Integrated Play and Drama Groups for Children and Adolescents on the Autism Spectrum

Co-Principal Investigators:
Henri Julius, University of Rostock, Germany
Pamela Wolfberg, San Francisco State University, USA

Lead Researchers:
Ina Losch-Jahnke and David Neufeld
with
Erzsebet Matthes, Thanh Nguyen and Franziska Schade

Abstract

Children and teens on the autism spectrum present distinct challenges in the areas of socialization, communication and imagination, which set them apart from peers. Without explicit support, they struggle to form peer relationships and be accepted in activities relevant to their peer culture. To address these challenges, this trans-cooperative research project focused on the application of Integrated Drama Groups (IDG), an intervention that expands on the Integrated Play Groups (IPG) model (Wolfberg, 2009). The IPG model is a research-based intervention that promotes social, communication and play development in children with autism through guided participation in mutually enjoyed play experiences with typical peers. The IDG intervention applies the guiding principles of the IPG model to social groups focused on mutual engagement in drama experiences.

Using a mixed-methods design, parallel investigations of the IDG intervention were conducted within United States and German research sites. Each site incorporated (a) a multiple-baseline study across participants using measures of symbolic play, social play and joint engagement adapted from IPG model research (Wolfberg & Schuler, 1992; Wolfberg et al., 2012), (b) within and cross-case qualitative analyses of symbolic play, social play and joint engagement (synchrony) based on observational data collected over the course of the IDG intervention; and (c) pre- and post-intervention assessments of “Reading the Mind in the Eyes” test (Child Version) (Baron-Cohen et al, 2001) consisting of 28 photographs of people’s eyes depicting emotions. Intervention fidelity, generalization, and social validity were also addressed using observation and interview data.

Primary participants included three children (ages 7 – 8 years) in the U.S. site and three adolescents (ages 11 – 12 years) in the German site with diagnoses of mild autism or Asperger’s. Each participant was assigned to one of six different groups with three to four typical peers of similar ages. Each group was led by trained facilitators who had experience working with individuals on the autism spectrum and a background in theater arts. The groups took place over a 12-week period in an after-school program in the U.S. site and a school-based setting during non-academic instruction in the German site. Each session was approximately 60 minutes consisting of a period of dramatic play, improvisation and scene-work with selected materials and props, a cool-down, and a reflective period to discuss what occurred during the session, followed by a period of free play/unstructured activity.

Findings to date include: (a) increases in the frequency and duration of social play, symbolic play and joint attention/synchrony across 5 of the 6 participants in the multiple-baseline study; (b) qualitative evidence for the emergence of more complex forms of play and synchrony of social engagement; (c) noted improvements in pre- post-measures of reading emotions in 4 of the 6 participants. Noted improvements were further documented to have generalized to other social contexts in the home, school and community. Limitations and implications of the research are discussed with respect to current theory and future directions for validating the efficacy of the IDG intervention. (Note: We are in the final stages of completing our cross-site analyses)

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