

Play Facilitation – A Training Program for Parents

By Annette Wisniewski and Ayanne Groupp

Tales from the Field, a monthly column, consists of reports of evidence-based performance improvement practice and advice, presented by graduate students, alumni, and faculty of Boise State University's Instructional and Performance Technology department.

Background

Lekotek, a national not-for-profit organization, promotes playtime as a joyful means to help children with special needs connect emotionally with others and reach developmental milestones. In the past, *Lekotek* focused primarily on training its internal staff to facilitate play sessions with children with special needs and their parents. Due to severe funding cuts, *Lekotek* asked a team of graduate students at Boise State University to develop an introductory course to teach *parents* these play facilitation skills in a group setting. This would allow *Lekotek* to reach a greater number of families more quickly and efficiently than their previous approach.

Approach

We framed the process of designing and developing this course around four critical questions (Stepich, 2009):

1. Who are the learners?
2. What do we want them to do that they aren't doing now?
3. Why is this important?
4. How can we help them accomplish those goals?

Who Are the Learners?

Our learner analysis identified the following characteristics of our target audience:

- All were adult parents of children with special needs.
- Nearly half were native Spanish speakers.
- The majority had only a high-school education.
- Many were optimistic about their child's growth potential, but were also concerned or frustrated.
- Most were unsure of how to encourage their child's development during playtime activities.

What Do We Want Them to Do That They Aren't Doing Now?

Defining exactly what we wanted the parents to do was the most difficult part of designing the course. We had a plethora of material but a three-hour time limit. Keeping in mind our target audience, we focused on the following five basic but critical skills, which are illustrated in Figure 1:

1. Use verbal cues to provide positive reinforcement.
2. Use non-verbal cues to provide positive reinforcement.
3. Follow the child's lead.
4. Expand play while still following the child's lead.
5. Facilitate repetition of play activity.

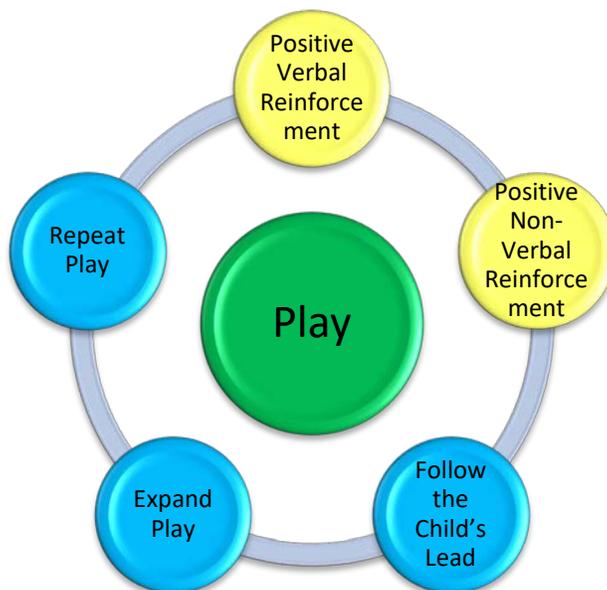


Figure 1: Five Skills for Facilitating Play

Why Is That Important?

The five learning objectives represent the most basic skills essential to encouraging a child with special needs to engage in interactive play. The objectives also support Lekotek’s mission: “using interactive play experiences, and the learning that results, to promote the inclusion of children with special needs into family and community life.” These play skills are abstract, which means they are difficult to define and practice. For this course, we characterized these skills in terms of a parent’s observable performance, since the child’s reaction was not a reliable measure of the parents’ behavior.

How Can We Help Them Accomplish Those Goals?

We used Merrill’s (2002) ‘first principles of instruction’ to design the course. Merrill describes a problem-solving approach made up of four phases:

- **Activation** – For each of the objectives, we first asked questions or set up activities to remind the parents of what they already knew. For example, for the non-verbal cues objective, the parents looked at photographs depicting positive and negative body language, selected the most appealing, and explained why.
- **Demonstration** – We showed the parents what we wanted them to learn using slide shows with photographs and video clips of Lekotek professionals during actual play sessions. In each case, the goal was to demonstrate the skills we were trying to impart. This was very effective in showing the dynamics of interactions between an adult and child in a play session.
- **Application** – We provided parents with a job aid and opportunities to practice their new skills on each other. We then provided a second opportunity to practice with their own children. Lekotek professionals performed as coaches. They informally observed the interactions and provided suggestions and feedback.

- **Integration** – To help parents transfer their new interactive play skills, we conducted a discussion after each objective/lesson based on three questions:
 1. What happened?
 2. What did you learn?
 3. How will this help you be a better play partner at home with your child?

Results

The Lekotek course was piloted twice – once for an English speaking audience and once for a Spanish speaking audience. Both sessions had waiting lists and were well received by the parents attending. Lekotek hopes to leverage the course into a national offering.

Summary

By asking the right questions and using a problem-based instructional design approach, even abstract skills can be successfully transferred to the learner.

References

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- Stepich, D. (2009). *What is instructional design*. Unpublished instructional material, Boise State University.

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