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**I just want my child to be invited to a birthday party!
User Friendly Strategies to Promote Social Inclusion**

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Have you heard the words of a parent “I just want my child to be invited to a birthday party!” A distinct lack of social interaction between children with a disability and their peers is prevalent, even in socially responsive and developmentally appropriate early childhood programs. Research emphasises that social inclusion cannot be maximised incidentally, without a planned approach using a range of validated strategies (Brown, Odom & Conroy, 2001). A peer mediated approach is generally supported as the most efficacious in promoting long term positive changes. Further investigation of the research confirms that identified strategies to promote peer mediation are not being transferred to practice within everyday early childhood programs (Brown & Odom, 1995; Odom et al., 1993).

This research was congruent with our own experience. A collaborative project was initiated by Broad Insight Group and conducted in a local kindergarten. The aims of the research were to investigate: (i) whether strategies designed to promote peer mediation could be readily adapted and applied within a range of early childhood settings (ECSs), and (ii) would these adapted strategies lead to positive social outcomes for a child with a disability and their peers. The outcomes supported our initial hypotheses, resulting in significant increases in social acceptance by the child’s peers, peer mediated interactions and in the frequency and quality of interactions by and towards the child. This research has been published in the Australian Journal of Early Childhood. A practical and user-friendly resource package has been developed from the research, and is now being implemented within a number of community services. We believe that this model positively impacts on the way in which children with a disability are supported within their community.

Key words: social inclusion, peer-mediation, user-friendly strategies

Introduction:

Due to our interest in the social inclusion of young children with disabilities within community early childhood settings (ECS), a comprehensive review of the literature was conducted. We found while strategies to promote social interaction and acceptance between children with a disability and their peers were clearly identified and documented, they were not widely employed within ECS programs.

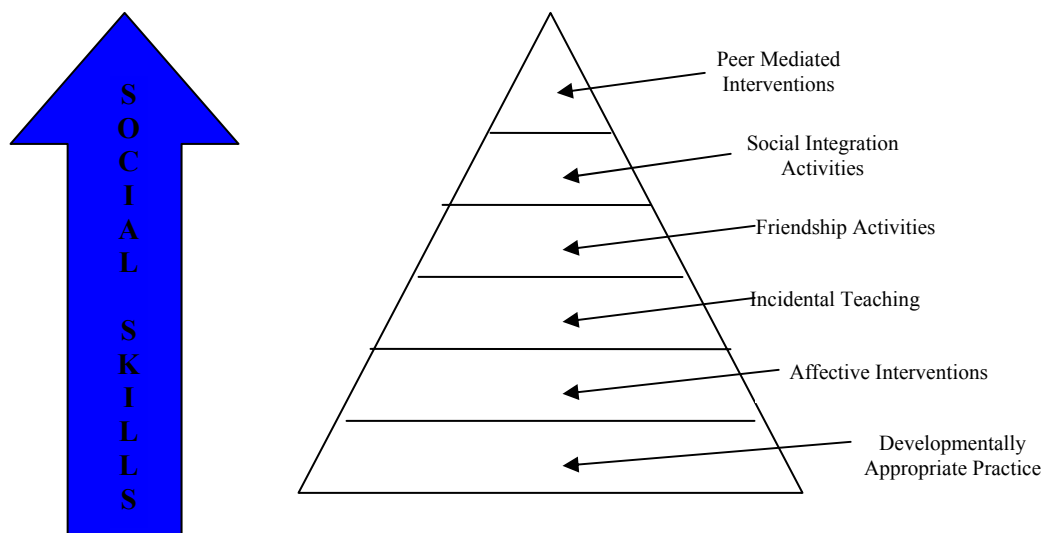
Hence, a research project was implemented within a local kindergarten, where the strategies identified in the research were modified to be incorporated within the ongoing program. The results of this project confirmed that when adapted, the strategies led to increased social acceptance and interaction for a child with a disability, and positive outcomes for peers. In response to the compelling research evidence and the results of the project, a program package was developed for application within community ECSs. This program has been successfully piloted in a number of ECSs, with a wider dissemination being the next step.

Literature Review:

Research tells us that social interaction within the peer culture is the basis from which friendships develop (Guralnick, 1990), and is an important medium through which language, cognitive and social learning takes place (Guralnick, 1981; McEvoy & Odom, 1987). Current literature reinforces the observation that typically developing children are more likely to interact socially with one another than with peers who have developmental delays or disabilities (Guralnick, 1981; Stoneman, 1993), and that compared with typically developing peers, children with disabilities in inclusive settings can interact with adults up to twelve times more (Harper & McCluskey, 2003; Hundert et al., 1998). Young children who do not have access to positive social interactions with peers are at risk of social maladjustment in later life (Brown, Odom & Conroy, 2001; Strain & Odom, 1986). Considering the above findings, it seems reasonable to suggest that children with a disability are likely to have reduced social opportunities, and consequently the potential for them to form friendships is severely limited, even within inclusive ECSs.

How then can social interaction between children with disabilities and their peers be facilitated? A range of social interventions aimed at facilitating social acceptance and social interaction between young children with disabilities and their peers have been comprehensively identified within the literature. These interventions were investigated in a study by Brown, Odom & Conroy (2001), and depicted within the following hierarchy.

Figure 1: Social Skills Hierarchy (Brown, Odom & Conroy (2001), p.164)



These authors found that while the four interventions at the bottom of the hierarchy may occur within many ECSs, it is unlikely that all would be present, and were insufficient to improve social outcomes for children with a disability. They argue that social integration activities and peer mediation interventions, at the top of the hierarchy, need to be present for this to occur. These are defined as follows:

- Social Integration activity interventions are those where staff arrange for children with limited peer interaction to be in contact with peers who are highly socially competent (Frea et al., 1999; Odom et al., 1988).
- Peer mediated interventions are programs designed to train typically developing peers with the social skills needed to draw children with disabilities into the play (DeKlyen & Odom, 1989; English et al., 1997; Goldstein, 1993; Goldstein, English & Kaczmarek, 1997; Harper & McCluskey, 2003; Kohler & Strain, 1993; Odom et al., 1988; Visoky & Dickerman-Poe, 2000).

This corroborated the results of a study by Odom et al. (1999) which found that social integration and peer-mediated interventions produced the greatest social outcomes for children with a disability in both the short and long term.

Several studies found that these planned social interventions were being infrequently incorporated into community ECSs (Guralnick, 2001; Hamilton, 1994; McConnell, McEvoy & Odom, 1992; Michnowicz et al., 1995; Odom & Buysse, 2002), and that often strategies were not user friendly (Brown & Odom, 1995; McEvoy & Odom, 1987; Odom et al., 1993). In response to the challenges identified regarding the implementation of interventions within community ECSs, coupled with the evidence highlighting the importance of planned social skills interventions, a research project was initiated.

Research Project:

Goals:

The goals of the project were to investigate:

1. Whether strategies designed to promote peer mediation could be readily adapted and applied within a range of ECSs? and
2. Would these adapted strategies lead to positive social outcomes for a child with a disability and their peers?

Method:

The research project was conducted in close collaboration with the staff from a local kindergarten, where a child with a developmental disability, Milly*, was attending. The project team reviewed the literature and from this chose the most relevant strategies to promote peer mediation within this environment. Goldstein, English & Kaczmarek's (1997) "Stay Play & Talk" program, coupled with Social Integration activities, were adapted to be able to be used within the everyday program of the kindergarten. It was felt that, in accordance with best practice, the program needed to commence early within the year, once the group was settled to enable the program to fulfill its goals. The program was planned and evaluated collaboratively each week, which was found to be fundamental to the success and outcomes of the program.

Results:

Three evaluation measures were used within the research; (i) a sociometric rating scale, where children were asked to rank friends in order of preference using an adapted version of McConnell & Odom's (1986) Friendship Train (cited in English et al., 1997); (ii) intensive ecobehavioural assessment of the child's and peers' social interactions using an adapted version of CASPERII (Brown, Favazza & Odom, 1995 cited in Brown et al., 1999), (iii) a quantitative and qualitative parent perception evaluation which surveyed the whole population of parents.

The results indicated that the program led to;

1. an increase in social acceptance of Milly by 79% of the group, after maintenance,
2. an increase in peer initiated interaction towards Milly, from 3% during baseline analysis to 31% at the conclusion of the program.
3. spontaneous peer mediation increased from 0% during baseline analysis to 21% at the end of the program.
4. parents noted most commonly that there was some change in their child's social functioning and attitudes, and were entirely positive when commenting about the program.

The results corroborated the findings within the literature, and showed that validated strategies were able to be readily adapted for use within ECSs. This led to the development of a Social Inclusion Program package.

Social Inclusion Program:

Goals and Strategies

The goals of the Social Inclusion Program are to increase the social participation of children with disabilities and/or children with difficulties accessing the social play, through the involvement of peers, known as peer mediation. Two main strategies are utilised within the program (a) Social Integration activities, and (b) The "Stay Play & Talk" social program. While the program is designed to be user friendly and flexibly applied, a planned approach has proven to be the most efficacious in promoting social outcomes for children with a disability.

Social Integration Activities

A social integration activity is a play activity in which a child or children with limited appropriate social interaction skills are brought together in a group with children who are highly socially mature. These specific activities reflect both the observed interests of the child being planned for and those of the group. Peers are the best promoters of social interaction within play and routines, therefore the primary goal of the social integration activity is for the peers to become the social mediators of the play. This process is referred to as "peer mediation" and develops over the course of the year. Peer mediation develops through the teaching strategy known as 'scaffolding'. Scaffolding is the support offered by adults to children as they interact (MacNaughton, 2003). Initially the adult does a great deal of modelling, within an appropriate context. This is followed by the child and the adult working together on the social task. Finally the responsibility for the task is handed over to the child; the child does more and more, and the adult does less and less. It is in the latter stages that the child performs the task independently, thus becoming the peer mediator.

“Stay Play & Talk” Social Program:

The “Stay Play and Talk” program (English et al., 1997) is primarily aimed at groups of preschool aged children in inclusive settings. The central idea of the program is that in order for play interaction to be initiated and maintained between children with disabilities/delays and their peers, the peers need to be taught about what are the essential elements within a play sequence. This can be done by involving the whole group or small groups in planned social problem solving experiences exploring how to be a good friend or helping somebody else to be a good friend. English et al. (1997) identify 3 core elements of being a good friend: (i) **Stay**: The need to stay relatively close to another child as a prerequisite for play to happen, (ii) **Play**: This involves joint or mutual attention around an experience toy, object or person. Exploring social themes relevant to the group at particular times can expand this (e.g. sharing, turn taking, co-operative helping), and (iii) **Talk**: (All forms of Communication) With the talking part of the program it is important to utilise strategies so that the communication partner (i.e. the child with developmental delay or disability) is able to participate at their level with a verbal child. For example if the child is non verbal, peers can be taught to comment on their own or the other child’s play with no pressure for a verbal response. If the child is verbal, the use of communication strategies such as expansion, repetition and seeking clarification of what has been said may be appropriate. The “Stay Play &Talk” phrase is simple and easy for children and adults to remember. It can easily be used as a prompt to encourage children to use the skills they have learnt in the whole group. It is important to remember to increase the awareness of the group to all forms of communication used by the children in the group (eg. Speech, natural gesture, key word signing, Picture Exchange Communication System or PECS, pictures, communication devices etc).

Use of Puppetry in “Stay Play & Talk” Problem Solving Groups:

The use of person like puppets in small or whole group mat time experiences are a particularly powerful medium through which to help your children explore and problem solve common social issues that you have identified through your observations. Planned scenarios are able to be acted out by using the puppets and involve the children in offering suggestions about how the issues in the scenarios can be resolved in an appropriate and positive way. Because the puppets are motivating, and effective in gaining children’s attention, children can be prompted during the social integration activities, to apply the solutions investigated in the group puppetry. The concepts can be further reinforced within the group situation by using the following resources: (i) “Stay Play & Talk” CD, (ii) Photo books of social activities – the children can ‘write’ the story to go with the photos, (iii) Story books & (iv) Picture sets.

The relevant “Stay Play & Talk” concepts are able to be further reinforced during social integration activities, and can be used practically to help the children recall appropriate social problem solving strategies.

Role of Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) staff in the Program

The Social Inclusion Program is designed so that ECS staff are able to plan and implement it within their existing program structure, without additional resources and supports. The ECI worker can have a role in introducing the program to the staff when supporting them around the inclusion of children within their services. This may involve initial modelling of the scaffolding approach within the social integration activities, and of a puppetry scenario.

Conclusion:

The Social Inclusion Program is a user friendly intervention resource for use within ECSs in Australia. Application within a number of kindergartens during 2005 has confirmed the outcomes for children with disabilities and their peers, and the ease of application within existing programs. Wider dissemination of the program has the potential to radically increase the social opportunities, both now and in the future, for young children with disabilities.

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