



Autism Speaks 2008 Treatment Award for Clinical Research



Integrated Play Groups: Promoting Symbolic Play, Social Engagement and Communication with Peers across Settings in Children with Autism

Pamela Wolfberg, Ph.D., San Francisco State University in collaboration with
Elliot Turiel, Ph.D., (UC, Berkeley) and Mila DeWitt, Ph.D. (SFSU-UCB)

Abstract

Children on the autism spectrum experience challenges in social interaction, communication and play and are at a high risk for being excluded by peers. Social isolation in turn deprives children of opportunities to develop their social, communicative and symbolic potential. The Integrated Play Groups (IPG) model is gaining recognition as an effective, evidence-based intervention in promoting social, communication and play development in children with autism while building relationships with typical peers in socially integrated settings. Expanding on an established research base, the present research project seeks to further validate the efficacy of the IPG model by conducting two complementary studies.

The first study will further examine the therapeutic benefit of the IPG model in targeting the core features of autism by instituting a more tightly controlled, quantitative analysis with a larger sample size of children diagnosed with autism than previous studies. We will examine whether 30 children (treatment group) who have participated in a 24-week IPG program show greater improvements in play, social and communication behaviors than 30 children (control group) who have not participated in the program, and if these improvements generalize and remain stable over time. Assessments will be made both before and after the intervention, and six months following the intervention. These will include: (1) observations of children's play, social and communication behaviors during free play with unfamiliar peers and during the IPG, and (2) Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales Parent/Caregiver Rating Form (VABS) given to parents to measure communication, socialization and adaptive behavior skills. We expect to find that children participating in the IPG intervention will show greater developmental gains in play, social and communicative behaviors than children who do not participate in IPG and that these differences will be maintained following the intervention.

Study 2 is designed to address the urgent need to foster an awareness of autism in the younger generation and further our understanding of benefits of inclusion. With 1 in 150 children being diagnosed with autism today, their typically developing peers need to gain an understanding of autism, and how to engage an individual with autism, if they are expected to include them in social circles and the work world when they reach adulthood. Initial studies suggest that after participating in IPG, typical peers developed greater sensitivity, tolerance and acceptance of their autistic playmates' individual differences and they gained a sense of responsibility as well as an understanding of how to include these less skilled players in play. They also reported having fun and developing mutual friendships that extended beyond the play group setting to the home and community. Through the use of focused interviews, this study will further explore the influence of IPG on typical children. 30 typically developing children participating in a 24-week IPG program will be interviewed one week before and one week after the program. We will explore changes in their understanding of autism and their judgments about fairness and the inclusion and exclusion of children with autism in activities with typical peers. We expect the findings to help us understand how children with and without autism co-construct and transform their peer cultures to allow for the inclusion of children with diverse ways of relating, communicating, and playing.