



## Structured Play Groups (SPG) ---EBP Brief Packet---

### Components of the EBP Brief Packet...

This evidence-based practice overview on Structured Play Groups includes the following components:


1. **Overview:** A quick summary of salient features of the practice, including what it is, who it can be used with, what skills it has been used with, and settings for instruction.
2. **Evidence-base:** The *SPG Evidence-base* details the NPDC criteria for inclusion as an evidence-based practice and the specific studies that meet the criteria for this practice.
3. **Step-by-Step Guide:** Use the *SPG Step-by-Step Practice Guide* as an outline for how to plan for, use, and monitor SPG. Each step includes a brief description as a helpful reminder while learning the process.
4. **Implementation Checklist:** Use the *SPG Implementation Checklist* to determine if the practice is being implemented as intended.
5. **Data Collection Sheets:** Use the data collection sheets as a method to collect and analyze data to determine if progress is being made for a learner with ASD.
6. **Tip Sheet for Professionals:** Use the *SPG Tip Sheet for Professionals* as a supplemental resource to help provide basic information about the practice to professionals working with the learner with ASD.
7. **Parent Guide:** Use the *SPG Parent Guide* to help parents or family members understand basic information about the practice being used with their child.
8. **Additional Resources:** Use the *Additional Resources* to learn more about the practice.
9. **CEC Standards:** A list of *CEC Standards* that apply specifically to SPG.
10. **Module References:** A list of numerical *References* utilized for the SPG module.

#### Suggested citation:

Sam, A., Kucharczyk, S., Waters, V., & AFIRM Team. (2018). *Structured Play Groups*. Chapel Hill, NC: National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorders, FPG Child Development Center, University of North Carolina. Retrieved from <http://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/structured-play-groups>

This overview  
brief will  
support your  
use of the  
evidence-  
based  
practice:  
Structured  
Play Groups.

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information visit:  
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## Structured Play Groups (SPG)

### What Is SPG?

Structured play groups (SPG) are interventions used to teach a broad range of skills and behaviors.

SPG groups are characterized by:

- a small predetermined group of children including children who are typically developing,
- who meet consistently across time to engage in structured routines and defined play activities,
- within a defined space, and
- are facilitated by adults who through clear roles use evidence-based practices (EBPs), such as prompting and reinforcement, to support the target child's use of skills and behavior during the playtime.

### Evidence-base

Structured play groups meets the evidence-based practice criteria set by NPDC with 2 single case design studies and 2 group design studies. The practice has been effective with learners in elementary school (6-11). Evidence-based practices (EBP) and studies included in the [2014 EBP report](#) detailed how EBP can be used effectively to address: social, communication, behavior, school-readiness, play, and academic outcomes.

### How Is SPG Being Used?

SPG can be used by a variety of professionals, including teachers, special educators, therapists, and paraprofessionals, in educational and community-based environments. Since SPGs require resources not easily acquired in a home, implementation in the home might be difficult.

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## ---Evidence-base for Structured Play Groups---

The National Professional Development Center on ASD has adopted the following criteria to determine if a practice is evidence-based. The EBP Report provides more information about the review process (Wong et al., 2014).

Efficacy must be established through high quality, peer-reviewed research in scientific journals using:

- randomized or quasi-experimental design studies (two high quality experimental or quasi-experimental group design studies),
- single-subject design studies (three different investigators or research groups must have conducted five high quality single subject design studies), or
- combination of evidence [one high quality randomized or quasi-experimental group design study and three high quality single subject design studies conducted by at least three different investigators or research groups (across the group and single subject design studies)].

### --OVERVIEW--

Structured play groups (SPG) are interventions used to teach a broad range of skills and behaviors. Structured play group meets the evidence-based practice criteria with 2 single case design studies and 2 group design studies. The practice has been effective with elementary school learners (6-11 years). Studies included in the 2014 EBP report detailed how structured play groups can be used effectively to address: social, communication, behavior, school readiness, play, and academic outcomes.

In the table below, the outcomes identified by the evidence base are shown by age of participants.

Early Intervention (0-2)	Preschool (3-5)	Elementary (6-11)	Middle (12-14)	High (15-22)
No studies	No studies	Social	No studies	No studies
		Communication		
		Behavior		
		School readiness		
		Play		
		Academic		



## Structured Play Groups (SPG)

### Early intervention (0-2 years)

No studies

### Preschool (3-5 years)

No studies

### Elementary (6-11 years)

Legoff, D. B., & Sherman, M. (2006). Long-term outcome of social skills intervention based on interactive LEGO® play. *Autism, 10*(4), 317-329. doi: 10.1177/1362361306064403

Loftin, R. L., Odom, S. L., & Lantz, J. F. (2008). Social interaction and repetitive motor behaviors. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 38*(6), 1124-1135. doi: 10.1007/s10803-007-0499-5

Owens, G., Granader, Y., Humphrey, A., & Baron-Cohen, S. (2008). LEGO® therapy and the social use of language programme: An evaluation of two social skills interventions for children with high functioning autism and Asperger syndrome. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 38*(10), 1944-1957. doi: 10.1007/s10803-008-0590-6

Wolfberg, P. J., & Schuler, A. L. (1993). Integrated play groups: A model for promoting the social and cognitive dimensions of play in children with autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 23*(3), 467-489. doi: 10.1007/BF01046051

### Middle (12-14 years)

No studies

### High (15-22 years)

No studies



## Structured Play Groups (SPG) ---Step-by-Step Guide---

### BEFORE YOU START...

Each of the following points is important to address so that you can be sure the selected EBP is likely to address the learning needs of your student.

Have you found out more information about. . . ?

- Establishing a goal or outcome that clearly states when the behavior will occur, what the target skill is, and how the team will know when the skill is mastered...
- Identifying additional evidence-based practices...

If the answer to any of these is “no,” review the process of how to select an EBP.

This practice guide outlines how to plan for, use, and monitor the practice of **Structured Play Groups**.

Keep in mind that **SPG** can be used to increase target skills/behaviors through adult supported play with typically developing peers.

# Now you are ready to start...

## Step 1: Planning

The planning step explains initial steps and considerations involved to prepare for SPG and develop a lesson plan for a learner with ASD.

### 1.1 Select target skills/behaviors to address

When identifying what skills, behaviors could be worked on through structured play groups, consider skills that:

- the child would have multiple opportunities practicing in group setting
- require social interaction/communication
- lend themselves to the activities most likely to be done in the play group

### 1.2 Select the setting

SPGs may be conducted in a variety of settings. Remember, consistency is important. Be sure the selected space can be used for each session and easily prepared for the group.

*Note:* For more information about visual supports, see the Visual Supports AFIRM Module.

### 1.3 Select the length, frequency, and duration

Depending on the ages and development of the children, a SPG should last for 30 to 60 minutes. Structured play groups typically meet 2 times per week for a minimum of 3 months and up to 1 year.

### 1.4 Select peers to participate

The ratio of learners with ASD to typical peers or siblings ranges from:

- 1 learner with ASD to 2 peers who are developing typically
- learners with ASD to 3 peers who are developing typically



*Use the SPG Peer Selection Checklist to identify and select peers.*

### 1.5 Determine activities and materials

Select play theme(s), activities, and materials for the SPG appropriate to children's ages, interests, development, and skills being addressed.

*Note:* For more information on selecting high interest materials, see the Reinforcement module.



*Use the SPG Learner's Interest Data Collection to observe and identify the learner's interests.*

Continue →

## Step 1: Planning (continued)

### 1.6 Identify and select roles

Using task analysis, identify all the possible tasks relevant to your selected activity. Next, develop roles for each of these tasks. Develop both novice or beginner roles and expert roles so that each child/student has an opportunity to feel successful and challenged.

*Note:* For more information about task analysis, see the Task Analysis AFIRM Module.

### 1.7 Establish a routine and rules

Develop a predictable and structured routine for the SPG that includes both an opening and closing sequence.

### 1.8 Identify opportunities to embed learner's outcomes

Once a routine and plan for the group is created, identify when during the SPG there will be opportunities to provide focus on the target learner's outcomes.

 *Use the SPG Lesson Plan to plan for and guide the SPG activity.*

### 1.9 Determine specific supports for individual group member

All children benefit from adult support when they are struggling or learning something new. Remember, there should always be at least one facilitating adult. More adults may be needed if the one facilitator is not able to observe the whole of the group's dynamic and address the individual learning needs of the child or children with ASD.

*Note:* For more information, see the Prompting, Visual Supports, and Reinforcement modules.

## Step 2: Using

This section describes the process of implementing SPG.

### 2.1 Provide orientation to learners

At the appropriate developmental level, give information about the following to all learners of the play group:

- What the purpose of the group is
- What is expected of the group
- What ways the group can help everyone play

### 2.2 Implement routines and activities

Use the routine developed in the planning phase to open the structured play group. If there are changes in the learners attending or the play schemes for the SPG, alert the members of the SPG of those changes using a predictable script.

## Step 2: Using (continued)

### 2.3 Transition to the play activity

Signal the learners when it is time to transition to the play areas. Use predictable verbal language and visuals. Follow the transition sequence to begin the structured play group.

### 2.4 Facilitate the group's play as needed

Guidance and support is provided during the play scheme for both novice and expert members of the play group.

Strategies and techniques include:

- Guiding participation
- Nurturing play interactions
- Scaffolding play
- Guiding social communication

### 2.5 Use additional EBPs to support learning and goal acquisition

Develop understanding and expertise in implementing the following foundational evidence based practices for young learners.

- Prompting
- Visual Supports
- Reinforcement

### 2.6 Fade adult support for individual learners

Gradually shift the adult's support of the learners with ASD within the play scheme.

Strategies include:

- developing a least to most prompting hierarchy
- moving the adult (physically) further away from the play routine and reentering only as necessary;
- developing individualized visual supports to assist the learner to independently play
- using an intermittent reinforcement schedule

Continue →



## Step 3: Monitoring

The following process describes how the use of SPG can be monitored and how to adjust your plan based on the data.

### 3.1 Collect and analyze data

Plan to collect data on the learner's performance of the target skill throughout implementation.



*Use the SPG Event Sampling Form to monitor the frequency of target skills/behaviors.*



*Use the SPG Duration Data Form to monitor the length of target skills/behaviors.*

### 3.2 Determine next steps based on learner progress

If the learner with ASD is showing progress with SPG based upon collected data, then continue to use this practice with the learner. Gradually new target skills and behaviors can be introduced to the learner with ASD.

If the learner with ASD is not showing progress with SPG, ask yourself the following questions:

- Is the target behavior/skill well defined?
- Is the target behavior/skill measurable and observable?
- Does the learner have sufficient opportunities to practice the skill during the play group?
- Is prompting or reinforcement used to encourage the learner to use the behavior/skill?
- Has adult faded support systematically?
- Are the routines and activities of the SPG implemented consistently?
- Was structured play groups used with fidelity? (Use the SPG Implementation Checklist to determine fidelity.)
- Was the structured play group implemented for the recommended minimum of three months for at least two times a week?
- Did the facilitator support the group's play as needed?

If these issues have been addressed and the learner with ASD continues not to show progress, consider selecting a different evidence-based practice to use with the learner.

# Structured Play Groups (SPG) ---Implementation Checklist---

*Before you start:*

*Have you...*

- Identified the behavior?
- Collected baseline data through direct observation?
- Established a goal or outcome that clearly states **when** the behavior will occur, **what** the target skill is, and **how** the team will know when the skill is mastered.

*If the answer to any of these is "no", refer to the "Selecting EBPs" section on the website.*

	Observation	1	2	3	4
	Date				
	Observer's Initials				
<b>Step 1: Planning</b>					
1.1	Select target skills/behaviors to address				
1.2	Select the setting				
1.3	Select the length, frequency, and duration				
1.4	Select peers to participate				
1.5	Determine activities and materials				
1.6	Identify and select roles				
1.7	Establish a routine and rules				
1.8	Identify opportunities to embed learner's outcomes				
1.9	Determine specific supports for individual group members				
<b>Step 2: Using</b>					
2.1	Provide orientation to learners				
2.2	Implement routines and activities				
2.3	Transition to the play activity				
2.4	Facilitate the group's play as needed				
2.5	Use additional EBPs to support learning and goal acquisition				
2.6	Fade adult support for individual learners				
<b>Step 3: Monitoring</b>					
3.1	Collect data on target skill/behavior				
3.2	Determine next steps				



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---SPG Learner's Interest Data Collection---

Learner's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date/Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Observer(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Observe the target learners' play interests. Record the amount of time the learner spends with each item or activity. Observations should take place over multiple days. Those objects or activities in which the learner spends the most time interacting with are of the highest preference.

Item/Activity of Interest	Duration of Interaction (in minutes)					Total Duration
	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	

Top three highest preferred interests: \_\_\_\_\_

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---SPG Lesson Plan---


Learner's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date/Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Facilitator(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Target Behavior/Skill: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

SPG Play Scheme: _____ Setting of Activity: _____	Frequency: _____ times a week Length: _____ minutes Duration: _____ months
Roles:	Materials needed:
Opening sequence: <input type="checkbox"/> Greeting:  <input type="checkbox"/> Transition to the group space:  <input type="checkbox"/> Review group members <input type="checkbox"/> Review schedule/play scheme <input type="checkbox"/> Prepare learners for the play scheme <input type="checkbox"/> Discuss learner roles <input type="checkbox"/> Review rules <input type="checkbox"/> Other/Changes in play scheme:	Rules:
Closing sequence: <input type="checkbox"/> Clean up:  <input type="checkbox"/> Review:  <input type="checkbox"/> Goodbye:	



## Structured Play Groups (SPG)

Goals for all learners:

Activity Scheme	Learner with ASD:	Peer:	Peer:	All Learners
Opening Sequence				
Play Activity				
Closing Sequence				

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### ---SPG Peer Selection Checklist---

Learner's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date/Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Observer(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Target Behavior(s): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Peer Characteristics	Possible Peers						
<i>Exhibits good social skills</i>							
<i>Has higher communication and language skills that the learner with ASD</i>							
<i>Has age-appropriate play skills</i>							
<i>Has positive social interactions with learner with ASD</i>							
<i>Is generally compliant with suggestions from adults</i>							
<i>Attends to an interesting task or activity for age-appropriate amount of time: _____</i>							
<i>Attends school on a regular basis</i>							
<i>Has similar schedule or academic groups as the learner with ASD</i>							
<i>Expresses a willingness to participate</i>							
<i>Has parent/teacher permission to participate</i>							

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# Structured Play Groups (SPG) ---Professional's Guide---

## Structured Play Groups

### Structured Play Groups...

- is an evidence-based practice for elementary school learners with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) from 6-11 years old that can be implemented in multiple settings.
- is conducted within a group of two to three typically developing peers and provides adult support in which social, communication, and play skills are targeted for improvement.

### Why Use?

- SPG has been found to be effective in improving the social skills, language diversity, and object play of learners with ASD.
- SPG incorporates a variety of instructional strategies, such as modeling, prompting, reinforcement, role-play, and visual supports.

### Outcomes

- The evidence-base for SPG supports the use of this practice to address the outcomes below:



## TIPS:

- Select the setting, length, frequency, and duration of the SPG.
- Select 2-3 typically developing, and willing, peers to participate in the SPG with the learner with ASD.
- Outline the routine, rules, roles, and materials of the structured play group sessions.
- Identify individual supports and outcomes for all members of the SPG.

Early Intervention (0-2)	Preschool (3-5)	Elementary (6-11)	Middle (12-14)	High (15-22)
No studies	No studies	Social	No studies	No studies
		Communication		
		Behavior		
		School Readiness		
		Play		
		Academic		



## Structured Play Groups

This tip sheet was designed as a supplemental resource to help provide basic information about the practice.

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# Structured Play Groups (SPG) ---Professional's Guide---

## STEPS FOR IMPLEMENTING

### 1. Plan

- Select target skills/behaviors to address
- Select the setting
- Select the length, frequency, and duration
- Select peers to participate
- Determine activities and materials
- Identify and select roles
- Establish a routine and rules
- Identify opportunities to embed learner's outcomes
- Determine specific supports for individual group member

### 2. Use

- Provide orientation to learners
- Implement routines and activities
- Transition to the play activity
- Facilitate the group's play as needed
- Use additional EBPs to support learning and goal acquisition
- Fade adult support for individual learners

### 3. Monitor

- Collect data on target skill/behavior
- Determine next steps

## Structured Play Groups (SPG) ---Parent's Guide---



This parent introduction to **Structured Play Group** was designed as a supplemental resource to help answer basic questions about this practice.

To find out more about how **SPG** is used with your child, speak with:

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This introduction provides basic information about Structured Play Groups.

### What is a Structured Play Group?

- Structured play groups is an evidence-based practice for elementary school learners with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) from 6 to 11 years old.
- With SPG, teachers and practitioners focus on target skills/behaviors for a learner with ASD through guided play with typically developing peers.

### Why use SPG with my child?

- Structured play groups provides learners with ASD a consistent play routine that can increase social skills and play skills.
- Research studies have shown that SPG can be used to address a variety of goals, including social, communication, behavior, school-readiness, play, and academic outcomes.

### What activities can I do at home?

- Since SPGs require resources not easily acquired in a home, implementation in the home might be difficult.
- Provide opportunities for your child to have structured play dates, such as a sports team or church group, with typically developing peers.



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these  
resources to  
support your  
use of  
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## ---Additional Resources---

### Articles:

- Banerjee, M., & Ray, S. G. (2013). Development of play therapy module for children with autism. *Journal of the Indian Academy of Applied Psychology, 39*(2), 245.
- Barton, E. E., & Pavilanis, R. (2012). Teaching pretend play to young children with autism. *Young Exceptional Children, 15*(1), 5-17. 10.1177/1096250611424106
- Brodhead, M. T., Higbee, T. S., Pollard, J. S., Akers, J. S., & Gerencser, K. R. (2014). The use of linked activity schedules to teach children with autism to play hide-and-seek: Linked activity schedules. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 47*(3), 645-650. 10.1002/jaba.145
- Dykstra, J. R., Boyd, B. A., Watson, L. R., Crais, E. R., & Baranek, G. T. (2012). The impact of the Advancing Social-Communication and Play (ASAP) intervention on preschoolers with autism spectrum disorder. *Autism, 16*(1), 27-44. 10.1177/1362361311408933
- Goods, K. S., Ishijima, E., Chang, Y., & Kasari, C. (2013). Preschool based JASPER intervention in minimally verbal children with autism: Pilot RCT. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 43*(5), 1050-1056. 10.1007/s10803-012-1644-3
- Groskreutz, M. P., Peters, A., Groskreutz, N. C., & Higbee, T. S. (2015). Increasing play-based commenting in children with autism spectrum disorder using a novel script-frame procedure. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 48*(2), 442-447. 10.1002/jaba.194
- Hampshire, P. K., & Hourcade, J. J. (2014). Teaching play skills to children with autism using visually structured tasks. *TEACHING Exceptional Children, 46*(3), 26-31. 10.1177/004005991404600303
- Henning, B., Cordier, R., Wilkes-Gillan, S., & Falkmer, T., (2016). A pilot play-based intervention to improve the social play interactions of children with autism spectrum disorder and their typically developing playmates. *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal, 63*(4), 223-232. 10.1111/1440-1630.12285
- Hu, X., Zheng, Q., & Lee, G. T. (2018). Using peer-mediated LEGO® play intervention to improve social interactions for Chinese children with autism in an inclusive setting. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 1-14*. 10.1007/s10803-018-3502-4
- Miltenberger, C. A., & Charlop, M. H. (2014;2013;). Increasing the athletic group play of children with autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 44*(1), 41-54. 10.1007/s10803-013-1850-7
- Morrier, M. J., & Sonja M T Ziegler. (2018). I wanna play too: Factors related to changes in social behavior for children with and without autism spectrum disorder after implementation of a structured outdoor play curriculum. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 1-12*. 10.1007/s10803-018-3523-z

## Articles (continued):

- Nelson, C., Paul, K., Johnston, S., & Kidder, J. (2017). Use of a creative dance intervention package to increase social engagement and play complexity of young children with autism spectrum disorder. *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities, 52*(2), 170-185.
- Stagnitti, K., & Pfeifer, L. I. (2017). Methodological considerations for a directive play therapy approach for children with autism and related disorders. *International Journal of Play Therapy, 26*(3), 160-171. 10.1037/pla0000049
- Wolfberg, P., Bottema-Beutel, K., & DeWitt, M. (2012). Including children with autism in social and imaginary play with typical peers: Integrated play groups model. *American Journal of Play, 5*(1), 55.

## Books:

- Gallo-Lopez, L., & Rubin, L. C. (2012). *Play-based interventions for children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorders*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Grant, R. J. (2017). *Play-based interventions for autism spectrum disorder and other developmental disabilities*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Solomon, R. (2016). *Autism: The potential within: The PLAY project approach to helping young children with autism*. Morrisville, NC: Lulu Publishing Services.
- Wolfberg, P. J. (2003). *Peer Play and the autism spectrum: The art of guiding children's socialization and imagination: Integrated play groups field manual*. Kansas, Shawnee Mission: Autism Asperger Publishing Company.

## Websites:

- Autism NI: Northern Ireland's Autism Charity. (n.d.). *Play: Learning how to play*. Retrieved 3/05/2018, from <http://www.autismni.org/play.html>
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## Structured Play Groups CEC Standards

The CEC Standards that apply to all 27 evidence-based practices can be found on our website at: <http://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/learn-afirm>

Below are CEC Standards that apply specifically to Structured Play Groups (SPG) module.

Standard	Description
<b>Initial Preparation Standard 2: Learning Environments</b>	
ISCI 2 S4	Design learning environments that encourage active participation in individual and group activities
ISCI 2 S7	Establish and maintain rapport with individuals with and without exceptionalities
DDA2.S3	Use specialized instruction to enhance social participation across environments
<b>Initial Preparation Standard 5: Instructional Planning &amp; Strategies</b>	
DDA5.K1	Specialized curriculum designed to meet the needs of individuals with developmental disabilities/autism spectrum disorders
DDA5 S3	Use instructional strategies that fall on a continuum of child-directed to adult-directed in natural and structured context
ISCI 5 S4	Use task analysis
ISCI 5 S9	Prepare and organize materials to implement daily lesson plans

Standard	Description
<b>Advanced Preparation Standard 3: Programs, Services, and Outcomes</b>	
SEDAS3.S8	Provide varied instruction and opportunity to learn play and leisure skills

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## ---Module References---

1. Owens, G., Granader, Y., Humphrey, A., & Baron-Cohen, S. (2008). LEGO® therapy and the social use of language programme: An evaluation of two social skills interventions for children with high functioning autism and Asperger syndrome. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 38(10), 1944-1957. doi: 10.1007/s10803-008-0590-6
2. Wolfberg, P. J., & Schuler, A. L. (1993). Integrated play groups: A model for promoting the social and cognitive dimensions of play in children with autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 23(3), 467-489. doi: 10.1007/BF01046051
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5. Wong, C., Odom, S. L., Hume, K. Cox, A. W., Fettig, A., Kucharczyk, S., Schultz, T. R. (2014). Evidence-based practices for children, youth, and young adults with autism spectrum disorder. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, Autism Evidence-Based Practice Review Group.  
<http://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/sites/autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/files/imce/documents/2014-EBP-Report.pdf>