

Myth - Communication can't be learned in play

Communication is a part of everything we do...even play. Think about playing a peekaboo game with a baby, blowing bubbles with a toddler, or finger painting with an older child. In all of these instances the child is having fun and participating in an activity they enjoy, but they are also interacting, taking turns, and communicating with others.

Think about how you play with your child.



At times, a parent may feel their child's therapist or teacher is just 'playing' with their child versus teaching or instructing. They may believe communication, language, and other skills can't be taught during play but should be taught in a more structured way. However, research, observation, and professionals' reports show us that communication can (and probably should) be learned through play.

What does research say?

For years researchers have studied if play enhances learning. The conclusions are clear. The simple act of 'play' facilitates learning; it creates a strong support for academic and social learning. "In fact, comparisons of preschools that use playful, child-centered approaches versus less playful, more teacher-directed approaches reveal that children in the child-centered approaches do better in tests of reading, language, writing, and math"¹.

Research shows us that play and learning are solidly linked. Mitchel Resnick⁴ says that play helps children "test out ideas, exercise their imagination, explore new possibilities, and refine their creative instincts". Here are just a few examples of how play, in this case with a train, offers opportunities to enhance communication as well:

Communication Skill	Train Example
Explore new language concepts	"The train went through the tunnel and under the bridge"
Learn new words	"The last car is called a caboose"
Improve initiation and turn-taking	"It's my turn to build the track"
Increase social interactions	"Which car do you like best?"
Reinforce power of choice making	"I want five trains not one."
Review how to request for help	"Can you fix my train?"
Communicate to solve problems	"The track is breaking, we need less hills."

Children learn concepts and the power of communication best when they are motivated. These situations are often found in play.

Where to start?

Angeline Lillard researched what are the characteristics of play that that make learning more achievable – playful learning³. She identified the following:

- Freedom to choose
- Interaction with hands-on activities
- Ability to involve peers



Freedom to Choose

Think about how excited a young child gets when given a choice. They might choose what to play, who to play with or how to play. This is playful but it's also powerful communication. A child who cannot speak needs a way to communicate all of these things and to do so in situations that are motivating and natural. This is why use of AAC is so important in a play situations.

Hands-on Play

Often times, if a child has significant speech, motor, and/or development delays their play can be less interactive. These children may appear to prefer watching videos, hearing music, listening to story books, watching their sister blow bubbles, etc. ...but wouldn't we all rather 'do' then 'watch'?

As caregivers and professionals we need to get more creative about how to help the child really interact, manipulate, and participate in play activities. Offer opportunities for communication within the child's typical day² then support the child in actually doing the activity. If a child has physical or mobility challenges, their occupational or physical therapist can be of help in making play more physically accessible. To get the most out of playful learning it needs to be more hands-on interaction and less 'watching' and AAC helps us with that too.



Interaction with Peers



Do children who have speech impairments get to interact as much with their peers as other children without disabilities? In most cases, the answer is no. This is really unfortunate because one of the greatest things about play is who you get to interact with as well as the potential for making friends and to learn by watching others. Let's take advantage of and create opportunities for children who use AAC to play and interact with peers. As an adult supporting the child, stand back and let them interact as much as possible and, when you do need to provide support, do so in a way that does not draw the peers focus to you.

In conclusion, the power of communication and the use of AAC is best seen during play activities and learning will happen even faster when interactive play is involved.

References:

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