



## **DRAMA STRATEGY/EXERCISE DESCRIPTIONS**

### **INCREASE FOCUS/ATTENTION AND REGULATE ENERGY LEVELS**

**LIGHTNING ROUND\*:** (CIRCLE) ONE PERSON STARTS A SOUND AND MOVEMENT AND EACH PERSON AROUND THE CIRCLE REPEATS IT ONE BY ONE AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE. THE ORIGINAL PERSON REPEATS THEIR SOUND AND MOVEMENT WHEN IT GETS BACK TO THEM, THEN THE NEXT PERSON STARTS A SOUND AND MOVEMENT AND THE PATTERN CONTINUES.

### **EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION AND SOCIAL CUES**

**GROUP MOOD\*:** ONE PERSON WILL LEAVE THE ROOM AND WILL SERVE AS THE GUESSER. THE REST OF THE GROUP WILL DECIDE ON A MOOD TO ACT OUT. WHEN THE GUESSER RETURNS, THE REST OF THE GROUP WILL ACT OUT THE MOOD, NON-VERBALLY AND THE GUESSER WILL TRY TO GUESS WHAT THE MOOD IS. IF THE GUESSING HAS TROUBLE WORDS CAN BE ADDED TO THE ACTING OUT OF THE MOOD.

### **FOSTERING SOCIAL RECIPROCITY**

**SOUND BALL\*:** (CIRCLE) ONE PERSON THROWS A SOUND AT ANOTHER PERSON AND THAT PERSON REPEATS THE SOUND AND THEN THROWS A NEW SOUND TO SOMEONE ELSE, THEY REPEAT THE SOUND AND THROW A NEW SOUND TO SOMEONE ELSE.

### **PERSPECTIVE -TAKING**

**FORTUNATELY/UNFORTUNATELY\*:** START WITH A SCENARIO. (E.G. IT'S SNOWING OUT.)

**PERSON A:** FORTUNATELY, I LOVE THE SNOW.

**PERSON B:** UNFORTUNATELY: YOU CAN'T GET YOUR CAR OUT.

**PERSON A:** FORTUNATELY, I OWN A SNOWMOBILE

**OH YEAH:** (PAIRS OR GROUP) ACTORS ONE-UP EACH OTHER ON IMAGINARY SCENARIOS.

**PERSON A:** LAST NIGHT I ATE A HUGE ICE CREAM SUNDAY.

**PERSON B:** OH YEAH, LAST NIGHT I BOUGHT AN ICE CREAM PARLOR SO I CAN EAT SUNDAYS ANY TIME I WANT.

**DUBBING SCENES\*:** TWO ACTORS PLAY OUT A SCENE NON-VERBALLY AND TWO OTHER VOICE ACTORS FILL IN WORDS TO THE SCENE ACCORDING TO WHAT THE ACTORS ARE DOING.



The Play's The Thing by Liz McDonough MFT/RDT

When I first moved to California, I was struck by how seriously adults in the Bay Area took Halloween. From the decked-out revelers in the Castro to the costumed in earnest chaperoning parents, it seemed like children no longer held the monopoly on the holiday. My years in theater certainly gave me a window into the delight of inhabiting a different persona. Still, it wasn't until I began my studies as a drama therapist that I learned the significance of dramatic play to child development. Now, twenty years later, I find myself spouting the necessity of play to anyone who will listen, namely for all ages on the autism spectrum.

Children learn by playing, by trying on and taking on roles; it's how they come to understand themselves and the world in which they live. Play is the outward manifestation of each child's inner life. It contains the conflicts they are attempting to resolve and the challenges they are trying to master. And play is intrinsically relational. It is the meshing of at least two worlds and involves negotiation, compromises, and at times, heated debates. It is at its heart, collaborative.

For many children, play comes easily. As infants, they are intrinsically motivated to pay attention to the faces of their caretakers and can see their own feelings and experiences reflected back to them. This process, known as affective attunement, sets the stage for an infant beginning to recognize himself both physically and psychologically. Child psychologist Claudia Gold coins this beautifully as "holding the child's mind in mind" - leaving the child to feel seen and understood. In addition, the infant is looking to the caretaker to provide him with all the information he needs to navigate his world. This social-emotional coursework is not given in French, Swahili, or Portuguese, but through the universal language of affect. On any given day, a toddler may receive a stern look upon crawling towards the hot stove, a warm chuckle when she hugs her sister, and calm reassurance when she tries to walk on her own but falls. Through her mother's facial expressions and gestures, the toddler begins to learn that the hot stove is dangerous; affection is encouraged, and falling down is part of learning. In addition to building schemas, these interactions also give personal significance to objects in the child's everyday life- like the rocking chair where the child was once nursed but is now the haven of mother and child during bedtime stories. In essence, the parents color the child's world with meaning.

While these emotional exchanges are educational, they also foster other essential capacities. Not only is the infant receiving all the good stuff his parents are putting out, but he is also learning that he can have an impact - when I smile, mommy smiles back; when I reach out for daddy, he picks me up. Just watch the mutual delight of Peek-A-Boo to see this phenomenon in action. This back and forth communication blossoms into social reciprocity and solidifies the bond between parent and child. When an infant can come to depend upon his parents to meet his needs, he will internalize that bond as a mental representation. In time, he can conjure up that mental image of Mommy or Daddy during a period of separation and project it onto an object- like a blankie- to soothe himself. British psychoanalyst, Donald Winnicott calls this "the child's first creative act."

So when a little boy takes his fork and pretends it's an airplane, he is trying his own hand at coloring an object with emotional meaning -marking the beginning of pretend play. Over time, the child can project a mental image of a person or fictional character onto himself and pretend to be Daddy or Superman or Darth Vader. All of these playful moments are integral to the acquisition of symbolic thinking and relational capacities. Taking on pretend roles is a precursor for perspective-taking and empathy. Turning one object into another lays the foundation for playing with ideas – the genesis of hypothesizing and complex problem-solving.

Infants and toddlers on the spectrum can struggle to attend to their caretakers due to a variety of factors, including sensory overwhelm, interest in inanimate objects, inability to prioritize faces in the visual field. Due to slower processing and motor challenges, the autistic infant may also have difficulty getting into the rhythm of the back and forth exchanges. Even the maternal gaze- the source of attunement and mirroring can be overwhelming for a little person on the spectrum. This means that although the attachment bond is formed, the autistic child is not getting the full benefit of the caretaker's lens to color the world with meaning for him. By missing much of the coursework, the social world can appear random, mystifying, and unpredictable. It is for this reason that as kids on the spectrum grow up, they are often found playing by themselves. This can get misinterpreted as the autistic child not being interested in playing or friendships and couldn't be further from the truth.

There are many ways to support and honor autistic play. One of the most tried and true, inspired by the Floortime Approach is aligning with the child's special interest. Depending on the student, it might be Super Mario, In-n-Out Burger, Scooby-Doo, Light Switches, or Sharks. Once granted access, we don't just nod politely in the direction of the interest- we actively engage. In one moment, this may mean donning a hoola-hoop in red, white, and blue scarves with a teen, or in another, it may mean sitting quietly with a primary student, watching the way the light reflects on the ceiling. By holding the "child's mind in mind" and aligning with the interest, we see the magic start to happen. The dancing light becomes a song sung by child and speech therapist; the hoola-hoop becomes Captain America's shield in a dramatic play session. The interest shifts from a solitary focus to something relational - it becomes playable. Through this mutual enjoyment within the play, reciprocity emerges organically. The enthusiasm that was initially reserved for the special interest is now transferred onto the relationship. Now that we are on the student's radar, they are naturally motivated to engage with us. By taking on various roles, exploring emotions and creating stories- the student becomes a player in a social emotional learning lab. Transferring these play skills to structured peer interactions is the next step in the process. An original school play is a great example of students sharing each of their special interests, but working in collaboration as a team.

Playing well with others has far-reaching implications for your child's future and it's time we took it seriously. In fact, I remember the day, I walked in and saw my esteemed colleague teaching multiplication to a class of middle schoolers. Initially, I did not recognize her because she was dressed from head to toe as Darth Vader. And no, it was not Halloween.



# AND ACTION!

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