



Encouraging Play

Children with Fragile X Syndrome (FXS) may have difficulty acquiring play skills for a variety of reasons. One of the most apparent reasons is the presence of motor planning difficulties. These children may not be able to come up with the idea of what to do with a toy (ideation), how to start (initiation) or how to actually manipulate the toy (execution).

We know that children with FXS have strong imitation skills. They also are incidental learners. We can use these talents to help with play development.

- Children with FXS cannot often come up with an idea of what to do with a toy. We have to be their model. We have to demonstrate simple play schemas that they can imitate and learn. A simple schema might be to take the child's favorite toys (3 plastic dinosaurs), get yourself an identical set so each of you can play, and demonstrate the dinosaurs going to sleep, waking up and eating breakfast. Being dramatic and silly helps here, as does using a rhythmic voice and the "same" or similar script. As the child masters and imitates this schema, you can add to it: the dinosaurs can take a ride in a truck to get groceries. Remember, having an identical set of toys/objects for each of you is important.
- So, what is a schema? This is an idea or an action that can be used for fun – it can be simple, sensory motor such as throwing a ball, or it can be more complex, such as pretend eating or being a superhero, or it can be inventive and creative. Schema's allow for expansion from simple to complex, they are the building blocks of play.
- Expanding a schema involves observing what the child is doing and then modeling or providing supports (props, scripts, etc) to add to the schema and make it more meaningful, last longer, more engaging and generally more fun.
- Exploring the possibilities of the interaction or object allow the child to understand the possibilities for action and fun, play is the child making these possibilities happen; play starts as exploration but expands into more purposeful action. If the child has limited schemas, start by following their lead, foster exploration and model play.
- Imitation is the backdrop for most schema acquisition. Since children with FXS often have strength in imitation, this provides a natural means for fostering play skills. Incidental learning opportunities, peer play and a "floortime" approach are all used as vehicles for play development.
- Therapists should utilize a play based approach, using the child's interests, with children with FXS because it capitalizes on their strengths while minimizing direct instruction/demand that can trigger hyperarousal and anxiety and limit learning and play.

The following are excellent resources available through Amazon:

- Moor, Julia. 2002. *Playing, Laughing and Learning with Children on the Autism Spectrum*.
- Aud Saunders, Susan. 2002. *Giggle Time - Establishing the Social Connection: A Program to Develop the Communication Skills of Children With Autism, Asperger Syndrome and Pdd*
- Parham and Fazio (eds), 2008. *Play in Occupational Therapy for Children*.
- Rogers and Dawson. 2010. *Early Start Denver Model for Young Children with Autism*

Available through AOTA press:

- Tanta, Kari. 2010. "Encouraging play and promoting peer interactions in young children with an autism spectrum disorder." In *Autism: A Comprehensive Occupational Therapy Approach*. AOTA Press
- Chandler, (ed), 1997. *The Essence of Play: A Child's Occupation*. AOTA Press.