



Autistic tamariki just wanna play too

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It can be easy to observe an autistic tamaiti and conclude that they prefer to be by themselves, that they are in their own world. We might observe them playing intently by themselves, pushing other tamariki away from their play, not looking at us or answering to their name, lining up cars, pencils, shapes, etc. However, we can confidently say that when we get the strategies right, autistic tamariki love to socially engage and have fun together with us.

Typically, developing tamariki develop pivotal capacities through a process of playing called intersubjectivity with their whānau, in choreographed games that they take part in together (Trevarthen & Aitken, 2001). Intersubjectivity literally means the meeting of minds, where the two minds of the infant and caregiver come together. They learn that being with people is good, to pay attention to an adult and jointly attend to other things and to imitate. They learn to regulate their own emotions, plan, problem solve and think. This all happens through the experiences of playing together.

What we know about autistic tamariki is that by one year of age we can easily see the first signs of autism (lack of imitation, less frequent eye contact, not responding to their name). It is also known through studies of babies that later get a diagnosis of autism, that between two and six months there is a reduction in attention to caregiver (Jones W, Klin A, 2013). Without the feedback loop of serve and return, there are less intersubjective experiences. By the time a tamaiti gets a diagnosis or parents are concerned regarding their development, the tamaiti may already be two or three years of age or older.

The challenge for kaiako is that when they approach and try to play, they may get pushed away by the tamaiti or their invitation to play is ignored, and the feeling that the tamaiti prefers to play by themselves may persist. To help kaiako and parents understand what is happening in these moments, we use a simple analogy – the dark alley. We ask them how they would feel if someone they didn't know said “would you like to come down this dark alley?” They soon understand that this would be quite frightening.

So, the first thing kaiako and parents need to accept when initiating play is that we need to take away the dark alley.

The Way to Play programme (Stuart and Blakey, 2010) highlights the need to take away the dark alley through their first strategy: **Pattern, Memory and Variation**.

“Reality to an autistic person is a confusing, interacting mass of events, people, places, sounds and sights. There seems to be no clear boundaries, order or meaning to anything. A large part of my life is spent trying to work out the pattern behind everything” (Joliffe in Howlin, 2004).

A **pattern** is a repeating set of actions where the tamaiti and the adult both have a part to play, a role or action, and their roles depend on each other for the game to continue. Autistic tamariki like patterns because they repeat, and as they repeat, they become predictable.

Mum is playing peek-a-boo with her son. She puts a towel over her face (mum's role) and says “Where's mummy gone?” in a sing song voice. Her son lifts his hands to take the towel away (son's role). They laugh together. Mum puts the towel back on her head (repeats the pattern) and so it continues.

Once the pattern is established, the adult needs to introduce small **variations** to the **pattern**. Make it “same same, but different”. This teaches the tamaiti that change is okay within a fun activity. It also provides opportunities for the tamaiti to think for themselves.

On the fourth repeat, instead of putting the towel on her own head, she places it on her son's head (variation) and pulls the towel off. They laugh together. Mum leaves the towel in between them on the floor. Her son picks it up and puts it to his head (thinking).

The **memory catchphrase** is like an advertising jingle and is very important. It names the game. It means that next time mum wants to play, she can use the memory catchphrase to restart the game. There will be no dark alley. The memory catchphrase could be a phrase or song, a gesture, or an object.

Mum wants to create a memory of playing together, so she emphasises the memory catchphrase and thinks “next time I play this game, I'll use the same towel”.

Way to Play also emphasises the adult style. The adult uses a sing song voice, rising and lowering in tone and volume, and reduces the number of words used. The adult is prepared to be silly by creating tension and anticipation, making themselves interesting, and using playful obstruction. The adult leaves lots of pauses to give the tamariki the opportunity to fill with a movement, a sound, a word, or some non-verbal communication, but carries on if nothing happens.

Dad and his daughter are jumping off the sofa together. Dad chants “jumping jumping 1, 2... 3!” Building up the tension to 3. They jump and dad pretends to fall to the floor and lies still. His daughter climbs back to the sofa, then notices dad is still lying on the floor. She jumps down and pulls dad up, who half gets up then falls to the ground with a big exhalation of breath. Daughter pulls him up again and they restart their jumping game.



All the strategies happen simultaneously. The third strategy is deciding what patterns to start. This strategy is called turning a **Me Game into a We Game**. Observing the tamariki gives you clues, not necessarily observing what they are doing, but what they are enjoying or getting out of an activity. This helps decide which patterns we can start with the tamariki and therefore be more engaging.

Mum has watched her son throwing plastic objects off the balcony onto the deck. She's getting tired of picking up toys. She thinks he likes the sound of the plastic hitting the deck. She also knows he likes numbers. She decides to start a game by throwing a rubix cube in the air and counting. The counting draws her son's attention. As she counts to 4, she 'accidentally' drops the rubix cube on the deck. Mum picks it up and starts again to count. Again, she drops it on 4. This time she has 'accidentally' dropped it in front of her son. He looks at it, picks it up and gives it to mum to restart the game. She makes an exaggerated “Oh no” each time it falls. He is soon saying “oh no” too!

By using these strategies, we are creating numerous intersubjective experiences for our tamariki, each time providing opportunities to strengthen their capacities in foundational learning skills.

We call this filling the teacup:



It is through these shared emotional experiences that we can strengthen connection, improve communication, teach life skills and so much more. **All through play!**

References

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EarlySteps is a Ministry of Education approved early support service that supports 49 high needs autistic tamariki in West Auckland. EarlySteps was established in 2019 by Neil Stuart and Thecla Moffat. They are committed to a joyful, play-based approach to supporting autistic tamariki to develop and thrive. They share how adults and tamariki can effectively play joyously together, and the many benefits this brings to tamariki and the whānau as a whole.