



PLAY Project Techniques

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PLAY Techniques with Examples for Functional Developmental Levels 1-4

Shared Attention/Engagement & Two Way Communication

1. 'Being with'

- Sit near the child as he plays in his *comfort zone*
- Keep engagement going. Follow cues gently
- Make comments/describe what the child is doing: "You're jumping high!"
- Repeat words/sound if they say anything
- Gently open or close one or two circles: offer a toy
- Give the child what he wants. Use natural motivations.
 - Turning on and off the water together
 - Hand him Lego's, train, cars, books to line up
- Do not command, direct, teach

2. Sensory-motor play

- (Touch) Rubbing the back, tickling, wrestling, rough housing
- (Vision) Watching/blowing bubbles
- (Sounds) Humming, drumming
- (Rhythm) Clapping on the back with rhythm
- (Movement) Wind-up toys
- (Kinesthetic) Shaking the arms in rhythm
- Putting the child on a spinning chair saying "go" and stopping her while saying "stop"
- Jumping on the bed

3. Theme & Variation

- Open and close door.
- Open and close door with a song
- Put your hand in the door and close it (gently) and say 'ouch'
- Hold the door closed until child complains
- Play peek-a-boo on the other side of the door.
- Use a puppet to play peek-a-boo
- Have the puppets head get caught in door and cry
- Bonk you head into the door & fall down dead
- Build anticipation with each variation

4. Taffy Pulling—stretch the interaction. Open and close 2 or 3 circles instead of one. Keep interaction going.

- Play dumb for a couple of circles. Ask the child what they would like to do?
- Give the train and ask for it back.
- Then try to take it back and let them resist you.
- Say "mine" i.e. gently tease the child.
- Give the train but fly it around their head first.
- After they have the train spin each wheel
- Make a different funny sound for each wheel

5. Salient Language

- Label each activity like “SPIN” for a spinning game, “DOOR” for a door game, etc.
- Then consistently use the word: “Would you like to play “SPIN”? Or “Let’s open and close the DOOR!”
- Say the word/words loudly and clearly.
- Use salient words across different settings/care takers
- Use sequences of language like 1-2-3, Ready-Set-Go
- Wait to see if child will finish the sequence: 1-2-. . .
- Repeat key words: Do you want MORE?
- Use opposites: OFF/ON, UP/DOWN, OPEN/CLOSE

6. Rhythm & Music

- Use rhythm in your speech patterns frequently
- Sing Children’s Songs like Ring-Around-the-Rosy & Row, Row, Row Your Boat, etc.
- ‘Capture’ child in your lap and move their arms up and down while counting 1-2-3.
- Pound gently on their backs and sing old MacDonald with each pounding motion.

7. Sense of Humor, Suspense, Surprise

- Find ways to make them laugh
- Have them push your nose and make a sound
- Fly them on your feet
- Pretend you’re asleep. Wake up suddenly when the child comes near.
- Play chase/I’m going to get you
- Capture them in your prison and let them get away
- Try slapstick (Bumping your head, falling down)
- Use mock anger (“Hey you give me that back. You took my toy.”)

8. One and Two Step Commands

- Ask them to give you something (and then. . .)
- Ask them to put it someplace else
- Ask them to get their shoes and ask for different feet. (“No not that foot, the other foot!”)
- Have them make choices (“Do you want this car or this car.”)
- Have them get the ball and give it to daddy.

9. Playful obstruction

- Get in their way so they have to move you
- Play dumb when they want something and make them open another circle.
- Close the door when they want it open
- Move the trains out of line ‘by accident’

10. Making them work

- When you think they can do something expect them (using your voice, facial gestures and pregnant pauses) to do it
- Play dumb and make them show you or tell you what they want
- Expect them to use their words (“Do you want **more**? Tell me you want MORE. (Use salient language.)

11. Rewarding/Reinforcing

- Applaud their accomplishments (if they like applause).
- When they initiate a response (open a circle), reward them with a rub or tickle or rough housing
- Give immediate rewards for accomplishments (like sensory motor play when they use their words.)

12. Making Random Behaviors Purposeful

- When they open and close doors get on the other side and say "Hello" when they open the door and goodbye when they close it.
- When they build blocks call it a 'tower'
- When they pour water turn it into a 'pouring game' by offering them different containers.
- When they line up trains make a choo-choo sound

13. Expectant waiting

- Waiting is a primary technique but it must be expectant waiting i.e. waiting for a return response.
- This helps children initiate (which is the essence of Greenspan Functional Level 3).
- The key here is to make an overture and then see what the child wants to do.
- Waiting allows you to observe the child more accurately and increase circles of interaction.

14. Going for Fun

- Ask yourself: "What would the child love to do with me?"
- Then wait for an answer. This is an intuitive way to play.
- You can use this technique both in the moment as you play but also as a way of generating activities.
- Then list the activities and try them out. You'll probably be right!

15. Big, Little, & Micro Circles

- This is a variation on 'Taffy Pulling'
- A **big circle** happens when you say, "I'm gonna get you" and the child runs. . . .
- **Little circles** happen when you chase and capture the child in your arms and say: You want a tickle? And child indicates: Yes, by looking or saying 'more' or 'yes'. . . .
- **Micro circles** happen when you raise your hand to tickle and say slowly (as your hand starts coming down) so that the child connects with each word: I'm....gonna....tickle...you....Here...it....comes....now (then tickle with a sudden final movement). (See also 'Suspense/surprise')

16. Add a word

- This helps children expand their language.
- When the child gives you one word, you give them two back. If they give you two, give three, etc.
- You have to imagine what the child would say if he or she could talk in longer sentences.
- For example, when the child says: "Up!" You might say: "Up, momma." or "Go up."
- Eventually you will add several words: "Momma, go up please. More cookie."

17. Asked and Answered

- This helps children expand their language and is a form of Salient Language.
- You say the word in the form of a question and then say the word in the form of an answer.

- For example, if the child wants a cookie, you would say: “Oh, you want a cookie?” Then as you are handing the cookie over you say: “A cookie” (You should stretch out/emphasize the sound of the ‘answer’ word.)

18. Sequences/Little Stories

- Create little sequences that have 1,2, or 3 steps.
- A good example would be “door play”.
 - First, open the door and play simple peek-a-boo.
 - Then knock on the door and wait. Then pop your head in and say ‘peek-a-boo’.
 - Then say “Where’s ____ (child’s name)?”, then knock on the door, wait, and then play peek-a-boo. Use rhythm to keep the child’s interest.
- I call these ‘little stories’. The idea is to help the child understand cause and effect (more than just pushing a button and making a noise).
- Use with skills of daily living (e.g. getting shoes on, going out, taking a bath, eating) as well as playing.

19. Problem Solving

- This is fundamental technique begins at FDL 4.
- The child wants something. You play dumb. They have to take your hand to the cupboard and point to what they want. That’s problem solving. (See “Playful obstruction”)
- You say, “Time to go bye-bye.” They get up, get their shoes and bring them to you. That’s PS.
- You ask: What do we do next? They hook their train to yours. That’s a higher level of PS.
- Problem solving never ends!! Greenspan says: “Throw them curveballs, mix it up, make ‘em work.”

20. “Rabbit Hole” Techniques

The Rabbit Hole is our metaphor for the self isolation of CZ activities. ‘Joining’ a child in their CZ allows for engagement (FDL 2), and as engagement increases, the perseverative and repetitive behaviors naturally decrease. This is the goal of the "Rabbit Hole" Techniques!

- **Being With:** Simply be with (i.e. quietly observe) and wait for the child to re-engage.
- **Narrate:** Label and provide a running commentary. Focus on paying attention to what the child is doing. This means to watch and describe **out loud** what it is that he/she is doing. You may sound just like a sportscaster -- that’s good! As an example, let’s say he is coloring. You might follow what he’s doing by saying, " ... *and now you’re coloring the hat red.*" ***Don’t tell the child what to do.*** You should just describe their actions. Also, stop paying attention if he/she starts demonstrating naughty/unwanted behaviors. If for instance, he/she starts whining, ***don’t say,*** " ... *and now you’re whining.*" In cases like this, ignore the bad behavior.
- **Help him do it better:** For example, if the child is lining up cars you would begin to hand him or her additional cars to add to the line of cars or show the child new ways of using the cars.
- **Imitate/Parallel Play:** Do something similar to what the child is doing (and see if he/she will imitate you). If the child is lining up his or her toy cars, you can begin to line up a set of cars next to them but add a slight variation (e.g., line them up facing in the opposite direction).
- **Theme and Variation:** Do something different with the same activity. E.g, open and close a door. Sing a song while you open and close the door, hold the door closed until the child complains.

- **Change the Sensory Mode:** If the child is "in his or own world," you can try to engage their attention with a really fun activity (e.g., bubbles or offer other sensory activities). **Keep in mind the child's primary/preferred sensory modality (i.e. visual, tactile, auditory, etc.)*

PLAY Techniques with Examples for Functional Developmental Levels 4-6

Shared Meanings & Emotional Thinking

1. Simple pretend play

- Give dolls and cars feelings or personalities ("I'm a car and I want to go fast up and down your arm.")
- Use slapstick with the dolls (Have them fall/say ouch)
- As the child begins to be able to open simple circles (FDL 3) challenge him to do one more circle. ("Your turn" or "What does your car want to do?")
- Build simple repetitive sequences if the child can follow. ("Hi. I'm a car. I want to say hello to the animals. Hi cow. Hi Horse. Etc.")
- Use books to look at pictures and have child show you the animals, etc.

2. More complex pretend play

- Note the difference between 'pretend' and 'real'
- Add more circles to increase complexity.
- Make themes become more complex.
- Play "Army". Work with aggression/helping out
- Play doll "Hide & Seek" or 'Chase' -pretend fear).
- Play "Halloween" Get candy from play animals.
- Play "Tea Party" Work with hunger/wanting more
- Play night-night (bedtime rituals) with a doll

3. Multiple Circles of Communication

- You can increase circles easily if you think of doing so
- At first child may only close circles (i.e. respond to you.) Get them to do one more thing.
- Use natural motivations like getting ready for a bath. Make them do every single thing to take a bath. Turn on the light to the bathroom. Turn on the water, etc.
- Have them make choices about which toys they want
- Challenge yourself to create 5 more circles. Write them down.

4. Feelings, Empathy

- Identify feelings early on ("You're mad about that!" or "Boy, that was FUN!")
- ID your feelings. Use clear facial expressions.
- Draw feeling faces,
- Incorporate feelings into simple and complex pretend play (see above) or when reading stories.
- Pretend to be "sad" or "mad" or "happy" or "scared" when playing with dolls.

5. Outings

- Outings are a three step process that involves:
 - A. Reading about going somewhere (e.g. the Zoo, the Farm, to a construction site, etc.)
 - B. Going on the outing and
 - C. Talking about it afterwards.
- Outings help the child learn about time, events, language, the difference between real and pretend.

6. Using motivation

- Using natural motivations increases the numbers of circles of interaction with the child
- Natural motivators are: Leaving, Going outside, Getting dressed to go, Going for a bath, Going Swimming, Bedtime, Meals, Going for a ride. Anything sequence the child wants to do.
- Get child to open/close as many circles as possible as they go through the highly motivating activity.

7. Appropriate/Real Language

- Make requests using a natural tone of voice instead of 'baby talk' or shortened sentences.
- Instead of saying "Want more?" say "What do you want?"
- This is a way to generalize 'salient language' and increase the quality of interactions.
- Appropriate language avoids 'prompts'

8. Essays

- More verbal children and can string sentences together. Expect them to use simple essays.
- When you are reading a book don't just ask 'yes and no' type questions.
- Ask "What is going on on this page?" "Tell me 3 things you see going on."
- Eventually expect the child to tell you about their day or a recent experience (see 'Outings' below)

9. Answering 'Wh' Questions

- "What" comes first. As in "What is this animal?"
- "Where" is a close second. "Where are your shoes?"
- Then comes open-ended "what" questions. "What are you doing?" "What do you think?"
- "When" comes next. Set up sequences of activities. (See OUTINGS below)It helps to have sequences of pictures or schedules. First we do this. Then we do that.
- "Why" is a FDL 5-6 skill - children begin to understand *why* in FDL 5, but will not ask "why" questions until FDL 6. Begin by explaining simple cause and effect relationships (e.g. The doggy is sad BECAUSE he bumped his head.)
- These may seem like 'teaching' but can be incorporated into PLAY activities when the child is ready.

10. Time Concepts

- Children at Level 5 can understand simple time concepts. "Wait. OK now it's your turn." Gives rudimentary sense of time.
- –Work with calendars, schedules, clocks, seasons in the context of everyday life.
- Use the words "Yesterday, today, tomorrow, later, etc" connected to real life events ("Later we are going to go to McDonald's)
- Stories are a great introduction to time because "What happens next? Oh, then he did X, Y, Z."

11. Practicing Pronouns

- Pronouns are hard for children with autism
- Start with receptive language: 'Give it to me/her/him.' Or 'You take it.'
- Using pronouns clearly & repeatedly in pretend play and in daily life can be helpful.
- Puppet play with pronoun concepts can be helpful.

12. Model, Rehearse, Expect (for advanced workshop)

This is the process of demonstrating complex social skills that are almost on the verge of being learned (i.e. just outside the child's **zone of proximal development**).

- Model dramatic situation with toy characters
- Rehearse with people playing out the situation
- Expect means expecting the child to do the skill in question in a real life situation
- Example: Learning 'Hi and Goodbye". The doll would use the greetings, the parents would use it and then the child would be expected to use it.

13. Theory of Mind: Puppet Play (for advanced workshop)

- Puppet play can teach children at Level 5 that people are thinking about things.
- Puppets can be the 'thinking' part of the brain
- The puppet can say, "I sure would like some ice cream" and the person playing can look like they are thinking and then say, "I sure would like some ice cream."

14. Social Stories (for advanced workshop)

- Based on the work of Carol Gray.
- Social stories address children's fears, needs, desires, behaviors, feelings
- Stories are simple and descriptive.
- Can help children learn to cope more quickly with difficulties (e.g. fears) than other methods.
- ***See the PLAY Project Blog for an example.***

15. Meta-cognitive strategies (for advanced workshop)

- MCSs can help the child avoid stresses by talking about the stressful situation before it becomes problems.
- For instance: "It's too noisy in here. I want to get out." is a meta-cognitive strategy.
- Use the "Model, Rehearse, Expect" technique to help children learn MCS.

16. Everything comes alive

- This teaches children imagination skills.
- Make any object act like a puppet.
- Use a high silly voice or a deep silly voice.
- Salt shakers can say "Here I come. Shake me. I make snow!"
- Make a (half a) glass of milk waddle along the table like a person and say: "Hi. Would you drink me?" or "No, no, no! Don't drink me!!"
- Any object can 'come alive'.

17. Mirroring/Reflecting: Feelings

- This important technique helps children understand their own feelings and put words to their feelings.
- First, be alert to all the feelings the child exhibits through his/her gestures.
- Then label the feeling with words and gestures that express the feelings for the child. Match the intensity with your voice.
- This is called 'mirroring' the child's feelings because you act like a mirror only reflecting back what you see.
- A mirror would not ask questions (i.e. 'Are you mad?') Instead use statements. 'You're mad!')
- Imagine what the child would say if he or she could tell you how he/she feels.
- For example: The child is very angry that his brother took his toy. You say: "That's my toy! Leave my toy alone!!!!"
- Other examples: "Weeee, that was fun!" or "You didn't like that!" or "Stop it, Mommy, please!"
- It may seem that we are encouraging children to be disrespectful but we are not. . .
- . . .It's very important that the child be allowed to 'talk back' appropriately even if angrily. (see the technique 'Negotiating Relationships')

18. Three-way modeling

- Once the child is tuned in to the world and imitating fairly well, try 3-way modeling.
- Have dad and mom 'model' for the child.
- Let's say we want the child to answer 'wh' questions.
 - For example, at the dinner table mom could say: 'Daddy what are you eating?' Dad: "I'm eating peas." Then Dad says: "Mommy, what are you eating?" Mom say: "I'm eating some delicious chicken."
 - Then the parents ask the child.

19. Speaking 'to' and Speaking 'for' the Child

- These are two related techniques that help children expand their language once they are talking with meaning. Age equivalent 18 mo. to 2 years old. Greenspan level 4-5.
- Speaking to the child is easy. It means not baby talking but using appropriate language.
- Parents whose child has evolved to level 4 often continue to use salient language. This is not good for this stage.
- Talk to the child in normal tones and rhythms and usage. Let them hear the music of the language.
- Speaking 'for' the child is trickier. It is related to 'Add a word' and 'Three way modeling' techniques, only more sophisticated.
- This involves modeling language for the child from the child's perspective i.e. What would the child say if he could say what he means. You will speak 'for' him.
- For example, the child says, "Up!" You say, "Pick me up, daddy."
- Or the child says "Go out." and you say, "Go outside, momma." Get it?

20. Finishing up/completing a task

- Once a child is understanding most of what you say then it is time to make them finish up tasks.
- Don't let them ignore you!
- This doesn't sound like 'following their lead' but, in fact, it is because it is within their capacity (their 'lead' so to speak).
 - When you call their name, make sure they respond. (See "Negotiating the relationship")
 - Make them say things the 'right way'.

21. Negotiating the relationship

- Important for children solid at FDL 5 or higher.
- Be aware of the boundaries of your relationship and help the children be aware of them too.
- Don't let them break off the relationship without at least acknowledging it. "Hey, where you going?"
 - If I walked away from you suddenly without saying anything, you would think it was weird!
- Expect the child to say, "All done" or "No more play." (or you say it for them). (See 'Finishing up')
- *Previewing and reviewing* what you going to do and what you have just done is a wonderful way to help the child understand relationships.
 - "First, let's play trains, then we can play chase and THEN we can sword fight!"
 - "We played with trains; we chased; we played sword fight. That was fun to do together!"
- I also call this 'huddling' to make plans.
 - "OK. You be the good guy and I'll be the bad guy and you can put me in jail." or "How should play good guys and bad guys?"

22. Overdramatizing

- This technique is important to help children empathize. Children with ASD have poor abilities to 'read' others emotions.
- Overdramatize your feelings:
 - When the child will not do something, cry and whine: "**Please, please, I NEED it!!**"
 - Make your face show the feelings you have.
 - Use big gestures or a more dramatic voice to make your point.