

Comments by Guest Editor

Play Therapy magazine is pleased to inaugurate this new feature entitled Ask the Expert offering responses to member questions by a play therapist who has demonstrated expertise about a particular topic. We thank the expert, guest editor, and those who submitted questions which have been edited to encompass as many points as space allows!

Autism

Background

Autism (ASD) is an umbrella term for a wide spectrum of disorders considered neurological in nature. The disorders affect how a child communicates and interacts with others, how he learns, how he plays, and even how he imagines. As of 2009, the Centers for Disease Control estimates that one in every 110 children born in the US will be diagnosed with autism by the time they are eight years old. Treating these children appropriately is imperative for play therapists who are on the front line helping these youngsters and their families.

Member Questions

1. What kind of play therapy interventions might be helpful for elementary age students with ASD who are experiencing anger management issues?

Often, anger management issues arise because a child with autism misunderstands the cues from the world around him. Consequently, one of the best play therapy interventions for helping a child impacted with ASD deal with anger is to get him involved in a social skills group that encourages role playing activities, social story narration and active strategies and techniques for dealing with challenging situations and feelings.

2. What research has been done on the efficacy of play therapy for Autism Spectrum Disorders?

The efficacy of play therapy as it applies to children impacted by autism is relatively a new area of research. However a new study, The Early Start Denver Model, appearing in the journal *Pediatrics* (Nov. 2009) describes a successful combination of applied behavioral analysis (ABA) with developmental 'relationship-based' approaches (DIR / Floor Time) that creates significant gains seen in IQ, communication, and social interaction of toddlers as young as 18 months impacted by autism.

3. What are the important things to keep in mind when doing play therapy with children with ASD? Does the play need to be modified at all?

The most important element to keep in mind when you are doing play therapy with a child with autism is that typically the child presents at a much younger age developmentally than what his chronological age may be. Consequently, the play often needs to be adjusted by slowing down the tempo and having visual supports so that there is specific structure and a predictable schedule to the interaction. Poor motor planning, emblematic to children on the spectrum, means that the play therapist has to work a bit harder, taking the germs of the idea for a play activity that the child is interested in and then expanding the initial motivation into a socially appropriate activity. The play therapist must also be more active when facilitating in a group situation, because children on the spectrum, while typically desiring interaction do not naturally possess the skills to know how to be reciprocal with peers.

4. How do you proceed to rule out developmental delays/autism in young children?

Autism, a social/communication disorder, is a pervasive disability with strong genetic components that impacts multiple systems within a child's brain and central nervous system. Symptomatically it presents as a lack in the ability to be socially reciprocal, an inflexible adherence to repetitive and often nonfunctional gestures and/or ideas and an overall interference in language development. If you have concerns regarding the quality of a child's play, or if the play is not progressing at an appropriate developmental pace, then share your concerns with the family and encourage the parents to have their child assessed as soon as possible. These assessments can be done by a developmental pediatrician, pediatric neurologist, or developmental psychologist leading a multidisciplinary team.

Reading Recommendations

Cotugno, A., Social Competence and Social Skills Training and Intervention for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders, *J. Autism and Developmental Disorders* (2009), 39, 1268-1277.

Dawson, G., Rogers, S., Munson, J., Smith, M., Winter, J., Greenspan, J., Donaldson, A., & Varley, J.

Randomized Controlled Trial of an Intervention for Toddlers with Autism: The Early Start Denver Model, *Pediatrics*, November (2009), 1-10.

Thompson, R., *Doing What Doesn't Come Naturally, Zero to Three*, November (2009), 33-39.

Wolffberg, P. *Peer Play and the Autism Spectrum* Autism Asperger's Publishing Co. (2003).



Guest Expert

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