



Epilepsy and Play

What is play?

Play is an important part of a person's development. It lies at the heart of learning to communicate and making sense of the world around. Children who experience developmental delay, particularly before the age of 11, can benefit enormously from play in helping them come to terms with their condition.

What are the benefits of play?

Play gives a child the opportunity to be in control. A child with epilepsy has so much in their lives that is out of their control and so, through the medium of play, they can take back some ownership of their life and explore their own feelings and reactions to their condition and experiences.

Play needs to be positive and rewarding. It needs to help build confidence and self-esteem whilst allowing a child to explore both themselves and the world around them. Play gives children a chance to practise controlling their behaviour and learn about their emotions and reactions. Play can assist learning and self development.

Adults/parents/carers need to allow the child to take control of their play and be willing to respond to the child at their level. Trying to engage a child in an activity for which they are not ready will almost certainly result in failure, frustration and disappointment on both sides.

Play can be used to try and develop the 3 cornerstones of social development:

1. Social interaction
2. Social communication
3. Social understanding and imagination

There are several stages or types of play that can be identified as children as develop

- Intensive interaction
- Non-directive play
- Directive play
- Imaginative play
- Play therapy
- Games with rules
- Positive redirection

Intensive Interaction

Intensive Interaction is based on mother-baby interactions when communication skills initially develop. For a child who is at a pre-verbal stage of development intensive interaction is a really useful approach to developing communication skills.

Characteristics of intensive interaction are as follows:

- The child is in control
- The adult responds to the child's body language and facial expressions
- The play is interactive
- It can be used to develop turn taking behaviour

Body language is very important during intensive interaction as the child will be learning a lot about itself through the response of the adult. The adult will need to:

- Share their attention
- Mirror vocalisations
- Mirror actions
- Mirror facial expressions
- Develop tension – possibly through expectancy games e.g. tickling games. This develops anticipation and the ability to understand that something will happen before it happens

Turn taking is important – it is one of the first things to develop in a relationship and is important because it brings about interaction with another person. This reduces the sense of isolation which otherwise can lead to high levels of frustration. Communication is the key to reducing frustration.

During the first 12 months a child will learn to regulate their emotions by having their emotions reflected back at them. Once this learning has taken place a child will be better able to cope with their own emotions and those of others. This is a very important piece of learning that will be with them for life and will enable them to understand and regulate their own emotions. When someone is angry, anxious or upset they need to learn how to become calm and to rationalize their feelings.

During intensive interaction it is important to distinguish between emotions such as

excitement, joy and amusement and emotions such as anger, fear and aggression. Positive emotions can be reflected and encouraged and the child will learn to enjoy being in this state. Care needs to be taken with excitement as it can get out of hand if allowed to mount.

Behaviour may become more uninhibited rising to a level where it becomes inappropriate; they may hurt themselves or someone else or not be in control of themselves. Conflict may result if their behaviour is inappropriate both in time and place, and could annoy other people. So try to calm them using slow down movements and slow down sounds.

Emotions such as anger and frustration need to be handled carefully. These are legitimate emotions and the child needs to learn to recognise them and how to handle them. The adult can help by naming the emotion and showing respect for it but then trying to help the child move on.

Give the child time and space to process their feelings, make soothing sounds and motions, try to introduce a new activity to distract the child from what has caused the upset. Be empathetic but beware of allowing the child to dwell on the negative emotions.

Non-directive play

This is where children are playing and adults are allowed to join in. The adults will support them but allow the children to take the lead and control its development. This type of play is usually displayed by children 2 years and older. Children are usually verbal at this point and there will

be some pretend play. This type of play is important for children to make sense of their world.

Non-directive play can be hard for children showing developmental delay especially the majority of children with autism who may not be able to engage in imaginative or conceptual play.

Children who struggle with non-directive play may prefer puzzles, matching games and construction games. These can be quite solitary but can become more interactive by playing the game together and introducing turn taking. For children operating at this level try and increase the variety of activities to avoid repetition, boredom and over dependency on a few chosen activities.

Directive play

Directive play can be used to develop social understanding and imagination. There are a variety of techniques including **modelling**, **joining in** and **being used as a tool**.

Modelling

This is where you do something and hopefully they copy you! The success of modelling depends on whether the child is interested in the activity and wants to do it themselves. Carry out the activity yourself and then hand it over or offer it to them. Use positive encouragement to help them engage in the activity. Praise the child in a meaningful way and as appropriate.

Joining in

Wait for them to start something and then

join in what they are doing so they learn how to take control and what the consequences can be.

The Human Tool

Allow them to use you as a tool. This often allows a child to develop the confidence to try something whilst reducing their fear of the unknown. They will be happy to use your hand to touch or do something and then watch your reaction prior to trying out the activity for themselves. Some children will take your hand and make you do what they want to do but are too afraid to try. After a while and if the actions are repeated you can gradually withdraw your hand/support until they are doing it for themselves.

Avoid hand over hand activities where you are guiding the child, they probably won't be engaged in the activity. For a child lacking confidence or with a condition such as dyspraxia where they may find it difficult to control their movements, use your hand to support theirs, but let them take the decisions.

Sometimes children will not be interested in play and may need time, space and permission to do nothing. You may be able to play at a low level e.g. play going to sleep and waking up. However there will be times when a child needs to be by themselves to process events and understand what has happened to them.

Imaginative play

Children move on to imaginative or symbolic play to understand what is happening around them. Children will play out their experiences, often repeatedly,

until they can accept and understand their world. Children often don't have the vocabulary or communication skills so use play to express themselves and explore their feelings.

For children trying to come to terms with their epilepsy it may help to have hospital type activities available, e.g. hospital sets, doctors/nurses outfits, stethoscopes, etc. These will allow them to play out their experiences. Battery and vibrating toys might be used by children to try and understand what happens during seizure.

Parents should not be alarmed by this sort of play, it is natural and all part of a child coming to terms with what has happened to them. If the play does continue repeatedly over a long period of time then it might be helpful to see a play therapist who can help the child work through their issues.

Games with rules

Children who can, will start to engage in these, and they are useful to help the child learn to cope with disappointment and losing. Play develops confidence and self esteem so allow children with low confidence or self esteem issues to win enough to feel confident, but lose occasionally. Useful games where an adult can contrive to lose without making it obvious include card games, scrabble etc.

Children will only be able to accept defeat when their confidence levels are high.

Positive redirection

This can be useful when you have a child with challenging behaviour. The key is to

use play to redirect their feelings in a positive way. Here are some examples

Challenging behaviour	What to try
They want to kick you	Go outside and kick a ball
They want to throw things	Throw something harmless e.g. balloon, pom pom, balls into a bucket, play basketball
Loud noises	Pacify, calm down
Shouting	Play a shouting game
Swearing	Ignore, done to illicit a response

Have a variety of play equipment available to your child including:

- Sensory play things
- Construction toys e.g. Lego etc
- Cause and effect toys
- Pretend play resources, dressing up outfits, train sets, cars, soldiers, dolls
- Role play equipment
- Turn taking games

Most importantly, make time to play. You are actually the best cause and effect toy there is but be careful how you allow yourself to be used. The child will quickly become an expert in how to play you!