

A RELATIVE SOLUTION TO A COMPLEX PROBLEM: ENGAGING SIBLINGS TO BUILD SOCIAL SKILLS

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Play is a primary context for children to learn important skills and to interact, but it tends to be “messy”. Children with special needs often find playtime with friends to be unpredictable and confusing because of its unspoken rules and rituals. They may be overwhelmed because they lack the skills to interact with same-aged peers appropriately. Children who don’t know how to play may refuse to participate, fail to recognize or respect the needs of their peers, disrupt activities, or quite simply, be unable to maintain control – leading to social isolation.

Although play is a great way to build social skills, getting access to appropriate peer role models may be challenging either because children are unwilling or contact is limited. Luckily, siblings – and possibly neighborhood pals – can be a wonderful resource. First, they tend to be handy. Activities occurring regularly in homes and communities provide consistent opportunities for developing and generalizing skills. Second, siblings may be motivated to help because they want an enjoyable play partner or to take a proactive role in their brother or sister’s life. Third, because homes are familiar, children with special needs are often less stressed and more responsive to learning there. Finally, encouraging appropriate play between siblings may solicit more positive attention from parents, thereby improving the quality of family time. For all these reasons, siblings offer a great conduit to improving children’s social skills.



What is sibling-supported play?

Sibling-supported play capitalizes on the availability of positive peer role models. It involves providing direct instruction in social skills within the context of typical play routines. Older or more sophisticated siblings and peers may take an active role in instruction in which they model activities, coach children to follow suit, and respond to the children to encourage positive behavior. When enlisting siblings or other peer play partners, it is essential that their involvement be voluntary. Play partners must see value in the child learning skills and feel confident that they can make a difference. Therefore, the activities selected should be “mutually-reinforcing”; that is, both of the children should find them to be equally enjoyable.

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What can children learn?

Through sibling-supported play, children can learn a wide variety of skills, from simply attending to play situations to more complex problem-solving and communication skills. Here are examples of the skills children may learn to improve their interactions with peers and that tend to be most valued by children and families.

Paying attention to people and environmental cues	Initiating play or joining activities in progress	Using friendly words and voice (e.g., manners, small talk)
Reading expressions and body language	Sharing and taking turns, including having conversations	Communicating needs (e.g., asking for toys or help)
Self-regulation (e.g., moving away or taking breaks)	Using safe and helpful hands (vs. hitting or grabbing)	Resolving problems and/or negotiating solutions
Tolerating less preferred topics or activities for periods	Following rules and activity sequences	Learning to be flexible in changing situations

How do we teach play skills?

Teaching children with special needs positive play skills requires both proactive planning and systematic teaching practices. It may be beneficial to select simple activities with a clear beginning and end initially and then progress to more complex games and interactions. We also want to gradually increase the role of siblings and other peers, with the ultimate goal being to have the children play independently. The steps we suggest for this teaching process are as follows:

- Identify activities that are fun for both the child and sibling/peer
- Analyze the steps or components of the activity
- Determine what specific skills are needed to participate successfully
- Assess the child's current skills to determine what he or she can already do
- Consider using visuals (e.g., videos, a bean bag to indicate whose turn it is)
- Model the skills for the sibling or peer partner, playing with them
- Coach the sibling or peer to gradually take over aspects of instruction
- Provide praise and feedback, rewarding participation with fun
- Introduce more complex or challenging activities

Fade adult assistance and proximity over time

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Story of Seth and Nick



When Seth was enrolled in our Peer P.A.L.S. (Playing and Learning Socially)™ Program, attempts at social skills instruction with trained typical peers were met with bellows as Seth clung to his mother. Seth was so overwhelmed by the play group that he was unable to develop or retain skills. Therefore, we enlisted his brother Nick as his social *play partner*. Nick shared activities he and his brother enjoyed as we brainstormed skills. Nick observed that Seth played mostly with toy cars, identifying vehicle colors and categories, but did so in isolation. We modeled, how to ask for specific cars and then do something fun with them, saying out loud, “I’m building a ramp to see if the white van or red car will go furthest.” Next, Seth began participating in activities Nick chose. We video recorded these activities to illustrate skills. Since Seth had trouble maintaining attention and turn taking with a partner, we initiated a simple seated game of catch with Velcro mitts, which made learning these skills enjoyable. As Seth succeeded, we

coached Nick to the next level, increasing his distance and then standing. Eventually we advanced to board games where Nick was able to independently teach Seth to spin the wheel, move his game piece, and pass the spinner to end his turn. Nick wanted his brother to be successful and worked diligently through difficult times. With the support of Nick and the consistent practices to guide their play, Seth is quickly developing the skills he needs to participate in play activities with other peers.

Conclusions

We all want children with special needs to be fully integrated and successful in social relationships. Learning to play is an essential aspect of their development. By engaging siblings and other pals in the educational process, we can meet these goals.

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