

Teaching Children with Autism to use Pretend Play

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Aim

To discover whether Early Years children who have autism and additional learning difficulties can learn to use pretend play within a class group and to explore the nature and implications of this.

Dimensions of this Case Study

Eight Early Years children were observed during the intervention period.

Summary of Findings for this Case Study

- All the children with autism did not use pretend play prior to the intervention programme.
- All the children with autism did use pretend play following the intervention programme.
- Some children with autism were able to generate spontaneous pretend play during the intervention programme.
- Some children with autism started to play with other children during the intervention programme.

Background

The children who took part in this project attend the Early Years department at Mowbray School in North Yorkshire. All the children are statemented as having learning difficulties. Most children in this department have moderate or severe learning difficulties. In addition a number of children have autism. Autism is a learning difficulty that pervades most other areas of learning. This is particularly true in understanding social experience, using communicative language and in flexibility of thought. One aspect of this is an impairment or absence of pretend play.

Eight children were chosen to take part in an intervention programme, which sought to teach pretend play. Five of these children also had autism in addition to severe or moderate learning difficulties. All the children were aged between five or six years. All the children had an understanding of speech of between 1 year 8 months and 3 years and 5 months. All the children with autism were assessed as having language levels below 2 years and 10 months. All the children with autism had difficulties in attending as part of a class. The children usually found sitting and watching the teacher for more than moments was not easy.

The Research Project

Pretend play is frequently seen in children as they approach two years of age and plays a prominent role in developing flexibility of thought for a number of years. Pretend play is first seen in functional play. In functional play, the child uses an object as it is meant to be used. Feeding a Teddy Bear with a plastic spoon or saying "bruum" as a toy car is pushed along the table, would be thought of as functional pretend play. If the child were to *imagine* that 'Teddy' had burnt his mouth on the plastic spoon or that the car had made a sudden reverse because of the frightening monster that had apparently *appeared* at the end of the table, we would consider this to be symbolic pretend play. If the child were to actively involve another child in this play scenario and develop the pretence as a pair, we would consider this to be social pretend play. If the child were to develop a play scenario that he had not seen or used before, we would consider this to be spontaneous pretend play. Normally

developing children aged between three and six years might combine all these aspects of pretend play in a single but very complex play scenario.

It is of diagnostic significance that children with autism have an impairment or absence of pretend play. Although many children with autism do use some pretend play, this tends to be narrow, repetitive, functional play. Children with autism are noted for not developing spontaneous symbolic and social pretend play. However the mental abilities that are used and developed within symbolic play are essential for effective learning and provide a foundation for later problem solving, generalising information, creative processes and understanding other people. These are central difficulties for children with autism and undermine most forms of subsequent learning.

A small number of researchers have in recent years found that in clinical studies it is possible to show that children with autism can use symbolic pretend play, (Charman & Baron-Cohen 1997; Lewis & Boucher 1988). In these studies researchers used structuring to assist the children with autism to use symbolic pretend play, e.g. "Show me what you can do with these". Although these studies involved more able children with autism than those in our study, I wished to see if these findings could be replicated with less-able children with autism in a classroom setting.

The Teaching Process

We wanted to teach the children to use symbolic play-acts, to watch the pretence of others, to take turns in pretend play games with other children and ultimately to create spontaneous play scenarios with other children in free-play settings.

Initially an adult modelled a number of play scenarios in front of the children who were sitting in a semi-circle. Children were then asked to use the same materials to imitate and extend the modelled play scenario. Other children continued to watch this. Videos of these sessions were shown to the children and the most important aspects were highlighted for the children. In subsequent play sessions, new materials were introduced and new scenarios were modelled for the children. As the group became used to this approach, adult intervention was decreased and spontaneous, social and creative acts were encouraged.

Typical examples of modelled play scenarios would include :

- pretending to loose a balloon and undertaking a journey to recover it;
- pretending to be asleep and waking to find that all your possessions have been stolen;
- what can we make out of this old linen sheet?
...a roof ...an umbrella ...a hammock ...or perhaps a jellyfish!

Equipment used for these lessons involved a combination of representation toy materials and non-representational junk materials.

The Teaching Style

The presentation of the pretend play scenarios was seen as crucial to the success of the intervention. To maintain the children's interest in the play of others it was necessary to use exaggerated voice and gesture. This gave the sessions a sense of fun and pantomime. The children seemed to enjoy this approach and laughed at the use of melodrama. Instead of holding the children's attention for two or three minutes as was anticipated, the children were able to watch for up to forty minutes.

Research Findings

Following the intervention process, all the children with autism were able to use symbolic pretend play without being prompted. We had not seen any evidence of this previously.

Improvements in Pretence

- Some children were able to combine several different types of symbolic pretence, within each episode of their play.
- The types of play used and the language that accompanied it were similar in the children that did and did not have autism.

Improvements in Social Play

- All the children with autism were able to engage and initiate social pretend play after the intervention, more frequently, more purposefully and using higher quality play than at the beginning of the programme.
- During the intervention there was a shift in the children with autism engaging their peers in play, rather than playing alone or using confrontational behaviours.

- All the children progressed towards social and unstructured play.

Staff working with these children report changes in their play, willingness to co-operate with others and improvements in their spoken language.

The Role of the Teaching Approach in the Children's Progress

The use of melodrama and pantomime held the children's attention to the modelled play scenarios. The children often copied this element in their play. It is possible that this use of affect was critical in our success. Further research would be required to confirm this.

Research Method

All the children were assessed to find their language levels (verbal comprehension). The five children with autism were further tested to find their developmental play levels. A high correlation had previously been found between verbal comprehension and pretend play, (Cicchetti et al 1994). These test results would give us a means of assessing individual progress in children who started at very different levels. Examples of the children playing in formal and informal play situations were recorded on a video camera. We used these to assess the children's progress in pretend play.

Summary

This study provides evidence that children with autism (with language levels over twenty months), may be able and motivated to engage in symbolic and functional pretend play. It seems unlikely that these children would have developed this by imitation or self-generation. Through this research we found that the children with autism had a capability to use symbolic pretend play. Through the intervention the children developed this ability and some of them started to use spontaneous, social, symbolic pretend play.

If this potential were developed through appropriately structured developmental play from the child's earliest years, one might expect children with autism to make significant improvements in a range of interrelating mental functions.

References and Further Reading

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