

AUTISM, PLAY and SOCIAL INTERACTION

Lone Gammeltoft and Marianne Sollok Nordenhof

Translated by Erik van Acker

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Jannik Beyer and Lone Gammeltoft

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Preface

This book arose from a desire we have had for a long time to pass on our experiences of how children with autism can improve their social skills by playing together in a group.

It was developed from the experiences described in *Autism and Play* by Jannik Beyer and Lone Gammeltoft (1998) and is based on the theoretical frame of reference described in that book.

This book is intended to be a source of ideas with practical examples of group games targeted at children with autism spectrum disorder (hereafter referred to as children with autism). The ideas can be used by both parents and professionals.

Our collaboration on play began in 1993 at Broendagerskolen, a school for children with autism and learning difficulties. At that time there was not much attention given to play as a way of working with children with autism, and the literature on the subject was very limited.

As playing is so vital in children's social development, we were surprised that playing had such a low priority in working with children with autism, so we decided to investigate whether playing could somehow make the social world more concrete and accessible for such children. That is what this book tries to illustrate.

We have taken inspiration from many different sources, not least from the TEACCH Program (Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication-handicapped CHildren), and of course the children, who are the best indication of whether we are creating the right atmosphere for them to enjoy play.

We wish to thank those children and parents who have inspired us.

Our warm thanks also to psychologist Maiken Toemming and speech therapist Anette Ly for constructive and critical comments on the manuscript.

Finally, special thanks to psychologist Jannik Beyer, who has been an inspirational sparring partner over the years.

Lone Gammeltoft and Marianne Sollok Nordenhof

Introduction



Peter Hansen (1868–1928) *Playing Children, Enghave Plads, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen* (Photo: Hans Petersen)

Playing occupies a large part of a child's life, and playing and childhood belong together. Through playing the child develops a variety of skills, not least in the social and emotional area. A child will always find a space in which to play, and playing is also recognized as

children's very own occupation – their way of 'being' and expressing themselves.

The impulse to play is spontaneous for the children – they play because they just can't help it. Playing is an end in itself.

When children play together they intuitively prepare themselves to tune into a kind of common 'transmitter/receiver channel' with a high degree of mutual attention to each other. This means that very early on in life they practise listening: waiting for and reacting to each other's signals – all that is implied in social interaction. They learn basic social rules in a natural context; for instance that you have to take turns and that you cannot choose or win every time.

Through playing children build up close emotional relations, in which they both copy and test themselves against each other. Playing is an activity driven by pleasure and can involve joy, enthusiasm, absorption, excitement, anger and seriousness – whatever heightens the experience. All in all, playing must be considered fundamentally important to the development of the child.

Some children, for various reasons, do not have a natural approach to playing – and children with autism, among others, belong to this group. Children with autism find it difficult to interact socially with one another – and consequently they are often seen as children who can't learn to play with others. But if the play is organized by grown-ups on the children's terms, the children find a common platform where – through play – they can gain social experiences, which otherwise can be difficult for them to obtain.

When we talk about play, we are primarily concerned with the social aspect of it, focussing on the interaction between children without the intervention of grown-ups. The social world is difficult to explain. We only get to understand it by engaging with it. One way for children with autism to do this is for them to play with their peers, whether they are other children with autism or other learning difficulties or their brothers or sisters. The games described in this book can be enjoyed by and be of benefit to any child, and they are designed such that even if the children do not understand their purpose, that need not put them off playing.

The games that we describe all take place in a very organized setting, which gives the children the chance to see each other taking the initiative and relating to each other. The games are all based on actual and visual materials used in ordinary children's play. There are examples of how a play environment can be built up through careful

organization and the use of visual cues, and how the togetherness of children at play can promote social awareness. The purpose is to create a forum for children where a joint agenda and a shared understanding of what they are doing together ensures a common focus of attention. Clearly setting out the agenda using visual cues helps the children understand what they are going to be doing together and can help them moderate their own impulses and ideas.

Clearly defined limits, both physical and abstract, help children with autism to concentrate on each other and in that way to respond appropriately in a social atmosphere.

As the social aspect is very difficult to clarify and visualize, the starting point for the shared experience must be a concrete and visual stimulus. At the outset we took part in the games with the children, but eventually we discovered that our presence was too obtrusive – we were interfering with the interaction between the children. From that time onwards we realized that we had to be invisible to provide space for the children to observe each other. We altered the parts so that we handed over the stage to the children and became ‘stage managers’, providing support through our work ‘backstage’.

As the games are simple and visually clear, the children do not need any special instructions. Of course there are exceptions when the grown-up can either teach the games to the children one by one or participate in the group until the new game is known to everybody.

The games must be continuously adjusted and adapted to each individual child and group so that the children get the degree of visual support that they need.

It is a good idea to videotape the children playing, so that it is not only possible to see what succeeded and/or failed but also to find out what the children think is fun – which can be something completely different from what we imagined.

A playgroup can consist of two to six children. The children are chosen according to a variety of criteria: temperament, level of social development, personality and interests. For instance, it can be an advantage to put together a temperamental girl with calmer friends or a quiet, cautious boy with younger children.

A game session typically lasts from 15 to 60 minutes.

Educational approach to playing

SOCIAL INTERACTION

For most people, navigating the social world is intuitive and entirely natural. We are well equipped to read and understand other people's intentions and feelings. We receive a lot of information just by looking at other people, and we instinctively try to create the best atmosphere for making social interactions succeed. How we do it is not easy to explain.

Children with autism do not seem to be equipped with the same innate social awareness. That is why we must lend them a hand by creating a framework for social interaction. Once we have we compensated for their social difficulties by creating meaningful limits in the physical space and through rules, the children can take part in social interaction without grown-ups being in control. The limits must support children in understanding what they are doing together and what they can expect from their interaction.

The following describes how you can create the ground rules for social interaction through the use of visual cues.

VISUALIZATION

The use of visual cues can make the presence of a grown-up unnecessary and improves the children's understanding and gives them independence.

By visualization we mean the use of objects or images as visual cues to explain a situation. Children with autism have difficulty transforming their impulses into appropriate action. They have difficulty creating method and order in what they do ('executive function') and their actions often seem to be random and out of context. They also have difficulty grasping the meaning of a situation ('central coherence'). For these reasons the children benefit considerably from structured education in which schedules, records, instructions and the like become visual, specific templates for the planning by which the rest of us navigate internally. Visualization is a support tool for a person with autism, like a white stick for the blind. Children with autism are often good at using their visual sense. By using visualization the children are able to function unaided in a range of contexts in which they would normally depend on the support of grown-ups.

Visualizing the limits of games condition the children for taking part in social interaction without grown-ups.

The advantages of using visualization in working with children with autism are that:

- images are concrete and non-transient, unlike, for instance, words, gestures and signs, so the information is clear and unambiguous
- it provides information in a form that many children can understand more easily than auditory information (i.e. spoken language) (Hodgdon 1995)
- it is possible to edit the information by extracting and illustrating both the order of events and the meaning of the situation.

Organizing games

Children with autism have great difficulty keeping their attention on a shared activity with others. They are often distracted by internal and external stimuli, or they become sidetracked by what we consider irrelevant details. They often have their own agenda and ideas of what the interaction should be about, but they never manage to communicate these ideas and intentions to each other. All of this makes it difficult for them to take part in a community.

The setting up of a common agenda therefore becomes a fundamental requirement for making interaction succeed for these children.

THE LIMITS OF THE GAME

In the following we describe how setting limits to the game helps the child to understand the common agenda.

Where will the game take place?

Children without special needs can play anywhere. They choose the physical space where the game is to take place and set it up together. They rarely have problems with a common focus and maintain the momentum of the game.

For children with autism it is necessary to set up, in advance, an environment where visual cues (physical limits) tell the children where the game is to take place. These limits can also help to minimize the risk of distraction by external stimuli.

A table with chairs is a good way of naturally limiting the area in which the game takes place (Figure 2.1). The chairs mark a place for every participant. The children can observe the area and each other and in this way they are better able to keep their attention on a common activity. The table forms the starting point of the interaction and is the base where information is given out and stored, so that everybody knows their place. Games that take place elsewhere can be delimited in different ways, using mats, carpets, bookcases or a taped area.



Figure 2.1 A table helps to limit the area in which the game takes place

What are we sharing?

An important condition for playing with other children is that you agree on *what* you are going to do together. For children without special needs it is easy to come up with a game that can be played by mutual agreement, because they can normally find something in common. Children with autism do not have extensive experience of

playing with other children and therefore often bring along their own ideas on what interaction should be about.

A significant part of establishing a common agenda is that the game plan is given in advance and visualized so that the children know exactly *what* they will be doing together and for *how long* they will be together.

The simplest way in which to do this is to let the actual toys represent the game. In the beginning it may only be a single activity that the children do together. Over time you add other *simple* activities, which are kept in separate boxes. The boxes are put in a bookcase or the like, so that you can take them from left to right. When the last box has been used, the game is over (Figure 2.2).



Figure 2.2 Materials for each activity are kept in separate boxes

This is a system that, in any context, provides children with information on how many and which tasks they need to do. Interaction and playing demand much more from the children than just carrying out the tasks; hence it is important that they do not have to use all their energy on understanding and executing the activity itself, but can focus on doing it together with other children. The social aspect of playing a game is so challenging in itself that the content of the game must be simple and motivating.

A general game schedule with a clear visual indication of content and order is a simple way of outlining the activity. It is a good idea to have the contents consist of several small, short games rather than one

larger, longer game. Shifting between the different games can be stimulating as long as the children are prepared for it.

The game schedule is numbered and each game is given a graphic symbol attached with Velcro (Figure 2.3). One of the children is in charge of the game session, which means that he or she is responsible for following the schedule correctly. As the children take turns at being the one in charge of the game session all participants have a chance to take responsibility in the course of the session (Figure 2.4). They often show great pride in taking on this role and get great satisfaction from following the system.



Figure 2.3 A numbered game schedule showing which games will be played and in what order

Graphic symbol number 1 is taken off the game schedule (Figure 2.5) and the corresponding toy put forward. When this game is finished, the toy is put aside and game number 2 begins. When the schedule is empty, the game session is finished. The last symbol, which is situated to the right of the schedule, is the timetable symbol. This means that

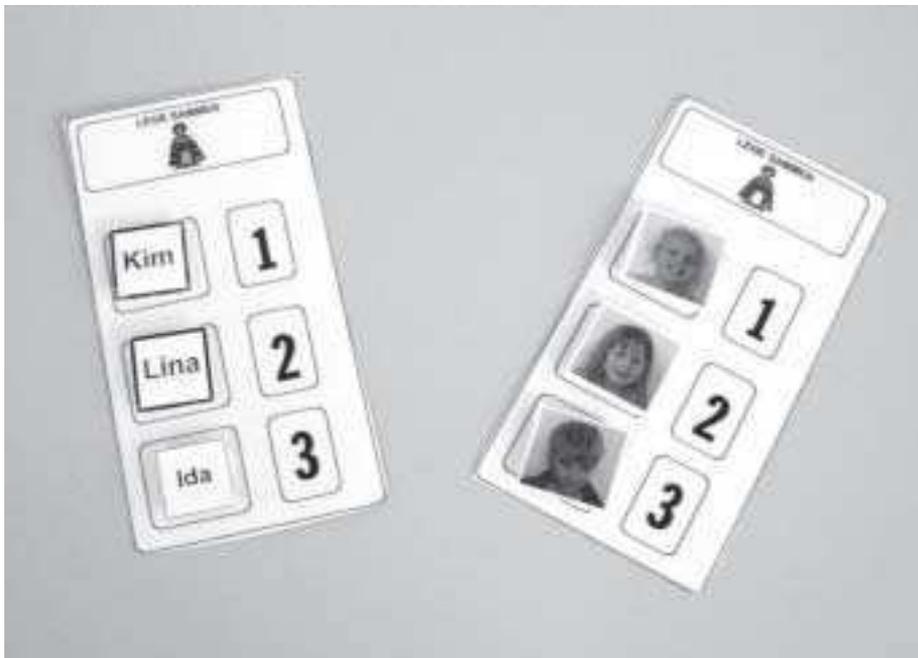


Figure 2.4 Order for taking responsibility for the game session



Figure 2.5 Taking off the graphic symbols

each child is able to check their daily timetable to see what the next activity is.

The game schedule is clear and easy to follow. All the children are prepared for exactly which game they are going to play and this gives them more energy to interact with each other.

As the children get to know the system, the child in charge can take responsibility for putting together the game schedule.

Who takes part in the game?

As children with autism have trouble taking the initiative to play with other children, it is essential that they know who takes part in the game. This information can be on their daily timetable. It is also important to clarify visually the order of the participants to make the game work as intended.

Giving a number to each child is a simple solution to this problem. The rule can be that the child in charge of the game always has the number 1 and that the other children get consecutive numbers and sit in this order. This way there are undisputed rules for which way to pass on a prop and whose turn it is – number 1 always starts. All this is



Figure 2.6 Numbers on the table show who sits where and the order of play