

## ASSIST PARENTS TO FACILITATE SOCIAL SKILLS IN YOUNG CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES THROUGH PLAY

**Yanhui Pang**

*Tennessee Technological University*

*This article introduces the negative effects of disabilities on young children's play skill development, which also adversely affects their social interaction with peers and their independence. Strategies recommended by studies in addressing young children's social skill improvement through play activity are introduced. Applicable and practical tips are summarized and provided for parents to use and help their young children improve social skills in natural environment together with real examples.*

### Vignette

*David, a two and half year old boy, has a vision impairment and has worn glasses since age 2. He is used to wearing glasses but his peers. They like to grab his glasses away, which leaves him confused where he is or where he should go to get his glasses. Except to make fun of him, the other children seldom play with him because he is too slow. David, himself, prefers to play alone both indoors and outdoors. Often, he plays in the sandbox during outdoor time. Indoors, he likes to build blocks by himself. If others come to join him, he will take the blocks away from a peer and fight with them.*

### What Does Research Say

Young children spend most of their time playing. Play skills open the first and a very important window through which young children interact with the outside world. Jordan and Lifter (2005) found that children's social and play behaviors are closely related. If children have difficulty with typical play skills, their development of relationships with peers, teachers or other community members will be impeded. According to Owen (1998) impairments in physical, cognitive, communication, sensory, emotion and behavior, and medical disabilities as well as cultural and social class issues all hinder children's typical play skills establishment, which are directly connected with children's social skills development. For example, physical impairments hinder children ability to move to materials or areas available for play, which limits the children's play activity with their typically developing peers. Children with cognitive impairment need more time to learn to imitate and learn special play skills than typically developing children, thus they usually find it difficult to engage in complex socio-dramatic play.

Play is considered the most effective means to improve social interaction with the outside world for children with disabilities (Jordan & Lifter, 2005). Through peer imitation, peer modeling, and peer meditation, children with disabilities can master some basic play skills and improve play behaviors. Garfinkle & Schwartz (2002) did a study on the effects of peer-imitation on child's play skills using a previously examined protocol such as teaching typically developing children to imitate the target child and providing effective and efficient prompts to the target child. They also measure the effectiveness of the intervention in different settings, e.g., the peer imitation and social interaction in training and generalized session. Results show that although participants differed in their behaviors, all target children could imitate the peers' behaviors to some extent and they can imitate without intervention for a period of time.

Peer-mediated intervention, such as taking turns and cooperating, also can improve children's play skills and social interaction (Kohler & Strain, 1999). Robertson, Green, Alper, Schloss, and Kohler (2003) studied how effective the peer-mediation intervention on children's behaviors in routine activities in inclusive settings. Children participating in Robertson et al.'s study are those with developmental delays such as inability to attend to routine activities and difficulty developing friendship, and their typically developing peers. Three skills were targeted at the participating children including the engaged and on-task behaviors and interactive play during free play, and appropriate participation in circle and story time activities. Results indicated that the children's with disabilities targeted behaviors were successfully improved. Several activities were recommended during the peer-mediated intervention such as the fingerplay and song.

The strategies/interventions used to improve children's social skills through play also include the peer training, promotion of friendship and increasing the early social-communicative skills of very young children. Kamps, Royer, Dugan, Kravits, Lopez, Garcia, Carnazzo, Morrison, and Kane (2002) initiated a study to facilitate social interaction for young children with autism and their peers through peer training. Two studies are made in evaluating whether the peer training can initiate peer interaction. Through the two studies, the peer training formats that have included the use of modeling, prompting, and reinforcement strategies within the context of activities, and those that included multiple peers over time, have shown notable changes in interaction skills for students with autism. These acquired skills can be generalized when the target children were put in situations with novel peers, though the social interaction is not as frequently as with the familiar peers.

Other strategies were also recommended to improve children's with disabilities social skills. Paraprofessional training is such a strategy, introduced by Causton-Theoharis and Malmgren (2005). The paraprofessional training that were recommended in the study consists of enhancing paraprofessionals' perspective, establishing the importance of peer interaction, clarifying the paraprofessional's role in facilitating interactions, and increasing the paraprofessional's knowledge base of strategies for facilitating interactions. After the training, it is known that most paraprofessionals improved their facilitative behaviors and a relatively small change in these paraprofessional behaviors yielded a substantial increase in student interaction.

However, if the paraprofessionals' intervention in children with disabilities is inappropriate, it will lead to unexpected outcomes. This is from another study made by Causton-Theoharis and Malmgren (2005) on strategies to help paraprofessionals promote peer interaction. The inappropriate paraprofessional intervention includes, for example, the unnecessary close paraprofessional proximity, overprotection, and paraprofessionals' dominating the conversation. The close proximity may result in children's with disability overdependence on adults and a reduction in the number of peer interactions. The paraprofessional's overprotection usually rebuffs the student helper. The children's with disabilities social interaction with peers were impaired as paraprofessionals dominate the conversation or replace the child to answer the peers' questions. Causton- Theoharis and Malmgren recommended that paraprofessionals should ensure student with disabilities is in rich social environment, that is, these students should participate in as much school activities together with peers as possible. Paraprofessionals should help the students with disabilities find similarities with peers. In this way, these students can find similar interests or have more conversations with peers. On the other hand, paraprofessionals can teach peers strategies and assist them practice interaction skills with students with disabilities.

Computer use is another strategy that establishes social interaction between children with disabilities and the typically developing peers. Hobbs, Bruch, Sanko, and Astolfi (2001) initiated a study to validate this assumption. Computers were instructed in structured and free

play time to targeted children, both with and without disabilities ranging in age from 3.5 to 12 years old. Results showed that the percentage of inclusive computer play time in structured time exceeded 90%, and that in free play time ranges from 46% to 67%. Children are more willing to choose inclusive computer play in the free play time at the end of Hobbs et. al's study.

As previously stated, peer imitation, peer-mediated intervention, peer training, paraprofessional training, and inclusive computer activity can increase children's with disabilities social interaction with typically developing children by improving play and social interaction skills. It is believed that there is a strong relationship between social interactions and play skills. Some studies focus on this topic. For example, Jordan & Lifter's (2005) study conducted a study on the interaction of social and play behaviors in preschoolers with and without pervasive developmental disorder (PDD). Results indicated that children's social behaviors are closely related to play behaviors. An inverse relationship was found between social complexity and play complexity, that is, the more complex the play activity is, the fewer social interaction between the children with disabilities and their peers. It is true to all children regardless whether they have PDD or not, because "both social behavior and play behavior use cognitive resources, and when these behaviors occur at the same time, they compete for these cognitive resources." (p. 46) Therefore, in order to improve social behaviors/interaction between children with and without disabilities, those play activities that children have already mastered are recommended rather than those new games or those that children are still in the process of learning.

#### Parents Can Help Build Social Interaction

The above studies recommend some effective strategies that can be used to facilitate social skills in children with disabilities. Parents can use these strategies to help their children's with disabilities build social interaction with peers, although these strategies did not mention the parents' function in the process of social skill promotion, because parents spend most of time with their young children, parents know the child best, and different families have different culture backgrounds which may impact the child's play behaviors. The following are some tips summarized from the above strategies that can be used by parents in helping their young children with disabilities to improve their social interaction with the outside world and maximize their independence. Some real examples (real names are avoided) are provided to illustrate the tips that are applicable in the natural environment.

##### *Create More Play Opportunities*

Parents can help create more opportunities for their young children with disabilities to play with the typically developing peers. For example, parents can create more opportunities for their children to attend community activities rather than keep their children at home all the time. Even for some children with challenging behaviors, they can be brought to community activity, field trip with assistance and supervision, and other recreation activities like sports, museum, and zoo.

Jake, a seven-year-old boy with autism, seldom has had opportunities to attend community or church activities since age five. He is always kept at home with a babysitter. The parents said they tried to bring Jake and his sister out with them before but every time Jake freaks out everybody. He was not cooperative at all. He cannot sit quietly for a while. He always wanders around, punching the table making noises; he screams sometimes. The parents said they felt worn out to keep Jake with them. After listening to their complaint, one of the authors asked them whether they brought Jake's favorite book or toys with him, or whether there is somebody accompanying Jake at the activities. The mom said they brought Jake's favorite books with him once. The book was grabbed away by a peer as he did not want to share with others. After a deep thought, one of the authors suggested one of the parents or anyone else that Jake feels comfortable with accompany him at community or church activities and explain to Jake's friends that sometimes he does not want to share. Rather than grab the book and run away, probably they can try to ask Jake what the book is about.

Later, one of the authors went to a church activity with Jake's family. The mom went to a discussion about autism. The father and the author accompanied Jake and other children, most of whom are children with autism and their siblings. The father politely invited Jake to the basketball game, his favorite one. He joined us running around actively but cannot catch the ball. We slowed down and tried to throw the ball more frequently to Jake. When other children felt bored with that and complained about Jake's slow speed, we tried to explain to them and most of them agreed to wait and applauded for each of Jake's successful catch, throw. Jake was very pleased at the applause and peers' encouragement. He played the basketball for about twenty minutes without screaming, punching, pointing, kicking, or biting.

#### *Encourage Independence and Avoid Overprotection*

Parents can encourage more independent play and avoid overprotection. Sometimes, parents substitute children to perform their daily tasks like self-care tasks, to answer questions if the children are asked, stop the peers from *interrupting* their children, and prevent their children from being involved in some *challenging* activities.

Michael's parents usually will bring him to a friend's house swimming during summer time. The children's pool is not really deep and reached only Michael's chest. The parents were scared, though, and tried to hold his hands and stay around him all the time. Other kids talked, played without "bothering" Michael and his parents. Later, the parents agreed to let Michael be together with his peers more during swimming but they put floating arm and body supports on Michael. At first, Michael felt scared but his parents shouted at him, *We are right here. You are safe. Mommy is here.* He was secure and tried to reach the ball and played with the other children. Before he could reach it, all of a sudden the ball was taken away by another boy. Jake swam after the boy and tried to get the ball. The boy mocked at Jake, *You, mommy's baby.* We have to stop both of them at last because they scrambled and fought in the water. But since then, Jake was more comfortable in the pool with his peers and without parents being close by. There were no more fights.

#### *Parents Need to Spend Time Playing with the Children*

Parents need to spend time playing with their young children everyday. Some parents spend a lot of time taking care of their children's special needs, helping them with self-care tasks, sending them to schools or hospitals. But, not all of parents make time to play with their children every day. Sometimes parents feel very tired after work or the extra trip to hospital or the meeting with teachers, therapists, early interventionists. Other parents are grieving too much to deal with the children's special needs. Still other parents overlook their children's play needs. Actually, children with disabilities can play, need play, and will benefit from play only if their parents spend a small amount of time reading to them or playing a game with them every day. Then, in their childcare centers or classrooms, the children with disabilities may be more able to share their favorite toys or play their favorite games with their peers. Often, children with disabilities are left out of play by peers because they do not know any games that they can play with peers, they do not have similar interests as peers, or they do not have play abilities they can match with those of their peers. Helping children master some basic play skills and learn common games can help them make new friends, maintain friendships and enjoy their free time, as well as enhance their social and emotional competence.

Conner, a preschooler in a university-based childcare center, has challenging behaviors in circle time and during large group activities. Since one of the author got from his mother that she and her husband seldom has any time play with their sons, the author encouraged them to play with Conner because the author found what Conner needs to know is that he really does not know how to play some games and how to share with peers. When he was told that he violated the rules, he always argued with others. He would feel so angry that he can bite others as well as poke others, which are the challenging behaviors termed by the classroom

teachers. His mother admitted that although they purchased a lot of toys for Conner, they seldom could spare any time every day play with him. They accepted the author's suggestion and took turns every day to spare about fifteen to twenty minutes playing with Conner. Gradually, Conner mastered some game rules that he usually played at school, and he formed skills of turning over pages, reading books, and sharing with others. Since then, he showed decreased behavior problems. He also felt heightened self-esteem after he can tell a story to his peers and this self-esteem maintains. When his mom delivered a baby girl, he feels very proud and tells his teachers and his other friends that he can play with his baby sister and can rock the rocking chair for his baby sister. The self-esteem really promotes him to be a fast learner as he intends to tell what he learns to his baby sister as well as his friends.

#### *Celebrate Parties Together*

Parents can help young children with disabilities make friends and increase their social interactions. However, parents of children with disabilities sometimes are unwilling to invite the children's friends and celebrate parties at home. They either think it will cause too much trouble or they consider it unnecessary.

Megan, a toddler with decreasing vision and hearing, is another child in the childcare center. She learns new skills quickly, enjoys outdoor activities, and is always willing to follow the teachers' instruction. Unfortunately, she always plays alone. One of the author learned that her vision and hearing impairment interfere with building up relationships with her peers. Therefore, other children are unwilling to play with her because she is slow in running and slow at mastering some circle time skills. Thus, she usually plays alone. When other children have birthday parties, they are unwilling to invite Megan, and Megan's parents never invite her friends' home. Before Megan's third birthday, one of the authors suggested Megan's mother inviting her friends to their house. At first, Megan's mother was startled because she never knew that Megan could have friends. The author then explained to her that Megan could have build relationship with other children if they have more contacts. The mother agreed to try to help Megan make friends and invited the whole class for her birthday. To the mother's surprise, all the children came and had very good time together. Megan, for the first time, smiled so happily. Now, whenever other children have parties, they invite Megan as well. Megan started some conversation with other children although sometime she was still left alone when her peers started to play a new game. At age three, Megan transferred to a new school and she made some new friends there.

#### *Facilitate Sibling Interaction*

One of the authors also encouraged Megan's mother to invite other children to play with Megan at home. Megan has three sisters; her twin sisters are one year older than Megan and another sister is one year younger than her. Megan's parents have difficulty accepting Megan when she was born and her sisters have the same attitude towards Megan. They do not play with Megan much, forming a group of three instead. After Megan's teachers and personnel from an Infant and Parents Service and from an Early Intervention System showed Megan's parents how smart and adorable a girl she is, they realize their neglect of Megan at home. They since then have more family time after dinner. One or both of the parents or their grandparents help Megan build blocks with her sisters, play cards, or play physical activities, which are Megan's favorites. Gradually, Megan's sisters like to share games with Megan. Parents also bring Megan with them whenever they have a trip, and they no longer leave Megan at home with her grandparents.

#### **Conclusion**

All parents love their children. It is also true to parents of children with disabilities. Parents' love is unconditioned. Sometimes the love is not true love though. It is indulgence, overprotection and parents themselves are not aware of that. Professionals, practitioners as well as social workers can help parents realize the problem in their love and help them guide the children to be more exposed to the outside activities, secure interaction and friendship

with peers, establish play skills, develop their interests, and facilitate partnership among siblings. All of these strategies are very practical and applicable that parents can implement in community and home environment and thus young children's social interaction and competence can be well improved.

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