

Facilitating Play Dates for Children with Autism and Typically Developing Peers In Natural Settings

Training Manual Review

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Facilitating Play Dates for Children with Autism and Typically Developing Peers in Natural Settings: A Training Manual (2006) by Laurie Vismara, Grace W. Gengoux, Mendy Boettcher, Robert L. Koegel, and & Lynn Kern Koegel is a parent-friendly guide on how to help your child with ASD communicate and play together with neurotypical children. This manual teaches what a parent or a professional needs to know to prepare for a play date, how to choose a compatible playmate and plan activities. One of the minor downsides of the manual is that it uses technical jargon. Including a glossary of key terms at the end could be helpful.

Facilitating Play Dates (2006) is comprised of two main pillars: clinical research results and evidence-based practice. The manual provides tips and strategies that could be used during facilitated play dates to promote social competence and build lasting friendships. These strategies were identified through extensive research and used with children with different functioning levels, across different social settings (*i.e., from full inclusion program to little or no exposure to regular peers*) and ages (*i.e., pre-school to elementary school aged*). Finally, the strategies that this manual offers can be customized for any child on the spectrum.

Structure of the Manual

Facilitating Play Dates (2006) consists of the following parts:

- Introduction: "Who Should Use This Manual"
- Executive Summary: "Clinical Research Results: What Makes a Successful Play Date?"
- Main Section: "Getting Started - Plan Ahead":
 - Step 1: Pick a Playmate
 - Step 2: Plan an Activity
 - Step 3: Prepare the Child
 - Step 4: Promote Interaction
 - Step 5: Review the Play Date
- Troubleshooting
- Conclusion
- References

In its Executive Summary, the manual clearly defines what having a play date means for the parents of a child with special needs: "[a]dditional supports and modifications are almost always

needed to guarantee success" (Vismara, & *et. al*, 2006, p. 6). Simply stated, play dates are increased opportunities for successful social interaction (p. 8). The manual discusses two types of play dates: (1) "without contextual support"; and, (2) "with contextual support play day package", which includes "mutually reinforcing activities and adult facilitation of cooperative arrangements" (p. 6). A successful play date with contextual support has the following goals: (1) to practice social interaction; and, (2) to develop friendships with peers, which are both dependent on the environmental factors such as proximity and reciprocity (p. 7). Fun is another ingredient of success (p. 8).

Getting Started - Plan Ahead

The Main Section of the manual, "Getting Started - Plan Ahead", discusses the length of an idea play date and who should facilitate (adult supervision is required) (pp. 10-11). Below is a summary of five steps when getting started.

Step 1: Pick a Playmate provides suggestions on how to find a right fit for your child. Among those suggestions are the following: (1) ask a classroom teacher or an SNA; and/or, (2) observe on the playground. Step 1 also provides tips about approaching other parents with invitations and how to deal with rejections. (pp. 12-14)

Step 2: Plan an Activity discusses the types of activities, ideas for activities other than discussed in this manual and importance of avoiding "down time" (pp. 16-18). They should be: "(1) structured; (2) planned ahead of time; (3) mutually reinforcing; (4) relatively short to begin with, such as 30 minutes; and (5) organized with cooperative arrangements". Sample activities include: decorating cookies, art projects, and playing organized games (p. 15).

Step 3: Prepare the Child discusses *priming* for activities and social behavior. This sub-sections is illustrated by examples from the real play dates that took place in the past (pp. 19-24). "The key to priming is to present and practice specific events that are very likely to come up during the play date" (p. 23).

Step 4: Promote Interaction explains what *mutually reinforcing events* and *cooperative arrangement* are. It is important to remember that "the role of the facilitator is to encourage social interaction", [*where successful sharing and turn-taking are involved*] "without necessarily coming between the two children" (p. 27).

This manual does a great job of preparing an adult for a play date facilitator role, which is a big plus for many unaware parents willing to "simply invite a friend over" (Vismara, & *et. al*, 2006, p. 6). Furthermore, it is based on the empirical cycle: Pick -> Plan -> Prepare -> Promote -> Review.



In other words, the manual emphasizes the significance of careful preparation and offers the step-by-step guide on how to avoid difficult and socially awkward situations.

Step 5: Review the Play Date specifically focuses on reviewing what went well and what went wrong during a play date, since evaluation is one of the major steps that adults tend to skip once the play date is over and everyone is ready to move on to the next thing. Furthermore, this manual has a "Troubleshooting" section. This section contains some preventive behaviour management strategies and anecdotal evidence in a form of parent reports. Having these tools at hand makes a play date review much easier and increases the chances of a successful social interaction in the future.

Conclusion

Overall, the current manual teaches to plan for success. That is, it provides a reader with a list of successful activities and games along with the facilitator strategies to foster supported inclusion across different social settings. As a parent of a child with ASD, I can attest that it is the most hands-on ABA-based manual that I have read thus far. I find it useful in planning activities and play dates for my own son. Finally, I would recommend this manual to other parents and professionals working with kids on the spectrum.