinguishable from the handling of a truck or a dish. The non-verbal children became interested in the actions they discovered they could perform.

None of the four non-verbal subjects developed symbolic behavior; they did achieve a communicative response which was demonstrated in anticipatory behavior and expression of preference. Their participation changed from passive to active imitation of teachers' motor behavior with toy props.

The symbolic behavior of play, "pretending" can take many forms. Pretending is a cognitive activity and the child must possess an image or notion of an action or an object in order to portray or represent it. There was variation among the subjects in the use of symbolic behavior. Pretending for some children was limited to representing physical actions, such as eating, running, dancing, jumping etc.. All of the verbal subjects demonstrated some degree of progress in the ways they combined ideas and objects. Interest in the toy props and familiarity with the play themes suggested by the teachers, appeared to be important elements in encouraging the children to active participation in play. Many false starts took place until the child's own interests were identified. Those themes

that were important and familiar to the children evoked the greatest intensity and absorption. The child's own interests were critical factors in the depth and intensity of play. These interests ranged from the motor activities involved e.g. driving a car, to emotional concerns e.g. going to the doctor, moving to a new school.

With the exception of the subjects who had the most advanced language development, all the blind and sighted subjects enjoyed the representation of motor action in their play. This was especially noticed in the blind subjects who had additional physical disabilities. Donny, who combines a severe physical handicap with blindness, demonstrated this enjoyment consistently. When he "pretended" to be driving a car, he moved his whole body. Libby, when she rocked her baby, also moved her whole body, enjoying the physical action of movement.

Those children who were operating at Stage IV in their language development (with the exception of Donny) did not seem to require physical motion as an accompaniment to their play. They were more involved in the dialogue aspects of symbolic play and paid more attention to role characterization, problem solving and the expression of feeling.

Dialogue Behavior and Role Play

The child's capacity to assume a role requires that he 1. is aware of the role, 2. is interested in its enactment, and 3. is familiar with the role.

The kinds of roles assumed by children in play involve:

1. functional roles, defined by the action theme of the play. If there is a car, there needs to be a driver.
2. speaking for a doll or a stuffed toy animal.
3. character roles, which are defined by occupation e.g. doctor, mommy, daddy, baby. These roles tend to be associated with appropriate actions and differ from functional roles in that they can be adopted without taking part in any action. (Garvey, 1977)

The three types of role play were demonstrated by the subjects. Functional roles were predominant among those subjects with Stage III language development or less. The subjects with the most advanced language were most able to assume character roles defined by dialogue rather than motor action. All of the verbal subjects, however, were able to respond to the character roles assumed by the teachers. They were not disturbed or confused to hear the teacher "pretending" to be a doll or a toy animal. There was no confusion expressed as the teacher slipped in and out of a play role. They also understood that when their teachers changed their normal tone of voice and expression, they were characterizing a play role. Some of the children began to imitate teacher expression and change their normal way of talking.

Even when the children did assume a character role, they had difficulty with a role that was not themselves. Spoken dialogue took the form of conversational responses to the role played by the teachers.

Dorene, pretending to have a picnic in the park, could make believe with realism and portray a role with vivid expression of voice, despite limited vocabulary and fluency.

Teacher: Are you dressed warmly enough?

Dorene: No, cold.

Teacher: Well, here is your sweater. Are you warm enough now?

Dorene: No, coat?

Teacher: Okay. You get it.

Dorene: Oh, heavy.

Teacher: Is it too heavy?

Dorene: Too heavy.

Nina interacted with three Barbie dolls as if they were able to talk to her. She changed her tone of voice when she played at being their mother or teacher. Nina addressed each of the dolls by name, when she was speaking to them, she looked at them when they were "speaking" imitating the turn-taking that is involved in conversation.

Nina: Listen to me. I am talking to you. Eat it, the food on the plate. Drink a cup through the mouth.

At the beginning of the project, Nina only told the dolls "You are pretty." "Nice yellow hair", "Pretty dress". As the play sessions developed, Nina became more actively involved in the characterization of her own and the roles, that were assigned to the dolls. They were either her children or her pupils. She became facile in simulataneously talking to her dolls and interpreting their behavior to her teacher.

Another partially sighted subject was hesitant about talking for the dolls. She would tell her teacher what to say. It was as if some of the children had to learn that they were in control of the play characters before they could assume a play role. This child too, gradually began to enjoy taking a play role and entering a dialogue with the teacher.

As the project progressed, the play sessions became longer. The children took more active roles and helped to sustain the play theme. More questions began to appear in dialogue as the children developed true characterization of roles.

Nina: (talking with her dolls) Are you having a nice time? Yeah! By listening you can talk. My friends listen to me and they talk to me.

Ellie: (working with a puppet) Oh, I'm going to get butterflies in my stomach.
Ellie: (answering her puppet and conducting a dialogue) How are you going to eat if you have butterflies in your stomach?
Ellie: Well, you would have to help me get them out. (And together they got the butterflies out of her stomach.)

Although none of the subjects progressed from one level of language development to another, all of the subjects used more language in play sessions. Language became instrumental in defining and extending the action of the play. Language expression also became freer and more creative. Extraneous and unrelated verbal expressions diminished and little perseveration

was noted during the play sessions.

Changes were also noted in the use of toy props. Toy props which were realistic, were needed before the children could pretend many actions. This was most true of the children whose language development was between Stage I and Stage III. Libby enjoyed bathing and dressing a doll, and while she could pretend to have a bathtub filled with water, she needed the doll to carry through the play theme.

Materials such as tea sets, grocery items, dolls and puppets lent themselves to more imaginary use than did stuffed animals, trucks, baby strollers. The non-verbal children responded most to those toys that provided sounds and textures that were pleasurable to the senses. Few differences were noted between blind and sighted subjects. Although it was easier for the sighted children to appreciate or recognize an object, once object recognition was accomplished, the differences diminished. Realism and familiarity of the toy props were important to all subjects.

As the play sessions developed, fewer toy props were needed to keep the play themes going. More objects and situations could be imagined. However the dolls who were the characters in the play needed at all times to be present.

The Role of the Teacher

Teacher-models played a critical and sensitive role in facilitating play behaviors. Too much activity on the part of the teacher placed the child in the role of an audience and too little failed to define and elicit active participation. Teachers found it necessary to constantly shift their roles to avoid stereotypic or routine responses from the children. By interjecting problems into the play, the teachers were able to extend imagination. This was far more affective than stating the problem at the beginning of play. For example, when a teacher said, "Oh, oh, the pot is burning! What should we do?", she got a more active response than stating "Let's pretend the pot is burning".

The teachers learned what sort of behavior on their part is truly helpful. Participation was encouraged by responding to the child's role and following the child's interest. This could be seen clearly in the videotapes that were made of the play sessions. It was important that the teacher understand which toy or activity was most involving for the child. It was only after repeated experience that the importance of motor actions to enhance the meaning of the play became obvious. Sometimes, the teacher just did not understand what the child was saying. It was too easy to miscue until the teachers became familiar with the children.

Teacher enjoyment of the child's play was an important factor in the child's enjoyment. These children are very dependent on adult reactions as confirmations of the "rightness" of their actions.

CONCLUSION

Both play and language are social behavior. The children who most enjoyed social interaction with the teachers became the most effective and imaginative players. Level of language development was neither a determinant of the richness of play dialogue nor the intensity of the childrens' participation.

The present study suggests that symbolic play has an important function in the development of communicative competence. Communication skills, imagination, social awareness and a sense of shared pleasure can be derived from play. Language in its conceptual (symbolic) and communicative (dialogue) functions is enriched and expanded in the course of symbolic play. The simul taneous development of language and imagination is seen in the play of young children. Special education for severely disabled children can profitably take the form of increasing and developing play skills in severely disabled children, who do not demonstrate spontaneous play.

During the course of the project, we learned that how play is modeled is as important as the modeling itself. Teaching play is not achievable by direct instruction. It is more a matter of showing, encouraging and eliciting play behavior. In teaching play it is important that teachers

1. Develop and follow the child's interests.
2. Use realistic toy props.
3. Model play without the use of props.
4. Introduce new props or new elements one at a time.
5. Have a separate space for play.

6. Children should not be corrected while playing. The teacher should respond to the child and integrate what the child seems to want to do into the play theme. For example, if the child is simply holding the toy props, the teacher can describe the action as if it were part of the play. The teacher must accept every effort of the child and not impose "sta ndards."
7. The enthusiasm and enjoyment of the adult in the play situation is a strong element in the encouragement and development of play.
8. Play themes that are familiar to the child are the most productive.
9. Play cannot be imposed by the adult, it can only be elicited, encouraged, nourished and expanded.

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Thematic Play Progress Chart

Child's Name ..... Date.....
Theme of Play .....
Toy Props used .....

1. Passive Participation
   - spectator of adult play behavior .....
   - laughs and smiles , makes effort to imitate .....

2. Active Participation with simple imitation
   - motor imitation handling toy .....
   - verbal imitation of adult speech .....

3. Child actively engages in thematic play
   - adds to adult suggestion with own ideas .....
   - verbal expression.....
   - engages in dialogue with adult around play theme .....

4. Child invents theme (any addition of idea)
   - dramatizes ideas with toy props .....
   - dramatizes ideas with words .....
   - contributes to adult theme .....
   - parallel theme developed .....

5. Child initiates play
   - uses toy props .....
   - does not need toy props .....
   - uses pretend props .....

6. Child directs play
   - gives verbal directions .....
   - uses language in interaction with toys .....
   - dramatizes role verbally .....

7. Theme
   - structured by adult verbally .....
   - structured by child verbally .....
   - structured by toy props used .....

8. Theme involves problem solving
   - verbal solution .....
   - dramatizes solution .....
   - action ..... action with puppet .....
   - evasion .....

9. Dialogue becomes main theme of play .....