

# **A Playful Approach to Treating Autism Spectrum Disorders**

by Robert Jason Grant Ed.D, LPC, RPT-S

I am always surprised when I hear someone tell me that children with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) cannot play. In my work with children with autism, which is predominantly play based treatment approaches, I see children play all the time in all kinds of ways. Some children with ASDs may not play in traditional or conventional ways but they do play. I am reminded of a young boy with autism who came into my office and always wanted to go to a specific play therapy room because it had a storage closet in it and he wanted to play with the vacuum cleaner. He rarely ever played with or noticed any of the toys in the play therapy room, but he played with the vacuum cleaner regularly. He played many different games with the vacuum and through his “vacuum play” we worked on skill development and had great success.

Many successful Autism treatments are play based. Floortime, The Play Project, Relationship Development Intervention (RDI), and Replays, are all common approaches to working with children with ASDs and all are play based treatments. The trend seems to be moving toward a play approach when working with children with autism. Evidence based treatments such as Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) are using play to help reach behavior goals. Some of the more popular ABA based approaches such as Pivotal Response Training and Comprehensive Behavioral Treatment for Young Children (CBTYC) focus on and use play to implement ABA procedures and accomplish treatment goals. Integrated Play Groups (another evidence based treatment approach) focuses on play groups that have one or two neurotypical peers involved in social play with children with autism spectrum disorders.

Play Therapy, a treatment approach that involves using play to treat a variety of issues and disorders, has many directive approaches and elements that can help children with ASDs to gain needed skills. Emotional regulation issues and social skills deficits are common with children with ASD’s. Play therapy approaches are designed to work on these deficits in a way that is natural, playful, and engaging to both the child and his or her parents. Directive play therapy techniques help children practice and learn skills and can be learned by parents and implemented at home for repetition and a greater retention of skill development.

Although symbolic and metaphor play is typically something that children with ASD’s struggle with, through treatment, children with ASD’s can begin to play symbolically and use and understand metaphor in their play. Regardless of symbolic play levels, children with ASD’s still play, and want to play and long for group and social play. For most of these children, the issue is not knowing how to engage or “play” not a lack of desire to do so.

Play is a child’s natural language, even children with ASDs. When working with a child with an ASD, it is important to remember that a label does not define or dictate what a child can do.

Diagnosis can greatly assist in helping with understanding and creating treatment plans, but what a child with an ASD can do, accomplish, or become is undetermined, and it is essential that we never cap the process so that we can leave the playful possibilities wide open.

In my work with the Play Therapy and Autism Network, I have been compiling a literature review addressing Play Therapy and play approaches in working with and treating children with autism disorders. The following is a partial list of that review:

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Dr. Grant works with children, adolescents, adults, couples, and families. His experience and specialization involves working with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Mood Disorders, Bipolar Disorder, Depression Disorders, Anxiety Disorders, Post Traumatic Stress

Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, and Adjustment Disorders (divorce, grief and transition issues). Dr. Grant also specializes in working with Autism Spectrum Disorders (Autism, Aspergers Disorder and Pervasive Development Disorder) and other developmental disabilities. Dr. Grant is the creator of <sup>™</sup>AutPlay Therapy, an autism and developmental disabilities treatment using play therapy, cognitive and behavioral therapy and relationship development approaches.

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