



PLAY SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT ASSESSMENT (PLAY SEA) OVERVIEW

The PLAY School Environment Assessment (PLAY SEA) describes the key outcomes to be achieved in the classroom as a result of the Teaching PLAY autism intervention program. There are 6 identified domains:

- A. Sensory Environment
- B. Sensitivity (Reading the Children's Cues)
- C. Responsivity (Following the Children's Lead)
- D. Effectiveness (Getting 'Circles' of Interaction)
- E. Interacting at the Right Functional Developmental Levels
- F. Peer-to-peer Interaction
- G. Fun in the classroom

This document is an overview of the 6 domains for evaluation. Professionals who pursue Teaching PLAY Certification receive training in the implementation and scoring of the full assessment measure. This overview serves as a teaching tool to look at the classroom environment through the lens of Teaching PLAY's developmental, relationship-based approach to autism intervention.





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A. Sensory Environment

Narrative: *Sensory environment* is the degree to which the classroom and staff is sensory friendly to the child with ASD. A stable sensory environment is a basic need of children with ASD. The PLAY Project emphasizes being aware of the child's sensory-motor profile so that the child can be available for interaction and learning. Thus, sensory environment is the first item on the checklist. Chaotic, noisy, demanding, and/or unpredictable environments can easily over stimulate children with autism causing them to either shut down (the under-reactive child) or misbehave (the over-reactive child). Also, children with autism often have particular sensory-motor needs (i.e. a 'sensory diet'). These children seek touch, squeezing, jumping, running, etc. Sensory environment outcomes include those actions on the part of the staff that demonstrate awareness of the various sensory profiles of the children in the class and the degree to which they address those profiles.

Sensory Environment: Key Questions

- What is the child's sensory profile? Sensitivities? Interests?
- What supports are in place to accommodate the child's sensory needs?
- What sensory experiences cause the child stress?
- What sensory opportunities are available/accessible?
- How is the adult helping the child to self-regulate?

An optimal 'sensory environment' is experienced as *very supportive by the child*. Structure—like schedules, verbal reminders, and/or the ready availability of an adult to mediate the environment—is *used routinely and often designed for each child based on their individual sensory profile*. When a child in this environment experience environmental stress it is quickly recognized, the child's feelings are addressed, and positive sensory modalities are used to help the children regulate themselves. These modalities may include using sensory breaks, giving the child opportunities for deep pressure, swinging, etc. The use of touch to soothe and/or have fun with the child is common. There are many opportunities within the classroom setting for sensory modulating activities (swings, tents, etc.) that are used often. *Children enjoy the sensory environment*. Sensory environment accommodations may be a part of the child's IEP.

Sensory Environment: PLAY Techniques

- Sensory Motor Play
- Rhythm and Music
- Changing the Sensory Mode ("Rabbit Hole")



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B. Sensitivity (Reading the Children's Cues)

Narrative: This item examines the extent to which the teaching staff seems aware of and understands the child's activity or play interests during both free time and academic routines. During free time, *sensitivity* is assessed by the staff engaging in the child's choice of activity, staff's verbal comments in reference to child's interest, and staff's visual monitoring of child's behavior or activity. During academic tasks the child may not have a choice of activity in which case sensitivity is assessed by the staff accurately reading the child's cues and responding appropriately to the child's intentions, feelings, statements, and/or behaviors. Teaching staff may be sensitive but not responsive - such as in situations where they describe the child's interests but do not follow or support them.

Sensitivity: Key Questions

- Is the child choosing the activity?
- Is the adult paying attention to the child's attention and intention?
- How is the adult's positioning during interactions?
- Does the adult seem to be reading the child's cues correctly?

In classrooms with optimal 'sensitivity' the teaching staff seems to be aware of the children's interests. They often position themselves so that they can make face to face contact with the child. Staff consistently monitors the children's behavior often detecting subtle and hard-to-detect communications from the children

Sensitivity:

PLAY Techniques

- Being With
- Narrating ("Rabbit Hole")
- Expectant Waiting



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C. Responsivity (Following the Children's Lead)

Narrative: This item rates the frequency, consistency and supportiveness of the teaching staff's responses to the children's behaviors. Responses are supportive when they *match* the child's actions, requests and intentions. Responsivity is assessed in relation to child behaviors that both *demand a response* from adults as well as non-demand behaviors that may not be directed toward the adult. Child behaviors include play, academic, and social activity as well as facial expressions, vocalizations, gestures, signs of discomfort, body language, requests and intentions.

Responsivity: Key Questions

- Is the adult responding to the child's gestural and verbal communication in a supportive way?
- Does the adult follow the child's idea?
- Who is opening most of the circles of communication?

In an optimally 'responsive' classroom teaching staff respond to *almost all* of the child's *demand behaviors* and to *most (>60%)* of the child's *non-demand behaviors* and intentions including subtle and hard to detect gestures, vocalizations and other behaviors. The teaching staff's responses are almost always supportive in insofar as they encourage the child's activity (take into consideration the academic requirements of the situation). *The majority (>75%)* of the teaching staff's responses match the child's behavior such that the teaching staff's responses are directly related to what the child is doing. For example, if a child is playing, the staff would respond with actions to the child's activity; if the child is vocalizing or communicating the staff would respond by vocalizing or communicating.

Responsivity: PLAY Techniques

- Big, Little, and Micro Circles
- Asked and Answered
- Theme and Variation



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D. Effectiveness (Getting 'Circles' of Interaction)

Narrative: This item refers to the school staff's ability to engage each of the children, regardless of their FDL profile, *in back and forth interaction* during both academic and free play situations. Staff should focus not only on academic tasks but be continuously aware of the importance of the 'interactional process.' Effectiveness is closely related to 'Responsiveness' (see C. above) and 'Interacting at the Appropriate Functional Developmental Level' (see E. below) since, by responding contingently and interacting at the right level, more interactional exchanges are likely. 'Effectiveness' means that the school staff are able to gain the children's attention, cooperation and participation in a *reciprocal* exchange characterized ultimately by balanced turn taking.

Effectiveness: Key Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How many circles of communication are happening in a row?• Is the adult enthusiastic, animated, and fun?• Is the adult focused on the interactional process ("going for circles")?• How is the adult's pace of play?• Is the adult incorporating multiple sensory modes into the play?• Is the adult expanding on the play to challenge the child?

In an optimally 'effective' classroom school staff are successful in engaging the child in a joint activity or communication to their capacity most of the time (>75% of the time). For a higher functioning child, interactive sequences generally last 6-10 or more turns at a time. *Most* of these interactive sequences are characterized by a balanced, reciprocal exchange of interactive turns. For a lower or medium functioning child, staff are able to interact optimally most of the time getting as many exchanges as can be expected given the children's various FDLs. With little prompting the school staff is successful at encouraging the children to transition into this pattern of longer and longer interactions with progressively more initiations on the part of the children. There is a focus in the classroom on the 'interactional process' almost all of the time. Pacing is consistently good, not too fast or too slow and promotes interaction.

Effectiveness: PLAY Techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Big, Little, and Micro Circles• Taffy Pulling• Making Them Work
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E. Interacting at the Right Functional Developmental Levels

Narrative: This item rates the degree to which the school staff are playing at the right functional developmental level (FDL) with the child with ASD. As an important part of Teaching PLAY, the teacher and school staff should have done an 'Individual Profile' on the child including Comfort Zone, Sensory-Motor Profile, and importantly Functional Developmental Level Profile. This item focuses on FDL but includes the other two elements. School staff should not be interacting at too high of a level (i.e. Zone of Potential Development) or too low (i.e. Comfort Zone) but should be interacting at the 'just right' developmental level (i.e. Zone of Proximal Development). This becomes especially important during academic tasks, which are often in the Zone of Potential Development for many children with ASD.

FDLs: Key Questions

- Is the adult playing in the Zone of Proximal Development?
- How often is the child engaged in Comfort Zone activities?

Optimal interaction in the classroom is characterized by school staff who *consistently* (75% of the time) interact in the right way for the child's FDL profile. They may *occasionally* misinterpret the child's FDL interacting in a way that is too high, (e.g. making academic demands that are in the Zone of Potential Development and/or talking to them in a way that is 'over their head'). Children are not allowed to spend much of their time (less than 25%) alone doing Comfort Zone activities without being engaged. Staff *often* interact in a way that addresses the subtler aspects of the child's FDL profile (e.g. focusing on getting 'circles' for a FDL 3-4 child; doing one thematic pretend play or joking for a FDL 5 child).

FDLs: PLAY Techniques

- "Rabbit Hole Techniques" (FDLs: 1-2)
- Little Sequences (FDLs 3-4)
- Simple Pretend (FDL 5)
- Feelings and Empathy (FDL 6)



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F. Peer-to-peer Interaction

Narrative: In addition to adult-child interactions, Teaching PLAY aims to help especially those children with ASD who have reached a FDL 4 capacity or above to interact with their peers. For children with lower FDLs the staff should encourage the peers to make overtures to the child. This item evaluates the extent to which school staff are aware of the child's capacity to interact with peers and the degree to which they promote peer-to-peer interaction in the classroom.

Peer-To-Peer Interaction: Key Questions

- Is the adult facilitating interaction with peers?
- Are activities designed to promote opportunities for peer play?
- Are peers encouraged to interact with the child on the spectrum?

In an optimal classroom peer-to-peer interaction is frequently promoted. School staff are *consistently* aware of the importance of peer-to-peer interaction for the child with ASD. During school routines and academic tasks, staff *consistently* promote peer interaction (e.g. encourage one child to give something to another child). During free time children with ASD are *frequently* encouraged to engage in peer-to-peer interaction with some adult facilitation.

Peer-To-Peer

Interaction:

PLAY Techniques

- 3-Way Modeling
- Theory of Mind: Puppet Play
- Making Behaviors Purposeful



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G. Fun in the Classroom

Narrative: ‘Fun in the classroom’ is characterized by the experience of enjoyment and positive mood by the child with ASD. When the classroom is fun, the child looks forward to going to school every day. They look forward to the routine, they like the staff, the environment is not too stressful for them, and to a large extent their needs based on their Comfort Zone, Sensory-Motor Profile and FDL Profile are met. In a fun environment, the school staff are warm, kindhearted, and know how to be inventive in little ways that are fun and funny. *Fun in the classroom* does not mean that the classroom lacks structure and order. The most fun classrooms combine structure and nurture in equal amounts.

Fun: Key Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is there a sense of joy during interactions?• What is the quality of the adult’s affect?• What is the quality of the child’s affect?• Is everyone having fun?

Optimally Fun classrooms may range from somewhat unstructured to moderately structured, with established routines and an academic orientation. The usual play of children is allowed and *consistently* encouraged. The staff are supportive, kind, and consistently fun. While the schedule, academics, and following the rules are still important for creating a predictable environment, there is tolerance for deviation from the structure and a *moderate* degree of flexibility toward the rules. Children who don’t follow the rules are *consistently* reminded of the rules and gently re-directed to the tasks at hand with a sense of humor. The staff tends to be *more child-centered* than *task-oriented* and show consistent warmth, playfulness, and animated expressiveness. Throughout the school day, they *often* promote playfulness for its own sake. While they *usually* stay within the structure of the class they *consistently* demonstrate a larger repertoire of innovative approaches that might interest the child (e.g. use different ways of using toys/materials or inventing a new or creative way to get information across). Children with ASD in these types of classrooms *seldom* show stress (i.e. through misbehavior) due to the demands placed on them.

Fun: PLAY Techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Going For Fun• Humor, Suspense, and Surprise• Everything Come Alive
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