Title: Symbol-Infused Play for Young Children with Complex Communication Needs

This presentation will discuss the importance of symbol-infused play to the development of communication and language in young children with complex communication needs (CCN). Children with CCN face intrinsic and extrinsic factors (Romski, Sevcik, & Adamson, 1997) that can affect their ability to engage in play and social interaction. Three stages of play development in typically developing children will be described: Social Play (Stage I); Exploratory Play (Stage II); and Functional Play (Stage III). Information about typical development allows us to better understand the challenges experienced by children with CCN such as those with cerebral play, Down syndrome, and autism spectrum disorders. The challenges at each stage of play and language development will be described, and strategies will be demonstrated that minimize the impact of the children’s intrinsic factors and maximize extrinsic supports for communication, language, and play.

Caregivers infuse symbols in social play activities for very young children starting from birth and continue as the children develop. During Social Play (Stage I), caregivers’ language input immerses the baby in the rhythms and sounds of language with repetitive and predictable social games and songs. Babies and caregivers take turns with mutual gaze toward one another. As infants learn to control their head, body, and extremities, they begin to react in predictable ways to their caregivers.

Young children with CCN may have low muscle tone and delayed motor development that impacts how easily they can engage in social play with parents. Seating supports for proper positioning may be needed for engagement in face-to-face interactions with caregivers. Children with CCN need extra time to engage in early turn taking. They may have subtle and idiosyncratic behaviors that parents need to learn to recognize as signs that the child wants an activity to continue or stop. Young children develop a “visual communication system” in social play with caregivers. Early communication behaviors include facial expressions, eye gaze between caregiver and child, vocalizations, and arm, leg, and body movements, and the beginning of turn taking. For the child, communication is pre-symbolic, but caregivers infuse symbols throughout their communicative turns. At the end of this stage of social play, young children are developing the understanding of spoken symbols (i.e., words and phrases) embedded in familiar routines. Aided language modeling with objects, gestures, manual signs, photos, and visual scene displays infuses symbols into songs, daily routines, and play activities.

At the beginning of Exploratory Play (Stage II), caregivers introduce objects into daily routines and activities. As babies gain greater control over their bodies, they begin to sit up with and then without support, and are able to reach for and grasp different objects that are within their immediate vicinity. Exploration of objects occurs when babies are given an object, which they bring to their mouths, exploring and vocalizing. They shake and bang objects against surfaces or in the air in order to hear the noises they produce. Cause-and-effect activities are common. Young children also notice the disappearance and recurrence of people and objects. While exploring objects through their senses and actions, children learn about objects’ properties and characteristics. During Exploratory Play, communication becomes intentional and gestures and early symbols emerge.

Young children with CCN may have difficulties achieving and sustaining upright posture requiring seating and positioning aids for support. In addition, they may have visual impairments and may need brightly colored objects or lighter objects against a dark background to highlight the contrast. Furthermore, they may have difficulty reaching for objects, which should be placed in close proximity. Toys that are lightweight and easy to grasp should be selected or adapted. By modifying these extrinsic factors, caregivers can enable children with CCN to have more success exploring and producing actions on objects. Objects can also be used as early symbols to represent concepts. Voice output devices can be incorporated into songs, games, and daily routines to promote turn-taking and choice making. Visual scene displays using photographs of the child and family members
engaged in familiar routines are appealing at this stage. First words develop during and children with CCN benefit from aided AAC symbols to express these concepts.

When typically developing children engage in Functional Play (Stage III), they are using toys and objects in ways that are specific to the objects' characteristics. They are now sitting independently and engaging with objects around them. During this stage, they will begin to crawl toward interesting objects. Children roll balls, push cars, stack blocks, etc. All of these actions require greater fine motor control. As typically developing children learn about the relations between objects and themselves and others, their receptive and expressive vocabulary increases rapidly. Children also begin to combine gestures such as pointing and showing with their new words. They coordinate joint attention between the objects they are playing with and their caregivers. Caregivers are using a greater variety of words and sentences with their children.

Children with CCN may have difficulty sitting upright independently and moving through the environment, and as a result, may need seating, positioning, and mobility aids to explore objects in their environment. They may also have difficulty manipulating objects. By providing toys that are easy to grab and can be acted upon in different ways, caregivers help children with CCN learn about the different properties of objects. Caregivers use unaided communication such as pointing and showing to draw attention to objects, and they model actions on objects and combine objects in new ways. Just as children who are typically developing need language input in their natural language, children who are at risk for being non-speaking needed augmented language input. Symbols can be infused in activities through aided language modeling so that children with CCN can associate words and word combinations with people, objects, and the relationships between them. Visual scene displays and other communication aids that combine people, objects, actions, locations, and other relations are important components of communication, language, learning, and play at this stage of development for children with CCN.


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Course Title: **SYMBOL- INFUSED PLAY FOR YOUNG CHILDREN WITH CCN**

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Signature **Beth E. Breakstone**

Date **10/29/2015**