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ABSTRACT

Inclusive early childhood settings are believed to promote interaction between children with special needs and typically developing children by allowing the latter group to serve as "peer models." This study examined the social play of children with special needs and their typically developing peers. Participating in the study were 156 typically developing and 26 special needs children attending an inclusive, university-based preschool. Children ranged in age from 22 to 61 months, with an average age of 40 months. Data were collected through classroom observations following the Howes and Matheson Revised Peer Play Scale. Each child was observed during 4 visits that included three 5-minute samples. Children's level of play (solitary, parallel, parallel aware, simple social, complementary and reciprocal, and cooperative/complex social pretend) and their playmate during each 20-second interval were recorded. Findings indicated that compared to typically developing peers, special needs children engaged in higher levels of solitary and parallel play and lower levels of parallel aware, simple social, and complementary and reciprocal play. Play interactions of typically developing children involved a special needs child 46 percent of the time. Play interactions of special needs children involved another child with a disability 20 percent of the time. The relatively high percentage of typically developing children's interactions with children with special needs may be a result of teachers' efforts to promote social play. (KB)

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**Social Play of Preschool Children with Special Needs
and Typically-Developing Children**

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A summary of a poster presentation at the conference on Human Development, April 14-16, 2000, Memphis, Tennessee. Direct Correspondence to first author: Department of Child & Family Studies, Syracuse University, 202 Slocum Hall, Syracuse, New York 13244-1250. (ljcouse@syr.edu)

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Abstract

Inclusive early childhood settings are believed to promote interaction between children with special needs and typically developing children and allow the latter group to serve as “peer models”. Play with peers is believed to promote social competence for both typically developing as well as special needs children. Children with special needs engaged in lower levels of play requiring attention to or interaction with other children, whereas typically developing children were involved in higher levels of relatively more sophisticated play. These differences likely reflect the nature of the disabilities evidenced by some of the special needs children, rather than a lack of opportunity for interaction with typically developing peers. The relatively high percentage of typically developing children’s interactions with those who had special needs may be a result of teachers’ efforts to organize the environment in ways that promoted social play.

Social Play of Preschool Children with Special Needs and Typically-Developing Children

A goal of many early childhood education programs is to enhance the social development of young children within a developmentally appropriate framework (Guralnick, 1993; Bredekamp, 1987). For many children the early childhood setting provides the first opportunity to interact with a large group of same-age peers. With the passage of PL 99-457, the early childhood classroom also may expose children for the first time to others who differ from themselves in terms of developmental level. Inclusive early childhood settings are believed to promote interaction between children with special needs and typically developing children and allow the latter group to serve as “peer models” for the former. One important context for peer interaction and modeling is play. Play with peers is believed to promote social competence for both typically developing as well as special needs children. This study examines the social play of children with special needs and their typically developing peers.

Subjects were 156 typically developing and 26 special needs children attending an inclusive, university-based preschool. A child was classified as having special needs if s/he received some type of support services. Children ranged from 22 to 61 months of age ($M = 40$). Data was collected through classroom observations following the Howes and Matheson (1992) Revised Peer Play Scale. Each child was observed during four visits, which included three 5-minute samples broken into 20-second intervals. The highest observed level of play was coded for each interval as one of the categories from the revised Peer Play Scale (Howes, 1980, Howes & Matheson, 1992): solitary, parallel,

parallel aware, simple social, complementary and reciprocal, and cooperative/complex social pretend play. The target child's playmate(s) during the interval also was recorded.

One-way analyses of variance were used to examine the differences in social play between the two groups of children. Special needs children engaged in higher levels of solitary, $F(1, 180) = 24.98, p = .000$ and parallel play, $F(1, 180) = 8.73, p = .004$, compared to their typically developing peers. Special needs children engaged lower levels of parallel aware, $F(1, 180) = 4.15, p = .04$, simple social, $F(1, 180) = 25.30, p = .000$, and complementary and reciprocal play, $F(1, 180) = 15.60, p = .000$ compared to their typically developing peers. Play interactions of typically developing children involved a special needs child 46% of the time. Play interactions of special needs children involved another child with a disability 20% of the time.

The complexity of play as a reflection of typical development has been well studied, yet relatively little is known about the play patterns of children with special needs (Welteroth, 1999). Children with special needs in this study engaged in lower levels of play requiring attention to or interaction with other children, whereas typically developing children were involved in higher levels of relatively more sophisticated play. These differences likely reflect the nature of the disabilities evidenced by some of the special needs children, rather than a lack of opportunity for interaction with typically developing peers. The relatively high percentage of typically developing children's interactions with those who had special needs may be a result of teachers' efforts to organize the environment in ways that promoted social play (Haney & Cavallaro, 1996). Previous research indicates that children with disabilities are successfully included by peers when their individual needs are supported (Odom, et al., 1996). Given ample

opportunity for interactions with typically developing peers, children with special needs may develop over time the social skills needed for sophisticated play.

Table 1

Proportion of Time Spent in Level of Play for Typically Developing and Special Needs Children

	<u>Means (sd)</u>		<u>F (df)</u>	<u>p</u>
	<u>Typically</u> <u>Developing</u>	<u>Special</u> <u>Needs</u>		
Solitary	.26	.41	24.98 (1, 180)	.000
Parallel	.23	.32	8.73 (1, 180)	.004
Parallel Aware	.28	.22	4.15 (1, 180)	.04
Simple Social	.17	.04	25.30 (1, 180)	.000
Complementary	.05	.03	15.60 (1, 180)	.000
Cooperative/Complex	.05	.00	1.98 (1, 180)	n.s.
Social Pretend Play				

Table 2

Highest Level and Proportion of Competent Play for Typically Developing and Special Needs Children

	<u>Means (sd)</u>		<u>F (df)</u>	<u>p</u>
	<u>Typically</u> <u>Developing</u>	<u>Special</u> <u>Needs</u>		
Highest Level				
Observed Play	4.72	3.58	54.44 (1, 180)	.000
Proportion of				
Competent Play (Levels 4,5,6,7)	.22	.05	29.93 (1, 180)	.000

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