Comparing the Effectiveness of a Parent Group Intervention with Child-Based Intervention for Promoting Playfulness in Children with Disabilities

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Abstract

Aim: The aims of this pilot study were: (a) to determine the effect size associated with a parent group intervention as compared with individual occupational therapy, for increasing children's playfulness; and (b) to explore parents' experiences of the group intervention. Methods: Families of 40 children aged 2 to 8 years were randomly assigned to two groups. Parents assigned to parent group intervention (n= 21) participated in activities designed to help promote play. Children assigned to individual intervention received therapy using play as a medium. The Test of Playfulness was the outcome measure. Nine parents from the parent group intervention participated in semi-structured interviews; resulting data were analyzed thematically. Results and Discussion: Small to moderate effect sizes were associated with the interventions: 0.15 for the parent...
group and 0.37 for individual intervention. Qualitative data from parent interviews revealed three themes: (a) Rethinking the value of play; (b) Promoting play; and (c) Parents helping parents. **Conclusions:** The small effect size associated with the parent group intervention may be the result of a number of factors that require further investigation. Parents’ initial reluctance to participate in a group to promote playfulness suggests the need for reframing of the primary roles of occupational therapy with children. Further research is clearly needed.

**Introduction**

In recent years, pediatric occupational therapists have expressed increased interest in children's play and playfulness (e.g., Parham & Fazio, 2008). Playfulness has been associated with a number of benefits that may make it particularly important for children with a range of disabilities. For example, Guitard, Ferland, and Dutil (2005) argued that a playful attitude contributes to problem-solving skills and adaptability and to decreased frustration, deception and anxiety. They also associated playfulness with imagination, joy, creativity, pleasure and spontaneity. Other authors have found a positive relationship between playfulness and coping for preschoolers (Saunders, Sayer, & Goodale, 1999) and adolescents (Hess & Bundy, 2003).

Children with disabilities are known to have difficulties with play and playfulness that often, but not always, reflect the primary characteristics of the disability. For example, children with autism have difficulties with symbolic and social play (summarized in Luckett & Bundy, 2007) and their playfulness is generally decreased (e.g., Skaines, Rodger, & Bundy, 2006). Children with ADHD have playfulness profiles that suggest a lack of empathy but no difficulty remaining engaged (Cordier, Bundy, Hocking, & Einfeld, 2010). Children with physical disabilities but no cognitive limitations have been shown to have greater skill for playful mischief and teasing, which is perhaps a way of playing with ideas that compensates for difficulty playing with objects or moving about in space (Harkness & Bundy, 2001). However, unlike children with ADHD, these children with physical disabilities did have unexpectedly low scores reflecting reduced engagement in play. Perhaps this was because they often were not the decision makers in the play and thus may have been less highly motivated by particular activities selected for them.

Even given the importance of play touted by researchers and theorists, society as a whole does not always perceive its benefits. Parents of children

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