

Time to play- increasing the duration of play and social interaction in Sixth Form

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Executive summary

This case study looks at expanding the duration of play and social skills in Sixth Form. It focuses on communication, social skills and building meaningful relationships with friends. This case study also looks at the exposure of pupils to new leisure activities, teaching them how to play games and to learn in a peer group.

This case study reports the findings of a three-month project with 6 students to increase the duration and range of play and social skills in Sixth Form. Paired Natural Environment Teaching (NET) was used to promote communication, social skills, and meaningful social interaction during games. Tutors observed and recorded the duration and quality of the experience. Overall, the duration of meaningful social interaction increased over the three-month period.

Introduction

This case study is about pupils in the Sixth Form at Tram House School. 6 pupils took part in the project. The pupils are of similar age and mixed ability. The pupils use Makaton signs and/or Proloquo2Go and Go Talk 9+ to communicate with others. Proloquo2Go and Go Talk 9+ are an Augmentative and Alternative communication device. It allows pupils to select an icon on their screen representing what they want and proceeds to say out loud what that item is, for those around to hear.

There is no doubt that play is an important part of child development. Wolfberg (1995) defines play as an activity that is pleasurable, intrinsically motivated, flexible, non-literal, voluntary, and involves active engagement. Through play, children learn social skills such as sharing, cooperation and turn-taking. Social language is learned, and friendships are formed during activities with peers. For typically developing children,

social interaction is a natural part of life. In contrast, many children with autism spectrum disorders lack play and social skills. Very often they opt out from interaction with others and engage in solitude and repetitive play. In this case study we will look at both the duration of play and expanding the range of interests and hobbies.

Method

As it was mentioned above, 6 pupils took part in the project. The project ran from September 2020 till November 2020 during 15mins morning play, and 30mins each afternoon play, every day. Pupils were already familiar with games such as pegs, Connect 4, building blocks, matching cards, wigs/make up/ dolls, turn taking game 'Fish Only' games were chosen for the purpose of this project. The pupils were already able to engage in the listed games with their tutors, however they were not able to engage in interactive and cooperative play with their peers. The play and social interaction were supervised by tutors. The pupils were asked to use a choice board with photos of various games. Learners were paired according to their abilities and interests. Common prompts were used to promote play behaviour e.g. from least to most, from most to least or graduated guidance.

Paired NET was used to increase the duration of play. NET stands for natural environment teaching, teaching "in the real world". During the play project the pupils had the opportunity to mand for their favourite game to play, work on sharing and turn talking. There were also opportunities to work on receptive identifications, imitation skills and waiting.

What did we try to teach in paired NET?

The focus was on social and leisure skills. When teaching interactive and corporative play tutors focused on pupils making friends, requesting to peers, and responding to requests from peers. When tutors noticed a decrease in motivation to play and interaction with a peer, tutors prompted the mand "finished" and the pupils were allowed to disengage reducing any possibility of leading to behaviours that challenge. Tutors also worked on increasing the amount of time pupils were engaged in playing games and reducing their reliance on screen time.

Results

Although Figure 1 and 2 do not show linear progress, there is a significant increase in duration of play compared to the

baseline. Factors that could have influenced data were low motivation to play with peers and/ or to play a particular game.

During the play project the pupils had an opportunity to engage in various games and expand their interests. Tutors noticed that screen free play time was much calmer and the pupils seemed to be more engaged. In addition, some of the pupils independently asked peers for “high fives” or tapped them on shoulder for attention. There was also an observed increase in eye contact and positive facial expression e.g., smiling. Over time some of the pupils also needed less prompts to either start a game or wait for their turn.

Children and young adults must be given an opportunity to engage in a meaningful social interaction to prevent and break the cycle of peer rejection (Wheeler, 2013). Exposure to peers is critical to develop appropriate social skills. Moreover, taking part in play activities promotes naturally reinforcing and mutually enjoyable experiences.

References

Wolfberg, P. J. (1995). Enhancing children’s play. In K. A. Quill (Ed.), Teaching Children with Autism: Strategies to Enhance Communication and Socialization ;Albany, NY: Delmar Publishers.

Wheeler, M (2013). Social activity groups: another approach for helping to bridge the friendship gap.

Discussion

This case study demonstrated that using NET and appropriate level of supervision during play sessions promotes meaningful leisure time and promotes friendship amongst students with autism. The next step would be to fade additional reinforcers e.g., the iPad and to continue to expand interests by pairing preferred activities with less preferred activities. Also teaching pupils to choose a friend that they prefer to spend time with.

Play and social interaction are an important element of human experience. Teaching children and young adults with ASD how to engage in functional play can enhance both emotional and cognitive growth.

Figure 1. NET plan duration for pupil 1.

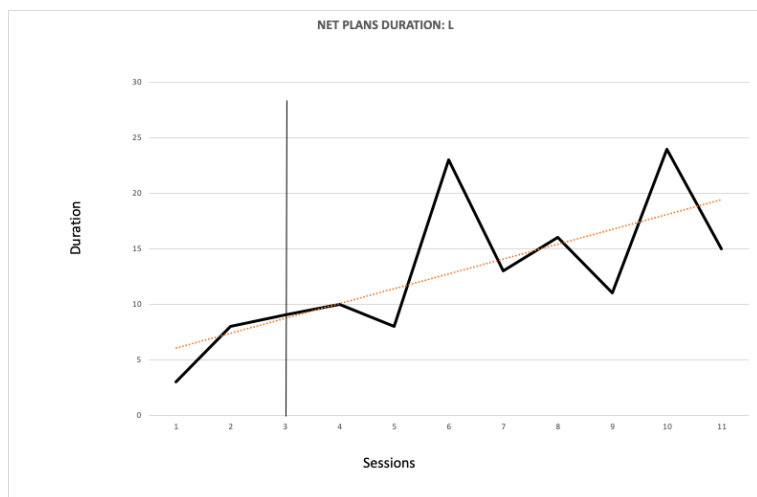


Figure 2. NET plan duration for pupil 2.

