

Vaska Stancheva-Popkostadinova and Tatjana Zorcec

14 Play in Early Intervention for Children with Disabilities

14.1 Introduction

Early intervention is described as a system designed to support family patterns of interaction that best promote child development (Guralnick, 2001), consisting in multidisciplinary services provided to children from birth to five years of age (Shonkoff & Meisels, 2000).

Blackman sustains that “the goal of early [childhood] intervention is to prevent or minimise the physical, cognitive, emotional, and resource limitations of young children with biological or environmental risk factors” (2003:2).

Numerous studies emphasise the benefits of early intervention in the process of achieving developmental targets and goals for children with disabilities. Play has a central role in early intervention for children with disabilities, and it is used both for assessment and intervention. Some researchers regard play as a developmental domain, some as a medium for the development of specific skills (Bergen, 1987), while the others consider play as a domain for assessment, intervention, and curriculum activities (Lifter et al., 2011) in the process of delivering intervention procedures aimed at improving the a child’s developmental and learning abilities (Casby, 2003; Lifter, 2008; Linder, 1993; Nwokah et al., 2013; Pierce, 1997).

Adults often use playtime to help children learn and often demand that play is functional to scopes other than fun. Obviously, learning is really important, but adults must not forget that when children play, ‘function’ is not what they are looking for. Children are simply playing and having fun. We know that play is intrinsically motivated and children are strongly determined to do this activity. When adults attempt to structure and direct the children’s play, sometimes their intervention can be stressful and children can respond rebelliously (Sutton-Smith, 1987). Needless to say, adults must support play, facilitate and promote positive play. This support is especially beneficial for children with developmental delays.

14.2 Play in Early Intervention

One of the first extended overviews concerning the use of play in early intervention was proposed by Doris Bergen, who made an interesting review of the existing literature on the “suggested uses of play for assessment, prevention, and intervention with special needs children” (Bergen, 1991:1). The vision and proposals she stressed are still actual: play-based model of assessment conducted by a trans-disciplinary

team; advantages and recommendations for overcoming the disadvantages of uses of play in early intervention for children with disabilities.

The use of play as a context for assessment and intervention and as a vehicle for successful inclusion in early care and educational settings intensified in the 1990s (Buchanan & Johnson, 2009). In their analysis of the use of play in early intervention, Lifter et al. (2011) delineated two important benefits of play for children with disabilities: facilitation of the development of more advanced play skills and the provision of a natural playful context to make it easier important clinical activities, such as the assessment and the implementation of educational and rehabilitation activities with a wide variety of goals in different developmental areas.

Early intervention programmes for children with disabilities are generally based on three different approaches: behavioural, developmental, and a combination of both. While the first approach is mainly addressed to implement new abilities in the child through specific 'ad hoc' plans of intervention, the last two are more related to the use of play and will briefly discussed in what follows.

The *developmental approach* is generally play-based and carried out in the child's natural environment. While adults play an integral part when applying the methodologies related to this approach, they do not actively structure or lead the learning opportunity. Play-based approaches to learning support the concept of natural environments presented in the early intervention literature (Dunst, 2007; Dunst & Bruder, 2002; Hanft & Pilkington, 2000). Play activities are used to implement goals in a variety of developmental domains (Sandall et al., 2005) for child-focussed interventions (Wolery, 2005).

Several studies have provided evidence of systematic relationships between developments in play and developments in other domains (Lifter et al., 2011). The integration of activities addressed to teach new skills into the play routines can be effective in improving both play and other developmental domains (Dunst, 1981).

Combined programmes have been developed using principles from both the behavioural and developmental approaches. In what follows, some example are shortly presented.

The Early Start Denver model promotes learning through play in natural routines, in combination with structured teaching techniques associated with behavioural therapies; it aims at developing play skills and language abilities (Rogers & Dawson, 2010). TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication handicapped CHildren) is an intensive intervention programme to promote learning and development, in particular, in the areas of communication and social skills, independence, coping skills, and skills for daily life. Children are supported by creating a very structured learning environment (Peeremboom, 2003). JASPER (Joint Attention Symbolic Play Engagement Regulation) targets the foundations of social communication (joint attention, imitation, play), uses naturalistic strategies to increase the rate and complexity of social communication, and includes parents and teachers as implementers of the intervention to promote generalisation across settings and activities and to ensure maintenance over time (Kasari et al., 2012).

14.3 Play-based Assessment

Assessment of development of sensorimotor and social play, as well as the onset, quantity, and quality of symbolic play in children can give indications about the possible delays in other developmental domains, and may support and validate other assessment measures that denote developmental problems (Bergen, 1991).

Play-based assessment occurs either in a special setting that has been designed to elicit a wide variety of behaviours (Linder, in 1990, gave a detailed description of this approach) or by observing play at the child's own home or within the setting where the existing early intervention programme is carried out.

Fewell et al. (1997) delineate the following advantages of play environment as a setting for the assessment: fewer demands on the child; more choices for the child to demonstrate his or her competencies; more active role of the child in the assessment; play allows the examiner to measure the child's skills across several play tasks and in several domains.

The existing empirical literature indicates that there are numerous benefits to using play assessment and intervention with young children: in fact, the assessment is conducted in the natural environment of play, emphasises learning in the context of daily routine, including child-preferred activities (Buchanan & Johnson, 2009); furthermore, play is motivating and elicits the highest level of a child's functioning (Kelly-Vance, 2008). In comparison to other types of assessment, play-based assessment was found to take less time and resulted in more favourable parent and staff perceptions (Myers et al., 1996); it removes many of the limitations associated with traditional assessment, and in case of children with disabilities, it offers also a number of opportunities to adapt the context to their needs (Fewell et al., 1997).

The *trans-disciplinary play-based assessment* is a method, developed by Linder, that brings together parents and professionals and gives the latter the opportunity to evaluate young children in a natural environment. Trans-disciplinary play-based assessment is a criterion-referenced developmental assessment approach designed to assist the planning of interventions for children with disabilities. During the assessment, the child and his or her parents play with developmentally appropriate toys, while the team members, through observation, assess the child's strengths and weaknesses across all developmental areas. The team members also make observations about the parent-child interaction (King et al., 2009). No specialised test materials are required and the assessment is not standardised: this allows for cross-cultural use. Assessment is unstructured, and a child's developmental status is examined through the informal context of play. The information obtained during the assessment is used to formulate the main goal and objectives of the further individualised intervention.

This type of assessment is less stressful for children and less burdened to the family. Linder (1993) indicates that the advantages of the adoption of such a method include: the use of the natural environment, a better rapport with examiners,

parent involvement, major flexibility in testing domains, the assumption of an integrated, holistic perspective on child development, and more useful information for planning intervention. The application of the transdisciplinary play-based assessments needs less time to complete than multidisciplinary standardised assessments (Myers et al., 1996), and it is a cost- and time-effective method (Bergen, 1991).

Bergen (1991) also stresses that developmental levels and delays may be effectively assessed by a team of specialists observing children in a play environment, and that, if the team maintains sensitivity to the elements that should be present for play to occur, the method can be successful without distorting the meaning of play.

14.4 Challenges in Using Play in Early Intervention

The scientific literature sustains the benefits of the play as an integral part in early intervention programmes; nevertheless, there are some challenges and limitations related to the context, parents, and practitioners.

Some early intervention researchers (Bray & Cooper, 2007; Dunst, 2000; Moore, 2008; Rix et al., 2008) report that children with a disability or developmental delay are not always supported to be included in play experiences, and that, play contexts may be overlooked as to their qualities of excellent sites for learning in both centre- or home-based interventions.

In order to achieve the goals of interventions, self-confidence and skills of parents in their abilities to nurture and teach their children must be enhanced (Nwokah et al., 2013). Some studies report parental dissatisfaction with the pressure to carry out activities as part of a programme as well as insufficient support to encourage their child to play (Rix et al., 2008). Matthews and Rix (2013) pointed out as a key challenge for parents involved in early intervention programmes to encourage their child to play and learn through enjoyable, daily childhood experiences. There are specialists complaining that parents do not seem to appreciate the role of play in child development, nor did they prove to be able to play with their children, especially when it comes to shared-object play and pretend play (Cumming & Wong, 2012; Nwokah et al., 2013).

On the other side, some authors (Bray & Cooper, 2007; Moore, 2008; Muir et al., 2008) found that many early childhood practitioners feel unprepared for and lack the knowledge and skills to implement appropriate interventions within their regular play-based programmes and routines. This may create some tensions and may impact the effectiveness of the interventions.

Both specialists and parents of children with disabilities need to be aware of the elements that must be maintained as play activities, as well as about the characteristics that play must assume to be truly playful, to the purpose of maintaining those elements whenever they use play in early intervention (Bergen, 1991).

14.5 Conclusion

Play is a normal activity in the childhood and is widely used in early intervention for children with disabilities. Nevertheless, the overemphasis on using play in early intervention as a means of instruction can be a serious barrier for the development of spontaneous and voluntary play by the child; in addition, in the early intervention, practice play is far from being the only determinant of any learning that takes place (Smith & Gossom, 2010).

Play can contribute significantly in helping children to feel in control with their lives, in using their preferred modes of interaction, and it is also crucial to the development of their self-worth and their competence (Bergen, 1991). The experience of using play in early intervention can contribute for achievement of ‘play for the sake of play’ for children with disabilities, but to reach this goal, future studies are still needed.

References

- Bergen, D. (1987). *Play as a Medium for Learning and Development*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Bergen, D. (1991, April). *Play as the Vehicle for Early Intervention with At-Risk Infants and Toddlers*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Educational Research Association Chicago. Retrieved from: <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED335115.pdf>.
- Blackman, J. A. (2003) Early Intervention: An Overview. In: S. L. Odom, M. J. Hanson, J. A. Blackman, & S. Kaul (Eds.), *Early Intervention Practices around the World*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.
- Bray, P., & Cooper, R. (2007). The play of children with special needs in mainstream and special education settings. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 32(2), 37-42.
- Buchanan, M., & Johnson, T. G. (2009). A Second Look at the Play of Young Children with Disabilities. *American Journal of Play*, 2(1), 41-59.
- Casby, M. W. (2003). Developmental Assessment of Play: A Model for Early Intervention. *Communication Disorders Quarterly*, 24, 175-183.
- Cumming, T., & Wong, S. (2012). Professionals don't play: Challenges for early childhood educators working in a transdisciplinary early intervention team. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 37(1), 127-135.
- Dunst, C. J. (1981). *Infant Learning: A Cognitive-Linguistic Intervention Strategy*. Hingham, MS: Teaching Resources.
- Dunst, C. J. (2000). Revisiting “Rethinking early intervention”. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 20, 95-104.
- Dunst, C. J. (2007). Early intervention for infants and toddlers with developmental disabilities. In S. L. Odom, R. H. Horner, M. E. Snell, & J. Blacher, J. (Eds.), *Handbook of Developmental Disabilities*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Dunst, C. J., & Bruder, M. B. (2002). Valued outcomes of service coordination, early intervention, and natural environments. *Exceptional Children*, 68(3), 361-375.
- Fewell, R., Ogura, T., & Wheeden, A. (1997). The Relationship Between Play and Communication Skills in Young Children with Down Syndrome. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 17(1), 103-118.

- Guralnick, M. J. (2001) A Developmental Systems' Model for Early Intervention. *Infants and Young Children*, 14(2), 1-18.
- Hanft, B. E., & Pilkington, K. O. (2000). Therapy in natural environments: The means or end goal for early intervention?. *Infants and Young Children*, 12(4), 1-13.
- Kasari, C., Gulsrud, A., Freeman, S., Paparella, T, & Helleman, G (2012). Longitudinal follow up of children with autism receiving targeted interventions on joint attention and play. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 51, 487-495.
- King, G., Strachan, D., Tucker, M., Duwyn, B., Desserud, S., & Shillington, M. (2009). The Application of a Transdisciplinary Model for Early Intervention Service. *Infants & Young Children*, 22(3), 211-223.
- Kelly-Vance, L., & Ryalls, B. O. (2008). Best Practices in Play Assessment and Intervention. *Best Practices in School Psychology V*, 33(2), 549-560.
- Lifter, K. (2008). Developmental Play Assessment and Teaching. In J. K. Luiselli, D. C. Russo, & W. P. Christian (Eds.), *Effective Practices for Children with Autism: Educational and Behavioral Support Interventions That Work* (pp. 299-324). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Lifter, K., Foster-Sanda, S., Arzamarski, C., Briesch J., & McClure, E. (2011). Overview of Play. Its Uses and Importance in Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education. *Infants & Young Children*, 24(3), 225-245.
- Linder, T. W. (1990). *Transdisciplinary Play-Based Assessment*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.
- Linder, T. W. (1993). *Transdisciplinary Play-Based Assessment: A Functional Approach to Working with Young Children* (rev. ed.). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.
- Matthews A., & Rix, J. (2013). Early intervention: parental involvement, child agency and participation in creative play. *Early Years*, 33(3), 239-251.
- Moore, T. (2011). *Early Childhood Intervention Reform Project. Revised Literature Review. Executive Summary*. Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, State of Victoria. Retrieved from: <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/childhood/providers/needs/ecislitreview-execsum.pdf>.
- Myers, C. L., McBride, S. L., & Peterson, C. A. (1996). Transdisciplinary, play-based assessment in early childhood special education: An examination of social validity. *Topics for Early Childhood Special Education*, 16(1), 102-126.
- Muir, K., Tudball, J., & Robinson, S. (2008). *Family Resilience where Families have a Child (0-8) with Disability. Final Report*. Sydney, NSW: Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales.
- Nwokah, E., Hsu, H. C., & Gulker, H. (2013). The Use of Play Materials in Early Intervention. The Dilemma of Poverty. *American Journal of Play*, 5 (2), 187-216.
- Nwokah, E., & Hope, G. (2006). Emergent Literacy for Children with Special Needs: Developing Positive Interest in Literacy Experiences (Part II). *ACEI: Focus on Infants and Toddlers*, 19, 1-8.
- Peerboom, T. D. (2003). *A literature review of the Treatment and Education for Autistic and related Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH) program*. Research paper, University of Wisconsin-Stout, Wisconsin, United States of America.
- Pierce, D. R. (1997). The Power of Object Play for Infants and Toddlers at Risk for Developmental Delays. In D. L. Parham, & L. S. Fazio (Eds). *Play in Occupational Therapy for Children* (pp. 86-111). St. Louis: Mosby.
- Rix, J., Paige-Smith, A., & Jones, H. (2008). 'Until the cows came home': issues for early intervention activities? Parental perspectives on early years learning of their children with Down syndrome. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 9(1), 66-79.
- Rogers, S. J., & Dawson, G. (2010). *Early Start Denver Model for Young Children with Autism. Promoting Language, Learning, and engagement*. New York and London: Guilford Press.

- Sandall, S., Hemmeter, M. L., Smith, B. J., & McLean, M. E. (2005). *DEC Recommended Practices: A Comprehensive Guide for Practical Application*. Missoula, MT: DEC.
- Shonkoff, J. P., & Meisels, S. J. (2000). *Handbook of Early Childhood Intervention*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, P.K., & Gossom, Y. (2010). *Children and Play*. Hoboken, NY: Wiley & Blackwell.
- Sutton-Smith, B. (1987). The struggle between sacred play and festive play. In D. Bergen (Ed.), *Play as a Medium for Learning and Development* (pp. 45-48). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Wolery, M. (2005). DEC recommended practices: Child-focused practices. In S. Sandall, M. L. Hemmeter, B. J. Smith, & M. E. McLean (Eds.), *DEC Recommended Practices: A Comprehensive Guide for Practical Application*. Missoula, MT: DEC.