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Foreword

This second edition on intervening in the play of children with autism is cause for celebration. It reflects the authors' practical experience of working directly with children, their parents and linked professionals and the new developments in the area of 'Identiplay'.

This book continues to set out a specific approach for intervening in the play of children with autism. Identiplay is, at its core, an adult-led teaching strategy focusing on:

- enabling children with autism to use toys in ways common to other children.
- enabling children to hear and join in with play narratives.
- enabling children with autism to learn a play skill, generalise it and add to it creatively.

Identiplay recognises that, for all children, there are times when adults need to lead the learning and times when learning is best supported through child-led activities. Identiplay acknowledges the importance of that balance.

This new book provides readers with an overview of the nature and significance of Identiplay. Keeping to its familiar format it offers even more case studies and play scripts enabling readers to link the ideas presented directly to their children. In addition, it stresses the benefits of the central learning relationship of child, parents and professionals.

Additions to this volume outline the increased scope of Identiplay both in terms of breadth of focus and flexibility of location. Children play indoors and out. It is important to apply Identiplay in a range of learning environments. Furthermore, the approach lends itself to the teaching of leisure skills and self-help skills to young people with autism. Set within an environment which draws on a range of good practise in autism, Identiplay is proving to be a helpful and accessible approach, chosen keenly by parents and professionals.

It is important that early approaches to play rest on careful observation of existing play skills. Parents and professionals commonly seek advice and guidance in the initial and ongoing assessment of play. This new edition clearly sets out a number of helpful assessment options so that the interventions of adults and the play of children can be noted and effective evaluations made.

The first edition provided a practical starting point for involving children with autism in play. This second edition builds on that practical focus and continues to provide parents and professionals with the answer to the key question 'How can I make a start on play?' However, its broader scope seeks to answer a number of additional questions too, namely 'How can we work effectively together?' and 'How can we be sure we are making a difference?'

Identiplay provides a launch pad to some of the best work I have seen in the area of play and children with autism, its research base is building and I know practitioners in the field will find this second edition a very useful resource to pick up and apply.

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International trainer in the field of autism and childhood anxiety.

Why Play?

Play

- *verb* 1. engage in games or other activities for enjoyment rather than for a serious or practical purpose.
- *noun* 1. activity engaged in for enjoyment and recreation, especially by children.

Compact English Dictionary Online; Oxford University Press (2011)

The dictionary definition of play includes enjoyment as the key defining feature. It suggests that playing is about 'having a good time'.

Anyone who has spent time observing children in pre-school and school settings, as well as at home, either as a professional or a parent, will have seen for themselves that play is an enjoyable activity. Smiles, laughter and shrieks of delight all feature in children's 'enjoyable' play.

Equally, those working or living with children will have heard youngsters' sadness explained by phrases such as, 'He won't play with me', 'She spoilt our game' or, 'I can't find anyone to play with'.

Enjoyment is clearly a key factor ... but is there more to it? Is playing just about having fun? Research suggests that there is far more to play than that.

Early signs of play behaviour are evident in most children in the first months of life and follow a predictable developmental course. Babies engage in sensorimotor play, for example, banging or spinning objects and oral exploration from about three months of age. From 12 months, relational play is evident. This includes activities such as piling up toys or putting objects into things. Shortly after, at about 14 months, the first signs of pretend play develop in the form of functional play. This can be described as the appropriate use of an object or the conventional association of two or more objects, such as a spoon to feed a doll, or placing a teacup on a saucer. (Ungerer and Sigman, 1981) This stage is followed at 20 months by the beginnings of symbolic play, e.g. pretending that one object is something else.

While this pattern of development is evident in typically developing children, in children with autism these developmental stages of play are impaired and often absent.

Typically developing play has a number of distinct characteristics (Wolfberg, 1999):

- Firstly it is pleasurable, having a positive effect; children often smile and laugh when playing.
- Play requires active engagement. Children become absorbed in their play while they explore, experiment and create. It is not an aimless activity.
- Play is voluntary and intrinsically motivated, as children freely choose the activity. Motivation to play comes from within the child, with no external demands or rewards; it is self-imposed, not imposed by others.
- Play involves attention to means over ends. In other words, there is a greater attention on the process of playing rather than what one 'gets out of it'. Any goals in play tend to be flexible, self-directed and are changed frequently.
- Play is generally open ended.



- Play is flexible and changing. During play, children are free to do the unexpected; they can (and do) change the rules and experiment with new, untried behaviours and ideas. Play can change as children build on and alter their ideas.
- Finally, play tends to be non-literal. In play, children treat objects, actions or events 'as if' they were something else; either using items as something completely different or playing at something real, e.g. 'play fighting'.

Play has been linked with advances in:

- cognitive
- social
- language
- emotional development.

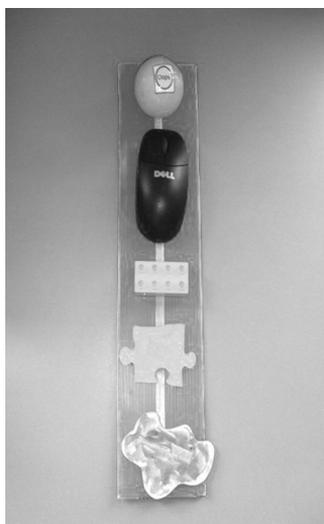
(Rubin, Fein and Vandenberg, 1983). Wolfberg (1999) described the contribution that play makes to all these areas of a child's development.

Firstly, play is believed to contribute to and requires a certain level of cognitive function. Children obtain knowledge of functional, spatial, causal and categorical relationships from early play activities as well as being introduced to thinking about meanings and limitations. In order to play, children, therefore, require a degree of flexibility and creativity in both their behaviour and their thinking. Both of these are also developed through play, leading to an increase and improvement in more original problem-solving. Play also gives children an opportunity to experiment with new and unusual behaviour.

Play also develops social competence, through engaging in intimacy and affection, which often lead to the formation of friendships. Play requires negotiation and compromise and frequently requires the interpretation of subtle social cues. Play allows children to test out their ideas about possible relationships (Wolfberg, 1999).

Through play, children experiment with different forms of language and some of its rules. This experimentation leads to the development of new skills. The introduction of a narrative structure often begins during play and this later gives rise to a child's literary imagination. Playing encourages children to express themselves as individuals and helps them to interpret and make sense of the world (Wolfberg, 1999).

For most children, playing can also be a way of dealing with stress and upset in their lives and sometimes helps them to work through difficult times and experiences. It allows them to suspend reality and pretend to be someone or somewhere else.



Top tips

- Shared sessional visual timetables are usually presented horizontally with the objects, photographs or symbols made large enough to be seen by a group of children.
- Often individual visual timetables are presented vertically. It may be that more than one child in the setting needs an individual timetable, vertically presented timetables usually take up less space and can be displayed on pillars, the sides of units or door frames.
- If using photographs to represent an activity, ensure that unnecessary background 'clutter' has been edited out of the photograph. Some young children with an ASD may focus on a tiny or insignificant part of a photograph rather than the key feature in it.
- Children using visual timetables *must* be taught to use the timetable. Initially this may involve an adult physically leading the child to the timetable and prompting him/her to remove the object, photograph or symbol before leading him/her to a matching item displayed in the play room. He/she then matches it to the one displayed before joining the activity. Sometimes a child may have to 'post' the item into an envelope/small box displayed in the play area. As the child becomes familiar with the system, the adult providing support can gradually reduce this support until the child is able to operate the system independently.
- The timetable belongs to the child. When he/she moves to a new group it should move with him/her, which will aid the settling in process.
- At times of transition it may be necessary to use a previously used timetable. Times of transition may raise a child's anxiety, thus a time table the child has used with independence and success presents the 'safe and secure' option, enabling the child to feel more at ease in the new setting.
- As a child develops new or higher level skills the timetable/schedule should be amended or upgraded to reflect these new skills. Prior to making such amendments it may be necessary to reassess the child to determine whether or not he/she has mastered the new skills. If it is decided to upgrade the timetable, time must be spent teaching the child to use the timetable following the amendments.

The Development of Self-help Skills

When target setting with the parents of the young children with additional needs, including those with social communication needs or a diagnosis of an ASD, the majority of parents ask that their child is encouraged to become as independent as possible. When one explores this in greater depth it becomes apparent that many are requesting support to develop early self-help skills. Skills like:

- getting dressed.
- eating skills – eating with a spoon or fork or, in some cases, sitting at the table.
- washing hands and face.
- cleaning teeth.
- personal hygiene – toilet training.

Children in most pre-school settings are encouraged to become increasingly independent as they approach school age. In addition to the skills outlined above, young children are encouraged to:

- hang up/collect their coats.
- get changed for some physical activities.
- put on an apron/tabard.
- put personal belongings in a set place.
- collect and return play equipment to the appropriate areas.
- set out a table for 'snack time'.
- pour drinks into beakers and hand them out to their peers.

These skills are an essential part of daily living and may be considered as the first steps taken along the road to independence.

Many of the activities presented above can be taught using the 'Identi' approach – using a duplicate set of resources/materials and a script to model the process for the child. Presented below are a sample of example scripts. However, it is important to remember that the potential of this approach in developing skills in this area is limitless.

Top tips

- An activity like getting dressed is a complex process – it would be unrealistic to present one script to teach the child to dress him/herself. The process will need to be broken down into component parts, each of these being taught as an individual step that will eventually lead to the completion of the whole process.
- One must assess what skills the child has already achieved – for example, a child may be able to put on his/her pants so the next thing to teach may be to put on a vest or t-shirt.

- Teach the processes associated with dressing with items of clothing slightly bigger than those the child might usually wear – socks are difficult to manipulate over the angles of the foot, so begin the teaching process with a loose fitting pair of socks, this eliminates frustration and often results in more rapid success.
- Always consider the size of the object or item the child is expected to handle – a young child may not have the physical strength to lift and pour a full jug of milk, so half fill it.

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